

sister in London who runs a touring opera company so there's a theatrical influence there too. In general, I think I benefit from a generally supportive environment, but in which I ultimately get on with things mostly on my own. I would love it if my children did something artistic with their lives, but in the end they'll do whatever they want to—wherever their abilities take them. I'd never force them into anything.

CD Reviews

**Natasha Barrett's *Isostasie*
empreintes DIGITALes
reviewed by
Maria Panayotova-Martin**

The term 'isostasie' refers to a condition or state in which pressure is exerted upon an object from all sides and implies a sense of equilibrium. This is a very apt title for the recent CD compilation of electronic works by English composer Natasha Barrett, who has since relocated to Norway, reflecting the influence of "acousmatic" technique (from her work at the Birmingham Electroacoustic Studio Theatre) and the stark beauty of the glacier-cut Scandinavian landscape. Barrett creates a cascade of sounds that seem to surround the listener, swirling around the virtual space created in their mind through the use of spatialization techniques. Nevertheless, the force of this often startlingly direct approach is continually kept in check by the composer's diligent attention to equilibrium in both the individual pieces and the overall collection. She achieves this balance by carefully combining natural sound samples with electronically derived sounds, cacophonous surges of noise with meditative stillness and a

constant consideration of the interplay of distance and familiarity in the handling of her sound material.

The first piece on *Isostasie* is called *Fictions (Northern Mix)* and is divided into three smaller pieces, each of them having a different subtitle referring to nature: (Track 1) *In the Rain*, (Track 2) *Midnight Sun: Middy Moon* and (Track 3) *Outside Snow Falls*. All the above share a specific sound world created using mostly concrete sounds from different and opposing natural environments. Presented in combination they form a unique style and show a different personal perspective on the world we live in because of the choice, placement and manipulation of sonic material.

The first subsection called "In the rain" makes use of, as we would expect, rain samples. The background of a weather environment is punctuated by close-up spatializations of the sounds of breathing and almost glissandi-like abstract sounds increasing in density. This culminates in almost pure tones, either chimes, birds or whistles and in a more meditative, low density and hushed volume. "Midnight Sun: Middy moon" opens with a crash of sound and more pronounced reverberation effects. It uses verbalizations, hard consonants and ominous howling, mixed with the concrete sounds of rustling and spoken voice, from which we catch bits of the title, such as the word "Middy."

These fragments of speech are cast against a scenery of mostly natural sounds, which are not processed, but mostly reverberated to add depth and combined with an added layer of what sounds like electronically derived sine waves. Natasha Barrett works with spatialization to create paths of movement for the faster moving sound objects, which is not only an effect of panning, but the simulation of depth based on the reverb techniques. The result is that the displaced voice becomes more unreal because of the creation of an unreal reality in which it is located. "Outside snow falls" presents an array of concrete sounds including footsteps, a cat's meow and cat food falling into a porcelain bowl, transporting the listener into the domestic scene of a kitchen interior, while the weather remains outside. The natural rhythms of everyday actions are juxtaposed against reverberated sounds of banging metal objects. These sounds transition to electronic clicks and whistles swimming on the surface, eventually floating into a gentle, interwoven suspended canon.

Displaced:replaced (Tracks 4,6 and 8) is the largest musical form on *Isostasie* because it connects a triptych of brief episodes that serve as interludes to the longer sections (Tracks 5 and 7) in between them. The first of these interludes is called "Fog, light wind", the second is "Wet and gusty" and the last one is "Gathering wind". The weather metaphor surfaces again in the ambient curtain of atmospheric sounds in

each of these tracks forming a mental link among them. In "Fog, light wind" Barrett uses concrete sounds in their natural rhythms, but rearranges them in new ways in the mixing process to create a personal musical landscape. Sounds from nature are used like building blocks, shaped and overlapped in varied rhythms and patterns to form this unique sound picture. Track 6 "Wet and gusty" employs different kinds of water sounds in a manner similar to the above technique, where the difference in their natural speeds is made more alive and real by panning them in opposite directions. Track 8 "Gathering wind" features filtered, reverberated wind mixed with dry crackles of the filtered high frequencies. These are familiar sounds which are sometimes processed very little, but undergo an alienation effect because they are used in an unfamiliar context.

Red Snow (Track 5) presents the dry sound of crunching snow as if someone were stepping on it or shoveling it. It also includes a tapestry of reverbed filtered noises, where some pitches come to the surface because of the filtering technique. The composer brings to the foreground certain elements through amplitude and panning creating an almost narrative function. We also have our first silences, followed by metallic pitched sounds, adding in and moving at different speeds. Some of them are repeating so fast that it seems like they are rolling which works well with the panning.

