

performances of his songs, first at the Vienna Wagner-Verein, then at Hugo Wolf-Vereins set up in Munich, Stuttgart and Berlin as well as Vienna.

Stokes too regards Wolf's songs as masterpieces, as do Walker and Sams (with some qualifications). Stokes's purpose in writing his book is to make the songs more accessible and to promote their performance to a wider public. Like the cello suites, the texts of the songs benefit from being read alongside recordings, ideally with the vocal scores.

But is the average music lover, who is likely to agree with Isserlis about the cello suites, quite as ready to consider Wolf's songs on the same level as Schubert's *Winterreise* and Schumann's *Dichterliebe*? Individual songs have become popular with singers; but the works published originally in single books – the Goethe and Eichendorff songs, the Spanish and Italian Songbooks – have no dramatic cycles, no overall structure. They are collections of poems which appealed to Wolf and which he set quickly in intense periods of creative mania. He himself was desperate to write operas, to move beyond his status as a 'mere' composer of songs. His settings of the poems he loved are distinctive, original, harmonically adventurous, with more than a nod to Wagnerian chromaticism. As Stokes explains, one of the features of Wolf's songs is their minimal melodic interest, with a stronger emphasis on the relationship of voice to piano. They are difficult to perform, for both singer and pianist, and require repeated hearings to be fully appreciated.

STOKES'S *Complete songs* is an indispensable reference work for Lieder singers and students of the Lied. For a portrait of the man himself one must return to Frank Walker's biography. For a detailed account of the music, Eric Sams's *The songs of Hugo Wolf* remains a fine resource. Stokes also credits as 'required reading' Susan Youens's *Hugo Wolf and his Mörike songs* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ARNOLD WHITTALL

## Spatial awareness

*Alien listening: Voyager's Golden Record and music from the earth*

Daniel KL Chua & Alexander Rehding

Zone Books (New York, 2021); 272pp; £25, \$32.

ISBN 978 1 942130 53 6.

*Looking within: the music of John Palmer: dialogues and essays*

Edited by Sunny Knable

Vision Edition ([no place], 2021); vi, 384pp; £36.99.

ISBN 978 0 9931761 7 3.

ON THEIR OWN, the words 'alien listening' might seem a rather unsubtle way of categorising a kind of New Music that deters rather than encourages listeners: in particular, avant-garde or experimental compositions that sound like negations of the qualities most commonly valued in music most frequently heard in live events or played from recordings. As the full title of the book by Daniel Chua & Alexander Rehding spells out, they understand 'alien listening' very differently. This is not primarily an account of existing compositions, still less an attempt to imagine how future compositions by earthlings might or might not relate to earlier compositions. Instead, it uses the 1977 launch of the Voyager spacecraft, with its specific intention of providing somehow-sentient aliens with an understanding of earth music, as justification for attempting a root-and-branch redefinition of musicology and music theory, as well as of the relationship between listeners, real or potential, and sound: and all this requires the premise that existing music theory, as it has evolved since Pythagoras, is fundamentally flawed – lacking, you might say, in any true sense of proportion.

From what we have learned so far about the differences between life and thought on earth and everywhere else in the so-far-explored cosmos

– and even if we accept the argument that it would be erroneous to exclude any possibility of comparable life-forms to ours somewhere ‘out there’ – it would still be astonishing if earth-specific features of any kind (beyond the basic materials that made human evolution possible) might be meaningful to beings as representative of the concept ‘alien’ as we are of the concept ‘human’. Nevertheless, *Alien listening* boldly goes in the direction of determining how a theory of music accessible to aliens-with-sentience might differ from – improve on? – what is usually understood by that term on earth. The main point is not to offer a detailed critique of a currently comprehensive exposition of the phenomenon as conventionally understood, like the still-invaluable *Cambridge history of western music theory* (2002/2004). Instead, the exercise of providing some other life-form in the cosmos (if – big if – they should ever actually encounter and access the golden disk attached to Voyager, and have an understanding of its nature somehow comparable to that of the launchers) treats the humanly unimaginable essence of any such outcome as the opportunity to rethink what sound and listening ‘really’ are: the end-product of what they have (so far) been for humanity is, of course, what civilisation and scholarship have compositionally understood them to be. You couldn’t wish for a more eloquently contemporary presentation of this radical rethinking than Chua & Rehding’s, with its liberal scattering of lighter asides and self-aware disclosures to subvert pomposity or hints of mundane academicism. But the quixotic nature of the enterprise is constantly signalled by the text, of which the following sentence is representative: ‘ultimately, it is difficult to describe the sensory world of species that have vastly different experiences from us’. That sentence actually applies to earthbound chiropteras, cephalopods and cetaceans, but it doubtless extends to any other species whose path Voyager might cross.

Also aimed at relevance to such species is IMTE – the ‘Intergalactic Music Theory of Everything’.

