

CDs AND DVDs

AKSIOM: works by BAUCK, STREICH, SVENSSON, MÆLAND. Aksiom Ensemble. LAWO: LWC1115.

The resurgence of European nationalism might make one a little weary to hear the first self-titled album by Aksiom through a regional, Nordic, cultural lens, but the remarkably thoughtful curation and cohesion of the album deserves some comment regarding its documentation of a regional style. The album showcases two composers from Norway: Øyvind Mæland, who recently premiered his opera *Ad Undas – Solaris Korrigert* at the Norwegian Opera, and Martin Rane Bauck, who co-founded Aksiom in 2010. The other two composers on the album are both from Sweden: Johan Svensson, artistic director of the ensemble Mimitabu, and Lisa Streich, recently awarded the Rome Prize to live in Villa Massimo through 2017.

Aksiom describe themselves in these geographical terms in their liner notes as well: ‘The ensemble, originating from the Norwegian Academy of Music, works mainly with new Nordic music and improvisation’. Under the direction of Kai Grinde Myrann, Aksiom’s main core of nine interpreters includes flute, saxophone, trombone, percussion, piano, guitar, violin, cello, and contrabass. Though the album might have thrown together several disparate and uncoordinated pieces under a regional banner, the pieces chosen for the album inhabit a shared timbral space, a generally dark muted hue without many spontaneous soloistic outbreaks. The pieces also share a formal sensibility – no urgent sense of development, but a rising series of waves of small, increasing climaxes in each piece, which give the entire listen as a whole a strong sense of unity and interconnectedness.

Throughout all four pieces, bright timbres emerge spontaneously like sunlight poking through the vantage point of cracks in a dark cave. As listeners, we seem to be crouched in dim, humid timbres, looking up and waiting for soft passes of light to shine through at dramatic punctuations. Even the cover design of the album seems to run every image through a prism into red, white, and blue, as if the photographs of the composers and interpreters have

been refracted through moisture in the atmosphere above, as it shines underground.

The above is admittedly a poor analogy for the music – in Grieg’s *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, higher register woodwinds and strings and brighter timbres emerge as we drive towards the climax, yet we don’t have the feeling we are burrowing out of the cave toward the sky, we are digging deeper and striking at precious and shiny metals, nearly striking gold or encountering the guardian that protects it. Johan Svensson’s *Shiver*, the first track of the album, has this same sense of digging down. The percussion, and the percussive effects from the other instruments, have the irregular continuity of miners hammering and drilling down into a mine, working through tough, hard batches of rock and sometimes surfacing something reflecting light. But like a miner digging for coal, they are not looking for, or developing toward, something shiny. They are simply mining, breaking up rocks, pressing their bodies against the generally unpredictable but rhythmic machines bouncing against the rock floors and walls, seemingly by chance unearthing some lustrous material.

Papirosn, the second track, composed by Lisa Streich, opens up a more delicate melodic and harmonic space – the guitar foreshadows brief piano and trombone outbursts, underpinned by slow contrapuntal movement in the strings. The least developmental piece on the album, and furthermore the most restful in the space it has established, the work nonetheless invests deeply in the hard-won consonances at its end. The tempo, texture, and gentility inform the breadth of the pieces around it as a whole. The guitar especially defines the space we are in with its roaming stereo articulations.

Stine Janvin Motland’s voice enters immediately on Øyvind Mæland’s *Étude Ralentissante*, the third track, well-placed at nearly the golden mean of the entire listening experience. The quaver ostinato patterns in the vibraphone, flute and strings put in work, carrying and cradling the voice, like a minecart, bringing Motland’s voice higher and higher, pressing against tensions in the ceiling of the sonic space. She sometimes matches the timbres of her accompanying

worker instruments, aims to partner with them, and at other times, demonstrates for them radical registral leaps, spontaneous energy and relief from the growing friction described by the quiet dissonances, slow bow pressures, and non-pitched woodwind air sounds. As her voice rises higher she seems to caress the cracks where brightness might break through, but she is ultimately at home in the lower registers of sound, in the cave we've been inhabiting all along.

