

## CDs AND DVDs

Allison Cameron, *Somatic Refrain*. Apartment House, the Allison Cameron band. Another Timbre, at196.

Does the image of a composer emerge from their past pieces as we bring traces of them, through interpretation, to the present? While each album-length retrospective selection from an entire oeuvre may paint a uniquely different portrait of the same composer, especially for a listener's first-time encounter with the composer's work, they are united in this reduction. The nature of a precis resists literal readings because the point of it is an abstraction. I encourage listeners to keep this in mind for the album *Somatic Refrain*, four works by Canadian composer Allison Cameron. Apartment House perform three of Cameron's compositions, spanning 25 years, with the added track 'H', recorded by the Allison Cameron Band. The result is a collaboration on these steady, labyrinthine chamber pieces – the admirable musicians of Apartment House found their way into them and found their way out of them – and they come to life.

Cameron, I learned, from simply listening to this album – but this is also corroborated by her website biography – has many identities. She is a Canadian composer for contemporary music ensembles, which *Somatic Refrain* showcases; an 'improviser performing on electronic keyboards, ukulele, banjo, piano, mini amplifiers, radios, crackle boxes, cassette tapes miscellaneous objects and toys'; leader of the Allison Cameron Band with fellow musician/composers Eric Chenaux and Stephen Parkinson, which forays into folk and popular genres; a member with trumpeter Nicole Rampersaud and drummer Germaine Liu of the trio c\_RL (pronounced curl); a sound artist, in particular working with underwater sounds from icebergs in Norwegian fjords; and an experimental and graphic score maker involved in improvisational groups such as Ensemble Supermusique (Montreal), Contact (Toronto) and Suddenly Listen (Halifax).<sup>1</sup> Many of these identities are present in the works that contain diverse soundworlds – from medieval melodies to a self-invented folk tradition to

whimsical instrument preparations to collaged sounds. And I can only imagine that it was Cameron's own performance experience that motivated her to write scores that give a lot of decision-making to the performers.

In the first and eponymous piece, *Somatic Refrain*, originally written in 1996 for Ronda Rindone, Heather Roche pushes and pulls multiphonics from the bass clarinet. Because Cameron's score is extremely open-ended – asterisks that indicate free improvisation on the harmonics of the fundamental are scattered across the pages – the performer can make this bass clarinet solo uniquely their own. Dependent upon the particular instrument, air pressure and speed, all moving parts of the oral cavity, temperature and humidity, among other variables, multiphonics are notoriously capricious, and thus somehow mystical. Roche recognises that no matter how practised, a multiphonic will live an individual life and reveal itself in its own time. She allows the harmonics to bloom and travel from their hidden places inside the fundamental. Who better to interpret *Somatic Refrain* than Roche, who is the long-time author of a beloved and indispensable blog on extended techniques for the clarinet?<sup>2</sup>

In *Pliny* (2005) and *Retablo* (1998), Cameron composes pairs of synchronous voices within the ensemble's Baroque-flavoured counterpoint, always leaving part of the sound surface bare. Looking closely at this surface, particularly at the moments of extension or rest, bursts of Cameron's found sound treasures are evident: Chinese medicine balls rolling around the inside of the piano, plunking the strings like an old phonograph recording of a dulcimer; the unpitched mechanical clustering of a toy piano; the small clanging of acolyte bells which sound as if they had time-travelled from centuries earlier. Percussionist Simon Limbrick contributes his own spin to this shimmering collection of sounds by adding brass and steel chains and a metal coat hanger to the vibraphone in the latter part of *Pliny*. Meanwhile, moments of syncopation in the melodic lines form a travelling carpet on which we move along.

<sup>1</sup> <https://allisoncameron.com/about/> (accessed 1 December 2022).

<sup>2</sup> <https://heatherroche.net/> (accessed 1 December 2022).

