

## PROFILE: XENIA PESTOVA BENNETT

Pianist and composer Xenia Pestova Bennett has earned an international reputation as a leading proponent of uncompromising music. Her work spans a wide range of soundworlds, styles and genres from classical to contemporary art music, free improvisation, experimental electronica and avant-pop.

Xenia's commitment to contemporary music has inspired her to commission dozens of new works and collaborate closely with major innovators including Annea Lockwood, Karlheinz Essl and Gayle Young. Her nine studio albums to date include widely acclaimed recordings of core piano duo works by John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen with Pascal Meyer for Naxos Records, *Shadow Piano* (Innova), for piano, toy piano and electronics, reviewed by Peter Margasak in the *Chicago Reader* as a 'terrific album of dark, probing music', the complete piano works of Gayle Young (Farpoint), hailed as 'a triumph' by John Eyles in *All About Jazz*, and *Gold.Berg.Werk* (Ergodos), a reimagining of J.S. Bach's Goldberg Variations by Karlheinz Essl that Luke Clancy introduced as 'a sci-fi journey in the direction of 1741' on RTÉ Lyric FM.

Xenia's own compositions are available on Diatribe Records and TakuRoku. Her full-length album *Atomic Legacies* features the Ligeti Quartet and the Magnetic Resonator Piano and was highlighted in Bandcamp's 'Best of Contemporary Classical' in 2020. In *The Wire* Julian Cowley described the album as 'boldly conceived and brilliantly realised. . . a foretaste of things to come'; on RTÉ LyricFM Bernard Clarke called it 'intoxicating, extraordinarily eerie and evocative'; in *The Quietus* Jennifer Lucy Allan praised its 'melancholy. . . heart-swells and proper feelings'; and on BBC Radio 3 Tom Service said that it resembled 'a nuclear musical reaction that produces great, irradiated beauty'. Xenia's subsequent album, *Atonal Electronic Chamber Music for Cats*, takes an unexpected turn, using vintage synthesisers in an exploration of 1990's techno-art-pop nostalgia.

*You've recently put out a call for more music for the magnetic resonator piano (MRP). How did you become involved with the development of this instrument and what for you are its special qualities?*

The MRP is a very intuitive and ergonomic instrument. Not only is it relatively stable and reliable in terms of technology, it also sounds great (who wouldn't want the possibility of infinite sustain or crescendo when you are constantly battling against attack and decay?) and feels good to play. I've done a lot of work with a range of new instruments over the years and it's always satisfying to be able to use existing motor skills invested through years of training as a pianist, rather than have to learn or reinvent something new completely from scratch. With the MRP, you still have the option to use the regular piano action, or augment it by switching on the magnets – magic!



Photo: Lorcan Doherty

I can't take any special credit in terms of instrument development as this is a stable instrument that has been going strong for over a decade. However, I am responsible for finding and exploiting a quirky 'defect' that makes a very peculiar stuttery/clicky Geiger-counter-like sound that I love. I use it in my piece *Radon* from the *Glowing Radioactive Elements* set for MRP (available on Diatribe Records).

*You're a composer and improviser as well as being a performer. To what extent do these different ways of making music feed into one another? Have they all always been part of your practice as a musician?*

This is a really interesting question. I've been improvising since I first encountered a piano, well before I had formal lessons, at the age of about four or five (in other words, making noises – which is all it is, really). However, when I went on to study composition, I was reluctant to perform my own music. It was always more interesting to have someone else's take on it. I rediscovered the joy of making noises a bit later. Now, it's the opposite: I am really invested in hands-on involvement in the pieces that I devise, which always include a strong element of improvisation. This gives me the best of all possible worlds – I can be a performer, composer and improviser all at once. My current projects combine these different roles in a tactile way – I am about to premiere a new concert-length piece called *All Aglow* for prepared piano, electronics, field recordings and voice where I explore inspiration from marine bioluminescence and place plastic detritus reclaimed from the sea inside the piano. I am also looking forward to composing and playing in a new piece with the United Strings of Europe as well as a collaboration with an electronica artist, Son Zept, involving an enormous and beautiful pipe organ and electronics.