The final piece, *Misanthropi IIIb*, by Martin Rane Bauck, makes for a nice formal closure. It opens with a handful of high delicate piano punctuations over a soft, fluctuating string texture, gently confirming the musical space we've been in for the past 40 minutes. At this point it's hard to believe these pieces weren't composed without each other in mind, or that there isn't some Nordic aesthetic sensibility of texture and form that ties them all together. *Misanthropi IIIb* is a great finish to the album, full of small anti-climaxes of white noise created by a bicycle pump or a bicycle belt, delicately affirming and offering closure to the sonic space.

The attentive sound engineering and the precise and delicate blending of unique instrumental timbres on all four pieces illustrate Aksiom's interpretive sensitivity as a whole, and the clear, intentional aesthetic space they wish to explore and express within. Though describing a Nordic sound with reference to dark timbres and subterranean imagery might seem a bit on the nose, as the Norwegian proverb goes, *Alt vil ligge der det lågast er* (everything lies where it is lowest).

Robert Phillips

10.1017/S0040298217000286

HORATIU RADULESCU: Piano Sonatas & String Quartets 1. Stephen Clarke, JACK Quartet. Mode 290.

'I prefer to have the theory and the theorems and everything and then to forget them, and to make a fantastic, devilish music'. So said Horatiu Radulescu in speaking to Bob Gilmore during their now much-referenced interview of 1996. In the first disc of what will be a comprehensive series, this pairing of Radulescu's piano sonatas and string quartets may create the impression of two very different musical voices. Piano Sonatas Nos 2 and 5 burst forth with driving bell calls and Romanian folk melodies – music that is tangible and decidedly human. In contrast, mysterious forces reach up from unknown

depths to pull the listener into the glimmering, intangible universe of String Quartet No. 5. Works of striking contrast, yet crafted from the same forge.

With the help of Gilmore's writings, fundamental connections are revealed. Passages from the Tao Te Ching of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu appear in each of these works, as titles, performance aphorisms and, in some cases, as integral parts of the notation. Also omnipresent is Radulescu's life-long fascination with harmonic spectra – he has been credited by many (himself included) as the father of Spectralism.

The equal-tempered piano might seem an incongruous instrument for a composer so focused on harmonically driven pitch precision. However, Radulescu saw his piano sonatas as 'simulations' of spectral harmony through equal temperament, and his spectral techniques are reified ingeniously through the constraints of the instrumental medium. He once described his piano music as 'a sonorous stained glass window' – words that evoke images of colour and surface, antiquity and mysticism, the objectivity of acoustic science meeting the subjectivity of human fable.

Piano Sonata No. 2 ('being and non-being create each other') takes up this contemplation of unified opposites, drawing inspiration from a Tao text which continues: 'Difficult and easy support each other. Long and short define each other. High and low depend on each other. Before and after follow each other.' 'It's nearly modern physics', Radulescu mused to Gilmore, 'matter and anti-matter, you see. It's a fantastic intuition [Lao Tzu] had'.

In this light, Radulescu's translation of harmonic spectra into equal-tempered nearest-equivalency seems in itself a kind of metaphor. The listener is at once aware of complex systems at work and unable to grasp them. Patterns in the pitch structures are soon overtaken by that familiar, rich and evocative sonority of the piano.

Piano Sonata No. 5 ('settle your dust, this is the primal identity') shares in this dialectic. Spectral harmonies, embedded within chime-like melismas and rhythmic ostinati, give rise to brilliant resonances through the uncanny evenness of Stephen Clarke's touch. Radulescu spoke of his admiration for Byzantine Monks and their disciplined listening practices ('they very ascetically enjoyed sound'). Clarke's performances are unmannered and generous, yet retain a coursing focus and a reliability of articulation that allows us to listen past gesture and into the fullness of the sound. The *out-of-tuneness* of the piano's temperament creates its own vibrant