

DARRAGH MORGAN AND JOHN TILBURY: *MORTON FELDMAN—FOR JOHN CAGE*, Diatribe Records (2020), (Digital Album) DICCD025; BENJAMIN DWYER: *WHAT IS THE WORD*, Diatribe Records (2020), (Digital Album) DIACD031; LINA ANDONOVSKA: *A WAY A LONE A LAST*, Diatribe Records (2020), (CD and Digital Album) DIACD026.

When New Music Dublin announced the four-day programme of its 2020 festival, one noticed that Diatribe Records—a jazz and contemporary music label based in Dublin and run jointly by composer and saxophonist Nick Roth and composer and percussionist Matthew Jacobson—featured prominently in its offerings. Out of the twenty concerts scheduled in the festival, five were organized by Diatribe.<sup>1</sup> While in previous years production companies such as Ergodos organized once-off performances,<sup>2</sup> a single label had never been given such a free hand. This development corresponded with the philosophy established by composer John Harris in his first three years as director where, instead of allowing one composer to curate the programming (as was the case in previous editions of New Music Dublin, with Donnacha Dennehy in 2014 and David Lang in 2015, for instance), Harris has given a wide range of composers and ensembles the flexibility to design their own programmes. The five concerts hosted by Diatribe on the so-called Diatribe Stage (in reality, a room on the first floor of the National Concert Hall in Dublin with a capacity for about eighty people) marked the release of seven albums produced by the record label, with musicians playing selections from their albums in the performances in the hope that it would grant additional exposure to the composers and musicians featured in the collections. This review discusses three albums launched during the festival that feature musicians and/or composers with ties to contemporary classical music in Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

The opening concert of the festival featured violinist Darragh Morgan and pianist John Tilbury in a rendition of Morton Feldman's *For John Cage* (1982). Morgan is an active proponent of contemporary music in Ireland as a soloist and member of the Fidelio Trio, as well as having an active career abroad, while Tilbury is considered one of the foremost specialists in the music of Feldman; together, these musicians have

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<sup>1</sup> New Music Dublin is a festival of contemporary classical music that has taken place every year in Ireland's capital since 2013. The exception was 2016, when the festival was postponed.

<sup>2</sup> In both 2018 and 2019 this Irish record label organized an event that brought listeners to an assortment of venues in Dublin for performances covering a broad spectrum of musical disciplines.

<sup>3</sup> The reviewer saw the performances of these albums live at the festival, which has provided helpful points of reference.

performed *For John Cage* in concert for years. Morgan attributes his understanding of Feldman's 'musical personality' to meeting Tilbury and conversing with composers Chris Newman and Howard Skempton, both of whom knew Feldman personally.<sup>4</sup> Morgan's approach to the piece (particularly his attention to Feldman's use of mean-tone intonation and its effects on expressivity) has also been informed by violinist Paul Zukovsky, who mentored Morgan and premiered *For John Cage* in 1982.<sup>5</sup>

In *For John Cage*—a 'little piece for violin and piano [that] doesn't quit',<sup>6</sup> as Feldman described it—a constant minimalist interplay between the two musicians creates a sparse texture that prevails throughout the work's eighty-four minute duration. Entrancing in its simplicity, the music endlessly turns over various scraps of materials that over time acquire greater potency. The performance is notable for its relatively relaxed tempo (other recordings of the work last between seventy and eighty minutes), which provides more space for each phrase to grow and fade. In order to capture 'the types of nuance and timbral purity' that he feels the piece requires, Morgan generally avoids vibrato while also tapering the end of each gesture 'with an upwards and downwards *sotto voce*' using a baroque bow, instead of abruptly cutting off the note. This delicacy and attention to detail is also reflected in Tilbury's restrained employment of the sustain pedal as well as his generally quiet playing. It is hard to imagine a more skilled and thoughtful interpretation of this modern masterpiece, and indeed one ventures to call it a definitive recording.

Whether it is because of the perceived musicality of his prose or the images and concepts described in his oeuvre, Beckett's influence on composers has been immense.<sup>7</sup> His texts have been incorporated into a wide variety of works, the most well-known being Berio's *Sinfonia* (1968–69), which sets excerpts from Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* (1953) and *neither* (1977) by Morton Feldman, which uses a sixteen-line piece of prose written by Beckett as a libretto. A recent addition to the growing list of compositions inspired by Beckett is the album, *What is the Word*, by Benjamin Dwyer, an Irish composer, guitarist, and musicologist now working as professor of music at Middlesex University. This album constitutes Dwyer's third release under the Diatribe

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<sup>4</sup> Darragh Morgan, *For John Cage*, sleeve notes for solo album, Diatribe Records (2020), (Digital Album) DICCD025.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Laws, 'Beckett and Contemporary Music', Paper Read at the Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin, 4 April 2006.

