

A selection of works from **CeReNeM** in Huddersfield suggests ways in which music academia might escape from itself. By Philip Clark



CeReNeM: (from left) Aaron Cassidy, Bryn Harrison, Pierre Alexandre Tremblay, Monty Adkins

**Monty Adkins**

*Rift Patterns*

Audiobulb DL/iBook

**Exaudi**

*Exposure*

Huddersfield University Press CD

**Splice**

*Silent Spoke*

Loop 2×CD

20 years ago, when I was studying music at the University of Huddersfield, nothing so fancy as a Centre for Research in New Music – CeReNeM – existed; an abbreviation based around the first two letters of each word would have seemed impossibly conceptual. My time there was spent consorting with the likes of composer James Saunders (writing music that sounded like John Adams), trumpeter Stephen Altoft (rebellious against the duty to play in the brass band) and harpist Rhodri Davies (repurposing his instrument as a channel for free improvisation), and after graduation we dispersed to pursue various activities away from the nest. Part of the rationale behind CeReNeM is to avert that brain drain. By releasing music by Huddersfield affiliated composers and publishing a journal, those associated with CeReNeM are making their pool of obsessions and approaches known to establish an identity that sets it apart.

Last year CeReNeM published a book, *Noise In And As Music*, which used the centenary of Russolo's *The Art Of Noises* as an opening to investigate current ideas about noise. Chapters include a discussion of vocal techniques pushed beyond conventional limits (from Artaud to Phil Minton); subtractive computer synthesis used to filter noise (beginning with Stockhausen and ending with Johannes Kreidler); how noise has changed instrumental technique in free improvisation; and the two way exchange of ideas about noise between composers

(Xenakis especially) and rock musicians (Lou Reed, Nurse With Wound, Merzbow et al).

Having willingly, eagerly in fact, cut myself adrift from academia 15 years ago, being confronted again with the language and structures through which academic practice expresses itself feels oddly alien. Frankly that word research jars. In *The Wire* 365, Frances Morgan writes about EMS in Sweden where sound has been investigated with urgent creative purpose. But the suspicion hangs heavy that composers who devote themselves to academic life are motivated more by researching into, rather than doing anything remotely useful with, sound. University is a good place to go if you want to research the properties of macrophage blood cells, or of Henry VIII's attitude to agriculture – or indeed the keyboard style of JS Bach, or the harmonic procedures of Anton Bruckner, or the life and times of Dusty Springfield – but there comes a point where music needs to re-enter the realm of speculation, away from definite answers and provable conclusions. Music's psychic, otherworldly life and its need to engage socially in the moment must, by definition, take place away from academia.

The suspicion remains that those who enrol at an academic music department expect to be taught how to compose – taking lessons in organising notes that guarantee a certain sound. Today, music programmes at Mills College and Wesleyan University perhaps best encapsulate the open-minded spirit of a place like Black Mountain College, where in the 1950s composers exchanged ideas with poets, writers and visual artists. But out of the lexicon of insults available to the music writer, dismissing music as academic still feels spectacularly damning, implying an over reliance on pre-learned tools of the trade.

Luckily in these three new releases affiliated to CeReNeM nothing quite so bad besmirches the Huddersfield name. *Exposure* showcases vocal music by composers Aaron Cassidy, James Weeks, Bryn Harrison, Stephen Chase, Joanna Bailie, Richard Glover and Claudia Molitor in excellent performances by the vocal group Exaudi. Professor Monty Adkins' *Rift Tides* shows how his work has evolved to encompass concepts borrowed from psychogeography, while *Splice* are a free improvisation quartet featuring Huddersfield's Pierre Alexandre Tremblay. And listening to these albums in sequence – and also thinking about other albums released recently by Huddersfield affiliates Richard Glover, Bryn Harrison and Peter Ablinger – one thing becomes clear: nothing here has anything to do with generic mainstream new music. The presence of Ablinger as Professor of Composition is emblematic of the music department's intimate ties with central Europe – the likes of Lachenmann, Nono, Donatoni and Klaus Huber were featured at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival long before anywhere else in the UK was taking notice, and CeReNeM prides itself on exchanges with research centres such as IRCAM in Paris and elsewhere.

Not everything in the garden is rosy. In 2013 in another publication I took a swipe at Bryn Harrison's 75 minute unaccompanied piano piece *Vessels*, which felt like the result of a research project exploring how you might compose a late era Morton Feldman piano work. On *Exposure*, the tumbling chromatic figures of Harrison's *Eight Voices* – which loop inside each other to create an aural illusion: is this music static or busy? – retains a strong Feldman imprint but, because there's no particular Feldman choral tradition, the piece moves with greater freedom. Similarly, the two CD set offered by

*Splice* feels marginally too aware that there is a tradition to be honoured, a syllabus of gestures waiting to be box ticked. The Miles Davis tones of Alex Bonney's trumpet are displayed too empathically, the juxtapositions between rockist grooves and free space too studied and contrived.

Perhaps there might there be scope to reclaim words like academic and research for music. Milton Babbitt, the American composer, whose purist 12-tone music became shorthand for navel-gazing academicism, wrote music that bubbled with wit, intelligence and sudden divergences into unexpected terrain. Richard Glover similarly feels liberated by a purity of procedure. *Corradiation* sets up a field of investigation, and Exaudi inch their way via micro-intervals towards a unison octave; when they arrive, this most basic of melodic intervals is refreshed and reheard as a fundamental truth. Claudia Molitor's *Lorem Ipsum* plays with the conceit of text that was written as sound in itself and offers no informational meaning, while Joanna Bailie's *Harmonizing (Artificial Environment No 7)* parachutes a sextet of singers into real environments and then teases your sense of time and place by using the studio to sieve out chords to be superimposed back on the raw recording.

Monty Adkins, too, steps his music into an imagined version of the real world. *Rift Patterns* is available as a download and as an illustrated book on iPad, and something about it kept drawing me back. Adkins relies on simple (but not simplistic) harmonic patterns which get smutched and stretched as they are walked towards new terrain, and uses objects found in urban and rural locations to vibrate against piano strings. These vignettes are admittedly pretty, like postcards disinclined to drift too far towards the sonic edge. But stepping outside, leaving those university red bricks far in the distance, clearly feels good. □

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