

Highlights included the premieres of Anna Heflin's *Play It As It Lays* and Ian Mikyska's *Still, not still*, as well as a performance of Lejardin Hiller's seminal 1957 *Illiad Suite*.

A few days later, another favourite was *Thaw* by Czech composer Marie Nečasová, subtly orchestrated and paced, performed with sensitivity by members of the Ostravská banda (Ostrava Days' resident chamber orchestra). It was a welcome salve amidst a concert filled with big sounds and some very long pieces.

One of my all-round favourite concerts was 'Orchestra Opening': a concert of music for three orchestras including works by Alvin Lucier and Phil Niblock, as well as *Game XXII*, a new game piece by Austrian composer Bernhard Lang. A concert for three orchestras has long been a signature feature of Ostrava Days, and what a good thing it is—it provides a sonorous spectacle that you don't get in many places anymore.

Two nights later, the cathedral in the centre of Ostrava hosted a concert of choral and instrumental music. The young American composer Henry Gloege's new piece *ave verum corpus* made a strong impression, and the venerable Afro-Cuban-American composer Tania León was represented by three short pieces for choir which concluded the concert with a great atmosphere.

Were there some problems with the festival? Yes. Despite the number of women participating in the composer institute as invited mentors, the festival programming remained very heavily skewed towards male creatives, with some concerts featuring no women at all. The concerts were long (occasionally too long), and there were some programming decisions that, from a technical perspective, made me scratch my head (a five-minute string orchestra piece in the middle of a nearly two-hour programme for string quartet?). But maybe this weirdness is the allure of Ostrava Days—to relish the excessiveness

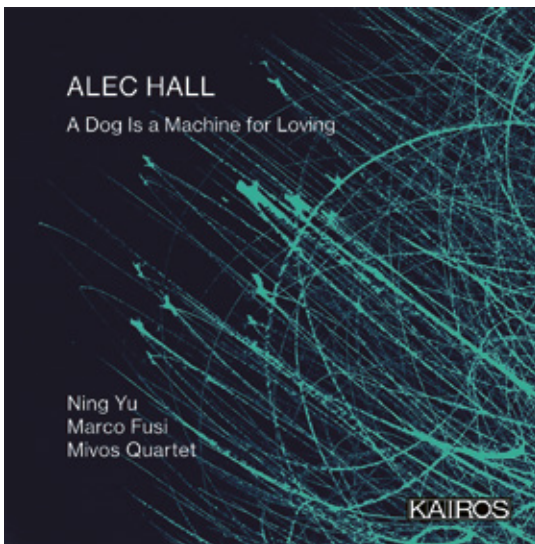
of it all and find moments that will stay with you long after a concert has finished. Where else in this day and age could you find a concert for three orchestras, two separate music marathons, re-constructed Futurist noise machines, an after-hours show of free improvisation, rap music and Americana-style folk, a saxophone quartet concert, classics of the Dadaist movement and a slew of hour-long pieces for solo instruments happening all in the same week?

Petr Kotík, alongside Ostrava Days' Executive Director Renata Spisarova and a small army of capable administrators, technicians and volunteers, should be commended for their smooth presentation of this glorious and slightly surreal experience. To quote the composer Christopher Butterfield after a concert one night, 'Only in Ostrava could I pull a stunt like this'.

Paolo Griffin

Alec Hall, *A Dog Is a Machine for Loving*. Yu, Fusi, Mivos Quartet. Kairos, 0022052KAI.

Since 1973 the John Lewis department store has been a notable landmark to the 'douce' residents of Edinburgh. It is here that the populace mulls over the correct colour of paint for walls, fashionable curtain poles and the most becoming curtains for said poles. It was therefore not without controversy when the shop decided to allow in dogs. For some, the last bastion of civilisation was about to be snuffed out by a mutt cocking its leg.



All this to say that not everyone likes dogs, and I wondered while listening to the title track of Alec Hall's new album, *A Dog Is a Machine for Loving*, whether affection for the animal is a prerequisite for enjoying this piece. The listener is invited to get up close and personal with some of Hall's pets, experiencing the roiling slaver in the jowls of these beasts, whilst being treated to some quenching, dry narration by pianist Ning Yu. The dog and piano sounds play sometimes together, sometimes apart. It is gratifying when the skittering of a dog across the floor is mirrored in the piano's complex gestural language, skilfully brought to life by Ning Yu. There is a pleasant distance, too, between the theory apparently necessary within the North American academic composition community (hello, Donna Haraway) and the sense that here is a dude who just really loves his dogs. That modernism has seemingly made little space for such affection is a good reason to reclaim the space now.