Track 7, *Viva la Sselva* (Long live the jungle) presents to us insect and animal sounds at night, such as cicadas regular rhythms and reverberated dogs barking. There is an interplay of heavily processed, fast-moving sounds panning in and out of the picture, like moths flitting around a porch light. Gradually the piece transitions into the low and almost sleepy rhythm of gentle sounds against the steady pulse of a cricket and the striated sounds of beating of insect wings. Whistles in the background, like breezes slowly stirring, are punctuated with the sounds of birds that range from whistles to clicks and are overlapped with insect rhythms and even the hum of a mosquito zooming in and out of earshot. The sounds gradually become more exotic and it becomes clear that we are in a jungle setting. These abundant layers of detail are arranged into an organic whole. The crux of the piece occurs when a sample of classical music is presented, like a radio in the wilderness, followed by a collection of voice samples which are formed into their own rhythmic patterns, possibly representing a convolution of human voice with insect rhythms. At this point the range of representation expands to include eerie, outer-space like sounds so that one could envision an entire universe from the smallest animals to man to the unearthly, extraterrestrial sounds of space. The overall effect is very visual and moves through a large natural territory closing again in the immediate sounds of a forest, as if one was walking alone.

Track 9, *The Utility of Space* picks up with crackling sounds and voice murmuring the word "space," ghostly against a concrete soundscape outside where we hear an airplane passing. Voice is highly fragmented into mere phonemes, yet still presented in the rhythm of speech so that one wishes to fill in the gaps, completing the sounds and words to "read" the sentence. There is not just a breakdown of syntax, but a complete fragmentation of the phonetic structure of words, resulting in crumbles of speech. Church bells ringing in the background ring and resonate to create their own pulse. They are extended and layered with processed speech and other rhythmic natural sounds such as wind, birds chirping and wave sounds swirling through the sound space in different concentrations and densities. At this point the music evolves into a stage of silence through which various filtered sounds used in previous tracks, such as the snow crunching, move through by means of panning and spatialization. The music turns steadily more abstract as the soundscape becomes crowded with heavily processed and filtered sounds. The repetition of bird sounds and the voice saying "space" is now entirely abstracted, sans the natural soundscape in the background. The use of these soundscape elements, including voice and the airplane sample, which returns at the very end, evokes a sense of presence without being overwhelming because they are taken out

of their naturalistic, narrative soundscape and abstracted into independent sound elements which are employed like musical instruments.

Track 10, *Industrial Revelations* begins with a crash of sounds and heavier, more mechanical rhythms reminding us of those from an industrial machine. After a slight pause the composer begins to draw out individual sounds and create groupings that swell in intensity and the density of metallic squeals, rhythmic clangs and the sound of steam being released. There are a series of these cells and again the use of lightly processed voice is present in a fragmented laugh or a brief interlude of distorted singing, screaming or speech. Overall this track serves as a conclusion for the entire collection of pieces by readdressing the relationship of humankind, nature and technology. Natasha Barrett's *Isostasie* mingles these sound worlds so that the audience experiences sounds anew, exploring them in a virtual space, which although it threatens at times to overwhelm the listener with pressures and intensities from all sides, never does so entirely because that space is thoroughly composed and the treatment of concrete/abstract sounds always remains musical.

**Eric Chasalow's
Left to His Own Devices
New World Records
reviewed by Ivica Ico Bukvic**

The 20th century has now closed its doors and we have plunged into a new era of uncertain eclecticism. Yet, regardless of the newly-established historical status of the past 100 years, we are still hard-pressed to condense the elapsed time and the artistic innovations it brought in a coherent and unifying fashion. Perhaps the only apparent thread that permeates throughout the last century is the continuous effort of timbral emancipation, for which the stage was set through Schoenberg's breakaway from tonality, maturing of the percussion choir heralded through the works of Varese and Stravinsky, experimentation with new timbres foreshadowed by the Italian Futurists, as well as Cage's questioning of sound, silence, and structure, but perhaps most importantly through the efforts of the electro-acoustic music composers and researchers.

At the beginning of this new 21st century we are finally ready to accept timbre as an equal partner to the other musical elements which have constituted the backbone of the traditional Western music for centuries. In such environment, the music that is not any more concerned with existentialism and validation, but rather art itself can finally flourish. In such environment we are finally free to

combine our traditional notions with our newly-acquired technological prowess and seemingly endless timbral diversity. In such environment we are at last free to write music the way we want to, mixing styles and media without being hindered by the political and traditional aesthetic boundaries.

