



practices of the new-music scene while also being uniquely well crafted and composed.

The tape's four tracks are 'Poems', 'Nocturnes', 'Chimes' and 'Gardens', and from the opening fade-in we can hear Toraman's decision-making clearly. In the liner notes she describes herself as a curator and archivist 'rather than a musician'. This is heard in how discrete, clearly chosen and diverse the sonic materials are, from Alvin Lucier-esque sine tones to pastoral field recordings to clubby synth pads. The tape itself, part of a lovely package from label Obscure & Terrible, is also made of a crisp clear plastic that fully reveals the magnetic tape itself, bringing an archival aesthetic. (I did not get a tape as I have no tape machine and I refuse, I refuse! But the tape does look lovely.)

I bristle when composers describe themselves as something other than 'composer', not because I think 'composer' is worth defending or preserving on its own, but because I think 'archivist' functions more as a rhetorical signal than a practical description, playing at an outside genre to insiders while still preserving one's original expertise in the eyes of outsiders. No matter what the liner notes say, though, Toraman's capital-A Artistry is present throughout the album. It is spare in such a way as to be clear she stands firmly behind her sounds. Although the language is ambient, it is not 'set it and forget it': there are clear starts and stops that reward a listener's attention.

'Poems' is the star track on the album, but not by much. It feels more like stanzas, Toraman letting gorgeous chords rest and bloom before positioning a new timbre, at just the right time, right in the middle of our gaze. This approach could be wispy but instead feels like you are being set down, gently and firmly. 'Nocturnes' is machinic but massaged, a human hearing machines as music. Toraman has a knack for taking sine-wave beating and making a quick, intense moment out of it, recalling Lucier again, but this is very much her own. The track ends with a healthy period of waiting, a respect for those of us who want to sit listening to it a little more.

'Chimes', half the length of the other tracks at five minutes, contains the only material credited to a musician, samples of Julie Michael's viola, which is beautifully played and mixed but stands out a bit, telling a little too much of the story. Although brief, the track pushes and pushes; it plays with presence and with shadows. It is disquieting but in a way we were set up for by the music preceding it. What was veiled is briefly in front of us; the machine we listened to

in 'Nocturnes' is now one we depend on or operate.

The entire tape is sonically very tactile: it tickles the ears, right down to the muted cricket samples in the final track. 'Gardens' is made of stalls and glitches, the longest track on the album and a worthy ending. After 38 minutes, the tape's arc feels traditional, but in a very satisfying way that embraces and respects the listener.

In a genre from which intentionality is being withdrawn, *In a Dark House* is an album that is part ambient, part electronica and wonderfully intentional. It will reward your time and perk you up. Toraman's concert-music career continues apace, but with this project she has shown her ability to look into alternate forms of performing and recording and produce top-quality work with patience and expertise.

Ian Power

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Michiko Ogawa, Lucy Railton, *fragments of reincarnation*. another timbre, at213.

To begin by stating the obvious – this is very beautiful music. And with a recording that is very beautiful, at first it feels hard to know what to say. I like it a lot. It is very enjoyable on repeated listens. It is pretty, generous music. Lush, calm, slow, expansive, easy, subtle. My dad, appreciator of lots of different music (though perhaps less familiar with much of the music that would usually be reviewed in *TEMPO*), also likes it a lot. He is happy to listen to it again and again as we both work in the kitchen in my family home in Newcastle, as the season turns from summer to autumn and the sky glows bright blue.

Largely based on modal, consonant harmonies, this long-form, semi-improvised recording explores subtleties of timbre and tuning through the juxtaposition of the equal temperament of an old Hammond organ and the Pythagorean tuning of the shō, a Japanese fixed-reed instrument. The shō is traditionally used in gagaku to create what we in the West would call cluster chords, but its set of available pitches is near-diatonic. This creates a world of essentially consonant clustered harmony, which is ever so slightly off-kilter from the tuning system of the Hammond. Railton's cello can traverse both worlds, but the clusters of the shō are what form the backbone of this 45-minute improvisation.

