

Originally commissioned by Philip Thomas, *Flax* was written during the pandemic. And it feels like 2020. The world has stopped. All is quiet, still. Notes appear on one long horizontal scroll, with no clear beginning, no end. Beautiful major-7th chords appear for a moment then get put away by muffling felt, like a broken promise. Every note requires so much effort. The keys feel too large, like stairs, or at least the length of a forearm.

Yet the recording doesn't betray the sound of the effort required to play the piano. There are no incidental pedal sounds, partly because the pedal doesn't come in really until the very end (surprise!), and there is no sound of breath or other movement, as there was in *Opus*, the last solo piano concert recording of Ryuichi Sakamoto. Clean, dry, the recording of *Flax* is masterful, pairing exquisitely with the virtuosic performance by Yong.

Yong plays each note with a perfectly consistent sound. The piano is bright but no note is loud. No note is quiet. Nothing is phrased. This is monstrously hard to do, as Yong must play in a way that doesn't encourage the resonance of the piano. Perhaps a flat finger in the middle of the key, with a hard-ish press, a slow lift. Whatever Arnold communicated in the score encouraged Yong to be the anti-instinctual pianist, to forget voicing, forget having a voice at all, which perhaps is the greatest accomplishment: maintaining an objectivity and a trust in this aesthetic.

So what is the aesthetic of *Flax*? Here are some observations. I have no doubt a live concert of *Flax* would be compelling – though the dramaturgy of the work is not dynamic, the human presence and withholding of such committed, lost wanderings would be fascinating. 'Nice' harmonies appear like accidents, pointing to some other genre, like a slowed-down and broken-up jazz improvisation. The two hands often have different characters, and any aberration seems like a chasm. For example, a minor second appears in the beginning, then not again for half an hour. Was the first a mistake? Given the intensity of the playing, probably not. But the continual posturing towards 'pretty' and the immediate denial require us to constantly switch our mode of listening, which becomes exhausting. *Flax* is demanding, perhaps for the sake of being demanding, saying your expectations are meaningless, beauty is meaningless, understanding is meaningless.

Despite (or because of) its structural nihilism, there is an impressiveness and grandeur to the project. Like a large Cy Twombly painting, the

pianist draws on a gigantic piece of paper with giant crayons. For this reason, I am curious about the notation – to know how much to attribute to the intuition of the pianist, to allocate intention fairly between composer and performer. It's a bit bothersome not knowing. Is *Flax* heavily notated like an Evan Johnson piece, the sonic result of which is similarly hinting but never revealing? Or is it written in free time like a John Cage graphic?

Towards the end of the 80-minute work, dyads appear, then clusters, then the left hand has single notes – gestures we haven't seen before present themselves. Only if you have been paying attention, however. Like the floating collagen threads that float across the vitreous film of your eyes – there when you choose to look at them. Have I heard anything like *Flax* before? Is there a limit to expansiveness? Does Arnold have hope for humanity? No good answers, but I am very grateful that *Flax* inspired me to ask these questions.

Julie Zhu

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Walter Zimmermann, *A Chantbook for Lipparella*. Lipparella. World Edition, 0041.

More and more recordings of Walter Zimmermann's beguilingly enigmatic music have become available in recent years, from Nicolas Hodges' survey of his piano music on *Voces abandonadas* (a series of WDR recordings from 2009, eventually released by Wergo in 2016) to the 2019 Mode reissue of the complete *Lokale Musik* recordings (originally released on LP in 1982), the Sonar Quartett's *Songs of Innocence & Experience*, a collection of Zimmermann's string music from 1977 to 2003 (again for Mode, released in 2020) and the retrospective gathering of his music for voices on the *Voces* album (also Mode, released in 2022). But this *Chantbook* is different, conceived not so much as a compendium, more as an album, where musical ideas flow across the ten tracks with a cumulative expressive intent.

