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 Sounding, Peter Garland’s consistently fine work as composer is often overlooked. These three pieces for piano, played by his longstanding associate Aki Takahashi, display Garland’s taste for structural sturdiness and harmonic nuance, each chord decisively placed, each pause shivering 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 New York, 2001. These flamboyantly gestural pieces can be heard in standard stereo and in still more vivid 5.1 surround. Skempton’s setting of three evocative poems, for two soprano voices, two cellos and solo voice on alto saxophone, is drawn to desolate interiors and abandoned artefacts imprinted with fading traces of human use or occupation. The label Ici artéfact see the visual dimension offer an ambivalent experience, and in isolation his music can be a little too manipulative or overly calculating in its strategies to fashion a mood or elicit emotional response.

Izumi Kuremoto

Late Chrysanthemums

Shotopen 2xCD + DVD

The mysteriously elusive Izumi Kuremoto appears to be a Japanese composer based in New York. Venus, for solo violin, was realised by Ellen Grongning 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, with 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

Mian 2xCD

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 Rite 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 says 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 actively variegated elaboration of a long and recurrent melody.

Stefan Wesołowski

Rite Of The End

In D’Allier CD/DL/JP

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’Allier 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 instrumentally suggestive, this is the soundtrack to an aftermath, a brooding distillation of memory burdened with a secret history of violence.