Of course, I am perhaps overly optimistic in my view of the current state of affairs in the ever-changing torrent of the contemporary arts scene. Nonetheless, the fact that nowadays we see more of such stylistic and instrumental cross-breeding than ever before is certainly difficult to contest. In this ever-changing current we, the artists, struggle to stay afloat. In this struggle, some of us happen to be the followers, slowly adapting to the trends of our times and/or expanding the paths that have been set before us. Others are the ones who lead, the ones who foreshadow the things that are to come.

Eric Chasalow's CD *Left to His Own Devices*, clearly establishes him as one of the leaders of our times. Most of the works on the disc predate this century, yet offer a wondrous fusion between distinct styles and mediums, nullifying many of the preconceived limitations and/or political borders beset by the ongoing struggle to recognize electro-acoustic art as an equal to the tradition-abundant world of acoustic music. In addition, the polarities between

the works themselves reveal Chasalow's skillfulness in both the electronic and acoustic realm. Hence, one by listening will be exposed to the complexity of Babbitt, timbral integration of Davidovsky, the colorful spectra of jazz idiom, wit and skill of Beethoven and Brahms, improvisatory power of Miles Davis, with a few sprinkles of John Cage and Elliott Carter on top.

The CD offers 9 distinct works, some of which are multi-movement endeavors. Rather than supplying an exhaustive journey from cover to cover, I will opt to entice you with just a couple of Chasalow's masterful creations that I personally found to be the most captivating, and hopefully in the process of doing so intrigue your musical taste buds strongly enough to make you explore the rest of the works under your own initiative. The first track on the CD, *In a Manner of Speaking*, opens up dramatically with a morphed sound of a clarinet that closely resembles an aboriginal didgeridoo and then quickly dissolves into its primal form. From there on, the piece quickly expands into a texture that bears strong resemblance to Davidovsky's *Synchronisms* series with the quasi-pointillistic incursions of both the acoustic and electronic counterparts. In this colorful conversation between the "real" and "fantastic," both the tape and clarinet coexist in a struggle to maintain timbral, textural, and rhythmic balance. Amidst the sea of colorful but relatively short phrases a texture surfaces, captivating listener's

attention through perpetual introduction of new sonic flavors, many of which bear associations with the real-world sonic phenomena. As such, we are exposed to sounds of vintage synths, meta-banjos, and various other pitched, but largely timbrally undefinable sounds. The resulting textural richness certainly exhibits the technological gap that separates Davidovsky's endeavors of the 60's and 70's and Mr. Chasalow's creation that was written right before the turn of the 21st century. Yet, the sonic palette remains true to its predecessor and the composer manages to generate a sound that is neither plagued by the technological poverty of the mid-20th century, nor the over-saturation of our digital age. Perhaps the only gripe that I could associate with this work is its brevity, as I could have certainly enjoyed a longer work. On the other hand, such attribute can also be seen as a compliment to the author's modesty, rather than a sign of a frail design (something that, in my humble opinion, we ought to see a lot more, especially on the various conferences that are populated with marathon-like concert programs).

Yes, I Really Did, composed in 1998 populates the second place on the CD and bears a unique contrasting aesthetic to just about every other work in the collection. Not only is its medium completely acoustic, but even more so its aesthetics is built upon the *Common Practice* tradition, exhibiting influences of great historical figures such as

Beethoven and Brahms. This piano trio is a warped reflection upon the past, as if the composer took a concave looking glass in an effort to read one of the early Romantic chamber works. Musical phrases and gestures boasting a relatively traditional architectural design of substantial rhythmic regularity, continuously infuse the overall texture, but they do so lacking one of the critical *Common Practice* elements — a tonal center. Chasalow utilizes evasive harmonic motions in order to avoid tonal implications, therefore generating a sound that closely resembles a piece from the Schoenberg's atonal period (albeit disregarding the Schoenberg's vigorous pursuit of avoiding even the feeblest hints of tonality, such as octave doublings). Composer's prowess with the traditional manipulation of the material truly shines in this single-movement work. The exchange of ideas among the players is suggestive of a meaningful introductory conversation that soon plunges into an energetic superimposition of pulse-driven ideas. However, despite the obvious allusions to the things past, Chasalow manages to overshadow the apparent influences with his own compositional character. It is also impressive to notice that the work exhibits none of the contemporary performance techniques as well as utilizes the oft-treaded post-Modern approach, yet nonetheless, sounds fresh and appealing.

