

Evan Parker/John Edwards/Steve Noble

PEN

Dropa Disc CD/DL

Recorded in Antwerp in January 2015, *PEN* is the first live document of Evan Parker's trio with the crack rhythm section of John Edwards and Steve Noble. The saxophonist is in fine form, responding to his partners' woodpecker percussion and elastic bass snaps with warm, almost bluesy phrases. At several points, the saxophonist embarks on his trademark flurries of circular breathing, complemented by Edwards's gloopy bass glissandi and hummingbird vibrations, and Noble's rattlebox drum effects. Part two is particularly impressive, opening with scampering bass runs and strummed chords from Edwards before slowing to a crawl. Parker lays down deep, dark tones, moving into a series of pinched and slightly raspy phrases as Noble raises the tempo. At one point, the trio almost swing, with Parker playing boppish lines with a gnarled edge, as Edwards walks over crazy paving and Noble rumbles and rolls.

Sloth Racket

Shapeshifters

Luminous CD/DL

Led by baritone saxophonist Cath Roberts, Sloth Racket's pieces often begin with loosely directed improvisations that lead into a theme. Once they get there, the UK quintet tend not to stay put. "Edges" opens the album with an exchange between Seth Bennett's bowed bass clusters and Roberts's inquisitive baritone. They settle into a delicate, wistful theme before Sam Andreae's tenor and Anton Hunter's crisp guitar open things out. Drummer Johnny Hunter finally enters with a series of inventive frame taps and light multi-directional rolls, inviting tenor whelps and guitar scabble. "Tracking" initially pivots on a creeping chromatic guitar figure, breaking down into a semi-free baritone and drum feature, before an elegant tenor figure and spacey guitar chords herald the shift into a slow-burning modal passage.

Trevor Watts Amalgam

Closer To You

Hi4Head CD

Reissued for the first time, 1979's *Closer To You* finds Trevor Watts blowing over superb grooves and slinky blues riffs. "De Dublin Thing" is a tight bit of free funk, with drummer Liam Genockey racing through Clyde Stubblefield-meets-Rashied Ali grooves. Colin McKenzie's in the pocket bass guitar provides an anchor, but can be a little stodgy, lagging behind Genockey's tearaway drumming. "South Of Nowhere" opens with McKenzie playing John McLaughlin-esque harmonics under Watts's soulful alto, before an angular groove heralds a leap into freedom. A 19 minute tribute to Roland Kirk, "Dear Roland" begins with Watts playing two horns over understated bass throbs, resonant gongs and rumbling toms. With shades of Miles Davis's "He Loved Him Madly", it's the album's clear highlight, with gorgeously mournful playing from Watts. □

Julian Cowley on memories of a taxidermist, illuminated aids to prayer, and a secret history of violence

Peter Garland

The Birthday Party

New World CD

As editor for 20 years of the journal *Soundings*, Peter Garland's consistently fine work as composer is often overlooked. These three pieces for piano, played by his longterm associate Aki Takahashi, display Garland's taste for structural sturdiness and harmonic nuance, each chord decisively placed, each pause shimmering sonorously like heat-haze radiating through a rugged landscape. But there's an unexpectedly intimate feel to *The Birthday Party*. Satie's influence, translated from Montmartre to Maine, contributes to the music's reflective nature and flexible take on time. Takahashi nurtures Garland's habitual lucidity, even when on *Blessingway* – a Navajo name – fuzzy clusters approximate distorted blues guitar. *Amulet*, inspired by a Roberto Bolaño story, has four piano tracks interlocked. They teeter dramatically between buoyancy and melancholy.

Gato Libre

Neko

Libra CD

Trumpeter Natsuki Tamura formed Gato Libre in Tokyo, 2003, and the unit now operates as a trio following the death of two original members. On *Neko*, which features six of his compositions, he is joined by co-founder Satoko Fujii, an accomplished pianist who in this context has consistently opted to play accordion, and trombonist Yasuko Kaneko. The notation for these largely improvised pieces is sparse but an overall consistency of mood speaks of a shared emotional wavelength as well as a common thread in the musical cues. The horns get elegiacally eloquent or register turbulent feelings through growls and squally burbling. Fujii presses on, radiating calm. Gently involving music, regulated by the accordion's steady and unflappable breathing.

