

**Review of Miranda Cuckson's *Melting the Darkness*
Urlicht Audiovisual UA-5988**

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The key to *Melting the Darkness*, Miranda Cuckson's collection of seven solo violin works engaging with microtonality and/or electronic sound, lies in the following statement from her liner notes:

While most of the works are essentially "dark," having an overall atmosphere of anxiety, danger, or sadness, each piece also has elements that affirm a sense of warmth, hope, or clarity.

Accepting for the moment the premise that “most of the works are essentially 'dark,’” it's fair to say that Cuckson effects a kind of interpretive radiography on this record. Her performances penetrate unyielding and opaque exteriors to reveal the pieces' interiors—without compromising their obduracy and opacity. For example, Cuckson's subtle but audible bow changes in Xenakis's *Mikka «S»*, the disc's first track and sole repertory piece, begin to suggest barlines that figure the piece's polyphonic glissandi as a kind of fluid species counterpoint, which in turn frames the two voices' simultaneities in a way that the reviewer had never considered.

The rest of the disc's pieces have much shorter performance histories than *Mikka «S»*, although several have been performed on multiple occasions in the US and internationally. Georg Friedrich Haas contributes *de terrae finae* to the disc; an initial listen through the almost-twenty-minute work seemed to indicate that Haas (who apparently composed the piece while deeply depressed) had yoked a variety of challenging and painstakingly notated microtonal harmonic resources to an essentially traditional musical narrative, an impression bolstered by Cuckson's helpful program note. The familiarity of this construction calls into question whether Haas has really “generate[d] a radical focus on sound” or simply adapted his particular microtonal practices to a conventional formal rhetoric, the gravity of the latter subordinating the particularity of the former. Nevertheless, the piece is faithfully rendered with a combination of intonational precision and restrained affective sympathy.

Oscar Bianchi's *Semplice* is, as promised in his program note, a reconsideration of the “overwhelming practice in our times of associating all sorts of notions of complexity with musical representation” that strives to imagine a clean slate. It's a canny move: in the course of pretending, so to speak, to have recourse to centuries of violin technique without any of the baggage, Bianchi arrives at a sparkling harmonic and timbral vocabulary, Cuckson's enthusiastic embrace of which is audible on the CD. If selective amnesia is what's required in order for Bianchi to compose pieces that invite such vibrant performances, who can argue with it?

Christopher Burns's *Come Ricordi Come Sogni Come Ecchi* was written in response to Nono's *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura*, a piece that both Burns and Cuckson have lived with for years as performers; Urlicht Audiovisual has made a recording of this collaboration available as well. The depth of their connection to the

Nono is apparent in Burns' piece, which is structured in six short movements. By the CD's halfway point, *Come Ricordi Come Sogni Come Ecchi's* intimacy (heightened on record by sensitive microphone placement) is more than welcome: in this work more than any other, the “overall atmosphere of anxiety, danger, or sadness” is thoroughly and inextricably interlaced with a “sense of warmth, hope, or clarity”.

In Alexander Sigman's *VURTRUVURT* (whose electronic sounds are diffused by transducers attached to the violin and to another resonating surface), that brightness is manifest as a sense of whimsy: samples of garbage trucks, broken glass, and even a sliver of The Smiths' song “There is a Light That Never Goes Out” collude to evoke a grimy cyberpunk cityscape, agilely negotiated by Cuckson's violinistic parkour. The darkness in *VURTRUVURT* is a kind of cartoon menace, albeit no less menacing for being so cartoonish—yet the fun of this piece, the atmosphere of play, is immediately sensible.

A fixed-media electronics part accompanies the violin in Ileana Perez-Velazquez's *un ser con unas alas enormes*. The piece grows from her interpretation of Cage's belief, emblemized in the *Freeman Études*, that “human beings can better themselves by overcoming their limitations”—and from her idiosyncratic observation that the 17th *Freeman Étude* includes rhythms reminiscent of Cuban music. At times, the image of Schoenberg's impassable wall (and Cage's determination to beat his head against it) comes to the fore: between flirtations with the possibility of surrender, the electronics stand in for the unbreakable barrier toward which the violin hurls itself. The reviewer confesses that the relationship to Cuban music eluded him, but one hardly misses it.

On the CD's title track, Robert Rowe demonstrates his facility (which is undeniable) with a stable of compositional techniques that will be familiar to many listeners. Indeed, the piece's “warm, largely conventional style of violin-playing” and its likable electronic sound-world evoke a certain cluster of affective spaces with unassailable competence. (For a composer of Rowe's standing, anything less would be a surprise.) However, what actually “affirms a sense of warmth, hope, or clarity” about the piece is its slightly mysterious ending, which takes a suddenly oblique turn; the opening of this unexpected window prompts a reconsideration of the preceding material, whose easy answers seem not to have been so easy after all. Cuckson's choice to finish the CD with Rowe's piece seems to acknowledge the specialness of its conclusion.

Assessed as a whole, viewed from the end of the record, are the new pieces on *Melting the Darkness* successful? Yes, but whether or not they've met the reviewer's criteria for success isn't particularly informative regarding the CD's value to other people who might listen to it. It is more important to emphasize the following about these pieces: they are *rare*. For inquisitive listeners who have little or no chance to hear radical contemporary music in live performance, Cuckson's decision to record and release these pieces may mean the difference between hearing them and not hearing them. In other words, there is a kind of darkness that Cuckson melts simply by sharing her work with us. Leaving aside Cuckson's remarkable knack for illuminating the *Gehalt* of the pieces she interprets, her sincere ambassadorship alone is a source of warmth, hope, and clarity.

Disclosure: The reviewer has worked on one joint project with Cuckson in the past.