Darragh Morgan and John Tilbury: *Morton Feldman—For John Cage*, Diatribe Records (2020); Benjamin Dwyer: *What is the Word*, Diatribe Records (2020); Lina Andonovska: *A Way A Lone A Last*, Diatribe Records (2020).

label. In drawing upon modernist and intellectually rigorous aesthetics from mainland Europe, Dwyer's music opts for a different path to that of many contemporary classical pieces written in Ireland today, especially those by composers of a younger generation who, on the whole, have perhaps been more open to influences from America.

Bookended by *six residua (after Beckett)* (2019), for solo violin, and *five disjecta (after Beckett)*, for solo guitar, the centrepiece of Dwyer's collection is *what is the word (triptych with interludes)* (2019). This is a five-movement reflection for double bass, guitar, violin, and narrator on three texts by Beckett—*neither* (1977); *Worstward Ho* (1983); and *What is the Word*, Beckett's last work, first written in French as *Comment Dire*. These texts appear in the first, third, and fifth movements, respectively. Two interludes marked by extreme contrast—ranging from quiet and ethereal chords, to aggressive bowing techniques that create scratchy and grinding noises—constitute the second and fourth movements. As in Dwyer's previous album released by Diatribe, *Umbilical*—a musical interpretation of the Oedipus myth—performers include long-time collaborators Barry Guy (bass) and Maya Homburger (violin). Dwyer joins these musicians on the guitar, and the speaker is actor Conor Lovett.

An extensive essay, titled '...eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence', outlines Dwyer's views on certain musical aspects present in Beckett's work and throws some light on the works in the album. Dwyer believes that Beckett's treatment of language, particularly his 'apprehension of music and silence', makes him not just a writer, but also a musician.<sup>8</sup> As Dwyer argues:

What is the word made from if not from sounds: sound fragments, phonemes, allophones, vowels, consonants, which merge to create words, phrases, sentences—the signifiers of linguistic semantics. Reverse the process and you get sound: sound fragments, dislocated pitches, the sonic signals that form music...language mutates from the evident to the resonant.<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation guides how Dwyer translates linguistic markers in Beckett's texts (such as dashes, elisions, echoes, repetitions, and fragmentations) into music.

The first movement of *what is the word* begins with a scattering of plucked notes in the guitar and bass. Swelled chords in the violin and bass follow, establishing the

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Dwyer, *What is the Word*, sleeve notes for solo album Diatribe Records (2020), (Digital Album) DIACD031.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

general texture and mood of the movement. The speaker enters about three and a half minutes into the piece, whispering fragments of the text broken into syllables that emphasize and explore the phonetic nature of the words themselves; 's' sounds from 'self' and 'close' are held and one can hear the popping 'p' sound from 'impenetrable'. The speaker then performs the entire text without fragmentation over a chordal backdrop in the violin and bass. Between various stanzas, the violin and bass perform a repeated falling figure that acts as an interlude.

Titled 'On!...Still!', the third movement opens with rhythmic passages that build in volume and intensity before suddenly cutting off into silence. There is a clear sense of musical structure, as the rhythmic passages grow longer over time—which could correspond to how Beckett gradually lengthens his phrases. (In particular, this linguistic aspect is demonstrated by the selection, 'Beyondless. Thenceless there. Thitherless there. Thenceless thitherless there', that is included near the end of the movement.) The rhythmic passages eventually lead to an apotheosis where the speaker enters with an exclamation of 'on', the first word in the text. The speaker delivers the prose over scratching noises in the bass and violin that occasionally intrude into the foreground, reminding one of how Luciano Berio sets the narrator's part over accompanying instrumental lines in works such as *Laborintus II* (1965) and ends on a held shout of 'Still' that segues immediately into a flurry of pizzicati and glissandi in the second interlude.<sup>10</sup>

The final movement opens with a homophonic texture in the instrumental trio that imparts an elegiac impression in its slow harmonic movement, the placement of the violin and bass in their upper registers, and a swooning figure in the violin that descends leading to the entrance of the speaker. Desperation and melancholic lateness are conveyed in the speaker's execution of the text, in which Beckett reflects on linguistic meaning, and are reinforced by the trio, which repeats and varies the passage from the opening of the movement as a refrain between various stanzas and breaks in the poem. In its generally sparse and quiet character, this movement serves as a structural resolution that unwinds the tension built in the previous sections of the work.