Dream Songs is an ambitious five-movement work for tape (posing as a tenor solo) and

orchestra, commissioned by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. If I had to describe it in one sentence, I would say that it is as if you took Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge* and mixed it with the late 20th century post-tonal orchestral idiom, resulting in a Mahler-like orchestral Lied of the 21st century. An amazing balance between the vocals and the orchestra dominates the work. Chasalow manages to exhibit yet another one of his talents through masterful orchestration coupled with a convincing tape counterpart. Through author's masterful hands, both the acoustic and electro-acoustic worlds are merged together resulting in a convincing and structurally sane work of a mass appeal. All five movements, although somewhat different in their character, convey the same restless mood that is in part driven by the poetry contained in the tape part. This comes as no surprise as Chasalow used five poems from the same-titled collection written by John Berryman. Although personally I am not a big fan of the *sprechstimme* and/or other semideclamatory text interpretations and incantations, in this case such treatment seems to work rather well, in part due to masterfully processed tape snippets that shroud the text and its respective vocalizations. The composer's boldness is apparent in his superimposition of a powerful sound of the traditional orchestra and the rich timbral possibilities of the electro-acoustic medium. Naturally,

orchestra predominantly resides in the realm of soft dynamics in order to ensure the legibility of the text. Even so, the piece is an impressive endeavor in every aspect and is probably one of my favorite works on the CD.

Finally, what would this review be without touching upon the piece the whole collection was titled after? *Left to His Own Devices* is an old-school electro-acoustic piece with subtle processing of the Milton Babbitt's voice and various organ-like sounds that appear to be simple extrapolations of the FM and AM syntheses, mimicking Babbitt's now defunct RCA synthesizer. Most of the processing involves pitch-bending without resampling, some sound-stretching, as well as generation of nebulae of pitched material. In that respect, the piece attempts to retain the character of the times when Babbitt's infatuation with the RCA synthesizer was at its peak. Perhaps the most captivating aspect of the work is its micro-programmatic treatment of the text, as well as the overall storyline that in part appears to be Babbitt's semi-autobiographical journey. Several quotes of Babbitt's instrumental music filter through the work disguised in the Chasalow's synthetic interpretation. The piece also consciously reflects upon the Babbitt's last work utilizing RCA synthesizer that he never managed to finish due to unfortunate defacement of the expensive machine by unknown vandal(s).

Composer's attention to intricate details in an attempt to recreate the RCA synthesizer, coupled by the subtle processing of the material yet once more speak of both his strong grasp of the technology as well as its tasteful deployment.

Many other remarkable works are a part of this collection, such as the *Suspicious Motives* with its intricate balance between the timbrally-rich chamber ensemble and tape, *Crossing Boundaries* that sonically resembles *Left to His Own Devices* while encompassing a much broader subject, *In the Works* as yet another purely acoustic work with a contemporary jazz-like aesthetics, as well as *Out of Joint* improvisatory piece for trumpet and tape, and *And It Flew Upside Down* that pays yet once more a tribute to both Davidovsky and Babbitt. The richness of the medium as well as styles offered herein consequently leaves something for every musical taste to appreciate. As such, *Left to His Own Devices* is a successful forward-looking compendium of Chasalaw's creations that boldly integrates the combination of the traditional acoustic music idiom and the modern electro-acoustic art.

**Elizabeth McNutt's *Pipe Wrench*
EMF Media
reviewed by Robert Denham**

Pipe Wrench: flute + computer, an innovative new CD featuring new music specialist Elizabeth McNutt, is a must-listen new release from the Electronic Music Foundation label. McNutt, a veteran performer of interactive music, is brilliant with impeccable interpretations of five pieces written within the last twenty years. One of the remarkable characteristics of the CD as a whole is how McNutt manages to infuse each work with a depth of meaning and purpose that can only come from an intimate understanding of the scores and the genre of interactive computer music performance as a whole.

McNutt is able to shape the sound of her own instrument to compliment the synthetically generated timbres around her; the range of her expression is a natural match for the timbral variety of computer music. This, coupled with a high level of virtuosity across the range of the instrument, allows her to get inside the computer program and manipulate it, one of the unspoken performance goals of every interactive composition. Her program choice is excellent, and represents an intelligent blend of profundity, brevity, and levity with pieces written between 1987 and 1996.

