

Conceived and performed by the London vocalist Elaine Mitchener, *Industrialising Intimacy* flickers into life at the point where any attempts at categorisation are doomed to fail. Mitchener herself calls the piece “an original work of contemporary music theatre, performed... in collaboration with Dam van Huynh, George Lewis and David Toop”. But its mash-up of composed music, free improvisation and input from a choreographer meets inside a hybrid form that has little to do with how modern composition, improvisation or dance are usually perceived.

Until one year ago, Mitchener had a three day a week desk job at Ricordi Music’s London office, where she was charged with promoting music by the likes of Luigi Nono, Franco Donatoni and Heiner Goebbels. But she had been taking classical vocal lessons for a number of years, biding her time as she meticulously pieced together the art she wanted to make. Engaging with free improvisation allowed her to experiment with, and expand upon, the vocal techniques she was honing around composed music, and she has shared stages with Steve Beresford, John Butcher, Maggie Nichols and Phil Minton.

But Mitchener has also persuaded Irvine Arditti – leader of the eponymous string quartet who make notey composed works by Brian Ferneyhough, Elliott Carter and Helmut Lachenmann their speciality – to take part in free improvisation. Improvising with pianist Bobby Few and bassist Henry Grimes was also an honour, she tells me, but Mitchener is by her own admission not a jazz musician. “I improvised off the shapes of their playing and they were totally cool about it,” she says.

When we meet in a central London cafe to discuss the creative footslog towards *Industrialising Intimacy*, it becomes obvious that the Mitchener project has been about embroidering something to call her own out of all the musical stimuli surrounding her. “*Industrialising Intimacy* has its roots in a conference I attended when I was working for Ricordi – the International Artists Managers’ Association,” she explains. “Someone from a commercial pop organisation gave a talk about social media and musicians, and said ‘We’re in the business of industrialising intimacy’. And I thought that was so sinister. He was talking about Twitter and Facebook, and how youngsters can connect with pop stars. But, in reality, you’re only in touch with the 50th person working for their Twitter account. And I find that disturbing. I’m not anti-technology in the slightest, but I am pro-personal interaction.”

Free improvisation, Mitchener continues, reinforces this belief in personal interaction: “Improvisation has allowed me to be uninhibited. You can still be analytical. You can be part of an ensemble. And your contribution is valid as anyone else’s.” And *Industrialising Intimacy* raises some searching questions about where collaboration can take an improviser.

The 50 minute work carves out a space for performance, Mitchener onstage without any props, in which three separately composed responses to themes of intimacy and personal interaction can co-exist. David Toop opens with a soundscape anchored around two texts, one by Thoreau and one anonymous (“*To think or reflect is to step aside from events, to give up the world for a space of internal quiet, as if you have entered a walled garden*”). Mitchener’s own piece was developed out of conversations with her mother recorded shortly after her father died two years ago; then George Lewis’s composition grew out of recorded samples of Mitchener’s voice around which he constructed a piece based on the poem *Memorial* by South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile.

As director, Dam van Huynh’s responsibility was to locate, then work with, threads running through all three pieces, and also to direct and choreograph Mitchener’s voice. Choreographers plot moves designed to guarantee precisely the same results every time. But Mitchener is preoccupied with how analysing movement can be incorporated into the act of improvisation to directly alter the means of vocal production.

“I’ve always been open to reflecting on improvisation after the event,” she says, “the idea that something created in the moment I might want to use again has never been a problem. And working with Dam has helped me draw everything I do into a unified approach. He studied with Merce Cunningham and has developed his own very unique movement language. What he does is sexy, not in a Rihanna way, but in the sense of massaging sound throughout the body. Merce split the torso into four chambers, and Dam has divided it further into six. It’s about feeling space and movement and energy throughout the body.

“Dancers hold the torso up and pull the stomach in,” she continues. “The breath is high. Classically trained singers do the opposite. The diaphragm is out, and needs to be to support the voice, but Dam wants everything held in. The important thing is, though, that he does not want me to be a dancer. ‘Stop

thinking dance!’ he says. He wants to work with the natural moves of the body. As a singer I know when a piece of text needs reinforcing to be heard; but with Dam I work on how a particular movement might effect or dissect the voice.”

Many of Van Huynh’s demands, Mitchener elaborates, require her to act counterintuitively. “Dam tries to work against the natural instinct towards, for instance, accompanying fast music with fast body movements, and I might actually be struggling to vocalise because of the position my body is holding. To enable movement in my body, an inner rhythm must be established and embedded which isn’t influenced or inspired by what I am hearing externally before I can start to meld voice and movement together.”

