

Pizzicati and staccato piano notes are haloed with harmonics and distressed with brief percussive gestures inside the piano and below the bridge of the strings. Low notes and secundal harmonies are added into the piano's kit bag while repeated notes and sharp cornered gestures enhance the repertoire of the strings. Partway through, the introductory material abruptly stops, like a compact car on a speed bump. The piano returns to the lower register, this time having a scalar passage interrupted by its own inside-the-piano playing and brusque declamations, which are particularly potent in a subsequent duel with the cello. Percussive attacks from all the players create a spacious yet spiky interlude.

In the second third, the ghost of Schoenberg seems to be playing tennis with Birtwistle's shade, with material that obliquely recalls early atonal music interpolated between scratched piano strings, pizzicati, repeated notes and frequent rests. This dialogue between touchstones from the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries does not persist, as the opening material returns, but is reordered and fragmentary in its deployment. The title's echo makes its presence more fully known with resonant slaps of the piano strings, greater use of pedal, and reverberating string verticals. Cello crescendi are harried by interruptions from the piano and viola. A filigreed motive is presented in multiple transformations in the piano's upper register – another nod to Schoenberg. The coda is a grab bag of miniature versions of the material from throughout, ending with a reshuffling of the piano's treble-register tune accompanied by string harmonics in an affecting dénouement.

Eckardt is a talented composer, uncompromising in the challenges he poses to performers and listeners. His works deftly evoke extramusical associations that suggest political engagement and an awareness of tradition. However, Eckardt's work also presents pathways forwards for postmillennial modernists. *Passage* is highly recommended.

Christian Carey

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Arash Yazdani, *Propagation of Uncertainty*. Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Zone Expérimentale, Ensemble for New Music Tallinn, Ensemble du bout du Monde. KAIROS, 0022201KAI.

Few composers dare to confront pain in music as literally as Arash Yazdani in his immense

retrospective album, *Propagation of Uncertainty*. Over two hours in total length, this collection of works charts the evolution of a distinctive compositional voice that commands acute physical engagement from the listener. The Estonia-based Iranian composer is joined by ensembles including the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir and Zone Expérimentale from Basel.

The musicians of Ensemble for New Music Tallinn are featured heavily throughout the first half of the album. Track one, *Finite Functions of Infinitive Sets*, begins with soft murmuring in the clarinets' low range, making best use of the instrument's dynamic ability to arise from – and recede back into – total nothingness. The harmonic language of the album is quickly established as the four like instruments tiptoe away from the initial pitch in creeping microtonal movement. Here I pause the track, unplug my headphones, connect my Bluetooth speaker and start again. I want to feel the beating pulses of microtonality with my hands, on my chest. Pitches jostle together, bumping and beating against the speaker membrane – this music is harmonically tactile.

Yazdani experiments with register throughout this piece, a vivid transformation against otherwise subtly evolving material. We enter a vastly different emotional valency towards the end, where the microtonal material is transposed to the clarinets' high range, and restlessness becomes insistence, or even desperation. I want to stay longer in this deranged texture, in the same way one might struggle to look away from a scene of abject horror.

Contrastingly – although born of the same gestural language – the second track, *Gā Geriv*, is hauntingly beautiful. The homogeneity of the four-flute writing brings about a closeness in the work, a sense of proximity, a function of play with the un/familiar. The title translates to 'the time for crying', with reference to funeral chants of the Lorestan and Kurdistan regions of Iran.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, a reverence pervades the work, especially as the flautists are instructed to sing quietly into their instruments. The slow transformation in *Gā Geriv* – as in Yazdani's other works, like *Stromateis: ...emergence...*, for four saxophones, performed by Ensemble du Bout du Monde – lends it a ritual quality. I wonder whether the composer uses these procedures to organise sound in the same solemn way religion organises belief.

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Arlo Brown, *Propagation of Uncertainty*, liner notes, p. 7.

Another registral shift: Yazdani's *Instruction Manual of How to Learn Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb in 5 Minutes* gestures towards the satirical tone of Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. A quartet of Otomatones – handheld synthesisers, with a user interface fashioned as an anthropomorphic quaver – are wielded again by the Ensemble for New Music Tallinn. Singing tortured glissandi (jumping off the cliff's edge from rigid micro-tuning to infinite continuity), these cyborgs perform despair with deadpan expression and a good deal of comic irony. It is not the only work on this album that operates in automaton territory – the digital aesthetic of *WinterWolf* for two e-keyboards collides with the fleshy tension of microtonal harmony as it is experienced by the listener. In this piece, I am reminded of the kitsch gothic of the fairground automaton, an encounter with the almost-human.

Yazdani is unafraid to make the listener uncomfortable. In fact, he seems to have a fascination with this affect as a self-proclaimed psycho-acoustician and an architect of disquiet. The introduction to *Convolutional Emergence* for violin and percussion is certainly an uneasy listening experience. In the introduction, achingly high, unstable violin harmonics teeter against bowed crotales, metallic on the ear. Tension is strung as such throughout the duration of the work, the final gesture a beleaguered upwards glissando, the violin dragging the vibraphone to high altitude. I am left wondering about the live experience of this piece and the potential for Yazdani's sonic unease to be compounded in corporeality. Truthfully, I was happy to be able to press pause occasionally throughout this recorded iteration.

The album continues with an homage to the composer's tutor at the Hochschule für Musik in Basel, Georg Friedrich Haas. The lineage of Yazdani's microtonal language is clear, as is his proclivity for darkness, both in form and concept. The dedicated work – for soloist on two pianos a quarter-tone apart in turning, performed by Talvi

Hunt – is perhaps the most romantic of the album in its melody. There are poignant moments of tonal harmony darkened by their microtonal inflection.

*Propagation of Uncertainty* seems to fluctuate between the embodied and the immaterial. The ninth piece on the album, *Hurreh*, is yet more music for which recording technology is pivotal in the listening experience. The work assumes an acousmatic quality as whispers and harmonics detach from their bodily point of origin. The recording lacks the earnest characteristic of live vocal performance and therefore assumes an almost inhuman quality. There is some abstract brilliance in Yazdani's rhythmical cluster chords, which rise like deadly clouds of volcanic ash.

Upon reaching *Nakba* – the last and largest work – I feel that thematic scale of the album is finally given room to unfurl in the depth of the orchestral sound. Indeed, scale is the factor that I hear most thoroughly transformed throughout this album, as the composer traverses the glistening micro-worlds of microtonality and vast, savage symphonic landscapes (where microtonality is lost in pure gesture). Yazdani's signature ascending glissandi return with devastating effect in this work, punctuated by stabs of rusted brass and serrated percussion. Arabic for 'disaster' or 'catastrophe', the term *Nakba* is used to refer to historical mass displacement of Palestinians and the violent destruction of Palestinian culture. In 2024, *Nakba* is violent and urgent listening.

Perhaps this is the message of Arash Yazdani's *Propagation of Uncertainty*. That violent sound – felt most acutely chest-deep, or as the stomach drops, or as microintervals pulse against the skin – is a precondition for musical existence. And further: that humanity is made and unmade in the ethics of comfortable listening.

Kate Milligan

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