

## Print Run

New music books

A new survey of sound art is a valiant, if not entirely successful, attempt to define the medium's elusive forms. By **Brian Morton**

### **Sound Arts Now**

Cathy Lane & Angus Carlyle (Editors)

Uniform Pbk 240 pp

The co-founder of *The Paris Review*, George Plimpton, once commented that writers tended to fall into two different classes, those who could speak illuminatingly about their work and its processes, and those who, irrespective of the quality of the work, babbled arrant nonsense about how it had come to be. A glance at most compilations of interviews with artists, not just the novelists and short story writers questioned in Plimpton's *Art Of Fiction* interviews, suggests that he was right. Except things have changed a great deal since he made those comments. With so much creative practice now centred on the academy, dependent on grant funding or tied to degree assessment, artists have had to develop rhetorics of explication and self-review, sometimes to the point where the proposal is the work and its execution simply a matter of contractual fulfilment.

We may have drifted into the situation comically imagined by Søren Kierkegaard where "in contrast to the age of revolution, which took action, the present age is an age of publicity, the age of miscellaneous announcements; nothing happens but there is still instant publicity". In contrast to *The Paris Review* interviews, where the average literate reader would have known the work of most of those questioned by the editors, very few readers of *Sound Arts Now* will have experienced many of the works discussed,



Elsa M'Bala performance in the field, 2017

which are often site-specific installations or white cube performances. And yet readers will come away with a clear sense of many of the works discussed. In another similarity to *The Paris Review* exchanges, it's clear that Lane and Carlyle have allowed their subjects to edit, extend and improve their statements, which gives them a reflective and formal quality that even the odd 'live' interjection and interruption doesn't quite disguise.

Clearly there are major issues of definition here. Speaking in Taipei to Jau-Lan Gao, creator of *Polyphonic Mosaic*, Cathy Lane cites a certain British consensus that sound art is "an emergent area of practice" that hasn't yet been firmly fixed, at least in institutional terms. Gavin Bryars wasn't the only British sound artist to emerge from a fine arts (and philosophy) background and there remains a certain departmental fuzziness about where these artists might first study and then place their work.

It's an uncertainty that comes up constantly in the interviews, as does a clear understanding that sound art has very specific local/national imperatives that make generalisation about it almost impossible. As Lane points out, German and Japanese sound art are much concerned with materials; Scandinavian sound artists explore remoteness and wilderness; Canadian sound art has a socio-geographical bias; and so on. Much of this can readily be attributed to historical backgrounds, particularly in the case of Germany and Japan, or to existing traditions of enquiry, such as R Murray

Schafer's ongoing influence on acoustic ecology in Canada.

Fascinating as many of the interviews are, the unavoidable conclusion is that Lane and Carlyle are more interesting than their interlocutors and what would have been more satisfactory than a book of interviews is an authored book largely based on them. A book with "Listening" somewhere in its title. At the end there is an Afterwords section which somewhat resembles a latterday *Wire* Invisible Jukebox: Lane x Carlyle. There they attempt to give some shape to an array of practices that only cohere round some fresh examination of aural processes.

Reviewing their subjects, they remember that "Maria Chavez talks about DJing her listening; Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Mikhail Karikis are trying to listening out [sic] for other people's listening; Mikel R Nieto talks about how others listen to us; Mark Peter Wright about 'listening-with', Hanna Tuulikki, listening to the 'more-than-human': Caroline Devine recounts learning to listen at the BBC and triggering other people's memories of listening..."

They describe listening as the membrane (thank God it wasn't rhizome) that unites these very disparate artists and if it seems lazy to use a quote to identify some of those interviewed, it's justifiable on all the grounds above. A fascinating book, but one which still feels like appendices to a more formal account of a still larval artform. A few pictures would have helped. The cover shot of Elsa M'bala recording in the field is worth a thousand words. □