

CDs AND DVDs

Lucia Dlugoszewski, *Abyss and Caress*. Klangforum Wien, Kalitzke, Anderson, Evans, Volkov. Col Legno, WWE2CD20460.

The seven tracks on Klangforum Wien's new Dlugoszewski portrait all date from her New York years. *Openings of the (Eye)*, scored for Erick Hawkins' 1952 ballet, was among her earliest professional engagements in the city – she was 27 at the time – and *Disparate Staircase Radical Other*, for the choreographer's posthumous 1995 Baryshnikov tribute, one of her last. Between them, *Abyss and Caress* (her trumpet concerto and highest-profile commission, written for Boulez and the New York Phil), two more Hawkins ballets (the pair were married in secret in 1960), and the chamber *Avanti* (recorded for the first time here) round out a four-decade retrospective of a singular voice that bridged dance, plastic arts and composition in the thick of Uptown modernism. By all accounts, the album reads like the missing attestation to a spirited feminine presence in a male-heavy avant-garde: it speaks, or claims to speak, of New York City.

But if you ask me, this one belongs to Detroit. For all her elsewhere similarities – and there are many: frequent comparison is made to Partch, with her arsenal of custom-built percussion; Monk, for their shared work on dance; Cage, for her extreme experiments in prepared piano; and her teacher Varèse, for her delimited structuralism – Lucia Dlugoszewski's first 25 years in Hamtramck, the Polish enclave, reveal more of her practice than any aesthetic resemblance ever could. It is in my city's habit to bear forth these fringe cosmologists, strange insurgents who wield erudition with a confounding and idiosyncratic sensuality. Dlugoszewski shares – with Alice Coltrane, Robert Ashley, Grace Lee Boggs and adrienne maree brown – this Motor City sensibility, bound not by their thinking *about* Detroit so much as how the city thinks *through them*.

Detroit is in Dlugoszewski's haptic attention to mechanism. The music *drives*: catches, clips, drops, shocks at breakneck pace, something always moving, ever activating, always building itself anew – but it does so without the promise of infinity. Sonic automation is here just as

temporary and susceptible to the pressures of the moment. Like her self-named 'timbre piano' – extended by all manner of strings, bows and plectra – just the slightest shift in touch returns a drastic change in sound. All pulse, rhythm, pitch lives halfway between an emerging body and brute form: a world as firmed by machine assembly as it is reactive to human riot.

Detroit is in the way she throws around philosophy and poetics with a reckless eroticism. Her texts – she writes as many words as notes – read even today like baffling prophecy: she fixated on her own music, borrowing terms, theories and ideas at whim with little regard for their compatibility or historical context. The recurrent theme is her search for a 'radical empirical immediacy' of sound – 'suchness', she calls it: 'Suchness, not events: suchness is personal, unique, vulnerable, bewildering, the hole in the wall – ultimately, perception. Form is how the ears listen. Sound that is not denotative, connotative, casual, postulated – is therefore pure suchness.' She insists on these kinds of proper nouns for her objects, stamping and mobilising them even at the risk of sense. The complete antipathy to East Coast/European intellectual methodology; Detroit knows much of that.

And then there's the music's ragged proximity to ruin. Dlugoszewski's architectural juxtaposing teeters dangerously close to collapse. The instant, she knows, is fragile, ever at risk of folding on itself. Occasionally it even happens: in the eleventh ensemble hour of *Abyss and Caress*, just before the ten-minute cadenza that closes the concerto, the orchestra ekes out a last cataclysm before dropping headlong into lowlands. Grit, thick weighty wreckage is all that's left when the omnivorous thrum of momentary creation fails. 'Like the spatial loneliness after a falling star', she writes in that programme note.

Detroit knows this, that much is certain. This is music from a city that has been through lonely.

In all this, Klangforum Wien have done due diligence and captured her with fidelity. The performances are scrupulous, painstakingly reconstructed and utterly committed to the stark corporeality of Dlugoszewski's world.

