

Density is a matter of scale.

Not just mass, not just volume—it is a measure of mass in relation to volume. How much is there of something given how big it is? How many events occur during what time span? How many people occupy a given space? How diffuse is your ten-inch-tall cotton candy? How tightly packed is my fist-sized snowball?

Density is proportional. And it is a factor in rhythm. Musical rhythm and the rhythm of everyday existence. Lives get dense and then they open up. We take a vacation. Reduce the number of events-per-day. Music is sparse and then thickens. Like the plot. Like a good pudding.

In the case of *Density 21.5*, the Edgard Varèse composition that gives this overall project its title and impetus, the material in question is platinum. In 1936, commissioned by French flutist Georges Barrère to write a piece for the debut of his new platinum flute, Varèse came up with one of the most concentrated four minutes in modern music. (He refined the work ten years after its initial completion.) Some six decades later, flutist Claire Chase started *Density 2036*, a commission project which, over an extended period that brings us to the original composition's centennial, will add an unprecedented number of fresh works to the instrument's repertoire.

A new proportion: the number of pieces in relation to the field. This 4-CD set is the first document of Chase's monumental ambition. It features eighteen compositions by sixteen composers from many different parts of the new and experimental music spectrum. Changing the density, thickening the plot. Let's call it platinum pudding.

Respectful of the work's history, Chase chose to include her own version of *Density 21.5*, adding to a lineage that includes interpretations by Severino Gazzelloni and Eric Dolphy. The choice of Varèse's piece is apt not just for its instrumentation, but perhaps for the singularly independent direction it suggested for new music. If we see its two contrasting motifs—one atonal, one melodic—as figurative markers for two seemingly divergent paths for contemporary composition, one through the restrictions and rigor of serialism and post-serialism into the serialist diaspora, and one that leads into a cornucopia of reclamations and reinventions of harmony and melody, then this single piece, written just as the world itself convulsed into a new geopolitical schema, arguably represents the dawn of our present musical era. I think its traces, or the traces of an underlying idea that made space for it to arise, are present in many of these works, in the relaxed way that elements can be drawn equally from both side of that supposed divide, from the arch and the lovely, from noise and song. The severity of musical ideology has given way to something more inviting, more accepting. Chase invited. And accepted.

Brazilian-born Marcos Balter kicks the program off with a meditative piece for seven flutes based on a poem by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. In the poem, a passing cloud evinces "a shivery blow," which is paralleled in the amorphous way the work moves—slowly, tremulously shifting, its shakuhachi-like breaths and eerie bent tones introduce a shadow of doubt into a peaceful moment. I love the surprising way the choir of flutes joins

at 4:20, thickening the sound, sending little wind sounds cascading into reverberant space.

You can hear intimations of the black metal and ambient music that has been a central part of American composer Mario Diaz de Leon's sonic universe in his composition *Luciform*. Star bright flute is contrasted with ominous synth chords. In the course of the piece, a pre-composed electronic part sets up Chase for a virtuosic trip through an obstacle course, brilliant runs and luminous counterpoint giving voice to the visionary score, which the composer describes as "a difficult path, a rite of passage, hovering between diabolical intensity and lucid wakefulness."

Brazilian-American composer Felipe Lara contributes two consecutive works, starting with the condensed intensity of *Meditation and Calligraphy*, performed on bass flute. Inspired by the calligraphy of G. Mend-Ooyo, meant as a modest gift for the Mongolian poet, it is a gorgeous contrast to the maximal work that precedes it, a palette cleanser, swooping and piercing notes, sometimes like chopping a melon, pitches and vocal sounds drawn from the calligrapher's distinctively musical name and delivered with shocking force across the transverse hole. Lara's incredible *Parábolas na Caverna* moves in an instant between delicacy and explosiveness in its illumination of Plato's famous dugout, the cave in which chained prisoners view their own shadows, making up stories from their own projections—an idea spookily relevant in today's media echo chamber. Some of the most incredible passages find Chase combining voiced and unvoiced notes at breakneck speed, while elsewhere the amplification and gentle reverb suggest the cavernous conversation at the heart of Plato's parable.

As always, George Lewis's contribution is thrilling and thought-provoking. Written for flute and electronics, meant explicitly to explore the relationship between sound-producing machines (the flute) and sound-reproducing ones (the electronics), it's a direct response to Varèse, who outspokenly preferred the former to the latter. Lewis's comments on the piece suggest his sly invocation and subversion of the overall Varéseness of Chase's project, suggesting a resolution of the thesis-antithesis dyad in terms of a "space-time" synthesis: "Rather than presenting the redundant truism of a composer 'working with time,' this work is created in dialogue with my deliberate misprision of Varèse's stated intention for his 1958 *Poème électronique* to introduce 'a fourth [dimension], that of sound projection,' to music. Varèse's statement seems to obliquely invoke the notion of space-time, an interpretation supported by a 1968 account of one of the composer's dreams that suggests the related notion of quantum teleportation as well as the sound of my piece: 'He was in a telephone booth talking to his wife, who was at the time in Paris. His body became so light, so immaterial, so evanescent that suddenly, limb by limb, he disintegrated and flew away toward Paris, where he was reconstructed, as though all his being had become spirit.'"

Chinese-born composer Du Yun contributes the final work of this first panel of Density 2036. Enticingly titled *An Empty Garlic*, including nods at Bach's Sarabande from the A-minor Partita for solo flute, the piece is scored for bass flute and electronics, and it exploits Chase's incredibly sensitive way with a melodic line, her singing providing a naked voice

as powerful (and sexy, and sad—in short, supercharged) as her metal machine. That it is so different from the other compositions for electronics and flute shows how much can be done with similar means. Paring away more outwardly florid and busier soundscapes, as well as electronics, as it goes along, the last four minutes are despondent and inward, a kind of movement through loss—extremely beautiful, remote, communing, each inhale a tone, each exhale a flurry of emotion.

—JOHN CORBETT