

It is difficult to describe Julien Malaussena's music. This isn't to say that I'm not going to take a crack at it – I've been deeply engrossed with Malaussena's work since stumbling across it several years ago on the ScoreFollower YouTube channel – only that the reader's expectations of discovering anything like a skeleton key or CliffsNotes summary of what's going on here and why should be tempered accordingly. At any rate, Malaussena's music is all about sound, in all of its richness. That statement is true, and I mean it sincerely, but both its obviousness and its unhelpful opacity reinforce the initial caveat to such a degree that it might make sense to see if Malaussena himself might offer anything more elucidating.

According to Malaussena, his compositional thinking is based not so much around gestures or structures but 'articulated sound energy': the initial idea for every piece is a sound event, which he then translates into material instrumental actions, which then get translated into the score as a blueprint for reproducing the kinesis of the original sound event. There's something of a conceptual tightrope-walk going on here, since, as a century of avant-garde provocation has taught us, a blueprint for avoiding cliché, no matter how elaborate, can easily end up becoming a cliché itself. For example, Malaussena's use of the phrase 'dressed rests' doesn't sound a million miles away from Stockhausen's concept of 'coloured noise', but, in practice, this isn't a reinvention of the old Darmstadt wheel. While Stockhausen speaks of stripping away layers of silence to find even further (silencey-er?) layers, like some sort of phenomenological babushka doll, silence in Malaussena's music exists as a tracing medium for kinetic action, like the canvas behind an action painting. This is music where sound is always a moving target. Which explains why Malaussena's notation – relatively conventional, perhaps even reactionary by self-conscious New Music standards – thwarts attempts to reverse-engineer what sounds to expect from the score alone or even to follow along with a performance from the score, despite the exceptionally clear engraving of the latter. The energy never matches up with its blueprint.

With the introduction out of the way, let's turn to a blow-by-blow account of what's in this release. First up is *Concerning Articulated Sound Energy*, which, as its title suggests, is a visceral introduction to Malaussena's sound universe (Malaussena's pieces often have 'leçon de choses'-type titles, e.g. the multiple chapters of *introduction au timbre et à l'énergie*). The small ensemble here functions as a sort of island of noises, a cohesive but differentiated sound unit whose fine-grained details recall the microscopic sonic landscapes of Hanna Hartman or Chaya Czernowin. *A view on Michelle Agnes Ritual* similarly evokes a lively and immersive sonic environment with inscrutable sound sources (water and bike tires, inter alia). The almost bucolic placidity of the piece's opening seamlessly morphs into an intense eruption in the final third, the bubbly water sounds shifting from gentle pond to hydrothermal vent.

*odd music* does what it says – it's an unsettling aural experience that never quite manages to leave a distinct impression, a slow tour through a sonic house of mirrors. The thirteen alto saxophones are given the Gabrieli choir treatment, spread antiphonally around a central axis and emitting a series of carefully layered multiphonics. Malaussena has colour-coded this material in the score and divided the saxophones according to their spatial location in order to at least visually differentiate the texture for the conductor, and the thing is still nearly impossible to

follow. In terms of listening experience, it's something of an outlier in Malaussena's oeuvre, which more commonly opts for sudden rather than sustained disorientation.

It bears repeating, by way of conclusion, just how disappointingly insufficient a written explanation of Malaussena's music is and just how much escapes description. It's said often enough about music, and it's especially true of Malaussena's work: the best way to appreciate it is to listen.

Max Erwin, September 2020