

Sillage Album Review

(Véronique Piron, shakuhachi and Lydia Domancich, piano, with Fumie Hihara, Koto; Gimini Music 1018)

I have thought for a long time that a convincing pairing of piano and shakuhachi would be difficult to achieve - the one a child of the industrial revolution with its high tension steel-strung frame, the other distinctly agrarian by comparison. The piano's power and brilliance might easily overwhelm the sonic subtlety that is the hallmark of the shakuhachi's language.

From the outset, it is clear that this will not be the case with *Sillage*. Track 1, a version of the Hon Kyoku classic, *Kumoi Jishi*, brings immediately to mind Lewis Rowell's lovely observation that Japanese music treasures the 'studied avoidance of simultaneity' for its 'illusion of multiple superimposed tonal images' - a beautiful effect, and one that sounds startlingly original on the piano. Such a stark beginning makes a statement about the album as a whole - that the shakuhachi is not going to fall over into a cod folkly Westernness, and that the piano and its heritage are not going to dominate or lead the proceedings.

Sillage is an album of eight pieces that are neither fully through-composed nor completely improvised: a wise decision given the manifest tensions that exist between the two primary instruments. Instead the three artists (the koto player Fumie Hihara joins Piron and Domancich on three of the eight tracks) have established a number of mutually credible sonic regions from which they have been able to build their varied collection of pieces.

Modality forms a key basis, sometimes providing a framework to kick against - adding chromatic density for extra expressive effect for instance in the koto and shakuhachi duet *Moon Chariot* (track 6) - and in track 3 *Juste Avant l'Aube* providing the much-needed security beneath a shakuhachi solo so in love with its own noisiness it might otherwise have descended into absurdity (to my taste, one of the most attractive moments on the album).

The final track *Brise Legere, Plume au Vent* makes recurrent use of the Western translation of the Indonesian *Pelog* Scale (a mode that also occurs in Okinawan folk melodies): semitone, tone, major third, semitone, major third. Numerous pianists have tried this - making a gamelan effect on the piano by running a rippling upper melody in this scale across a lower *Pokok* core melody - but I have never heard one pull it off so well as Domancich does here, possibly because, by focusing on providing the backdrop to Piron's foregrounded solo, she is able to concentrate on sustaining the mood while the shakuhachi carries the melodic interest.

Overall, the framework approach has been most effective when it allowed the musicians to revel in their spontaneity and skill. In the closing four minutes of track 4 *Calm Night, Rush the Waves* for instance one can hear, in their use of nuance and sensitive timing, a genuine sense of exploration, presence in the moment and generosity running between the two principal performers.

Sillage has not proved the incommensurability gap between piano and shakuhachi closed. Throughout the album the balance of force is by and large maintained by simply reining in the piano, which does leave an aftertaste - the image of a racehorse generously running with greyhounds. In the title track *Sillage* (track 6) Domancich more than makes up for this (one note, one string almost throughout) by her musical energy. *Sillage* is possibly the most exciting track on the album. There are however only two moments where the piano has truly been able to let rip. One is late on in *Brise Legere*, as the spirit of the music expands, the other is at a similar point in *Calm Night, Rush the Waves*. These are the two longest tracks on the album: it is as if the pieces themselves have to attain a level of substance before the full might of the piano can be employed to provide the counterbalance.

What is clear however is the sympathy between the two lead performers - that they want to be in that room together, exploring. One can only hope that they continue to do so, working their way toward an unlikely goal that could be very compelling indeed.