Echoes, fragments, and sketches of harmonies and melodies from each of the five movements in *what is the word* appear in the *six residua* and *five disjecta*. In the first *residua*, for instance, Homburger plays shimmering harmonics and scratchy drones that recall the music with which she accompanied the singer in the first movement of

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<sup>10</sup> Dwyer once expressed admiration of this work in an interview. Tobias Fischer, '15 Questions to Benjamin Dwyer' (July 2005), <http://www.tokafi.com/15questions/15questionsbenjamindwyer/>

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*what is the word*. Commenting on the nature of residua in Beckett's work, Dwyer writes, 'Beckett shores the unusable, leftovers, *disjecta*. He thus articulates humanity's failure; its inability to rise above the barbaric; its hubristic assumptions that it knows all, where in fact it knows nothing'.<sup>11</sup> In exploiting the potentials of discarded materials in his music, Dwyer not only mimics how Beckett treats language in his work, but also participates in a broader political and social discourse. This interest in connecting his music to broader political and social issues is a distinguishing feature of Dwyer's work, as demonstrated by his feminist retelling of the Oedipus myth in *Umbilical*, which seeks to offer 'the space to contemplate the political, societal and spiritual restrictions historically (and presently) placed on women's sexuality'.<sup>12</sup>

*A Way A Lone A Last* represents the debut solo album of Australian flautist Lina Andonovska, who has been active in the Irish New Music scene for a number of years as a soloist and performer in the Crash Ensemble (an amplified music group specializing in contemporary classical music that has been based in Dublin since its founding in 1997). Built on the relationships Andonovska has developed in Ireland, the album features five works by four composers (Donnacha Dennehy, Barry O'Halpin, Judith Ring, and Nick Roth) who were either born in Ireland or who currently live and work in the country.<sup>13</sup> All composers are represented with one piece in the collection, with the exception of Roth, who contributed two. Written explicitly for Andonovska within the last four years, the works on the album are relatively short, with the longest lasting just under thirteen minutes. Percussionist Matthew Jacobson joins Andonovska on two of the recordings. The other three pieces are written for solo flute, with or without electronics. Andonovska employs the full range of instruments in the flute family, including the bass flute, alto flute, and piccolo. In terms of the album's design, the compositions are arranged in a balanced and logical manner that leads the listener from one work to the next.

The solo flute is a popular choice for many modern composers because of the wide range of effects that it can create. It is therefore unsurprising that the album features an array of extended techniques, including multiphonics, key clicks, flutter-tonguing,

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<sup>11</sup> Dwyer, *What is the Word*, sleeve notes for solo album.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014), 196.

<sup>13</sup> At the launch, Andonovska stressed the importance of her friendships with the composers featured on the album.

slap-tonguing, and singing while playing the flute. A representative variety of these sounds is on display in the first work on the album, *Hox* (2019), by Barry O’Halpin. The title of this piece is drawn from the subset of homeobox genes that determine the growth of body parts in animals, and the transformation involved in this process has ‘an affinity with the piece’s cyclical, obsessive structure and fidgeting insect physicality’, according to the programme note.<sup>14</sup> Scraping sounds produced on the skin of a drum, rustling paper, fingers rolled on a drum head, and whooshing and spluttering noises from the bass flute create a quietly anxious atmosphere in the opening of the work that continues until about the two-minute mark, at which point popping sounds on the flute and ricocheting sticks in the percussion establish a steady rhythmic pulse. A few phrases in the flute and percussion repeat themselves over time, invoking a restless impression that relates to O’Halpin’s theoretical approach.

Since *Hox* remains in a relatively soft and reserved sound world, it serves as an effective prelude for the subsequent work, *A Loved A Long* (2017), by Nick Roth. This is a much more animated work that draws inspiration from the last six hundred and eight words of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* in the original 1939 edition of the text. *A Loved A Long* is an adaptation of *A Way A Lone A Last* (2015), which Roth originally wrote for recorder trio; together the two titles form most of the last line from Joyce’s novel, ‘A way a lone a last a loved a long the’, with the exception being the final ‘the’ that dangles into silence.<sup>15</sup> After an aggressive opening involving overblown multiphonics and strong accents on the flute, Andonovska whispers words from *Finnegans Wake* while repeating one note low in her range. The piece then takes an unusual turn, incorporating Bach-like figurations and a shout that sounds like a war cry. These elements transition directly into each other; the sudden juxtapositions seem to relate to the narrative style of Joyce’s work, which employs a large assortment of source materials and frequently shifts between different topics and ideas.

*Bridget* (2019), by Donnacha Dennehy, distinguishes itself from the rest of the pieces in the collection by setting a live flute part against several pre-recorded flutes. The inspiration for the piece came from the British artist Bridget Riley, particularly in the way her paintings play with speed and tempo through their use of ‘repeating, accumulating images/patterns’.<sup>16</sup> Although Dennehy says Riley also influenced *Bulb*

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<sup>14</sup> Barry O’Halpin, quoted in Lina Andonovska, *A Way A Lone A Last*, sleeve notes for solo album, Diatribe Records (2020), (CD and Digital Album) DIACD026.

