

CDs AND DVDs

Christopher Butterfield, *Souvenir/parc/Frame/Port Bou*. Aventa Ensemble, Linwood, Sacks. Redshift, TK528.

When asked why he chose to write music, the Canadian composer Christopher Butterfield replied that he always gave the same answer to this question: ‘it seemed like an interesting way to live’.¹ His latest album, featuring four works spanning a period of almost 20 years, confirms the assured pragmatism of his outlook. The four pieces demonstrate an intriguing variety of ideas, from recordings of Barbadian tree frogs in *Souvenir* to compositional materials derived from serial and chance procedures in *Port Bou*. This album’s imaginative breadth is indicative of Butterfield’s prolific output – his catalogue includes chamber works, opera, ballet and an extraordinary piano trio with a duration of many hours (*Madame Wu Said*). Following Quatuor Bozzini’s 2017 album, *Trip*, which featured Butterfield’s string quartets, this latest album, brilliantly performed by Aventa Ensemble, is a welcome addition to the composer’s recorded chamber music.

Souvenir, parc, Frame and *Port Bou* are substantial pieces for chamber ensemble. The works range in duration from around 14 to 21 minutes. The musicians of Aventa Ensemble, conducted by Bill Linwood, deftly convey the idiosyncratic, at times improvisatory character of the material. Like the composer, the performers (with the exception of vibraphone player Rick Sacks) are based in British Columbia, Canada, where Butterfield was, until recently, professor at the School of Music at the University of Victoria.

The album begins with *Souvenir*, the earliest of the four pieces, dated 1995. The opening musical material, lasting only about 20 seconds, instantly conveys a feeling of precision and intensity that characterises much of *Souvenir* (and the other three pieces). Angular clarinet lines in rhythmic unison, played by A. K. Coope and Keith McLeod, are juxtaposed against delicate, high piano, while the percussion adds a regular pulse. Towards the end of this initial idea, recorded tree frog sounds become apparent,

creating a fragile thread of rhythmically uneven, high-frequency material that is evident throughout much of the work’s 21 minutes. The composer stated that this movement was based on ‘a set of improvisations made with undependable electronics’.² While strikingly angular lines, sometimes combined with Darren Buhr’s precise, pizzicato double bass, convey an improvisatory, almost jazz-like quality, frequent unison passages demonstrate a high level of compositional control. After about 12 minutes, the music’s restless forward motion is replaced by sustained tones, forming the interval of a major second over several octaves. Subtly shifting glissandi add a minor third, creating a startling A minor sonority. This sudden, unexpected change from one musical idea to another is characteristic of the exhilarating variety within this piece and throughout the album. After about two minutes, a wood block heralds a return to material that is more reminiscent of the opening, complete with tree frogs. Sustained unison lines, punctuated by percussion, give the ending a more contemplative character.

The second track, *parc*, is a percussion concerto, composed for Toronto-based percussionist and artist Rick Sacks. The vibraphone’s opening line, formed of wide, leaping intervals that span the full range of the instrument, seems to echo some of the melodic material heard in *Souvenir*. Unpitched percussion irregularly punctuates the vibraphone line, creating a sense of metrical ambiguity. As in the preceding piece, the music is characterised by startling changes in instrumentation and material. The breadth and variety of materials provide the ideal setting for Rick Sacks’ virtuosity.

Frame (2012) opens the door into another, startlingly different soundworld. Trumpet, piano and tubular bells dominate a series of loud, monumental, percussive attacks, becoming quieter as other sounds emerge. Butterfield relates the idea of not quite aligned vertical attacks to Cage’s use of ‘Korean Unison’, as heard in his work *Ryoanji*. In *Frame*, there is a spacious quality to the material, underlined by

¹ Höstman, A., ‘My World as I Remember It: An Interview with Christopher Butterfield’, *TEMPO*, 71, no. 282 (2017), pp. 6–17.

