convincing eight-stringed meta-instrument throughout.

You may have inferred from my opening paragraph, the part about the repeating and incrementally adjusting and backtracking and regrouping, that I had Feldman on my mind; and indeed, the New York School hovers low over some of the work here. Long passages of *Anyway, where threads go, it all goes well*, a setting for soprano and piano of what the booklet describes as 'a fake John Ashbery tweet' (I'm not sure what that means, and I'm not sure I want to know) bring immediately to mind the piano and vocal writing of early Cage (the Cage of *Four Walls*, for instance) and middle-period Feldman, but Wollschleger is not overwhelmed by these sometimes overwhelming influences. However early-1940s-Cageian the plain whiteness of the melody, however Feldmanesque some of the repeated piano harmonies, there is a sense of things ever so slightly askew, of things stuck, a sort of deeply hidden whimsy or extremity or tension beneath the grace. There are breaches, very subtle breaches, of the sort of decorum that defined Feldman's style, a pushing of things just a little bit too far, setting them rocking and toppling. And of course there are the chromatic pitch pipes: both performers are also responsible for periodic interruptions by reedy, melodica-like clusters, creating a sort of slow-moving, long-range antiphony that is as unexpected as it is effective.

If *Anyway, where threads go* is gentle whiteness and light, *Between Breath* is the opposite: cavernous, rocky and darkly hued. Much of the trombone's language is split tones, dirty and aggressive; much of the piano's is muted on the strings, reaching for that same aggression. Where there are shafts of light – mostly, slow arpeggiations of overtone-derived harmonies in the piano, with the trombone sometimes contributing a growling fundamental octaves below – they are surrounded by their generating darkness. Only at the end do the instruments actually merge, though, in a resonant haze of growls and squeals that makes this cavern image of mine almost palpable. What begins in growls ends in chirps and haze.

Although the four works here were composed independently, Wollschleger has conceived of this album as a single multi-movement work, which would make the extended violin solo *Secret Machine #7* the cloudily glittering finale. Based almost entirely around the E of the top string, its microtonal environment and the anatomy of its overtones, this work proceeds like the others, step by tentative step, looping back on itself before shyly and tentatively proposing a new way forward. This piece is Wollschleger at his purest, and perhaps his best: the influences are worn lightly, and there is something about the persistently soft edges of the timbre, its constant mutability, its advances and retreats, that balances with the trademark stuttering form to make a strikingly coherent language, the material generating its own way forward in an utterly convincing organic fashion. And violinist Miranda Cuckson is extraordinary here, controlling those edges, navigating sharp turns in narrow spaces in pianissimo and below, imbuing each gesture and each event with its own gentle urgency through the tiniest of shadings.

In some ways this is the most modest piece of the four here: harmonically the simplest, instrumentally the least attention-grabbing. But, despite and because of that, it is also the most memorable, the most characterful and the most convincing. In retrospect, the other music on this disc approaches territory that seems external: the New York School weighing heavily on *Anyway, where threads go*; the flirting with extended-technique cliché of *Between Breath*; the showier virtuosity of *Violain*. All of these pieces are strong, convincing, despite these lurking dangers: but only *Secret Machine #7* avoids them entirely, and shows us the reticent but urgent core of Wollschleger's compositional being.

Evan Johnson

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Linda Catlin Smith, *Flowers of Emptiness*. Apartment House. Another Timbre, at230.

'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter', wrote Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. While the goal of such a depiction is noble – preserving a personality through facial expression, hairstyle, body and posture – it often risks flattening the depth of the three-dimensional human into a lustrous two-dimensional surface. The same applies to musical portrait albums, which frequently comprise extended periods of creative output, attempting to solidify the fluidity of a person's existence. One recent example is *Flowers of Emptiness* on Another Timbre, featuring eight chamber works by Canadian composer Linda Catlin Smith that span nearly 40 years of her career, from 1986

to 2024. Performed by the magnificent Apartment House – experts in the composer's oeuvre, having recorded five other CDs of her music for the label – the album stands as a striking testament to this enduring collaboration. With Wilde's words in mind: what does Another Timbre's *Flowers of Emptiness* communicate to us about the essence of the composer and her style?

