

loses focus, then the texture really does change. The high harmonic disappears, and the music becomes faster. Slightly faster but certainly much *busier*. Microtonally adjusted unisons become a blurry focal point. The next major change comes at the next section: a bed of white noise now cushions the still busy unamplified cello. Finally, in the fourth section, the cello reclines on a drone note, left-hand pizz.'s giving some texture, and the bed of white noise shifts to a much lower band of frequency. A full close of this music concludes Part 1.

Part 2 picks up with a riff-like groove formation of the same materials found in the opening. It is arranged into a distinct shape with a strong implied downbeat. The pitches F-quarter $\flat$, A, D, A in natural harmonics suggest the outline of (almost) a triad. Gradually, the white noise reappears, this time as a field recording of a body of water. The field recording cuts out, and the business as in Part 1 returns. After the temporary agitation, another moment of repose sets in, again with left-hand pizz. and a more present white noise bed. The drone this time slowly glissandos. One can feel the passage from consonance to dissonance and back again, against the neighbouring open string. A second full close concludes this part.

Part 3 begins with the busy texture, overleaping the expected regular groove section. Here the electronic noise is an oppressive presence. It now has an internal rhythm, a quality and texture of its own. This continues into the next section, the most active and pressured version of the droning textures. The final part has one or two little figurations from the cello, and the electronics have a moment without the cello. One final interjection and the piece ends.

There is a simplicity and a directness to this music. The material is stylish and attractive. I find the formal conceit interesting: three cycles through the following gauntlet: groove, busy, blurry, drone. A trajectory from more to less detail. In photography, it is a move out of focus. The real interest comes in the third iteration: what do you do with this cycle? Repeat it? Try to find another version of these four material types? Instead, what Sheen has done is to deconstruct the cycle, mix and match the elements, and that loss of stability brings about the end of the piece. Here, I wonder – what other possibilities are there within this modality? I feel strongly that there's an opportunity to develop the deconstruction more; I simply feel that whatever interesting idea that could have happened didn't get the chance because

the piece was over before it had the chance. In the words of American film-maker David Lynch, there was no 'eye of the duck'.

Alex Huddleston

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Stefan Prins: *inhabit*. Ensemble Mosaik, EnsembleKollektiv Berlin, Murray, Deutsch, BBC SSO, Volkov, Nadar Ensemble. Sub Rosa SR564 (2CD)

For over a decade, Stefan Prins' work has revolved around the ambiguous, seductive intersections between humans and their technology. Prins first came to international prominence with works like *Generation Kill* (2012), an aggressively disconcerting piece involving lighting and gaming controllers that eventually reveals itself as a broadside against technologically mediated US military atrocities in the Middle East, and the *Piano Hero* series (2011–16), a collection of virtuosic and playful ballets shared between a keyboardist, their instrument(s), and their own split selves via video and live electronics. Other works have included the *Fremdkörper* and *Flesh + Prosthesis* series, *Hybrid*, *Hände ohne Orte* and so on. You get the idea.

Over the years, this preoccupation has gathered ever more potential resonances in the wider world: climate change, social media and its explosion of unintended consequences, the sudden arrival of double-edged AI hype. In the recent works on this release, though, Prins has turned notably inwards. Inwards in multiple senses: inwards in that nothing here engages explicitly with that wider world; inwards in that long stretches in all these works are characterised by landscapes of calmness and quietude; and, most of all, inwards in the sense that much of what happens happens inside instruments themselves, brought to us by arrays of small microphones and transducers, aggressive amplification, feedback and an extraordinarily sensitive technique on the part of both the composer and his interpreters.

Inhibition Space #1 (2020), for a low wind trio augmented with internal microphones and effects pedals, is a 'pure' cyborg etude. There are machines within machines here: the instruments as machines – robotic caverns – navigated with the aid of other machines – the depth-sounding microphones – powered by breath: the boundaries between systems dissolved, the integration utterly convincing.

