

Éliane Radigue

Zeiss Major Planetarium, Berlin, Germany/
berlinerfestspiele.de

In Éliane Radigue's concerts, the acoustic space in which her music unfolds is critical. For this rare continuous performance of her three hour *Trilogie De La Mort* in its entirety, Maerzmusik's online festival chose the Berlin Zeiss-Grossplanetarium, a planetarium turned culture centre whose semi-spherical auditorium has a domed roof some 30 metres in diameter, with a multichannel, 50 loudspeaker PA installation originally designed for astronomical displays.

Throughout her composing life Radigue has overseen each soundcheck herself, with meticulous attention to detail but, now aged 89, she no longer travels abroad. On this occasion, the technological preparation of the venue is entrusted to François Bonnet. It is in good hands since he is the current director of the Paris GRM centre for electroacoustic music, where

Radigue worked and first encountered acousmatic music in 1955.

As Bonnet says, "Éliane Radigue's music is all about coupling the music with the space." He diffused the original stereo recordings of the *Trilogie* as a multichannel live performance from the mixing desk, through the planetarium's loudspeakers, to an empty hall, in a live-streamed binaural recording using a centrally-positioned dummy head (an artificial human skull with a microphone in each ear). This binaural technique virtually replicates the planetarium's acoustics, provided each remote listener is wearing a decent set of headphones.

The *Trilogie* was composed on the ARP synthesizer between 1985–93. Radigue prefers to avoid direct associations between her music and her Buddhist faith, leaving listeners to choose their own imagery, but here she specifically explores the Buddhist concept of death as rebirth, in a deeply personal reflection on her

own experiences at that time. Part one, *Kyema*, takes influence from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, blending bass hum with interjections of tiny high frequency harmonics. *Kailasha*, a somewhat bleaker tonality, explores the illusions in Escher drawings, as an analogy for moving between different worlds and *Koumé*, sounding like warm orchestral strings at times, contemplates ashes as a substance for transforming death into life.

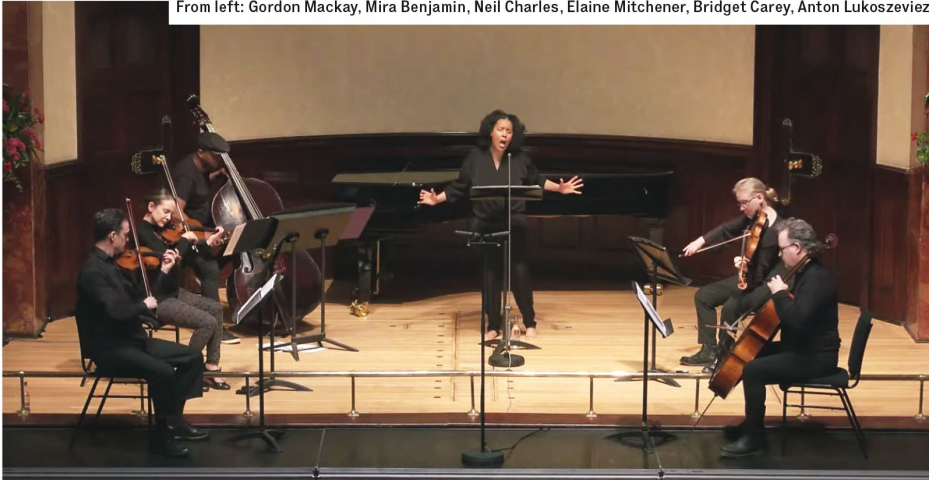
The *Trilogie* opens with an interminably slow fade-in of a drone, which, given the planetary context of the venue, suggests the hum of the Earth beneath a night skyscape. Just as each star that you notice stands out momentarily brighter than the rest, so each tone that catches your ear seems a little louder, as you scan across a sound universe filled with movement, texture and colour. There is so much happening in Radigue's continuously evolving sounds, beating against each other; tiny changes make big impressions

and keep your eardrums pricked for any strange news from another star.

