

A Tasty Swarm of Small Signals (Review)

A Tasty Swarm of Small Signals is an impressive sound art project comprising 91 micro-compositions by sound artists from every corner of the globe. This wide range collection has been curated by Francisco López and includes original work of James Webb, Lawrence English, Francisco López, Asmus Tietchens, Louis Dufort, Alan Curtis and Zbigniew Karkowski.

Working with field recordings, sound manipulation, and generated sounds, these internationally acclaimed artists offer us the possibility of listening and experiencing some of the most enticing proposals, tendencies, approaches and investigations in this field of art.

James Webb opens the collection with “Sightings into the dreams of others”. His pieces share a dreamy atmosphere, an oneiric quality, both beautiful and strange. With a delicate, poetic touch Webb introduces several sounds like bird chipping, piano notes and morse code signalling, creating an elegant whole that has the effect of drawing our attention out of the work itself, back into our own sound environment, and finally integrating both.

As in Webb’s work, the next artist of the collection, Lawrence English, requires the imagination of the listener to complete the pieces here presented. Through an artful integration of field recordings and synthetic sounds, English creates suggestive and beautiful compositions which wake up our imagination and make us see that we are always part of the work itself, in the same way as we are part of the world we look at. The world is not just a set of objects around us and the compositions are not just a set of sounds. We relate to each object, to each sound, with our personal emotions and memories. The world which we live in, as English’s compositions, is always a unique experience, a personal creation.

While Lawrence English is able to integrate field recordings and created sounds in an extraordinary way, Francisco López goes further and blurs any distinction between these different sounds. By an artful manipulation of the field recordings the artist makes the natural sounds no longer identifiable, and as a result they move away of any reference or visual association. In his proposal López directs our attention to the sounds themselves, and lets them follow their own path, their own development into other sounds and variations.

Similarly Asmus Tietchens also focuses on the manipulation of field recordings in ways suggested by the sounds themselves. His artful employment of silence and isolated sounds, (small signals), is complemented by an increasingly obscure atmosphere, conforming a subtle composition. Short bubble like percussive sounds hit repeatedly on a persistent silence, than soon evolves into a dark ambience. No rhythms, no sequence, no pattern, no thought. Just unidentifiable sounds, dropping from nowhere on top a black background, a cosmic silence, a universal darkness.

Louis Dufort proposal deals with the inner structure of sound matter. He places sounds under his unique microscope to show us the different frequencies, reflections and elements each sound contains. This approach is able to focus all our attention on the sounds themselves, instead of being treated as elements of a structure that encompasses them and gives them a specific meaning obtained from their place in the structure.

In Alan's Curtis pieces, in contrast to Asmus Tietchens proposal for this collection, there is no silence, but a succession of disquieting sounds and distortions, and a constant feeling that we are reaching some kind of limit, something is about to break through. Waves of sound take over, fill all space and ourselves, and carry us through a labyrinth of sounds and variations where we seem to disappear and where only sounds remain.

Karkowski proposal is an investigation in the vibration of electronic sounds and takes us to an experience of this ever lasting reality. Everything is a vibration taking place in time. Our first exposure to these pieces can be confounding, but if we get past our tendency to look for rhythm and harmony, an experience of sound can get through, showing us the ever present vibrations surrounding us, inside of us, everywhere.

All these proposals are presented in an audio DVD, where each artist presents thirteen two minute compositions over a fixed image, adding to more than three hours of sound. It offers us a taste of the most interesting proposals in experimental sound art, and of the most compelling experiences that this art form can bring us to.

text by S. Porrúa