

long fade-out in the last ten minutes or so of the first performance is just one illustration of their astonishing control.

The two performances are of course different from each other: on one occasion I found the second performance rather more fragile and attenuated in the middle of the work than the first one, though I did not feel this was the case on another listen. Either this is an extremely novel type of CD where the performance actually changes each time it is played, or my personal journey through each performance was different each time I listened. Perhaps this is because the music facilitates deep reflection and provides a space for the listener to bring something of themselves to the music? Whatever your own journey through this fascinating recording will be, prepare for an immersive and time-altering experience.

Caroline Potter

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Héctor Parra, ... *limite les rêves au-delà*. Deforce, Goepfer. Passacaille Plus, PP9702.

Twenty-first-century advances in physics and astrophysics have taken us to the very limits of our understandings of the universe. Institutions, laboratories and experiments such as the Large Hadron Collider, LIGO (the Laser Gravitational-Wave Observatory, based in Louisiana and Washington state) and the global telescope array known as the Event Horizon Telescope have discovered new fundamental particles, observed gravitational waves and captured direct images of black holes. These are, by some measures, the most advanced fields of scientific knowledge, as well as some of the most exciting and imaginatively adventurous. Given music's long and illustrious relationship to the physical sciences, it is a little surprising that more composers haven't engaged in detail with these developments in their music.

One who has done so, and for more than a decade and a half, is the Catalan composer Héctor Parra. His opera *Hypermusic Prologue* of 2008–09 was set to a libretto by the theoretical physicist Lisa Randall (author of a model for five-dimensional space); *Caressant l'Horizon* for chamber orchestra (2011) considers the warping of spacetime at the event horizon of a black hole. ... *limite les rêves au-delà*, composed in collaboration with the cellist Arne Deforce and sound designer Thomas Goepfer, as well as the French physicist Jean-Pierre Luminet (with whom Parra also worked on the orchestral *Inscape*, 2018), extends such imagery

across a still larger canvas. Over an unbroken 70 minutes, cello and live electronics take us on 'a psycho-acoustic journey' (quoting the composer's liner notes) from the origins of life on Earth, through hypernovae, the merger of two black holes (a phenomenon first observed by LIGO in February 2016), the crossing of the event horizon into a different universe and, finally, a perception of ourselves as '3D holograms of an encoded reality in 2D on the surface of the far reaches of the Universe'. A lot of the imagery, much of it speculative, of course, derives from a poem by Luminet that imagines a journey through a black hole, 'L'astre qui fut lumière'.

I confess that Parra's 2001-like cosmological narrative – with its references to spaghettification and Poincaré dodecahedral space – had me reaching frequently for Wikipedia (with only limited enhancements to my understanding). More seriously, it also threatened to block my appreciation of the music itself. I do not object to metaphorical or programmatic superstructures around a musical work; indeed, many of my favourite composers are very fond of them. But the intricacy and apparent precision of Parra's programme ('Gravitational shock and merger of the two black holes, followed by an immediate burst of gravitational waves of the LIGO type' is a typical example) threatens to limit the listener's own imagination. An unfortunate and ironic outcome, given the context.

Yet the music itself is of such sumptuous and extraordinary immediacy that I was encouraged to persist, past the event horizon of the work's own supporting discourse, as it were. And here it becomes apparent that despite the specificity of the composer's descriptions, *limite les rêves* isn't intended as descriptive music. The opening section, 'Life on Earth', follows a broadly expansive trajectory, from protozoa to human language, but after this the precise correspondences are left to the listener. What we get instead are lines of force and interaction – of attraction and destruction, of approach and transgression. Thresholds, horizons, fields, tides. Forces that underpin the cosmological drama but that can equally apply to the interaction of a bow and a cello string, and to a cello and its live electronic expansion. In this respect, the three musicians create a complex system of intersecting orbits. Deforce, as one of new music's leading and most versatile cellists, brings a wealth of playing techniques and sounds to the table, but it is the role of Goepfer's electronics, which flip and roll like a particle spinning through space, that I particularly enjoyed. In the work's most surprising section – 'Approaching Black Hole and Galactic Collision' – the

juxtaposition of Goepfer's soft, sinewave loops and Deforce's increasingly agitated playing captures, with genuinely affective power, the passivity of interstellar space and the collapse of fundamental particles. In the final section, 'Return to Earth in Holography', warped electronic reverberations serve as the holographic projections referred to above, a reality somehow more real than the cello physically in front of us.