The paradox is that this album too is a sort of retrospective, drawing together works from a period between 1994 and 2021; what makes it special, however, is that each work has been reconceived for the resources of Lipparella, a Swedish ensemble devoted to the creation of a new repertoire for Baroque instruments and countertenor. Walter Zimmermann's collaboration with Lipparella began in 2019, the product

of a chance meeting of Zimmermann and Lipparella's Peter Söderberg at the Ultraschall festival in Berlin, but only two of the works presented here were written specifically for Lipparella. *Dit*, for example, was written in 1999 for ensemble recherche's 'In nomine' project. A solo string instrument, a cello in the recherche version, a viola da gamba on this album, shadows the melody of a folk song from Western New Guinea that, like John Tavener's 'In nomine' melody, has a range of a ninth. It's a breathtakingly arbitrary connection, and in this new setting it is no longer even contextualised by other 'In nomine' music; but it's also breathtakingly beautiful: for a little more than two minutes voices speak to one another across time, geography and cultures.

Something similar happens on the opening track. *Cirkel* begins and ends with the voice of the Danish poet Inger Christensen (1935–2009) chanting parts of her poem 'Lys' (1962); her intonations are diatonic, with something of the quality of a nursery rhyme, yet they frame music for countertenor and theorbo, Zimmermann's 2019 setting of another Christensen poem, that is much more fragmented and chromatic. 'To sketch a spindly circle in water or air' is how the poem begins and it is just such a spindly circle that Zimmermann's music evokes, the complexity of his musical response apparently at odds with the assuredness of the poet's own voice.

Different qualities of voicing are also explored in the third and fifth tracks, *Gras der Kindheit* and *Från Hovets Bibliotek aus der Bibliothek des Meeres* (both 2006), where Peter Söderberg's oud playing and Louise Agnan's viola da gamba playing respectively is combined with their singing. Both sing well but there is no doubt that this is not their day job. As Söderberg observes in the excellent liner notes that accompany the CD, his is a particularly challenging task: 'it was not until the score had arrived', he writes, 'that I realized that this was actually a solo work, demanding the performer to play the oud and use his voice – singing in German and reciting in Arabic'. He goes on to comment that this task is 'unusual and insecure' but also has 'desirable qualities, such as a certain directness and intimacy'. This is emphasised by the track ordering, the insecurity of the two part-time singers framing *Zman-vertont* (2007) in which Mikael Bellini's thrillingly exact countertenor weaves around Baroque oboe and violin lines.

Lipparella's musicianship is consistently compelling: they have found their way into the heart of Zimmermann's enigmatic, anti-

rhetorical aesthetic, and the performances and recordings have that 'certain directness and intimacy' that Söderberg mentions. Yet the music itself, for all its textual and formal clarity, is rarely direct. The earliest work, *Shadows of Cold Mountain 1* (1994), sounds straightforward enough: the music traces a single sliding line, but what is determining its path, and why is it being played simultaneously by three tenor blockflutes (here multitracked)? The answers are provided in Zimmermann's contribution to the liner notes: the sliding line is a transcription of calligraphy from the 'Cold Mountain' series that Brice Marden (1938–2023) began in the mid-1980s and it is multitracked because the resultant interference tones draw together 'the world of colour and the world of sound'.

Like all Walter Zimmermann's work, the *Chantbook for Lipparella* maps an ocean of intertextual currents. His is music that has fascinated me ever since I first encountered it in 1982, but nowhere before have I found the paradox of its variety of means and unity of purpose so beautifully articulated as it is in this album. To quote Inger Christensen's words in *Cirkel* again, this is music that 'sketches a spindly circle' but, as it does so, also 'puts a finger to the lips' and 'lays a hand on the heart'.

Christopher Fox

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Ian Wilson, *Orpheus Down*. Davis, Calderone. Farpoint Recordings, fp094.

The distinguished Irish composer Ian Wilson's recent piece *Orpheus Down* (2021) dramatises the familiar Orpheus and Eurydice underworld story in ten relatively short movements for just a duo of bass clarinet and double bass – an atmospheric and not unusual pairing that works very well in timbre and range. Both players here are experienced old hands with new music and improvisation using extended techniques: Gareth Davis in the tradition of his once teacher the late Harry Sparnaay and Dario Calderone in a similar tradition of the late greats Fernando Grillo and Stefano Scodanibbio. I mention these historical predecessors simply to point out that most of the sounds they use here have been exploited in similar situations for well over half a century – extended techniques can no longer be called 'new'. In the early days of free improvisation we might have been excited by Peter Brötzmann's (or similar) visceral screaming but now these loud bass clarinet split notes, which