Ogawa and Railton recorded their duo of shō and cello first, and then Ogawa subsequently overdubbed the Hammond to add a bed of harmony and resonance. This is, in some senses, simple music – transparent in its construction, sensitive and straightforward in its execution. The meeting of Railton’s cello with Ogawa’s shō as well as the Hammond organ is inspired as all three instruments can have a metallic brightness to them, which creates a timbrally consonant sonic landscape. The listener is therefore presented with an improvisatory dialogue that has, at times, very blurred delineations of voice. In a simple way, this leads me to read into this music a real sense of generosity, a genuine spirit of collaboration.

Within the first 30 seconds, the music has unfolded from a single note into a harmonic cloud that juxtaposes the shō’s tuning with that of the Hammond, establishing the minute discrepancies of pitch that are the focus of the entire recording. Unlike much contemporary music that experiments with tuning, though, this ‘detuned-ness’ is very subtle. This is a less abrasive contrast than that which is often heard in, say, the music of Catherine Lamb (a composer and frequent collaborator of Railton’s, whose work is also centred on tuning). Lamb’s music is often on more of a tightrope, much sparser and more explicitly and deliberately ‘detuned’. This record does not feel especially vulnerable. Its slight slippage of tuning is, rather than unsettling and challenging, warm and liquid, to my ears at least. In this sense, it called to mind the soundtrack to the 2022 film *Aftersun* – which makes sense, given that it was composed by Railton’s fellow experimental cellist Oliver Coates.

This represents a divergence from the darkness of much of Railton’s work. Her usual deployment of electronics, field recordings and an unsettling, fragmented gestural landscape is replaced here by slowness and warmth. I perhaps expected this record to be similar to Railton’s recent release with organist Kit Downes (*Subaerial*, 2021, SN Variations), which was also improvised – but it isn’t at all. *Subaerial* was recorded using the organ in an Icelandic cathedral, and *fragments of reincarnation* features an

old, battered Hammond organ, and yet *fragments of reincarnation* has a much more religious atmosphere. The opening’s stately organ gesture reminds me of the Anglican choral music that I loved in my undergraduate years. The solemn, warm modality of the music of Howells feels like an unlikely reference point for the improvisations of Lucy Railton and Michiko Ogawa and yet that’s what comes to mind repeatedly when I listen to this recording. The gestural language is similarly sweeping and assured, much less murky and nebulous than what have come to expect from Railton’s work.

The beauty of this record reminds me of some of my favourite ambient tracks – the work of Chihei Hatakayama, specifically the album *Mirrors*, from 2011. Though that album is hazier and has interludes of unpitched texture in the form of field recordings, it feels similar in its deployment of consonant clusters and wavering brightness. And it feels ridiculous and trite to say, but this also reminds me of Brian Eno’s richest, slowest, brightest music, like *Music for Airports*’ ‘2/2’ (1978).

And while moments in this improvisation do stretch and slip away from pure modal consonance, with the shō’s clusters overlapping at times to create some temporary instability of modality, the music never really changes in mood away from its fundamental warmth. Structurally, the piece is built around the *aitake* series of 11 chords that the shō would conventionally play in *gagaku*, and this gives the recording a pleasing structure of flexible, reiterative cyclicality, which at the 45-minute mark simply ends. This is apparently what gave Ogawa and Railton their title, *fragments of reincarnation*. Perhaps this is the lapsed Catholic in me speaking, but I can only assume that they also felt the religiosity of the title to be appropriate – reincarnation feels an aptly grand, generous idea for this music.

*I refer throughout to the interview Ogawa and Railton gave to another timbre ahead of the release, which can be found at [www.anothertimbre.com/ogawarailton.html](http://www.anothertimbre.com/ogawarailton.html) (accessed 9 September 2023).*

Joanna Ward

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