

CDs AND DVDs

Aaron Cassidy, *A Way of Making Ghosts*. ELISION, Ensemble Musikfabrik, JACK Quartet, line upon line, Cassidy, Nawri. Kairos, 0015073KAI.

Composer and conductor Aaron Cassidy recently became Professor of Composition and Director of Incontri – Institut für neue Musik at the Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover. He was previously at the University of Huddersfield for several years. Cassidy has become known as one of the most innovative figures in extending the parameters of music notation. *A Way of Making Ghosts*, his latest recording for Kairos, spans pieces from the outset of this innovation, from the String Quartet (2002) to the recent *A Way of Making Ghosts* (2020).

The JACK Quartet perform the String Quartet with laser-beam focus. Exaggerated crescendi, overbowing, glissandi, microtones, percussive attacks and pizzicati set the stage for the extended palette one will hear throughout this recording. After a thunderous opener with swells of sound, a comparative oasis with thinned texture allows one to focus on each successive playing technique. Gradually, all four strings rejoin the fray, with pianissimo harmonics and a cello bass note ending the piece.

ELISION, who play much of the music on the recording, perform an early work, *The A/grammatical study for three (quasi-) independent players* (2002/2008). Conducted by Manuel Nawri, it is played by oboist Peter Veale, violinist Graeme Jennings and percussionist Peter Neville. Here, Cassidy has begun to move away from conventional notation into a score that indicates gesture, often using an extended kind of tablature. It is noteworthy that he worked in this system in his sketches for the String Quartet, only to renotate parts for the players in more conventional notation. In the violin notation, hand position, gestures, playing techniques and bow pressure are foregrounded in favour of strict pitch and rhythm notation. *A/grammatical study* seems breathless, with phrase barriers rendered almost immaterial by constant overlap. The oboe focuses on upper register-pitch-bends and trills, while percussion includes chimes and stentorian drums.

The Wreck of Former Boundaries is excerpted, with a series of solos for ELISION. Formed by composer Liza Lim and guitarist Daryl Buckley,

the ensemble is one of the finest in Australia. *The Wreck of Former Boundaries* could be considered a calling card for both Cassidy and ELISION. The complete score is some 37 minutes long, for septet and electronics. Excerpts included here demonstrate Cassidy's further notational explorations. Scores include multiple parameters, some colour-coded. Microtones are segmented in an eighth-tone scale. Tablature has separate lines dealing with pitch, rhythm, playing techniques and timbre. Many segments look like the visuals one would find in a DAW for computer music. Kudos to Kairos for the colour score excerpts in the booklet.

Double bassist Kathryn Schulmeister plays a near constant stream of arco glissandi. Bow pressure, percussive hand damps and haunting harmonics make for a fiendishly difficult piece, even by Cassidy's standards. Joshua Hyde plays an alto saxophone solo with lip pops standing in for pizzicati and howling multiphonics as phrase markers. The second section of the piece is comparatively subdued, creating some of the most fetching music on the recording. Soon enough, shorts bursts break the reverie, with repeated notes distressed with microtones succeeded by altissimo attacks. A brief coda returns to the delicate music of the piece's centre.

There are not many lap steel guitarists playing new music. In fact, Daryl Buckley may corner the market. His solo includes an electronics part that often imitates the sounds of the pedal steel. The piece takes all of the techniques found in the acoustic instruments playing the aforementioned solos and 'turns it to eleven'. Lap steel is all about glissandi and vibrating notes, techniques Cassidy uses ubiquitously. It is a clamorous outing but one that demonstrates the composer's intentions writ large.

The most recent pieces on the album date from 2020. ELISION makes one more appearance on *Self-Portrait, Three Times, Standing* (15.3.1991–20.3.1991). Hyde, playing tenor saxophone, trombonist Benjamin Marks, Alex Waite on piano and Rohan Dasika on double bass are conducted by the composer. The piece begins with bell-like sonorities played pianissimo, although a long crescendo replaces this soon enough. Muted trombone and saxophone perform a layered duet. The double bass once again deploys arco glissandi and

harmonics. A fixed-pitch instrument, the piano is not often used by Cassidy. Its clusters, polychords and scampering runs fit in with the rest of the group. In the middle section, it dominates the others, only to be upstaged by saxophone and trombone once again. The juxtaposition between microtones and piano clusters serves to have two different pitch systems going on at once. The effect can be dizzying. The last section of the piece finds the group erupting followed by a long decrescendo led by an ostinato bass pattern.