The first piece on the CD is *The Twittering Machine* (1995) by Andrew May. May wrote this piece in collaboration with McNutt, and it serves as a wonderful opener since it plunges the listener directly into an atmosphere where acoustic and electronic sounds are melded. "Melding" is an especially appropriate description, since the computer is primarily used to subtly alter sounds that are physically produced by both McNutt and her flute. These sounds produce the "twitters" (the title is taken from a painting by Paul Klee), which become the focus of the piece as they eventually envelope the flute in a constantly morphing canopy of sound. The other birds, seemingly the computer generated offspring of the original, take on many forms (clicking, murmuring, pulsing) and serve as a constantly morphing background. Though the twitters continue in various forms for nearly the entire piece, the work has a strong sense of direction; an overall arch that yields a great sense of satisfaction to the listener.

Cort Lippe's *Music for Flute and Computer* (1994) allows McNutt to display her skill in improvisation. As with much of Lippe's music, the focus of the piece is more about timbre than form, specifically in how the color of the flute reacts with various colors generated by the computer. The computer rarely usurps the central role of the flute, and generally takes on a subservient role as it tracks the live performer's melodic line

and responds to certain predetermined events. Lippe states that "The work has elements of both a solo and a duo: at times the computer part cannot be separated from the flute part, while in other instances the computer has its own independent musical function." The piece is generally effective in achieving this goal, though it might be argued that the flute's role is too central or that the computer is not given an opportunity to really show its worth as a solo instrument. However, if this is a shortcoming, it is not enough to significantly detract from Lippe's distinct compositional voice.

A refreshing change of pace comes with the CD's third piece, Eric Lyon's *The Blistering Price of Power* (1993). This work provides a humorous counterbalance to the meditative qualities of Lippe's music by virtue of its levity, "spiritual understanding," and its limited role for the flute. If this last statement seems peculiar, suffice it to say that the piece operates much in the same manner as John Cage's *Radio Music*; at times a station featuring the flute is present, but this alternates with any one of a number of flute-less stations that might take full command of the airwaves. These channels are only juxtaposed near the end of the work, which means that the flute is absent from the texture for at least as much time as it is present. Despite the fact that the flute's character remains relatively unchanged throughout the course of the

work, the abrupt shifts in texture along with the frequent electronic solos allow the acoustic instrument to retain its freshness and vitality.

Barry Moon's *Interact 1* (1996) is essentially guided by the performance-time decisions of the flutist. As such, the work takes on a meandering quality that may give the impression of a lack of formal clarity. However, this sense of wandering is really the point of the piece, since it allows the listener to revel in the richness of the sounds resulting from McNutt's decisions. If the listener can realize this, he/she will no longer experience the nagging question "where is this piece going?" but will instead experience a state of anticipation, as if to ask "what comes next?!" It is true that the structure of this piece may not be easily grasped by classically trained ears, but it is equally true that once the purpose of the piece is exposed it yields a fascinating exposé of sounds and textures. Some of these are quite distinct from the flute, while others are dependent on its timbre (severe pitch warping, timbral distortions, echoes, etc.). One sound in particular, which Moon uses near the beginning of his piece, thickens the character of the multiphonics McNutt plays, thereby allowing her to activate a choral texture. The electronic sound serves to expand the character of the multiphonic, showing an understanding of both flute writing and computer programming. All of the

sounds share the common purpose of responding at various levels of intensity to the musicality of the performer.

In contrast, Philippe Manoury's *Jupiter* (1987) displays an excellent balance of color preservation and formal clarity. Both of these factors are essential to the success of this work, since its monumental length of 28 minutes sets it apart from the four shorter works on the program. In terms of color, it is true that the flute dominates the texture, but it is countered with a reasonably limited palette of computer generated sounds, like washes of color punctuated by synthesized bells. These tend to be more gentle and soothing than the computer timbres found in the other four pieces on the CD. In this way, the flute is not overwhelmed by the infinite variety of the electronics, which by virtue of their limitations enable the listener to have a greater sense of memorability and recognition. Manoury is able to use the submission and withdrawal of specific timbres to clarify the work's formal structure (as was purposefully lacking in the Moon). He uses these features to give the listener a helpful, but in no way condescending, guide as to the destination of the work. This sense of direction, along with McNutt's skillful interpretation, gives the work a depth and profundity that would not have otherwise been possible.

Manoury's work provides the strong finish that *Pipewrench: flute + computer* deserves. In addition to McNutt's stellar performances and scrupulous attention to detail, all five pieces on the disk are worthy of serious contemplation. All of them treat the subject of interaction from a slightly different perspective; from May's chattering dialogue, to Lyon's humorous contrasts, to Moon's use of musical dialogue and wandering lines. I fully recommend this recording as McNutt's triumphant realization of five works from the very recent past, any one of which may with time prove to be a masterpiece of the interactive genre.