Perhaps even more than she could have imagined: compared to clips of the early Hawkins ensemble performances, it's a wonder to hear just how far new-music performance has come in 75 years. Finally, it seems, she has interpreters dexterous enough to keep up with her utopian, hairpin velocity. And calling in Peter Evans to tackle the impossible trumpet writing was curatorial brilliance. Though Evans is a vastly different player from Lucia's chosen Gerald Schwartz – less technically careful or classically 'beautiful' – his seemingly effortless abandon in the high-stakes extremities is a welcome reminder of the longevity of Dlugoszewski's impact on the instrument's modernity: many of new music's brass techniques were seeded first by her suggestion. Evans plays like a long-lost child of this music, and his touch lends the concerto a delirious sense of instantaneity.

But Evans, an American, is conspicuous here: the album is a predominantly German-speaking affair. Which isn't theoretically a problem – Americans do the inverse all the time – except that it's not an isolated phenomenon. Like Musikfabrik's Partch project ten years ago, or the mounting of Braxton's *Trillium* in Prague in 2023, American cultural negligence continues to foist responsibility on to Europe for the upkeep of our less-orthodox inheritances: as I write this, Musikfabrik is busy preparing a night of Hawkins/Dlugoszewski ballets for MaerzMusik in Berlin. America banks on other governments to fund what our novelty-fuelled performance economy can't spare the time to preserve, and the result has been a contemporary experimentalism increasingly ignorant to its own ancestry. Much is owed to Klangforum for the Dlugoszewski renaissance, but it begs the question why it took enterprising Austrians to rediscover an artist reared in the Corn Belt? Perhaps, if we showed more care for our weird vanguard, we could learn to better love the industrial mid-American grandeur that such a reckless intellectual independence as hers makes almost holy.

Ty Bouque

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Linda Catlin Smith, Cassandra Miller, Laurence Crane, *Folks' Music*.

Chamber Choir Ireland, Hillier, Esposito Quartet. Louth Contemporary Music, LCMS2302.

If the ongoing tumult of our fast-paced reality doesn't provide enough fodder for contemplation, consider adding one more item to your list – the state of things with new music. Although

minuscule in comparison with more pressing concerns, there is a crucial question articulated by Paul Griffiths in his liner notes for *Folks' Music*: what happens to compositions after their inaugural and often solitary performance? 'Festivals come and go. First performances also. Where new music is concerned, the instincts of the throwaway culture have largely taken over. A new piece, even by a composer of acknowledged distinction, will be performed a few times and then discarded. On to the next one,' writes Griffiths.¹ Whether this is because new music has been contaminated by the toxic by-products of our excessively saturated information society, affecting the way our tiny music economy works, is irrelevant. The reality is that most pieces do not get a second performance.

But should all pieces be recorded and preserved for future generations, thereby increasing our digital footprint with gigabytes of data? Certainly not! However, in 2023, one organisation – the Louth Contemporary Music Society – successfully managed to preserve music that really mattered. *In C Irish* has become a documented piece of history, allowing listeners worldwide to live through the first performance of Terry Riley's infamous *In C* played by traditional Irish musicians on traditional instruments. Their latest offering, *Folks' Music*, features two choral works – *The City, Full of People* by Cassandra Miller and *Folio* by Linda Catlin Smith – as well as *String Quartet No. 2* by Laurence Crane. These compositions, commissioned by LCMS' co-founder Eamonn Quinn, were initially performed and recorded live at the LCMS midsummer weekend festival in 2023. Now existing in digital form, the question becomes more relevant than ever: do they deserve to be preserved into the future?

The City, Full of People by Cassandra Miller opens the album with its gleaming contrapuntal bliss, whose sheer beauty, typical of any polyphonic work, can only be grasped unilaterally, from one viewpoint only. Over its 16 minutes, the listener gets to enjoy a moving performance by Chamber Choir Ireland conducted by Paul Hillier. The choir, strategically divided into six groups encircling the audience, creates a unique spatial dynamic that disperses an omnipresent radiance, compensating for the inherent human limitation in focusing on multiple vocal lines simultaneously. Fortunately, the recording successfully captures and preserves these spatial reverberations. In her characteristic approach to borrowing pre-existing material and infusing it

¹ Paul Griffiths, *Folks' Music* liner notes.