² Liner notes.

occasional moments of silence. Short glissandi blur the line between instrumental sound and vocalisation. It is a captivating, intriguing and intensely strange sonic environment. Around eight minutes into the piece, a glockenspiel line, underlined by double bass and clarinet, creates an almost poignant sense of delicacy, abruptly transformed by the addition of a drum kit in the final four minutes.

The layered, contrapuntal opening of *Port Bou* (2001) is built of beautifully sinuous, angular lines, which are so characteristic of Butterworth's music. As in the other pieces on this album, transitions between sections are sometimes abrupt, lending a playful quality to the material. At times, pitches seem to coalesce around unison focal points, giving a sense of arrival. Butterworth states that the piece is structured using serial and chance procedures and found material, and it is the structure of this piece that is one of its most striking elements.³ The repetition of the opening idea, around two minutes before the end, suddenly draws attention to the form of the piece. During the final minute, a variety of fragmentary materials, including brass glissandi, a vocalisation and a loud bass drum attack, seem to allude to the vast universe of Butterfield's musical imagination.

This album provides a captivating insight into a soundworld that is at times intriguing, surprising, fascinating and beguiling. The clarity of the music often seems to bely its complexity – repeated listening reveals subtle details and links that might not be immediately apparent. The album notes draw attention to Butterfield's connection with Victoria, British Columbia, the city of his birth, where he completed some of his studies and taught composition. However, the quantity and variety of his output is testament to a career that is far from insular. Time spent in Toronto and at Stony Brook University, New York, brought him into contact with composers who have all developed individual, distinctive paths, including Martin Arnold and Linda Caitlin Smith. His students include composers such as Cassandra Miller. Given the extent of his influence as a teacher and leading voice in Canadian new music, it is surprising that his work does not seem to be more widely known and performed in Europe. Perhaps this latest album will help to redress the balance. *Souvenir* demonstrates an inspiring range of ideas that intrigue and surprise from moment to moment, realised with confident, pragmatic clarity that is devoid of pretension. It

is music that speaks on its own terms, born from a highly individual, creative approach to composition – the work of someone who has found an 'interesting way to live' as a composer in the world.

Edmund Hunt

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Matthew Kaner, Héloïse Werner, *Taking Flight*. Durance. SOPLAYLIST Records, Bandcamp.

Oboist Anna Durance's new EP contains just two short pieces of three and a half minutes each: Matthew Kaner's solo *Flight Studies: The Snowy Owl* (part of a series of 'flight' solo woodwind pieces) and Héloïse Werner's oboe and cello duo *Double Incantation*, with cellist Louise McMonagle. It is, in a sense, a short showcase for the excellent Durance – a player with a rich sound and an expressive sense of line and phrase. Both works, though, are strangely old-fashioned despite Werner's bends and air/whisper sounds. Kaner's quasi-programmatic owl character study piece is particularly so, even 'English' in that 1960s 'cow pat' sort of way (a nod to Elisabeth Lutyens), with perhaps a hint of the style and approach of the cornerstone of the solo repertoire, Britten's 1951 *Six Metamorphoses*. Maybe it's an oboe thing. Many composers, past and present, seem to have perpetuated the espressivo minor-key melancholy, unable to resist the oboe's 'idiomatic' lure. But then I think of Holliger playing things like Globokar's *Atemstudie* or his own *Studie über Mehrklänge*, or more recently a handful (and it is only a handful compared to the clarinet and flute) of more experimental individuals (in this country, for example, the extraordinary playing of Chris Redgate) and I feel reassured that the oboe is not really woodwind's lost cause. Kaner's approachable and 'playable' piece will, I'm sure, be useful and welcome among young players wanting to move away from core repertoire. The duo, unlike Werner's own wonderfully experimental and adventurous singing, is disappointingly and, I suppose, surprisingly traditional. With its rather incessant rising tone motive passed between the two, and an ill-judged sudden ending modulation of the same tone, it comes over as the beginning of something more substantial and still in its early sketch days.

Roger Heaton

10.1017/S0040298223000748

³ Liner notes.