

EDITORIAL: VERY HEAVEN

The nineteenth-century writer Honoré de Balzac refused to be photographed because he believed each exposure dissolved a vital layer of the spirit. His great contemporary Gérard de Nerval went further, holding that each photograph released a *doppelgänger* who would pursue the sitter until their death. Roland Barthes, in his highly personal study *Camera Lucida*, uses the term *punctum* to denote the touching detail in a photograph that wounds or distresses the observer. We read how Native American tribes were initially wary about being photographed or audio recorded, for reasons not dissimilar to those of their French counterparts. My father, when I bought a cassette recorder and microphone in my early teens, refused to let me record the sound of his voice, in keeping with goodness knows what superstition he had picked up; it will bring us bad luck, he said.

None of this is exactly nonsense. Photographs and recordings are hauntings, of a kind: a once-living event is captured and replayed, the same and yet strangely different. Many of us have experienced an uncanny feeling in listening to recordings of Brahms playing the piano, or Joachim the violin, recordings made many generations before our birth. It is as though their ghosts are playing for us. Nerval did not say if the *doppelgängers* live on after death: recordings certainly do.

Joanna Bailie's recent music often takes recordings as points of departure – a music box, a car passing, a fragment of a Brahms symphony. She generally makes no attempt to disguise them, allowing the sounds to charm or to wound us, as the case may be. And her installation work reanimates the ancient optical device of the *camera obscura*, a precursor of photography, turning the world literally upside down. Cassandra Miller's music will often start from recordings of musicians: Maria Callas, an unknown mbira player from Mozambique, the song of a North American thrush. But these are typically not present as actual recordings in the finished composition; they have inspired new things. Music begets other music, in an atemporal jumble of voices of the living and the dead, the close-up and the geographically remote.

Besides the creative (and fearless) use of recorded material, several other themes are threaded through *TEMPO* 269. One is a focus on the work and ideas of young composers, three of them: Bailie, Miller, and Andrew Hamilton, whose wit, devotion to (supposedly) simple musical materials, and faultless ear for musical pacing combine to make his work marvellously distinctive. Another is a spotlight on those who make music happen in other ways: the American philanthropist Betty Freeman and, in our Profiles section, Winrich Hopp, artistic director of Musikfest Berlin. Yet another theme is that of notation, already approached from a different angle by Richard Barrett in *TEMPO* 268, which is the focus of the article by composer Christopher Fox (whose piano piece *More things in the air than are*

visible offers a wonderfully different use of a field recording to any of those discussed above).

One might argue that there has never been a better time to be a young composer than today. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', wrote William Wordsworth, thinking of the French Revolution, 'But to be young was very Heaven!' Young composers today have an unprecedented degree of access to performance opportunities, dissemination of their work (thanks to the internet), and the festival circuit. The composers' competition of the Gaudeamus Muziekweek in Utrecht, for example, solicits submissions only from composers between the ages of 20 and 30, and it is not the only such festival to do so. I will confess that this sort of thing always provokes mixed feelings in me: being young does not necessarily make one interesting. And as an audience member one is not always in the mood to listen to so much music by young composers, any more than one is always in the mood to eat eels. Of course young composers should be encouraged, given opportunities to have their work heard, presented with challenges. The worry is that our society increasingly fetishises the young, often at the expense of the less-than-famous mature artist whose work is at least as worthy of exposure. (After the age of 75 it all becomes fine again; without lifting a finger one is suddenly hailed as a living legend, especially if critics have disparaged one's music for the previous half-century.)

What, though, of the apparent necessary corollary of youth – that to be young is to be radical, that any composer of integrity under the age of 40 should want nothing more than to wave two fingers in the direction of authority? Are composers like Bailie, Miller and Hamilton part of the twenty-first century *avant-garde*?

This question would be easier to answer if we had a clear sense of what, if anything, the term '*avant-garde*' really means in 2014. For Betty Freeman, offering financial support to the work of older, marginalised composers like Harry Partch or Lou Harrison, or young firebrands like Peter Garland or Steve Reich in the 1960s and 1970s, the issue was clearer: the radical (sometimes radically simple) work of these figures fell, at that time, largely outside the agendas of the institutionalised support networks. It might be argued that that kind of *avant-garde* doesn't really exist anymore. 'When I hear the term', says American musician and video artist Sharon Cheslow, 'I think of the historical *avant-garde* of the 20th century. If I were to think of an equivalent for contemporary music, it would be underground, experimental and/or improvised music or sound art that challenges traditional ideas about music making in some way'.

The three brilliant young composers discussed in *TEMPO* 269 seem to have less of a wish to overthrow than to supplement. If at all, they turn their backs not on the past but on certain constructions of the past (if one accepts the validity of the distinction). And in so doing, one suspects that their music will live to haunt us for a very long time.



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