<sup>15</sup> This final line constitutes the first half of the first sentence in the novel, thus completing the work’s circular narrative.

<sup>16</sup> Donnacha Dennehy, quoted in Andonovska, *A Way A Lone A Last*, sleeve notes for solo album.

Darragh Morgan and John Tilbury: *Morton Feldman—For John Cage*, Diatribe Records (2020); Benjamin Dwyer: *What is the Word*, Diatribe Records (2020); Lina Andonovska: *A Way A Lone A Last*, Diatribe Records (2020).

(2006), for piano trio, that work differs in its use of spectral techniques; *Bridget* traverses a more traditional harmonic terrain. At first, Andonovska plays a few melodic blocks alone. As the piece progresses, various figures repeat and overlap, creating an impression of gradual accumulation that eventually builds to a forte return of the opening. In its dovetailing lines and strong sense of rhythmic propulsion, *Bridget* represents a particularly effective example of Dennehy's post-minimalist aesthetic.

*A Breath of Fresh Air* (2019), by Judith Ring, is the shortest work on the album, at about four and a half minutes. While the title might lead one to suspect that the music is relaxing and light, the piece in fact 'focuses on the many things in life that can restrict us from being light and airy, whether they be fears, frustrations or anger'.<sup>17</sup> Ring translates these emotions sonically with breathy sounds in the introduction that are coupled with anxious panting noises produced by Andonovska, and, later on, loud key clicks, slap-tonguing, and repeated 's' sounds that she vocalizes while playing which lead to growling noises created by flutter-tonguing. Although the piece is for solo flute and does not use any electronics, it does end with a three-part chorale—with two lines created by scratchy multiphonics, and a third by Andonovska's voice, which repeats one note—the resolution of which imparts a final feeling of exhalation.

Like his other piece in the collection, Nick Roth's *Bátá* (2017), for amplified bass flute and drums with feedback, engages with an influential written work, in this case Roland Barthes' *Image Music Text* (1977). Roth inserts selections from this text into a musical environment influenced by the aesthetics of Jungle music—a genre of electronic music originating in the British rave scenes of the 1990s—in order to 'trace the concept of fugue' in Barthes' work, with a particular focus on its rhythmic elements.<sup>18</sup> This is apparent in the opening of *Bátá* where the percussionist (Matthew Jacobson) speaks the words, 'Linear, linearity, linearity disturbed', over rhythmic patterns that he creates on the drums. While the incorporation of two sources from such contrasting disciplines is a risky and imaginative move, the piece was a difficult proposition for this listener, as it seemed to lack a coherent structure. Overall, the range of aesthetics on display in this album—from minimalism, to jazz, to Roth's chaotic conglomeration of materials—is emblematic of the stylistic heterogeneity

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Ring, quoted in Andonovska, *A Way A Lone A Last*, sleeve notes for solo album.

<sup>18</sup> Nick Roth, quoted in *A Way A Lone A Last*, sleeve notes for solo album.

evident in works by living Irish composers, at a time when contemporary classical music in other nations has sometimes acquired an homogeneous impression.

Along with Ergodos, Diatribe is one of the main labels disseminating the work of contemporary classical composers and musicians from Ireland to audiences abroad. In an interview before the New Music Dublin 2020 festival, Roth described one of the core missions of the company:

[W]e're trying to address ... how Irish music is perceived internationally. There has been a huge focus on exporting Irish traditional music around the world, and obviously a lot of pop groups come from Ireland. But anything that's more towards the improvised or the contemporary is hugely under-represented on stages and festivals around the world.<sup>19</sup>

In its role as an international advocate for contemporary music from Ireland, the label does receive financial support from The Arts Council for recording projects, but no annual funding. 'We don't get paid as directors. We don't get paid as producers. It's really just an expensive hobby', says Roth.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, both Diatribe and Ergodos lack studios in which they can record and produce their work.<sup>21</sup> While one hopes the Arts Council will increase their commitment to the development of this necessary infrastructure in the years to come, it is still remarkable that Diatribe is able to produce albums with such high-quality precision that not only add to the available recordings of Irish music on disc and download, but also effectively survey and document the breadth of musical activity happening in the New Music scene in Ireland today.

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<sup>19</sup> "'People want to break down boundaries": An interview with Nick Roth and Matthew Jacobson of Diatribe Records' (19 February 2020), <https://journalofmusic.com/focus/people-want-break-down-boundaries-interview-nick-roth-and-matthew-jacobson-diatribe-records>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ergodos had a production venue in Dublin city centre from 2017 until 2019 which has recently been demolished. A hotel is being built there instead.