Ultimately, while speculative astrophysics is Parra's chosen terrain, his subject is humanity – both its limits and its possibilities. In *Hypermusic Prologue* this took the form of a love story across different dimensions of the universe; in *Caressant l'Horizon* it was the heroic encounter with the unimaginable forces of the event horizon. In . . . *limite les rêves au-delà*, however, the story is extended into a kind of transcendence, a state of cosmological enlightenment. If you can find a way not to dwell too much on the details or specifics of that journey, you will find much to appreciate here.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson

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Alex Paxton, *Happy Music for Orchestra*. Dreammusics Orchestra and Ensemble, Paxton, Wang, Terry, Herd, Inghamells. Delphian, DCD34290.

When I saw the album artwork, 'dirty bubblegum' was the first phrase to pop into my head; when I listened to the music, it was 'Richard Strauss TikTok'. This is exuberant, virtuosic, at times beautiful, often impatient, energetic, juvenile, colourful, funny, messy, annoying and, yes, happy music. Textures and styles morph and meld with an astonishing speed across the six pieces on this disc. Prominent stylistic elements include but are not limited to cartoon music, math rock, movie music, free jazz, commercial jingles, cheerily little diatonic tunes and ironic fanfares, all piled into the same score. It's like the downwardly mobile neoliberal rococo of a hoarder's living room. The music is dizzying and impressive, equally for the density of different elements as for the degree to which it still works. I encountered a phrase in a meme somewhere that applies to this music: 'I am neither serious nor ironic but a secret other third thing.' Post-ironic? That which is subsequent to post-irony? The music feels very contemporary: very very complicated emotions that are no less earnestly and strongly felt for it. In general, each bit of musical clutter is given just enough rhetorical space to be recognised and indeed

*expressive* before another element comes along. Each piece gets a quiet moment and there's something very special in them. Again, these moments convey a very contemporary feeling: there's a listlessness and a crash, like lying down on a couch completely exhausted but still scrolling on a smartphone. The sheer superabundance of novelty and thrill certainly leaves an impression. But I find the more interesting aspect is the way that the musical collaging perches on the very edge of coherence.

At less than four minutes, the opening piece for orchestra, *Love Kittens*, begins with a cute little tune on the trombone, Paxton's instrument, with clever ornamentation and padding. It's a humble and unassuming start to the piece and to the album. But before 15 seconds has elapsed, a dazzling mixture of high metallic percussion and high winds interrupts, like a cluster of arcade games. It's difficult to tell what exactly the orchestration is at this moment. Electronic and acoustic instruments here are fused in a unique way. A sudden quiet section for murmuring strings creates a crisis point which gradually brings about a conclusion.

*Od Ody Pink'd* is a kind of outlandish Straussian tone poem trombone concerto with Paxton's hyper-virtuosic noodling as a more or less constant fixture in the foreground. It is perhaps the strongest piece on the album. The first section alternates between a schizophrenic John Williams-style Christmas movie score and a Gershwin-esque brassy portrait of the big city. A reflective and sentimental undercurrent surfaces from time to time. Around the five-minute mark, Paxton goes for a climax in the form of everybody-does-everything-as-fast-as-possible-at-the-same-time. Undoubtedly exhilarating at first, it does start to drag after about three minutes. Ultimately it lands on a quite lovely extended murmuring coda, similar to the ending of the first piece.

*Strawberry* begins with moody low synthesizers, mumbling low brass, sine tones unsettlingly beating. Somehow that moodiness is maintained even as a soaring anthemic melody emerges and the material characteristically goes crazy. Eventually a groove is established, and the voice of countertenor Patrick Terry enters singing in a post-(post-post-post-)punk style. As the vocal lines unfold, they get more and more unwieldy and wild, more silly in their aperiodic extensions. A quiet section like exhaustion sets in. As the first section somehow managed to maintain an emotional state as the material morphed around, so too this exhausted feeling persists as the amount of activity picks back up.