The pleasure of Apartment House's performance arises from the tension between the overall image and individual voices. Cameron's music can be described as winding systems made of basic units (lines and dots), and it is the skill of ensemble work that leads to an aural result that brings out the bonds between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic. In the middle section of *Pliny*, Cameron asks the pianist (Mark Knopfler) and vibraphonist (Limbrick) to improvise a slow, irregular rhythm on a chord, moving up a register and then down. This improvisation nudges our attention from rhythmic multiples to a transforming and stretching dance, perfectly supported by the violin (Mira Benjamin), cello (Anton Lukasiewicz), clarinet (Roche) and flute (Kathryn Williams), which hold the outer contours. For *Pliny*, Cameron was interested in the infinity series à la Per Norgard, but eventually found her own way through 'some melodies and harmonies trying make a puzzle of some more traditional sounding phrases', whereas in *Retablo*, she was inspired by Rudolf Komorous' dance-like Sinfony no. 4, 'La Tireuse de cartes'.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate takeaway from this album was that the many paths Cameron took in her work reflect a desire to find a unified self, even if there is never a signature style. In *Somatic Refrain*, listeners hear not only a rewarding quarter-century portrait of Cameron, but also the type of collaborative ensemble work by Apartment House that is able to breathe new life and wonder to work spanning histories.

Julie Zhu

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*Adjacent Spaces*. Dries Tack (clarinets). Orlando Records, or0046.

In the liner notes of Belgian clarinetist Dries Tack's new solo album, *Adjacent Spaces*, we are told that he is determinedly not trying to emulate 'an artfully played melodic instrument in the service of a beautiful orchestral sound'. There is no question that he is completely successful in this mission: there are only a handful of recognisably clarinet-like single notes and even these, on the bass clarinet, often only appear momentarily before being split into multiphonics. Tack also says that he isn't interested in 'Showing off... playing as many notes as quickly and elegantly as possible... that's exactly

what I don't want'. But, despite himself, there is a great deal of virtuosity on display here in a wide range of unconventional techniques – what we used to call 'extended techniques' – including playing just with the mouthpiece, or without the mouthpiece with air sounds and brass-player lip buzzing directly into the instrument, plus a great deal of vocalisation, all delivered with energy, technical command and complete commitment. Tack has planned the disc of six pieces to move from more conventional 'new' techniques (multiphonics for B flat clarinet) through wild simultaneous singing and playing, to progressively using less of the instrument until the final piece, in which he doesn't play it at all, using just his lips and vocalisation. It's a neat idea and, taken as a whole, is a fascinating project. While some of these pieces might not perhaps work satisfactorily as 'pieces' in isolation, there is never a dull moment and always something sonically arresting going on.

He opens with Sciarrino's well-known (to clarinetists), and surprisingly often played, *Let me die before I wake*, which he calls 'old' new music – it was written in the year of his birth, 1982. Before I read the liner notes it seemed to me odd to include it here among all this new work written especially for him, but his reasoning is quite persuasive. It was written for what he calls 'a strange bird in the instrument's family', but it isn't actually that strange. This is a full-Boehm system instrument that has a few extra keys and goes down to a low E flat rather than the usual E, so that players can transpose parts for the A clarinet without the need for a second instrument. It was quite popular in Italy and Eastern Europe – all the major makers produced them until they fell from fashion, with only the Czech maker Amati now still making them, I think. Sciarrino wrote the piece for the great Ciro Scarponi (who tragically died at only 56, in 2006), who played a full-Boehm instrument. The clarinet multiphonic fingerings in Bruno Bartolozzi's pioneering 1967 *New Sounds for Woodwind*<sup>1</sup> are for the full-Boehm, as are those of that other great Italian player Giuseppe Garborino in his *Metodo*<sup>2</sup> of 1978 – so the instrument is very much part of the Italian DNA and mid-twentieth century clarinet playing in general. Rather than playing the piece on a normal B flat, Tack talks about finding an instrument that turned out to be in poor

<sup>1</sup> Bruno Bartolozzi, *New Sounds for Woodwind*, tr. Reginald Smith Brindle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Giuseppe Garborino, *Metodo per Clarinetto* (Milan: Suivini Zerboni, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Allison Cameron, [www.anotheritimbre.com/allisoncameron.html](http://www.anotheritimbre.com/allisoncameron.html) (accessed 1 December 2022).