Smith's writing often strikes me as remarkably consistent with two stylistic traits I often observe in her body of work. The first is what I previously referred to as an 'icy sense of drama'.[1] Though Smith, in an interview with the label, notes her 'aversion to high drama', it would be misleading to suggest her music lacks drama altogether.[2] While it may eschew high drama, there is a subtler, more nuanced form of tension that she regularly conjures – one that captivates me deeply. Many of her pieces begin in the most innocent way, characterised by stable and serene soundworlds, only to be disrupted by what can be aptly described, borrowing from philosophy, as an *event* – a radical rupture that unsettles the established order, seemingly impossible yet, in hindsight, perfectly coherent with what came before. Equally striking is the second trait: the organic way her music grows and develops, resembling a natural organism – like the spores of moss or the rhizome of a tree – imbuing it with a sense of vitality and life. Just when a musical idea seems to vanish into the void, it reappears with a fresh, surprising comeback. These features may be overt or latent, incessant or fleeting, but they permeate her music, at least to my ears. Fortunately, *Flowers of Emptiness* offers fertile ground for further exploration.

As the album centres on three of Smith's string quartets in their debut recordings, let us explore them in chronological order. *As you pass a reflective surface* (1991) plunges directly into tense chords, which gradually unfold as each instrument adds one note at a time. Its six-minute duration is perfectly balanced, offering just the right mix of repetition, variation, rests and unexpected melodic fragments to create a cohesive whole. The ongoing tension between consonance and dissonance culminates in the piece's hypnotising finale. The second quartet, *Waterlily* (2008), at just four and a half minutes, is perhaps one of the shortest string quartets ever written. It features chorale-like chords and echoing melodies that shimmer delicately. As the evocative title suggests, the music glides atop gently undulating ripples of water. Fugitive and serene, it vanishes as soon as it captivates.

The final quartet on this album, aptly titled *String Quartet No.6*, adheres to the conventions of its classical genre: it presents multiple 'themes' that undergo thorough development, and showcases excellent interaction and imitation between the parts. But above all, it epitomises Smith's distinctive traits, mentioned earlier. Firstly, the material unfolds in a rhizomatic manner, developing organically and at its own pace, with only rests marking the transitions between sections. Secondly, the icy drama manifests through unexpected shifts in character and texture. Each new section retroactively alters the perception of the previous one, growing more brooding, and plunging into gripping, uncharted territory. These *events* mark points of no return, both in the material's evolution and in the listening experience. This gradually unravelling sense of complete structure is highly compelling, making this piece undoubtedly the most cohesive and fully realised string quartet on the album.

The same feeling of watching a play in which the scenery shifts without you noticing can be found in *Flowers of Emptiness*, a string trio for violin, viola and cello – and the earliest work on this CD, dating from 1986. It opens innocently, with a majestic, solemn atmosphere, the material swinging back and forth organically. An inquisitive, incessant motif keeps creeping in throughout. Yet something in the second half disrupts that innocence, subtly altering the music's overall perception, so it no longer feels the same as it did at the start. This magical linearity becomes perceptible in the beautiful *Nightshade* (2021) for clarinet, violin, cello and double bass. The bright timbres of the instruments propel the music forward, enhanced by occasional undulating and pulsating textures. It flows like a river, smooth and continuous, yet subtly shifting in depth and colour.

Then, there are the shorter works. A little gem and a testament to Smith's technical mastery is *Blackwing*, written in 2018 for clarinettist Heather Roche. This bass-clarinet solo begins with a brief fragment of just a few notes, organically growing into an upward melody that spans multiple registers. Akin to Bach's compositions for monophonic instruments, the piece is rich in hidden polyphony, rendering the harmony subtly audible: it demands careful attention to both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the music. Another work that

[1] Marat Ingeldeev, *Folks' Music* review, *Tempo* 309 (2024).
[2] http://www.anothertimbre.com/catlinsmithflowers.html (accessed 29 November 2024).

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highlights this interplay between vertical and horizontal elements is *Das Rosen-Innere*, composed for cello and piano in 2024, and the most recent piece on the album. Here, the cello acts as an afterword to the piano's melody, which unfolds with inquisitive upward intonations, never venturing into extreme registers. The cello enriches the piano's stark, monochrome timbre with warm overtones. Though it grows bolder and louder, it never exceeds, say, a restrained mezzo forte. The shortest work, *Lamento* – a violin duo from 2010 – may feel a touch too brief. Its unison playing and two-voice interplay evoke the fleeting sweetness of a candy's aftertaste – delightful, but vanishing all too quickly.

No portrait is ever perfect, yet all portraits remain invaluable for those distanced by time or place. In the end, *Flowers of Emptiness* captures something of the composer's essence: a commitment to subtlety, organic growth and the quiet power of transformation. It may not encapsulate the whole of Smith's artistry, but it effectively sketches the contours of her writing and leaves the curious listener eager to delve deeper. Offering a range of shorter and longer works for various instrumental combinations, it is just one interpretation among many. Yet it demonstrates how naturally music can flow, and how understated drama can become a profoundly moving experience – more so than any overt, banal sentimentality.

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