

BOOKLET NOTES

Hipster Zombies From Mars is a kaleidoscopic ride through some eighteen years of compositional endeavor and many thousands of hours of piano practice. From outer space to the darkest recesses of the human mind, the music alludes to worlds well beyond itself, sometimes seriously, sometimes satirically, sometimes both simultaneously. Yet the listener can remain ignorant of all that and still enjoy the sonic stories created by ever-changing pianistic colour and texture. To achieve this duality – now here's something for the music nerds – there is constant stylistic poaching from a myriad of sources: the Middle Ages, the Baroque, romanticism, post-romanticism, impressionism, early modernism, high modernism, neo-high modernism, new complexity, minimalism and post-modernism, to say nothing of film music, game music, technological noise and a good swathe of Western popular music genres from the last sixty years.

The first and oldest work, *Terraformation* (1999), was commissioned by Ars Musica Australis to promote contemporary 'art' music in western regions of metropolitan Sydney, Australia. This piece has three main parameters: an extramusical programme, clear forms reflecting traditional classical music, and an uncompromising high-modernist surface. The idea was the transparency of the first and second would cast the third in a more appealing light, as per the commissioner's intent.

Inspiration for this work was drawn from Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Red Mars', a popular science fiction novel about human colonisation of the red planet. Among the author's speculative forays is the notion of 'terraformation', a series of geochemical processes whereby an uninhabitable planet is made habitable. The four movements of the piece are musical descriptors of technology used in these world-changing events. This includes the soletta, an artificial satellite which by boiling the surface, releases carbon dioxide into the air, causing global warming; the windmill, which in great numbers also raises temperatures through kinetic-energy-to-heat conversion; *cyanophyte primares*, a form of blue-green algae which provides oxygen for the atmosphere; and the permafrost pump, which by melting the icy poles, floods the surface with life-sustaining water.

The second work, *Uncanny Valley* (2011), explores a strange perceptual phenomenon often associated with the fields of robotics and animation. Common sense suggests as a visual representation of a human being becomes more and more 'human-like', we have a more and more positive response to it. And yet, at a certain point when the resemblance is especially close, our reactions switch to discomfort, disquiet or even revulsion. There are many possible explanations for this reaction, but one compelling argument is that leading up to that point, we see an increasingly pleasing estimation of a person, while beyond it – that is, in the uncanny valley itself – our perception is actually of a 'real' human being with something wrong or off.

This trajectory suggests a theme and variations form, with a bona fide, healthy person being the theme and facsimiles of varying quality – an industrial robot, a humanoid robot, a stuffed animal, and a corpse, zombie and bunraku puppet combined – the variations. Since the piece traces progress towards, descent into, and ascent out of the uncanny valley, the variations in this case precede, rather than follow the theme as they usually would.

The final work, *Indie Ditties* (2014-17), is essentially a book of preludes in the classical tradition, with twelve movements, each in a different 'key'. Like Debussy, the notion of key is substituted for a space with a specific tonal centre, around which a variety of scales, modes, et al. are explored. Like Chopin or J.S.Bach, these tonal centres are organised in a strict pattern; in this case, based on thirds.

The piece's overarching title refers to ideas, objects, situations and the like – twelve 'scapes', each with its own title – which reflect the now familiar phenomenon of indie/ alternative/ hipster subculture. The take on this social stratum is complex: part fascination, part affection, part puzzlement and part satire. Like with hipsterdom itself, an exact stance is hard to articulate...

Some effort has gone into designing *Indie Ditties* as a complete or partial cycle by balancing key, structure, mood, etc. Nevertheless, as the work was written largely to address the state requirement of New South Wales (Australia) that, as part of their graduating exams, secondary school music students play a short piece written in the last twenty-five years, each movement stands quite well on its own.

So how is all this 'Piano Music For A Post-Ironic Age'? On the face of it, the pieces are quite different from each other, with their own purpose, affiliations and sonic palette. They do, however, share two contrasting attributes: endless opportunity for mockery and critique within their own maelstrom of musical and extramusical meaning, and genuine intention to communicate and connect, regardless of aesthetic preference or experience. It is this paradoxical simultaneity – irony and sincerity as one – which makes this music very much of the post-ironic now.

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