*You've often collaborated with other musicians. Are there any collaborative approaches that you've found especially rewarding?*

I've learned so much from so many composer and performer colleagues. It's really great to be able to work with someone over a period of time on several projects, which gives us the opportunity to really get to know the other person's work and develop trust. There are so many rewarding collaborations I could mention, not least the fact that I am lucky enough to cohabit with a fantastic composer and beautiful person, my partner Ed Bennett, who taught me so much about music and has written many wonderful keyboard works for me to play. At the moment, I am also learning the complete piano works of Annea Lockwood and feel incredibly fortunate to have had the privilege of working with this amazing composer over the years. I first met Annea in North Wales, where we did *Piano Burning* with SoundLands. I later went on to perform a version of *Piano Drowning*, also organised by SoundLands and featuring a new work by Ynyr Pritchard. We kept in touch and continued to intersect in London, New York and Belfast as I gradually added more of her pieces to my repertoire. Annea has such a fine and sensitively tuned ear, as well as a constant sense of wonder and joy – she is one of the most positive people I've ever met, which is so inspiring.

*I love your playing of the Bach Goldberg Variations on the album you made with Karlheinz Essl. What made you decide to present the work in this way?*

Thank you!

Again, I can't take any credit for the idea. *Gold.Berg.Werk* is an existing piece by Karlheinz Essl, so the concept is all his. It provides a wonderful way to reframe and re-experience the Goldberg Variations. I had wanted to perform the piano version ever since I first heard the harpsichord version some years ago. Hearing this piece live is such a special experience: the algorithmic live electronic interludes are specialised in real time, in between the Bach. While Karlheinz uses only two loudspeakers (including one transducer), these are hidden, placed and angled in a very clever way, which makes the sound appear to bounce and fly around the space. It creates an aural illusion of a multi-speaker array without the visual distraction. Using a modern grand piano is very fitting: as a resonating string instrument, it works really well when combined with the electronic interludes, which use modified recordings of a string trio. I found the experience tremendously refreshing, which brought a new perspective on something familiar. It was also an excellent excuse to finally learn the Goldbergs.

*How did new music come to play such an important role in your career?*

I was lucky to have amazing open-minded teachers. I studied composition alongside piano as a child. It was during these formative early lessons that I discovered a lot of contemporary repertoire. My teacher at the time was quite daring with what he was teaching and composing (in the former USSR). After my family moved to New Zealand, I rediscovered my love of new music at university. I was able to escape school early and enter the undergraduate degree at Victoria University of Wellington at the age of 16. My piano teacher was the great Judith Clark, who made sure that all her students played contemporary pieces (including music by living composers) alongside standard repertoire. I promptly started hanging out with composers, who were the cool people, and enrolled in composition classes as a second study, both acoustic and electronic. I then went on to focus more specifically on contemporary piano repertoire in London with Philip Mead, Amsterdam with Håkon Austbø, privately with Yvonne Loriod in Paris and Avignon and finally with Louise Bessette and Sara Laimon in Montreal at the Conservatoire de musique de Montreal and McGill University, where I completed my doctorate. I haven't looked back since!

*What's next? Do you have a sense of how the musical world, and your place within it, may be changing?*

We are living in a very challenging time for artists in the UK. It's much, much more difficult for young people wanting to start a career in contemporary music today than it was 20 years ago. Change is definitely needed, but, unfortunately, it is not clear how or when things will change. Spending a lot of time in Northern Ireland, I often work with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, and it is absolutely remarkable to observe the difference between available funding and general support for the arts in the two countries. We urgently need some fresh thinking in the UK. We all have to keep going somehow and remain positive meanwhile, but I really hope that new opportunities will arise before too long. Music and art are so nourishing and precious – we can't afford to lose our basic human right to explore, grow and develop new sonic spaces.