A Way of Making Ghosts: Self-portrait, 1996 is performed by Ensemble Musikfabrik: Helen Bledsoe plays piccolo and alto flute, Christine Chapman horn, Carl Rosman contrabass clarinet and E-flat clarinet and Dirk Wietheger cello. Once again, Cassidy conducts. A forceful first section has piccolo and horn taking up a duel under which the strings play pressured glissandi. A spate of glassine harmonics delineates a second section. The horn rejoins, playing fast peregrinations between stopped and unstopped notes. The players move adroitly between their doubling instruments, adding to the colours found in tutti passages. Fortissimi are succeeded by delicate sustained strands, interrupted with progressively greater frequency by horn attacks. And for a moment, rest, a space of silence rare in the music. Pianissimo filigrees are sporadically interrupted by furious interruptions from contrabass clarinet, piccolo and a repeating figure in the horn. A cry from contrabass clarinet momentarily slams the door shut on the passage, only to have it resumed. Penetrating piccolo and fleet gestures from clarinet and cello are taken up, only to be interrupted once again by a forte multiphonic from the clarinet. Not to be denied, cello glissandi and delicate piccolo resume their lines again, only to have the clarinet push the proceedings, with a flurry of activity coming to an abrupt close.

Cassidy's music is innovative, but not for innovation's sake. Instead, he strives to allow musicians to embody his works on a visceral level. This is also true of the forms he creates, which may surprise the listener but, in retrospect, display a firm sense of design. Can he go much further in this direction? One is eager to find out.

Christian Carey
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Bryn Harrison, *A Coiled Form* Saviet. Another Timbre, AT201.

Violinist Sarah Saviet originally commissioned composer Bryn Harrison to write a short solo

piece of five minutes, but the open-ended approach to repetition which emerged in the collaborative process of composition quickly led to the formation of much longer performances: 20 minutes for the London premiere, 40 minutes in Berlin, and for this new CD release a vastly extended version which lasts for more than 50 minutes.

At its heart, this is a work which deals with repetition and our relationship with repeated sound, taking Saviet's violin through nearly an hour's interrogation of the same simple musical phrases. Harrison (quoting the story about stepping into the same river twice, often attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus) states, 'You never step into the same river twice. The water is always flowing, always changing. And it's the same with music – even if you're repeating a phrase or a pattern, it's never exactly the same twice. He adds that when repeating musical thoughts there are '...repetitions are never exactly the same – there will always be slight differences'.¹

This creates a listening process of continual, obsessive re-examination of the same musical material – a direct reflection of Harrison's comments on his own compositional practice: 'I'm never satisfied with anything that I do, and I'm always re-examining and trying to refine it. It's a very obsessive process for me' – and his ongoing attempts to distil his own distinct twenty-first-century take on minimalism to create something that is as perfect as possible. The title – *A Coiled Form* – aptly describes the experience of listening to this piece. Since Saviet seems to 'uncoil' and 're-coil' Harrison's short phrases with widely varied numbers of repetitions, and that these sets of repetitions then form larger blocks, which themselves are repeated, sometimes immediately, sometimes much later, we form the impression that the music is somehow 'nested' or coiled inside itself, and that we, as listeners, are turning it over in our hands, rotating it and viewing it from different angles.

This multifaceted viewing of the same musical object generates the underlying form of the piece: a continuous span of concentrated rapid violin figurations, many of which are as short as three or four pitches. These figures are often immediately repeated, sometimes with slight variations in timing or emphasis, but generally in forms much like their original

¹ <http://www.anothertimbre.com/vessels.html> (accessed 31 May 2023).