Required to be as different as possible from such post-Pythagorean dogmas as those on offer from Rameau, Fux, Riemann, Schenker, Schoenberg *e tutti quanti*, what Chua & Rehding eventually come up with seems closest to a kind of modernist or post-modernist aesthetic schema, in harmony with a view of the cosmos whose

patterns do not form stratified structures, but interpenetrate each other in their difference to weave a translucent, relational, unfolding surface. [...] There is no hierarchy, no conquering or dividing of a preexistent territory. [...] As a weaving of time music is not held together by some Pythagorean totality, it neither emanates from a fundamental base/bass nor descends from some fundamental unity. Rather, music is a network or meshwork that spools and sprawls without a center or a fixed boundary to control its movement.

Readers for whom this recipe has significant things in common with present-day avant-garde and experimental concerns to subvert the rooted but un-well-tempered sonorities of spectral harmonic schemes may feel at home with the extravagant aspirations on offer here, especially if they are already committed to a version of spectralism that downplays fundamentals in the interests of a pervasive instability in the dialogue between sound and noise. Could it indeed be that aliens are already among us, and already composing their unearthly music? Chua & Rehding make passing reference to one philosopher who has been found relevant by traditional music theorists when contemplating spectral and post-spectral initiatives. But instead of engaging with existing attempts to attach Deleuzian thinking to specific post-classical compositional styles and designs – for instance, Edward Campbell’s *Music after Deleuze* (Bloomsbury, 2013), which has its own way of ‘thinking musical time’ – Chua & Rehding prefer to locate their nexus of hypotheses well beyond any methodology that retains essential links with actual musical post-classicism. This may be the logical result of their concern with possibilities remote from the here and now, but it casts a frustrating aura of technical imprecision over the verbal unfolding of their rhetorical weave.

The current cultural climate may well take a more measured and serious view of *Alien listening* than I appear to be doing, interpreting its ethos and attitude as refreshingly undoctinaire and its emphasis on a welter of innovative scientific contexts as exemplary. I suppose a time may come when musical life on earth would decide to take account of something learned from beyond earth: but what kind of thing that might be surely requires very substantial evolutionary changes in humanity itself which by definition we can have little grasp of here and now. Meanwhile it is more important than ever for writing about music to give especially close and careful attention to compositional characteristics, as serious musicians continue to grapple with the consequences of the heterogeneous response from institutions and audiences to modernist initiatives since c.1900. The extent to which composed music can embody a sense of the mundane and the earthbound has always been part of such narratives, and on balance it seems more productive to explore why this music still matters to us than to worry about whether it might ever mean something we can understand to impossibly distant life-forms that probably share none of our own constituent qualities. But if you are intrigued by the question of whether what we understand as ‘music’ might nevertheless cross the boundaries of absolute otherness, *Alien listening* is somewhere to start.

**A**LTHOUGH the book about John Palmer (born in 1959) is called *Looking within*, it gives consistent attention to spiritually resonant, even utopian aspirations that add up to a much more accessible sense of how human creativity can look to ‘the beyond’, rather in the spirit of Jonathan Harvey’s vision of spectralism as ‘spiritual breakthrough’. Since 2013 Vision Edition has won attention with essay collections from Richard Barrett, James Wood and Frank Denyer that make strong cases for composers less prominent on the contemporary cultural scene

than they deserve to be (see MT, Summer 2020, pp.95–103). There are also several books from Palmer himself, including a two-part analysis of Harvey’s *Mortuos plango, vivos voco*, complementing his earlier study of *Bhakti* (published elsewhere), and his collection of *Conversations* with a wide range of musicians including Harvey and Vinko Globokar – Palmer studied with both – reviewed here in Summer 2016. In this latest compilation of ‘dialogues and essays’ Palmer’s own compositions are the centre of attention, and he has assembled a strong cast of sympathetic interlocutors. The bulk of the printed material is nevertheless Palmer’s own, as he responds in detail to questions or statements about his life, beliefs and creative work. Generously illustrated with score extracts – variably legible but sufficient to give a reasonable idea of musical character – it is fair to describe the result as the case for the defence. Granted that it could have appeared invidious to invite a Palmer sceptic to expand at length in critical terms about the music’s possible weaknesses, the book’s approach to surveying its extensive materials in an introductory as well as promotional spirit should certainly encourage interested readers to follow up what is on offer in other media concerning a composer notable for the international reach of his activities and contacts. Palmer’s generosity in spending time visiting and writing about other composers, as well as teaching, and creating his own music, is a rare quality whose origins can perhaps be found in his early interactive work in popular music and improvisation. If, by some standards, his own compositions can steer too close for comfort to the ephemeral aspects of improvisation, while shunning the abrasive challenges that stem from the aggressive melancholia of much mainstream modernism, there are plenty of other musicians – like the editor of this collection, Sunny Knable – for whom such qualities are matters for celebration rather than reproach.

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