Somewhere towards the end of the 1990s, the music staff of my high school decided to refresh the keyboards. The model they chose was standard for the time, save for the addition of a round button labelled 'DJ'. Hammering that button

would repeat the shout 'DJ!' for as long as a twelve year old's stamina could last. The other samples that I remember particularly were the two versions of the exclamation 'Oh, YEAH!', which almost paradigmatically displayed the gender divide of the vocalists involved. Even then it was clear to us that there was a sexual element to the female vocalisation, one that was less obvious in the male. Sexualisation of the feminine voice, as well as its use as a helpful and supplicant digital companion, is an established part of our culture.

Hall's work *There are Only Two Ways to See Inside Someone* sets itself the difficult task of teasing out such layers of cultural baggage to explore the erotic. In doing so, the composer identifies a lacuna in the New Music landscape similar to the love for his pets, but this time in the inspection of sexuality. Moans and gasps in the electronics combine with Marco Fusi's diaphanous violin to create arresting textures. The voice is quickly taken out of its 'natural' sound world with fast repetitions, distortions and granular breaths moving from the intimate to the sonically vast. One of the 'two ways' suggested by the title is related to an MRI machine, and I'm left uncertain how to interpret the interplay of sounds from that mechanical, seemingly impersonal technology with the implied sexual energy at work. Do the voice, instrument and machine become sonically entwined? Is this the mechanical transcending itself as it is critically pulled apart or recycled? Perhaps the piece is a vehicle to ask these questions. If nothing else, and quite apart from possible interpretations, the relationship between violin and audio is dynamic and engaging, which is far from an easy feat.

The mechanical plays an important part throughout this disc. The final work, the string quartet *The Water's Memory, the Memory of Sand*, is no exception. It is an excellent performance by the Mivos Quartet where they are heard to engage

with their instruments as machines, which they essentially are. But the performance of mechanical gestures on these centuries-old instruments seems to introduce a distance between the machine-like sounds and their instrumental repetition; it is a creative distance that Hall's music seems to exploit.

Contrasting this mechanical material is a cantorial melody. Hall's family background is Jewish, though he was raised in a secular environment. The timbral distinction given to this melody—it sounds both comparatively distant and strained—is extremely effective and the most obvious link to the piece's purported theme: the Israel-Palestine conflict. If the piece cannot even begin to reach the sides and depths of the suffering and devastation that this 'conflict' continues to inflict, then it is hardly the fault of the music in question, but the gravity of what we have seen and still see.

Neil T. Smith

Laura Cocks, *FATHM*. Out Of Your Head Records + Relative Pitch, RP/OOYH 001.

Flute virtuoso Laura Cocks, a member of reputable New York City New Music ensembles such as Talea and TAK, has dozens of album credits to their name. *FATHM* is Cocks's first solo album as a sole creative force: composer, performer and improviser.

As such, *FATHM* presents music borne out of an inseparable intimacy between player and instrument, composing and sounding, imagining and listening. I often

find that music performed by its own composer bears an audible trace of this immediacy, and this is certainly the case in *FATHM*. Whether on C flute or bass flute, Cocks's stunningly novel technique is always charged with purpose and energy. Breath activates the instrument, but breath also carries a wild repertoire of vocalisations, and becomes a distinctly expressive 'voice' in its own right: one which reaches beyond music into a different kind of non-verbal discourse. Someone is trying to say something. At times it's almost like an epic verse recited by some extraterrestrial bard piping through an unfathomable respiratory system.

The first three tracks—*A thread held between your fingers*, *Illinois* and *To beget*—establish the ruffled and rugged sonic surface that defines the album, one whose musical elements are constantly twitching in a kaleidoscopic flux. Three infinitives for bass flute—*To beget*, *To outstretch* and *To fly*—successively intensify and lift with each track shorter than the last. The later consecutive tracks *To outstretch*, *A seed sucked between your teeth* and *A marsh wren* form another loose triptych recalling the album's opening three tracks, leaving it to the listener to find the connecting thread between them.

The hollering all-caps and snatched vowel of the record's title are echoed in *FAVN* and *YARN*, two of the lengthiest tracks which anchor the album. *FAVN* is an exploration of trumpet embouchure, in which the flute's embouchure opening is completely covered by the player's lips. It's an unusual effect in flute repertoire, typically coming off more as novelty than compelling material. But here, it's a revelation: an extreme intensification of Cocks's physical and expressive effort. Crossed with the album's characteristic restlessness of texture, it makes for music with a powerfully animated character, as if two cartoonishly unintelligible adults out of Charlie Brown were arguing over a glitchy