

Lawrence Dunn's 22-minute *Suite* is bewildering in both source and result. Starting off like a 20-layered mensuration canon, the instruments wind around each other in soft-spoken, meandering melodies, none fully audible over the other. The liner notes promise 'refracted counterpoint, ricercars, sarabandes, dances, fauxbourdon... concerned with history, migration, confinement, and colonialism'. The notes also make a big deal out of the 'flatness' of the way the piece is performed, and I struggled throughout as this flatness flipped back and forth in my mind, like a 2D cube drawing, between 'meta-flat' and 'flat'. After 12:00, though, the texture breaks brilliantly, and the ensemble shifts into exhilarating fits and starts, complete with (again barely-audible) field recordings and electronic aspects. At 17:00 we enter into the most dramatic portion, with a strong pedal note in the bass that edges oh-so-close to ostinato, drawing the climax out for quite a while until the shimmering ending.

It is perhaps old school of me, but I am stricken by how the experience of this piece would be worlds away if one did not read the liner notes, or if the liner notes commented more on the *technique* of those musical forms rather than their sources. Politically, I wonder: what are we encouraged to do? There is definitely an aspect of Brechtian alienation, perhaps the frustration I feel at my inability to pick apart the texture should mirror the frustration I feel in the face of injustice in the world, all the better to practice breaking out of it. Perhaps I am meant to be motivated to research the piece's sources on my own time. The piece is a large achievement and cinematic in scope; the notes write of the work being 'strange-but-familiar', and I spent a good amount of time longing for more of the strange. Dunn seems to be taking the high road past the overt referentiality of a composer like Alfred Schnittke, and I am encouraged to explore more of his catalogue to hear how this treatment evolves.

The album closes with a version of *murmurs* by one of Europe's pre-eminent composers, Rebecca Saunders. Saunders is an expert sound-sculptor, and Explore Ensemble does not miss the opportunity to sound wonderful while interpreting her work. In performance, musicians are placed around the room in arrangements of soloists and duos, and this CD includes an extra track with a binaural mix of *murmurs* to better account for this immersive experience. *murmurs* is representative of the best of twenty-first-century *musique concrète instrumentale*, and one can easily picture oneself in the hall, the ear wandering

among the exhibits while the body stays put. The clarinet of Alex Roberts, and the string section of David López Ibáñez on violin, Morag Robertson on viola and Deni Teo on cello, shine the most brightly as their piercing tones and tremolos push our consciousness through the fog into another realm, however briefly.

This record was a statement from the moment it was announced. From a distance, the four pieces could almost be seen as four individual answers to the same prompt, and yet the only redundancy here is the expertise of the composers and the consistency of the performances. While bits of the album perplexed me, as a whole it is a must-listen for a monumental snapshot of British new music of the past years.

Ian Power

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Evan Johnson, *Indolentiae Ars*. Rosman. Huddersfield Contemporary Records, HCR31

This is a record.

This is not a record.

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Indolentiae Ars is Evan Johnson's third portrait CD in five years, a quiet accession to the unspoken consensus that, on recording at least, his music is best left alone with itself. Even when not hampered by an inadequate medium, Johnson's music demands acclimation, asks for time and extreme attention as it stakes its wager in attenuation and private failure. Recording poses real risks to that wager. To *record* – rooted in the Latin word for heart, as in 'to know by heart' or, more concretely, 'to commit to permanent memory' – is a form of absolute mastery (the last step is called *mastering*). That control rubs awkwardly against the rough and inhospitable shoulder of Johnson's music, where, by design, 'mastered' and 'controlled' are the things it cannot ever be.

So the very premise of a recording of the music of Evan Johnson is an incongruity. There can be no 'definitive' or 'faultless' iteration of music that hinges itself on loss, imperfection and slippage. Johnson's is a music of fissures, insurmountable disjunctions between *how* and *what* carved opened by the inability of a body or an instrument to fully accommodate a score or a threshold – but the fissure between this medium of transmission and the music's ontology is not one for which it plans. So it is as much a gesture of apology as respect that his music ends up on these albums all alone.

We offer time – enough for as many attempts as possible, all of which fail but do so with increasing assurance – in place of true fidelity, that this music may have adequate space for approaching some assembly of its truth.

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This is a record which falls short.
This is a record which succeeds.

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Carl Rosman is one of a small handful of performers in which Johnson puts his absolute trust. That trust is essential: Johnson writes music in which the fallibility of both performer and instrument are painfully exposed. A ‘successful’ performance is one in which strenuous inadequacy must be sustained and communicated with impossible eloquence. It is an intensely vulnerable act, to ‘fail’ so publicly.