The piece received what Mitchener calls a “public sharing of a work in progress” at Oxford’s Ovada Gallery earlier this year, an experience that emphasised how very exposed she is as a performer. The gallery was already set up for an exhibition, obliging Van Huynh to replot some aspects of his choreography. “The audience were therefore surrounding me,” she recalls. “They followed me around the space, or I pushed through them. One guy refused to move out of the way and we had a face off. The audience are not invited to be interactive, but I don’t know what they’re going to do. I open a door and invite the audience to peek in. It’s very voyeuristic.

“The dress I wear to perform the piece looks like a concert dress, but it’s not,” she adds. “It’s very revealing. Through the thin lace, I’ve got my baps out and there’s a fragility about it. It’s modest and immodest at the same time. Which relates to the idea of a spider’s web. The fabric is delicate, but because of what I’m doing I don’t look fragile in it. I feel very strong in that outfit.”

Mitchener and Toop worked together for the first time in 2012 in Aldeburgh on Toop’s opera *The Star-Shaped Biscuit*, and Mitchener has just returned from performing their collaborative opera *Of Leonardo da Vinci* at the Ultima Festival in Norway, a piece that intensifies the relationship between voice and movement. “I sometimes think, wow, what have we opened up here? The Leonardo piece is actually five years old, but now I do it very differently. I couldn’t perform it as I approached it five years ago. I’m a completely different musician today.” □ Elaine Mitchener performs *Industrialising Intimacy* as part of Brighton Dome’s Earsthetic series this month: see Out There. elainemitchener.wordpress.com

Philip Clark



Hana Knizova

Unofficial Channels Inches Per Second

Bob Purse’s entries on the WFMU blog were a time machine that whisked you back to 1950s America: a world where radio is the dominant medium and adverts for lawnmowers and meat companies jostle for attention. And of course a world where reel-to-reel tape ruled. When Purse spots a stack of tapes at a rummage sale, he pounces, and that’s how he’s wound up with a basement full of tapes containing who knows what. For almost eight years Purse dipped into the pile and digitised what he found, titling his posts *Exploring My Reel-To-Reel Catacombs*. Now, with WFMU’s blog mothballed, Purse has started a new blog, *Inches Per Second*.

Purse elaborates on his passion for collecting in a letter to a sceptical young friend, later posted as an essay on the WFMU blog: “I think there are at least two things going on: one, that you may not share a fascination for the past, both a voyeuristic interest in what people’s lives have been like and a nostalgia for things I’ve experienced or wish I’ve experienced, but, even more importantly, that you may not be able to conceive of a life in which everything isn’t readily available on tape, pictures, video, DVD, computer, etc.” His excitement for his musical favourites is infectious: Dora Hall was the “Queen Of Vanity Entertainment”, who sang on records given away free with Solo plastic cups (Dora was married to the owner of the Solo Cup company). Her backing group was run by Larry Taylor, and was some slick outfit. “The trumpet solo just kills me,” Purse raves. “It’s sexy as hell, smooth and full of just amazing little melodic ideas.”

Another local star in Chicago was Merigail Moreland, who started recording with a cappella backing singers in 1953, aged ten. You hear the group rehearsing song endings, before taping a series of cheerfully outlandish ditties. Someone enquires, “Who’s head cheese at our house, Who will get his way?” as the whole Moreland family sing about the about the lack of wages for housework (the answer is baby, by the way).

Clearly Purse’s blogs are also an odd exercise in cultural history. One stack of tapes belonged to Harvey and Irene Schmitt, who ran the Ponderosa Family Nudist Resort in Indiana, and frequently took part in languid, eminently reasonable radio discussions about nudism. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are weird entertainment, and there’s a good series here from Dionne Warwick, explaining how to fill out customs forms. But it’s not only radio – Purse includes tapes of his family singing and kidding around in the 50s and 60s, recorded on his dad’s 1952 Concertone machine. This brought a flashback of myself and my brother around 1960, recording a skit satirising our parents’ visit to the pub – while they were out at the pub! We even managed overdubs, that’s how good that Grundig reel-to-reel was. □ inches-per-second.blogspot.co.uk, blog.wfmu.org

Clive Bell

Freedom

Vocalist **Elaine Mitchener** occupies an intimate space between opera, improvisation and choreography

Of

Movement