But Prins' concept of the human is subtler than the mere fact of breath. For one thing, the basic state of *Inhibition Space #1* is feedback: that most chaotic of machine states, where a millimetre here or a decibel there can so upend the sounding situation that all predictive models fail *a priori*. The tremble, the human body's quantum unit of precision, governs everything. Further, the score behind this 12-minute performance is a single page, a hand-drawn map in which arrows lead between states of being, ways of relating, ranges of possibility. The players are left to navigate these machinic caverns by means of one of those slivers of things that remain unambiguously human: spontaneity, creativity, mutual sympathy, something like affection.

Finally, there is the way the piece sounds. The interaction of Prins' outlined situations, the performers' inhabiting thereof, the live processing and the pervasive, threatening instability of a feedback-based language create a metallically twisting, calmly febrile ribbon of sound that is as pure a mix of the human and the artificial as I can imagine. The timbres are electronically alienated, but the interesting thing, the important thing, is the way the gestures live. The whole thing is shot through with pulsations at various scales with blurred edges and fluctuating inner life. Nothing is still for more than a moment. Instead, the three musicians from ensemble mosaic remind us that the cycles that underpin our worlds as humans – heart, breath and so on – are there because we are machines.

The other works on this two-disc set each exceed half an hour in length, and are (more or less) fully composed in score. The largest is *inhabit_inhibit* (2019–21), a nearly 50-minute piece for large ensemble (here, Ensemblekollektiv Berlin, led by Max Murray), electronics and pre-recorded sound, enveloping a group of 'feedback soloists' that includes and expands upon the trio of *Inhibition Space #1*. With this expansion – of duration, of size and of space, with the players (and loudspeakers) positioned in groups around the audience in live performance – comes, inevitably, the image of the ecological. There are foregrounds and backgrounds, nearer and more distant environments, ecosystems.

The ensemble soundscape of *inhabit_inhibit*, though, is industrial. Instruments are noise generators, calibrated so that their vocabularies overlap and their identities melt. Instrument-specific events – timbres, gestures – are the exception. The electronic component is, fundamentally, a thickener, or a generator of depth of field.

When, just before the 12-minute mark, the first 'cadenza' emerges for the feedback soloists (at first the same trio, with the same set-up, as in *Inhibition Space #1*, supplemented by a baritone saxophone), eventually augmented by string chords (actual strings! actual chords!) and with resonance routed through the soundboards of harp and piano, the fundamental oppositions become clear. Compared to what has come before – the writhing, metallic soundscape that now, suddenly, feels like a backdrop – this passage is vulnerably organic. The now-familiar trembling fragility of that feedback mechanism sets out the other pole of a large-scale opposition through the lens of which the remainder of the work is inevitably heard. It is not 'human vs. machine', though; the human sounds human because of machines; the machines are machines routed (mostly) through humans. It is a question of the externalisation of biology – or, more precisely, the externalisation of a technological simulation of the biological.

Despite this duality, there is an overwhelming continuity. Silence is rare. Boundaries are pushed, cracked, rather than exploded; motion and wavering progress come from the gradual expansion and budding off, dehiscence, of particular behaviours from within the material stream. The ecological metaphors, intended or not, come almost too easily: humans and technology are become one, but so are this hybrid species and its world.

under_current, the 2022 electric guitar concerto that takes up most of the second disc, is an interesting counterpart to *inhabit_inhibit*: almost as long, also pitting an individual 'hybrid' instrumental set-up (here in the hands of dedicatee Yaron Deutsch) against an ensemble. That ensemble is significantly larger (the Ilan Volkov-led BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra), though, and the instrumental situation of the soloist is quite different. The result is a sense of massive implacability that is all the more striking when juxtaposed with what comes across in retrospect as a paradoxical fragility, or instability, vulnerability, in *inhabit_inhibit*.

