

of mechanistic, athletic material that leaves nothing to chance and nowhere to hide. They are also, again like everything here, couched in a language of sharp corners, surprising juxtapositions and recorded interventions, and, like everything here for a third time, they are flawlessly crafted. But the drama they stage is human, not rhetorical; the energy is organic, not imposed from without; the stakes seem higher, the shared experience with the towering exertions of pianist Magdalena Cerezo Falces and percussionist Leonie Klein more intimate, and the sonic language more concentrated. As a result it is these pieces that show the most of what the best of those old radio hits, whatever their degree of compression or danceability, had in spades: soul.

Evan Johnson  
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Jason Eckardt, *Passage*. Hardink, JACK QUARTET. Kairos, 0022028KAI.

American composer Jason Eckardt was recently named Distinguished Professor at City University of New York, the highest faculty distinction given by the institution. Two substantial chamber pieces from the 2010s are included in *Passage*, his first portrait CD for Kairos.

Eckardt's music addresses political and social concerns in intricately abstract ways. His works are distinct, energetic and often bracing, combining new complexity's extended techniques and hypervirtuosic ethos with the harmonic underpinnings and formal considerations of late modernism. His rhythmic language is considerably intricate, rife with metric modulations and rapid shifts of demeanor. JACK Quartet (Christopher Otto and Austin Wulliman, violins; John Richards, viola; Jay Campbell, cello) is one of a small handful of active groups that might possibly be able to play *Passages*. The last time I saw them live, shortly before the pandemic, JACK played a concert of all five of Elliott Carter's string quartets in a single afternoon at the Morgan Library that was of extraordinary quality. Their recordings of Helmut Lachenmann (mode267) and Ligeti, Pintscher, Cage and Xenakis (Wigmore Hall Live) are additional bona fides.

*Passage* is a signature work with a long gestation. The sense of narrative implied recalls the aforementioned Carter quartets. Cast in three movements, it is inspired by the CIA's sensory deprivation of detainees, the prisoners' subsequent release to transition to the outer world, and testimony against their torturers. Each of

these experiences is supplied its own movement: *Subject* (2011), *Ascension* (2014) and *Testimony* (2018). *Subject* depicts the brutal treatment of detainees, with ricocheting attacks, bow pressure and an arpeggiated chord that repeats at structurally significant points, sounding like a cell door slamming. Occasionally, the prevailingly forte dynamic recedes to high, hushed harmonics, suggesting the woozy state of mind of the tormented momentarily left alone, only to have the quartet re-enter with vicious, slashing gestures. *Subject* is a vivid depiction of the horrors inflicted on detainees by the CIA and its minions in various countries for decades.

*Ascension* addresses the return of detainees to an everyday life that will never again be everyday, filled with anxiety, PTSD and flashes of disturbing memories. Percussive clicks, altissimo sustained notes and fragments of the first movement's gestures lurk in a digressive and ominous framework. The music of the interrogators is played in a duet between viola and cello, until the violins move to the fore, enacting a nightmarish fortissimo fever dream. Eventually it is dispelled and the ominous music returns in the low strings, this time with soft violins in a duet of harmonics.

Long held high notes are distressed with microtonal glissandi at the opening of *Testify*, creating another unnerving texture. After these are finally cut off, the cello, which appears to depict those testifying about their crimes, provides a brief solo. This is once again interrupted by the violins. A colloquy ensues, and the cello's solos gradually grow longer, louder and more resolute. In an angular unravelling, the violins make one last attempt to win the day but are silenced. A coda filled with bow pressure ensues, concluding with enigmatic soft harmonies: justice, however provisional, has banished the secret police and their tactics. JACK performs *Passage* assuredly, with each detailed nuance rendered vividly.

The quartet is joined by pianist Jason Hardink for the quintet *Pulse-Echo* (2013). Hardink's playing accords well with that of JACK, adopting a rhythmically potent approach that blends with the percussive nature of many of the strings' gestures. A title that one could imagine for a Harrison Birtwistle score, *Pulse-Echo* itself has some aspects that recall late British modernism. Actually, the title is taken from a quote by Arnold Schoenberg: 'Art is the cry of distress of those who personally experience the fate of mankind. Within themselves they carry the pulse of the world and only an echo reaches the outside. And that echo is the work of art.'

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.