other devices commonly found in the home played with percussion mallets.

Papadimitriou’s work and planning in the studio, with this source material, has not only led to the design of formal compositional strategies, but also suggests a total aesthetic. Although Papadimitriou seems to have formal outlines for his Objects, he also included subjective decisions in the studio, effectively enriching his wide range of materials.

Revisiting “Object 1,” within the first 30 seconds of the track, one hears a small range of abstractions alluding to objects that could have been struck or strummed. These performative elements are highlighted. Within these seemingly compact sonic clusters, sometimes within mixtures, pitch references can be clearly heard. Overall, there is a dense stratification of processed layers, concealing the causality of sources.

In “Object 2” the listener may notice a set of miniature machines. Glass-like sounds are introduced here as well. The narrative formed alludes to a relationship between these imaginary machines and materials that they could potentially have produced. “Object 2” also highlights the use of the wind chimes, to create a dream-like environment. Other aspects highlighted in this track are percussive attacks, stemming from the use of mallets. In “Object 3” the sonic textures reference a materiality that is granular in density. There is an elastic quality that results in an expansive, sonic space. Overall, the abstracted sound objects in this track demonstrate an expanded, larger scale.

In “Object 4,” Papadimitriou has successfully drawn out more of the metallic qualities in his source material. There is also a sense that the objects heard demonstrate their own patterns of movement in space. With all of the processing used, the objects inside this space simulate play between one another. This emerges from a new relationship formed between Papadimitriou’s enhanced objects and their sonic trajectories. This track also mirrors a visual choreography of new patterns within the sonic frame provided.

In “Object 5,” Papadimitriou seems to have distilled plucking and scraping actions, referencing his stringed sources. As the piece progresses, the notion of physicality related to those sounds is blurred. This ambiguity embodies Papadimitriou’s initial concept of affecting the listener’s perception of sources. In this track, he also exploits silence in a manner that extends his composite gestural devices. For me, a game narrative emerges in this track, and although mixed for stereo listening, the listener hears spatial depth within an ensemble of sources. As such, even with a range of electronic techniques utilized, this track produces an illusion of a multidimensional listening space.

“Object 6” contains more of a musical narrative, among a rich juxtaposition of source material. We do not just hear a merger of these sounds, but a counterpoint among the layers formed from these materials. There is a dialogue present that features musical relationships without directly referencing pitch material. With its distinctive orchestration, this track particularly demonstrates a sonata-like form as well.

“Object 7” begins with a prominent silence, beginning similarly to the first movement. This movement could be viewed as a finale, with a heightened sense of performativity, connecting phrases and further solidifying larger gestures. Here, Papadimitriou doesn’t juxtapose source materials in an extreme way, but does still include an imaginative variety of them. The use of brushes is prevalent in this track as well.

These works contain a highly complex set of variations, demonstrating many subtle musical events and timbral changes. Papadimitriou has clearly taken great care in shaping his layers, offering the listener the widest possible range of color and density, derived from his source materials. Not only does each Object have its own narrative or poetic composition, it contains multiple objects that emerge while listening. This set of works encourages a well-rewarded and highly engaged listening experience.

Annette Vande Gorne: Illusion

Reviewed by Arian Bagheri
Pour Fallah
Lisbon, Portugal

Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On, better known as The Slave Ship (1840), is among Joseph M. W. Turner’s finest paintings, and one of the most recognizable visual artworks of the romantic movement. Fused with the painting L’étoile noire (1957), by the founder of les automatistes Paul-Émile Borduas, it greets listeners of Annette Vande Gorne’s latest acoustic venture, Illusion, in the form of Luc Beauchemin’s cover...
Seule issue [2020]. The level of intertextuality is broad. Beauchemin’s title hints at necessity. The cover art’s contrasting frames of references, too, provide an air of calamity. It is difficult—one may say impossible—to free one image from the other, or to brush aside the many implications of these whispers, these overtones in the context of here and now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the ethical, as well as economic, state of the world today. In spite of a seemingly absent narrative, these specters endure, however, throughout Illusion, at times by virtue of the omnipotence of sounds, and at others, through the performer’s material and gestural presence.

