



Eva-Maria Houben

Air: Works For Flutes And Organ

Edition Wandelweiser CD

"Music, in performance, is a type of sculpture. The air in the performance is sculpted into something," Frank Zappa suggested in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. Eva-Maria Houben's works for flutes and pipe organ, on her new release *Air*, do indeed have the shaped and moulded feel of sculptural processes within time. Yet Houben scarcely conforms to Zappa's definition of the composer as "a guy who goes around forcing his will on unsuspecting air molecules, often with the assistance of unsuspecting musicians". There is no hint of coercion in her music, but a strong sense of musicians and instruments working together, with air as their shared medium.

Zappa's image of the strident composer, wading into static air and wilfully generating "atmospheric perturbations" needs to be set in context. Physicist James Jeans, in his classic 1937 study *Science And Music*, pointed out that if the air molecules that exist in an ordinary room were to be lined up side by side they would form a chain that could stretch around the earth 25,000 million times. That fact alone should deflate the most hubristic compositional ego. Physical reality precedes and sets fundamental terms for each creative act. As Jeans explained, miniature whirlwinds form when a blast of air encounters an obstacle, just as whirlpools appear when a stream of water strikes a rock. "It is precisely these little whirlwinds of air that are responsible for the production of sounds in wind instruments – without them our flutes and organ pipes would cease to function."

Jeans also pointed out that sound travels far faster in solid materials such as wood and metal than in air. Within the bodies of wind instruments there occur vibrations

of much higher frequencies than those that occur in the columns of air that each contains. As an organist herself for more than 30 years, Houben has experienced at first hand that instrument's physical heft, the sculpted plasticity of its structure, its vibrational feel and particular sound. Her compositions respond with sensitivity and evident fascination to the swirling eddies that form at the lip of each organ pipe or at the opening of a flute or recorder, producing their distinctive instrumental character.

As a longstanding member of the Wandelweiser collective Houben has favoured a pared back, whittled down approach to music-making, although in her recent pieces, including the three included here, a less austere aesthetic, embracing gently articulated melody, is evident. Ruth Walser's recorders, with their windways specially designed by master technician Geri Bollinger, take the flute role in the three pieces on this recording. On *Ein Schlummer (A Slumber)*, recorded at Elgg, near Zurich, Walser warbles consoling lullaby phrases on tenor and bass recorders while the church's organ, played by Barbara Müller-Hämmerli, curls and wraps tenderly around their sound, and the building's acoustic seems to sanctify this blend.

Aufhören (Coming To An End), performed by Walser solo, is a studio recording that nonetheless features architecturally reverberant decay, teasing out her stream of air shapes into hollow pockets of expiring sound. Throughout the three movements and 21 minutes of *Atmen V (Breathing)* Walser was performing once again in Hardstudios Winterthur, in Switzerland, while Houben's organ playing was recorded in St Margareta's church, on the outskirts of Dortmund. This sleight of hand in the production process creates no audible sense of dislocation. The

The compositions of Eva-Maria Houben breathe new life into reductionist convention. By Julian Cowley

instruments inhale and exhale, wheeze and whistle, drone and sing and fuse identities in hazy atmospheres that blur their auditory image like mist on a mirror.

These performances do indeed sculpt air, yet air in itself is neither tranquil nor vacant. Each breath we necessarily take draws in countless millions of molecules and, as Jeans dramatically told us, "it is only their continual hammering on our lungs from inside that keeps our chests from collapsing". As Houben's restrained and refined music is played, every solid surface in the performance space is under constant bombardment as molecules zoom and bounce around at speeds comparable to that of a rifle bullet.

After pursuing the characteristic reductionist trajectory and ground-clearing intentions of the Wandelweiser collective, Houben seems to have initiated a programme of reconstruction, a reimagining of music in the purged and scoured space. Other Wandelweiser composers have made a similar return to notes and harmony in recent years. Here, the erasure of familiar musical conventions, the embrace of apparent emptiness, proves to have been a means of establishing contact with suprasensory conditions of existence and with their physical consequences.

On its return journey from sound's molecular domain, Houben's *Air* crosses a point where the piping of a recorder declares its affinity with the rustle of blades of grass in a breeze or the high whine of overhead wires in strong wind, and where the emergence of an organ tone shares the character of an essential breath. What the muted eloquence of *Air* really conveys is that even within the least openly expressive work of bleached minimalism there is an incessant din of atmospheric perturbation that whirls unheard around each unsuspecting listener. □