Simon Holt

A Table Of Noises

NMC CD

A Table Of Noises is a lively percussion concerto inspired by Simon Holt's memories of his great uncle, a taxidermist. Launching straight into rickety rhythms and a crisscross of shrill whistles, soloist Colin

Currie and members of The Hallé Orchestra embrace the spirit of homespun surrealism figured in this piece's allusions to a dog that falls asleep standing up and a neighbour whose glass eye swivels when she grows angry. Imagine *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* given a radical overhaul by Xenakis, factor in a healthy measure of Lancastrian humour, and you'll be somewhere in the vicinity of Holt's workshop with its quirky contents, resident ghost and invigorating energy. *St Vitus In The Kettle* provides a brief intermission, manic in mood, rigorous in form. Then *Witness To A Snow Miracle* extends Holt's bold and brilliant contortions of orchestral sound to treat the death of a young Christian martyr. Chloë Hanslip on violin ratchets up the anguish.

Eva-Maria Houben

Livres D'Heures

Edition Wandelweiser 2×CD

Johan Lindvall

Solo/Ensemble

Edition Wandelweiser 2×CD

Almost 100 years ago, historian Johan Huizinga noted that during the European Middle Ages contrast between silence and sound was more marked than in modern life. But bells, he observed, were a continuous presence, coordinating life, encoded with communal significance. Eva-Maria Houben's intriguing reflection upon medieval books of hours, illuminated aids to prayer, opens appropriately with a lengthy sequence of variously inflected chimes rung out on tubular bells and piano. They mark passing time while conveying a strong sense of devotional stillness. That perception of simultaneous change and stasis continues through an exchange of frail tones between two violins. A further hour is occupied by three versions of some enigmatic ritual performed at the threshold of audibility by Houben and an associate using a range of hushed instrumental resources.

Oslo based composer and pianist Johan Lindvall belongs to a less self-assured domain of quiet music. His piano preludes flaunt their inconsequential character, while his invocations of three iconic lesbian women are sober and reserved. More satisfying are his subdued, delicate pieces for chamber ensemble.

Izumi Kuremoto

Late Chrysanthemums

Shotpeen 2×CD + DVD

The mysteriously elusive Izumi Kuremoto appears to be a Japanese composer based in New York. *Venus*, for solo violin, was realised by Ellen Gronningen in 1993 and *Opening*, for two soprano voices, two cellos and the composer's MIDI embellishments, was recorded in 2001. These flamboyantly gestural pieces can be heard in standard stereo and in still more vivid 5.1 surround sound on the DVD, where they are combined with Mark Depman's video images of cascading water, maritime traffic and airport activity. Two recordings from 2016 on the second CD exhibit less extrovert fluency, more shading and variability of mood but also a more pronounced air of formality. Soloist Elizabeth Panzer joins The Brooklyn String

Quartet for *Three Movements For Harp And Strings*. Then violinist Gronningen, a member of that quartet, steps into the expressive limelight once again to etch out the contours of *Late Chrysanthemums*, with a mellowing gloss from Eric Phinney's vibraphone.

Max Richter

Out Of The Dark Room

Milan 2×CD

In 1989 Max Richter was co-founder of Piano Circus, a British keyboard ensemble set up to ride the crest of current interest in minimalist music. Since then his multifaceted career has accommodated numerous credits for film scores, six of which are represented here. Richter's success in providing appropriate accompaniment for a memorable and troubling film such as Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* is beyond question. He knows his craft. Still, some scores detached from their visual dimension offer an ambivalent experience, and in isolation his music can at times appear a little too manipulative or overly calculating in its strategies to fashion a mood or elicit emotional response.

Howard Skempton

The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner

NMC CD

Howard Skempton's music doesn't wait to be admired, it engages actively in communication. This welcome release presents two works, each spanning more than 30 minutes. Skempton's setting of *The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner* avoids accentuation of the ghoulish and surreal elements in Coleridge's narrative. Baritone Roderick Williams sounds like a man intent on making meaningful social connection rather than some haunted deviant, and the chamber ensemble steer clear of expressionistic excess. The solo voice on *Only The Sound Remains* is allocated to viola, although all 16 members of Birmingham Contemporary Music Group bring their own colours and accents to this attractively variegated elaboration of a long and recurrent melody.

Stefan Wesołowski

Rite Of The End

Ici D'Ailleurs CD/DL/LP

French photographer Francis Meslet is drawn to desolate interiors and abandoned artefacts imprinted with fading traces of human use or occupation. The label Ici D'Ailleurs commissioned music from Polish composer Stefan Wesołowski to accompany an exhibition of Meslet's work. *Rite Of The End*, a sequence of six atmospheric pieces, came into being when Wesołowski's temperamental affinity with that imagery took on its own momentum and grew beyond the project in hand. These are his own instrumental evocations of loss and decay, mournful progressions through cavernous spaces. Wilting melodies are hemmed in by resonant menace, dissipated through drifting clouds of bowed tones or punctuated by ominous percussive thuds. Studio crafted and cinematically suggestive, this is the soundtrack to an aftermath, a brooding distillation of memory burdened with a secret history of violence. □