“Déluges et autres péripéties” [2014–2015], the most recent endeavor on this album, operates from a singular, base leitmotif: “We await destruction.” Replacing the ambiguity of the image with the certainty of the word, Vande Gorne chooses to walk in the glinting footsteps of poet Werner Lambersy, whose voice is one of the three used in the piece. Least subject to the manipulations pertinent to musique concrète, Lambersy’s voice is used mainly to wend an otherwise umbrous or disquieting narrative. It is spoken using a narrator’s voice, akin to Jean Négroni’s role in Apocalypse de Jean by Pierre Henry. The piece is, in form, an art song. With a length of half an hour, its effectiveness depends on the listener’s willingness to follow along. For it is punishing throughout, singular in this respect in Vande Gorne’s repertoire, at times more threatening in character than the album Impalpables while matching, if not exceeding, the fervor of the opera Yawar Fiesta.

Vande Gorne’s implacable art song is a far cry from Turner’s gracious, albeit troubling, landscape. Where Turner transfigures, Vande Gorne echoes the dread, supporting a horrific poem, in her own words, “with horrific sounds.” Not only is the piece texturally and emotionally unrelenting, the implementation of the voice in reverse can only be described as misanmic, rendering it vicious in ways contradicting contemporary acousmatic aesthetics. In this respect, the vicious narrative has few parallels in the greater electroacoustic repertoire, among them, Michel Chion’s “Sanctus,” from his early work, and the mass Requiem [1973], an equally demented endeavor “rich in extended vocal experiments and, most of all, spoken words.”

Yet, does this bring the piece closer to Borduas and les automatistes? The art song is dedicated to Francis Dhomont, whose rapport with spoken words is exemplary within the broader acousmatic tradition. As per the majority of acousmatic works, it makes use of the fixed medium, and is designed for a 16-channel setup. This places it well away from the inclinations of les automatistes. Declarations such as “It seemed as if our future were set in stone,” from the scandalous 1948 manifesto, Refus Global, for which Borduas and les automatistes are most remembered, here are not points of departure for unrest but very much Vande Gorne’s aspirations. For her as a composer, fixity remains both an aesthetic and an ontological necessity. Hers is, in other words, neither a romantic, but, even more prominently, nor a revolutionary concern. In her own words: “I do not have a Romantic vision of art” [CMJ 36(1):10–22]. The automatic and the improvisatory are, in her view, contrasted with architecture and organization—with mastery over one’s time. This is what she also shares with Chion. His notion of sons fixés [fixed sounds] Vande Gorne deems to be “correct,” in relation to fixing time. Having said that, it may be useful to question the nature of this “mastery” over time.

Today, acousmatic music remains part medium and part listening strategy. In the first instance, it involves fixed media, with scattered examples of hybrid [live with fixed elements] media, which often incorporate small groups or individual performers. It is also as a fixed media that notions such as sons fixés find immediate meaning. In other words, the further one moves away from fixed into hybrid media, notions such as sons fixés become more difficult to follow. For one thing, the live instrument or electronics can disallow any immediate control outside that of the performer. Hence, the implicit decision of most composers in the acousmatic tradition to produce works more often in the former category. With regard to listening strategies, it is fair to say that many listeners are unfamiliar with either reduced listening or spectromorphology. The select few who are familiar would struggle to find any reciprocity, strictly speaking, between the listening strategies and the notion of fixed sounds. So, does this “mastery” point to anything except an aesthetic proclivity?

The two iterations of the third and last piece included in Illusion, “Faisceaux,” are concluded respectively, in fixed and hybrid media.