Whereas the 'feedback soloists' in *inhabit_inhibit* (and *Inhibition Space #1*) are vehicles for highly amplified frailties powered by wavering breath, Deutsch's guitar is a wall. His mastery is expressed through a pinpoint control of slow-moving, twitching hums, buzzes and frozen roars. There are extended passages of gently manipulated ground hum, either as an unaccompanied timbral nadir or in a strange frozen duo with foil-wrapped strings. The guitar's

language is one of expansions and contractions, occasional noisy spasms and gradual swellings: this is this instrument at its best, its most expressively compelling, with its uniquely uncanny combination of gestural intimacy and hall-filling weight.

The orchestra is largely a sounding board. There is little of the confrontation that characterizes *inhabit_inhibit*: there is much less of an ecological sense of figure and landscape. There are still machines here – with Prins there are always machines – but in the world we are presented with, they all seem to be under Deutsch's command.

Finally, the quietly beautiful *mesh*, for small ensemble (the Nadar Ensemble, of which Prins is a co-director) and electronics, returns us definitively to fragility, and to embodied, fallible humanity. Again we begin with a lengthy electric guitar solo, but this is not the guitar of *under_current*. Instead of concrete, instead of walls, the spare, harmonic-laden opening of *mesh* sets a tone like that of the *Inhibition Space*, albeit with very different means: contingency, uncertainty, wandering. There is finally silence. The sudden introduction of the rest of the ensemble (trombone, bass clarinet, cello, electronic sound) after a few minutes only multiplies the vulnerabilities.

There are, eventually, walls here too: long stretches of noise courtesy of a euphonium played with a plastic reed, for instance, accompanied by a picturesquely funereal bass drum. But these walls, never the most solidly built, quickly collapse, and their collapse becomes the event of the piece. Their rubble is perceptible in a remarkable passage about two-thirds of the way through, in which the euphonium's static becomes an organic world of hisses and electronic birdsong, helped gently along by irregular bursts of col legno tapping in the cello; and it is this rubble that we find ourselves traversing until the end.

There are also two cadenzas, one for feedback-enhanced clarinet alone and one for the full ensemble, which bring us close to the world of the *Inhibition Space*, complete with arrow-linked boxes suggesting a maze of interacting behaviours. The gentle pulsations, quasi-regularities and breaths put us on familiar turf, but with a new sense of desolation, among the ruins.

As a coda: in the last couple of decades, among a number of youngish composers, there has emerged a conception of musical material as something organic, defined by almost zoological interactions – as animals warily circling each other

in a small space. This material likes to twist along, avoiding silence almost entirely, avoiding precise contours almost entirely, avoiding rhythm almost entirely except in etiolated, skeletonised forms.

I am borrowing some of this language from something I wrote about the music of Clara Iannotta in these pages a few years ago,¹ and I am also thinking of, among others, Timothy McCormack; all of these composers, Prins included, studied with Chaya Czernowin at Harvard University in the 2010s, as did a number of other composers whose work falls under the broad umbrella I am imagining, and it is tempting to ascribe the spread of this way of thinking about material to Czernowin's influential music and pedagogy, and to the prominence and influence in turn of so many of her students.

There is something else to it, though. A distinguishing feature of this sort of music – *inhabit_inhibit* is a textbook example – is the dethroning of pitch by more general categories of timbre, register, noise, attack; pitch often comes across as a colouring of timbre, rather than the reverse. These are forces let loose by what we can somewhat handwavingly call a post-*musique-concrète-instrumentale* tradition, and there is a sense of material finding its native form, at last. Consider the infancy of serial writing, those awkward little piano dances of Schoenberg's in which received notions of rhythm and metre and phraseology and sectional form kept the lurking demons of musical anarchy at bay by force. Maybe these composers are the Weberns or the Stockhausens of this sort of extended-instrumental-palette material, discovering its larger-scale form-building properties.

In any event, Prins' fascination with the monstrous hybrid, the human in the technological and the technological in the human, points its own way in this general trend: in his work, we control what we can control, we wrestle with what we can't, and the form, the rhetoric, the way the music moves, is a trace of that wrestling.

Evan Johnson

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¹ 'Clara Iannotta: *MOULT*.' *Tempo*, 76, no. 299 (January 2022), pp. 95–96.