Fallibility – one of the central tenets of Johnson’s music – is not the stumble itself but the object’s capacity to do so, its *fail-ability*, which is to say its positive potential for negative achievement, its capability for coming up short. Johnson’s wager is that object’s fallibility is its radical verity: failure unmasks the gap between eidolon – virtuosity, the rhetoric-less *I-could-be* – and resultant, unintentional inaccuracy – fallibility, the *I-can-not*. In that rift is the instrument’s truth, its soft and luminous *I am*. His music’s accrual of physical limitations, its encrustations of not-quite-enoughness are its way of getting at what the instrument really is, centring – a perverse sort of love – all the things it cannot do.

Indolentiae Ars collects Johnson’s complete solo works for voice and clarinet, two instruments whose fallibility implicates the breath and the body in granular, audible traces. The mark of Rosman’s command is the continuous sense of voyeurism which accompanies a listening. He is denuded before the microphone and yet refuses to back away, permitting us to hear more of his body than we ought to. It is a labour of immoderate trust in one another, to risk such intimate perception; that trust is audible, even – or most especially – when the music falters.

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This is a record which looks back.
This is a record which looks on.

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Though he is only 43, Evan Johnson has changed enough to reward a retrospective. The oldest works on the album were written at the peak of Johnson’s mathematical determinism, every attack justifiable in accordance with an unseen formula. ‘Supplement’ (2004), the earliest work on the disc, encases the music in divagating

parentheses, musical footnotes which quickly drown the performer in impossible simultaneities. ‘A general interrupter to ongoing activity’ (2011) overloads the isolated parameters of vocal musculature to the brim, occluding the successful execution of any single layer. These are the heavy hitters of a first assertion, laden with the force needed to break new ground.

The more recent works feel different. ‘In modo esalando’ (2021) and the title track “‘indolentiae ars’ a medium to be kept’ (2015), written for the temperamental Stadler nine-key basset, begin at the spare aposepsis to which the other works only gradually arrive. They have already passed through the dystopic maximalism and settled in the crags of what is left when the dust has settled. They are still relentlessly difficult, but less prescriptive or processual, comfortable now with enigma.

And, more recent still, the pair of miniature voice solos, the two *Rückenfiguren* (literally *two-figures-with-their-backs-turned*), open towards a new Evan Johnson. Conceived to bridge the gaps between decades on this disc, they mark the first time in his career Johnson has simply *written*: no formula, no system, nothing but instinct. They took him just under a week to complete, and the result is more delicate, even more sparse and attenuated and tentative than his most overloaded work. The paradox is that, somehow, it is even more sure of itself for being so.

The music is steadily coming into its own in these crevices of loss. In the near silence of a decade of rigorous failure, it is discovering itself complete.

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This is a record which has cracks.
This is a record which is whole.

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For all its dialetheism, *Indolentiae Ars* emerges as a miraculous unity, a testament to the virtuosic fallibility which Johnson has excavated for two decades. As the best albums do, it has, as an unbroken document, a quiet narrative. Literally quiet: the journey takes place in the silences.

The album’s title is drawn from Robert Burton’s gloss on Germanicus in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton is writing about the proper duration of grief, dissuading against excess. He offers *Indolentiae Ars* as *the art of repressing sadness*: not the elimination of grief, grief-absent, but its total suppression. Suppression is not mastery: it is only forcing-under, rendering silent that which would be too much to say.

On a small scale, the effect of suppression on this music can be measured in ‘ground’ (2010),

the opening contrabass clarinet solo. Arlen and Koehler's old torch song 'Stormy Weather' is the cantus firmus, but the loping hopelessness of their ever-collapsing melody is only delicately traced, sunk instead into the sonic substratum by an *art of repression* which never allows it to surface with any clarity. Unheard but ever present, grief remains the bedrock. It is in the not-being-there.

Similarly, the melancholy of failure, the thing which binds this music to itself and makes of it a whole, is never heard. Sound is all the attempts. Sound still carries something like hope. But as each younger work edges closer to the threshold

of devastating scarcity, and as self-confidence and surety dawn in preposterous tandem, stillness stops feeling like a consequence. In the emergent silence of confident suppression, a comfort of trust: that which is gained by losing.

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Medium/music; mastery/failure; then/now; cracked/
whole.

This is a record of those solidi.

This is – borrowing Johnson's own description of 'ground' – 'a record of what lies beneath'.

Ty Bouque

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