

set of instruments now at their disposal, it may not be the last.

What a commitment. What a performance. What a group.

Neil T. Smith

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Jack Sheen, *Sub*. Octandre Ensemble, Hargreaves. SN Variations, SNCD11.

It makes sense that our notion of musical time derives from our heart, from our breath.¹ The musical vision of time made by humans for human consumption is of course anthropocentric, so much that we are conditioned to expect some kind of regularity in rhythm and form, as reliable and unconsidered as our next heartbeat or our next breath. What distinguishes Jack Sheen's album *Sub* is its commitment to an alternative musical time, where there is constant though unpredictable motion, a layered world in which gestures drift over and past and under a cloud of pink noise, but we are unsure when each will begin or happen next.

Performed by Octandre Ensemble and conducted by Jon Hargreaves, *Sub* is a collection of 11 tableaux between two and seven minutes long. The pieces, then, are song-sized, but the scope of the spectrum evokes large landscapes where foreground and background interchange identities. The first track, *Sub One*, exemplifies the kind of sound painting that embodies all the tracks. It begins with four violas circular bowing muted strings, creating a cavorting noise layer, punctuated by a repeating rhythmic melody on the two bass clarinets, while the five alto flutes and two trombones hold a steady ground of air and alternating held notes F and E. The landscape is steadfast and immersive, a single living diorama, and ends as abruptly as it begins, like the delineation between picture frame and wall.

This abrupt silence, the spaces between the 11 movements, may be the most meaningful part of the entire work, the musical event that each piece works towards. In the video of a live performance of *Sub* shot by Laura Hilliard that comes with the album, these silences are fixed and thus curated: the right amount of rest and

reprieve before the next full frequency spectrum of noise and sensual mingling of pitches. The digital tracks, however, leave the duration of the silence up to the listener – I would not have minded if all 11 movements were on one long track with intentionally composed silences.

As a whole, it is not a stretch to think about *Sub* as a metaphor of the messiness of life. The tapes of field recordings and generated noise make up the substrate on which the instrumental gestures grow. The display of the stochasticity found in nature encircles our attention, which both swells and shrinks, encouraging and pointing to the kind of noisy distraction that pervades our attention-seeking society. Our skin is a boundary between our flesh and what is outside, but our ears do not have the privilege of such a barrier, and so we develop a tolerance for the noise of the street, the noise of our organs, the noise of our lives. Perhaps this is why Sheen and sound engineer Simon Reynell in mastering placed the taped noise at the surface of the album. The noise is not simply projected in space, at Menuhin Hall where it was recorded, but rather it sounds closer to our ears, as if the digital sound were mixed in. We must wade through this noise for those moments of silence that are more precious than ever, and Sheen sets up the context for us to appreciate the silence that we take for granted.

Furthermore, it is not easy to compose organicity, an impossible mixture of order and disturbance. Sheen's repeated loops – sliding in and out of a consistent time and deftly performed by Octandre Ensemble – become fluid lines that define a form one moment and divide it at another, suggesting a limitless space ever mutating in imagination yet also a beautiful, sonic refuge.

Julie Zhu

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Revoiced. Corvus Consort, Ferio Saxophone Quartet. Chandos, CHAN20260.

Freddie Crowley, the conductor of the 13-voice Corvus Consort, calls his new album with the Ferio Saxophone Quartet *Revoiced*, which is apt because every short item, except one, 16 in all, has been arranged or transcribed by Crowley. Of the four new-ish pieces, three are existing works revamped by Crowley or the composer, and only Owain Park's *Miserere after Allegri* is specifically written for this combination of saxophones and choir. Thirteen of the tracks are

¹ People prefer music with tempi similar to their normal heartbeat. See Iwanaga M, 'Relationship between Heart Rate and Preference for Tempo of Music', *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 81, no. 2 (1995), pp. 435–40.