

Nancarrowkaraoke

Nancarrowkaraoke is a singular project that unfolded over 5 years, where I took all of Conlon Nancarrow's piano rolls, transcribed them for my own voice and recorded the transcriptions multi tracking my own voice. The decision to transcribe and vocalise the player piano rolls of Nancarrow was obvious, ridiculous, audacious, scary and irresistible in equal measure, and the project began in 2015, the first performance took place at La Plaque Tournante (an artist space in Berlin founded by Frederic Acquaviva and myself) in April 2016 on the occasion of Maurice LeMaitres' 90th birthday. There are so many vocal influences in the music of Nancarrow that flicker and flitter in and out of focus as the music plays out its complex structure. The piano rolls have often been transcribed for various ensembles such as 'Bang on a Can All Stars' and London Sinfonietta, but have never been performed by voices. Famously, Nancarrow was traumatised by an early encounter with ensemble when they couldn't get anywhere near the dazzling rhythms and precision that he wanted. Every generation of new music player has brought with it an incremental raise in the level of virtuosity in contemporary music playing, so it wasn't until later in Nancarrow's life that he heard his music on 'live' instruments and one violinist I spoke to who played in one of these rehearsals said that Nancarrow almost cried when he heard his music played accurately in ensemble for the first time. Not that Nancarrow considered the lack of ensemble liveness to be a hardship. There is an unbridled joy in the uncompromising sound of the player piano that come directly from him, completely unmediated by another human being. So the big question with this set of recordings is why vocalise the music of Nancarrow at all? Nancarrow is all about pulse, tempo and rhythm 'each piece is a universe where the laws of time are redefined'. In many ways the voice is the diametrically opposed instrument to player piano, possessing a myriad of colours, textures and timbral possibilities. One answer to this question is very selfish. Nancarrow never wrote for voice and I love his music so much I really wanted to perform it. Indeed, his music is one of those that I would often sing along to. The voice as an

instrument is unique in many ways, one being that it is a wind/bellows instrument where flesh is carved into, by sound actually creating the instrument. So every voice you hear is a flesh thing, moulded by all the music and sounds that instrument has ever made. It really is and was always post-cyborg in this respect, as it is in some ways it is a flesh sound making machine, like an oboe or trumpet, that your brain programmes music into, to be reproduced either by means of a score or by memory (because as Boulez famously said, all improvisation is regurgitated memory) I really wanted the music of Nancarrow programmed into my vocal DNA so I could get to know it inside out. Also, having learnt Aperghis 'Recitations' and working them up a nice speed, as a singer I wanted a new challenge that was as much fun as those pieces. But perhaps the more interesting reason for Nancarrow is more metaphysical. I sometimes refer to myself as a post-cyborg atomic mezzo soprano. This description is both tongue in cheek and deadly serious. All my own projects in some way pose the question, what is it to be a live, flesh performer in the era of computers and computer generated performance? What is it to be a flesh brain composer in the era of AI? Who am I? Why am I here? What do you all want from me?!