

## CDs AND DVDs

Caitlin Edwards, *Exhale*. Edwards, Booker, Edwards, Jones, Smith. Self-published album.

Caitlin Edwards' debut album, upon first listening, was such a striking new sensation that I immediately knew I needed to share my impressions of it with the readers of *TEMPO*. However, that conviction was not of a well-considered analytic nature. Rather, I was driven by what struck me as intense yet contradictory sensations that, I felt sure, would be both stimulating and enlightening to dissect with words. How naïve and presumptuous I was! While a spontaneous, deep enthusiasm for Edwards' musical vision has, after multiple listenings, persisted, my initial reasons for wanting to share *Exhale* with present readership have become muddled. What I had to say about the music was so thoroughly enmeshed in my own biography that I risked ending up speechless. Yet it's precisely this evolution – from analytic optimism to inarticulate imbrication of the composer's motivations with my own – that I wish to talk about. While the review may actually be more about this reviewer than about the album under consideration, I am confident that these impressions will help a reader decide whether the disc is worthy of their closer attention.

When I pick up a new album by an artist whose work is entirely unfamiliar to me, my expectations are coloured by a lifetime devoted to new music. On this background, the compositions are – to a degree that one could almost call contractual – obligated to compel me to rethink my relationship to sound, to history, to other such broad zones of meaning. So in my first explorations of the disc, I eagerly ascribed various cognitive dissonances to Edwards' music. The rhythmic language seemed to be at cross purposes with the melody. Then the dramatic arc was long while the formal structure was short. Then the music seemed to try to reconcile influences of Bollywood with the sensibilities of an intimate, casual jam session. None of these generalisations are entirely wrong, and the next listener might be able to find traces of them in an independent hearing. But each assertion I made seemed to violently misrepresent the intentions of Edwards and her collaborators. I unfairly expected the disc to help me justify

my initial impetus to write this review. What am I supposed to say now, as these initial impressions dissipated into figments of my initial imagination? I genuinely love this album, and I love how it has forced me to confront, in new ways, the demands that I seemed to be making of it as a purportedly seasoned and wise listener.

*Exhale* is born of a personal set of influences that are so specific to Caitlin Edwards and her collaborators that it would not make much sense to name them. The primary characteristics of the music are an irresistible sense of flow (and fun!) and a certain empiricist approach, rather than any easily recognisable, recurring stylistic features. That 'empiricism' is meant literally: as has been confirmed by Edwards in interview, each track on the album is the result of an iterative process of layering, shifting, editing, grouping – and then each of these same gerunds again, but preceded by the prefix 're-'. The compositions thus have evolved into rich tapestries, woven precisely until the point where the musicians agreed that they no longer needed any more layers. The warp was cut, everybody slept on it, a tweak here and there, then on to the next piece until the album felt complete. It sounds so simple when one puts it that way!

The album is launched by a short 'Intro' that sets the tone of the whole endeavour. Edwards shows us her instrument, and checks to make sure we're settled in for the ride, in the manner of a baroque toccata. She seems to say, 'I didn't over-think this and neither should you.'

On the title track, 'Exhale', Edwards spins out gorgeous riffs on her violin, one after the other, and her imagination seems boundless. Each tuneful outburst has a clear sense of groove and direction, yet playfully cuts against the beats being generated in the background. While the soloist spills urgently forward, the accompaniment feels hesitant: slightly unbalanced, slightly disjointed. It is perfectly clear that the accompaniment preceded the solo part in its creation. Indeed, the accompaniment is probably still going on right now, having had no reason to stop. But the violin explores such a markedly different groove that it seems to

directly interrogate our assumptions about what a groove actually is. Edwards sustains that mystery while also letting on that it's no mystery to her. She is smiling from ear to ear and having a deliciously good time with it. All of that comes across instantly and so directly – her certainty and the listener's befuddlement – that it's all overlaid still further with an odd sense of reassurance. We are all captivated by the same layers of sound while also acknowledging that we hear it in different ways.

'Sumn to Tell Ya' is a similarly playful reverie, with more Bollywood vibes, and the clear hierarchy of layers continues to hold sway. The melody breaks up into a stretto of calls and responses. Then, with just a slight change in emphasis, that same melodic material seems to settle into a vamp. Attention is drawn to the undercurrent of ostinato activity: freshets of narrow-band noise and some quick bi-directional glissandi affirm the Bollywood touch, in no other way than that they are reminiscent of tabla. After several refrains, these interactions are brought to a close by a certain *deus ex machina*, whose exact nature should not be revealed at the risk of spoiling the track. Edwards is compelled to interrupt the reverie with an outside (biographical) force, but the decision to do so makes an odd kind of sense. Her sonic exploration had no immanent reason to come to an end.

The track entitled 'Black Enigma', whose centrepiece is an angular, plucked double bass solo executed by Caleb Edwards, is notable for its reduced cast of characters. The layering effect of the other tracks is far less pronounced here: no percussion, no digital ostinati. Instead the spare bass line underlays an expansive, capricious violin fantasy, only briefly enriched in some spots with thick tremolo multi-tracking. Were it not for this penultimate track, the whole album would perhaps suffer from a sameness of density. As it stands, this leavened duet texture is a perfect prequel to the finale, 'Outta My Head', where the familiar exuberance of the first two tracks returns and explores the widest melodic range of the whole album.

Caitlin Edwards is a young composer and violinist, keeping herself very busy with a highly varied, promising career as well as a busy mentoring schedule. Her performing and pedagogical responsibilities are enough to keep any ordinary musician occupied, so music lovers can call themselves lucky that she found the time to put together this album. Now I hope the reception of *Exhale* will give her the

encouragement she needs to continue sharing her creative gifts in the recorded medium.

Philipp Blume

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John Cage, *Choral Works*. Latvian Radio Choir (Sigvards Kļava). Ondine, 1402-2.

This is a wonderful album, presenting four late works by John Cage: three of the number pieces and *Hymns and Variations*. Their quietude seems even more appropriate today than when Cage created them: music whose making reshapes our understanding of the world in as sustainable a way as is possible. *Hymns and Variations* (1979) is indeed a twofold recycling, Cage using again a version of the reductive compositional technique that he invented in 1969 to turn Satie's *Socrate* into a monodic piano piece, *Cheap Imitation*, this time to make new music out of two hymns, 'Old North' and 'Heath', by the eighteenth-century American composer William Billings (1746–1800), from his 1770 collection *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.

Cage took these source works and then erased notes, at the same time extending the durations of some of the notes that survived the process of erasure, so that Billings' quite straightforward tonal harmonies become blurred and new heterophonic melodies emerge from the interplay of the voices. Cage also abstracted vowels from the texts set by Billings so that their religious content disappears. The result is a work in 12 movements, each two minutes long: first we hear transformed versions of the two hymns, then a series of ten variations, each one presenting a different set of erasures and extensions. It's music that is grave, yet full of light, and is sung with perfect dedication by the Latvian Radio Choir, directed by Sigvards Kļava.

In 1993 William Brooks published 'John Cage and History: *Hymns and Variations*', an extraordinary piece of analysis in which he reverse-engineers the process that Cage used to compose *Hymns and Variations*, working out how the chance operations must have been organised to turn Billings into Cage. Brooks' scholarship is, as ever, exemplary and his conclusions fascinating: he suggests that Cage enables him to 'hear through the *Hymns and Variations*, tracing in their absence the source materials on which the process was performed. Billings is present, but only as if heard at a distance, or through a screen; Cage gives me something like a metaphor for memory, or decay, or simply the