The beauty of the binaural experience is that it extends your hearing beyond your immediate environment. Momentarily, you think it has started raining outside, a small aircraft is circling overhead, a car is running its engine just outside your window, or you can hear the sea in the distance, but these are all synthesizer sounds with Radigue's infinitesimal fingertip alterations to the knobs causing high harmonics to slowly emerge, hinting at melodies that flicker above the different layers of constantly buzzing ARP oscillators.

Trilogie De La Mort invites you to surrender to its gentle harmoniousness, although it never quite lets you rest, with the constant agitation of beating contrasting tones. I really hope this concert will be repeated in the acoustic reality of Berlin's planetarium.
Jo Hutton

From left: Gordon Mackay, Mira Benjamin, Neil Charles, Elaine Mitchener, Bridget Carey, Anton Lukoszevize



Elaine Mitchener & Guests

Wigmore Hall, London, UK/YouTube

Elaine Mitchener's recital brings into view some lesser known creations of modernist musicians and artists, setting up unexpected contrasts and juxtapositions. Mitchener is an experimental vocalist, movement artist and composer who works across the jazz/improv and contemporary classical spectrum, with a particular focus on the Black avant garde. Her Wigmore Hall programme draws mostly on the American maverick or experimental tradition, making connections with jazz. With Mitchener are Gordon Mackay and Mira Benjamin (violin), Bridget Carey (viola), Anton Lukoszevize (cello) and Neil Charles (bass).

Thankfully classical elitism is moribund, but for jazz musicians string instrumentation at one time seemed to represent classical legitimization. Mitchener's opening composition came from that era – Charles Mingus's rarely heard *String Quartet No 1 (With Voice)*, first performed in 1972 at the Whitney

Museum, New York. Noticing a citation in Gene Santoro's classic Mingus biography, cellist Anton Lukoszevize obtained a copy from the Mingus archive at Washington's Library of Congress. It's for the unconventional line-up of violin, viola, two cellos and voice, and set to the text of Frank O'Hara's poem *The Clown*. In a blindfold test, it would be hard to recognize Mingus as composer – the modernist idiom recalls Schoenberg's *Second String Quartet*, with its part for soprano. The taut ten-minute structure with its tortured expressionism provides a novel perspective on his output.

Benjamin Patterson, who died in 2016, was a Fluxus iconoclast who performed with John Cage – his early work *Paper Piece* (1960) relocated quantities of paper from the stage into the audience. His eventful *Duet For Voice And String Instrument(s)* features Mitchener's dynamic phonetic experimentation and sound poetry.

Like Charles Mingus, Jeanne Lee

is best known as a jazz musician – a vocalist influenced by Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington. But from the 1960s she pioneered performances that fused modern dance, vocal improv, sound poetry and visual art. Her *Mingus Meditations*, with words from Mingus's autobiography, was originally recorded with bassist Dave Holland. Mitchener's acrobatic improvisation and sensitive interpretation of the text are beautifully supported by Neil Charles's haunting basslines.

Louise Bourgeois was best known for her large-scale sculpture and installation art, but she was also a painter and printmaker. Her *Insomnia Drawings* were adapted by Lukoszevize's group Apartment House as graphic scores in 2019. This is their first performance with voice – a highly intuitive one, with evanescent instrumental textures and free vocalising rising to a powerful conclusion.

In Lukoszevize's arrangement of Archie Shepp's "Blasé", with words by Jeanne Lee, the string quartet's shifting

chords are a backdrop to Neil Charles's and Mitchener's more improvisatory performance. Mitchener's solo *Thought Word*, with words by NH Pritchard, reflects her dynamic focus on phonetic experimentation and Kurt Schwitters-influenced sound poetry. *Genesis – 04* is a spiky composition by Hungarian poet and performance artist Katalin Ladik.

The final piece is Christian Wolff's jazzy *I Like To Think Of Harriet Tubman* (1985), which sets Susan Griffin's text on Harriet Tubman, the former slave who risked her life to free others through the Underground Railroad. Wolff's music is mostly political in form rather than content – in its use of amateur players, for instance – so this piece is an exception. Unusually, Wolff said that he imagined the text being read with a jazz backing.

This is an imaginatively conceived recital, and with challenging material like this, it is good that it was available online for a month after live streaming.
Andy Hamilton