Bagheri Pour Fallah on Vande Gorne cd
Whereas the former is designed for fixed stereo medium, the latter is accompanied with a pianist. Within the acousmatic tradition, collaborative works, regardless of the nature of the collaborations, rank among the strongest. For example, Gilles Gobeil’s best works, including his individual recordings, are those involving composer-performer René Lussier. Simon Emmerson’s duets with Lol Coxhill outrival the composer’s “fixed” works. Barry Schrader’s recent collaboration with Wadada Leo Smith has not only exposed his works, for the first time, to a wider audience, it is furthermore aesthetically varied in ways that are not true of his earlier output. The list goes on. And the hybrid variant of “Faisceaux” is no exception. Albeit suffering from what has already been discussed regarding hybrid media—namely, that the fixed sounds are accompanied with a narrow number of instruments or performers [in this case, one pianist]—the hybrid rendition is one of the most commanding works included in Illusion.

It is evocative but also pulsating and alive. The performer’s presence is able to disrupt, even if briefly, the moribund, idealistic narrative evoked by the fixed component. It is a refreshing take, compared with similar ventures of Vande Gorne into evocative sound worlds, such as “Terre” [1991] or the included fixed-medium variant, and although using instrumentation that is as of now depleted by composers time and again, it manages to stand out in a selection dominated by fixed media. What is evident, from “Faisceaux” but also the other examples noted above, is that the alleged mastery over time is, more than anything, an aesthetic qualifier. Although it is true to some degree that a narrative temporally fixed also allows the composer to have more immediate control over the output, this is by and large incidental and furthermore subordinate to the primary function of the fixed medium, which is to predefine the work aesthetically.

Finally, it is the spirit of Arsène Souffra that roams Illusion. The album’s opener, “Au-delà du réel,” with which I find apropos to close this review, is dedicated to the enigmatic composer. Obliquely reminiscent of Vande Gorne’s own “Métal” [1983], the piece pyramids percussive and instrumental resonance into hypnotic spectra, while conniving at performative gestures. Compared with the former, its use of spectral mobility, pronounced by oscillations and rotations primarily, is much more vivid, thereby evolving faster with a magnetizing effect on the listener. As per the other dedications on Illusion, it is a material, not a merely symbolic celebration. The piece utilizes sound-objects from a rare collection gathered by Souffra, catalogued according to materials, ranges, and frequencies.

It is as if instruments become doorways to the tenebrous. His self-described “instrumental” piece, “Incantation [N’sien ufo d’ra]” [1981], for ondes Martenot, tcheng, and three percussionists, albeit with a modus operandi different from that of Vande Gorne, in which both a score and performers are present, achieves analogous aesthetic results. The piece’s backstory is also one that pertains to the discussion on composer and performer reciprocity in the acousmatic strand. Allegedly, another version was intended by the composer but was never realized, due to the performers’ unwillingness to learn “the unusual notation of the score.” Vande Gorne may not be a romantic, yet the acousmatic tradition with which she identifies has always been prone to idealism. Acousmatic music, which, rather interestingly, positioned itself in contrast to concert-hall music, appears all the more today to suffer from the same set of predicaments besetting musique spectrale, once openly described by Grisey also as an aesthetic. And this is Illusion’s weakness as well as source of its partial strength. Acousmatic music, as aesthetic, is recognizable strictly due to the fixity of vision shared by its practitioners, and in that also, it cannot proceed forward unless opening up the creative space for performers, stressing reciprocity and collaboration.

David Felder: Jeu de Tarot


Reviewed by Ross Feller
Gambier, Ohio, USA

This disc features two, significant, multimovement works, as well as a violin solo, by composer David Felder. The first piece, “Jeu de Tarot,” is scored for violin soloist, eleven performers, and electronics. The second piece, “Netivot,” is for string quartet and electronics. The presence of virtuoso violinist Irvine Arditti is felt throughout this disc, as a soloist alongside an ensemble, as part of a string quartet, or as an unaccompanied soloist. The two ensemble works will be reviewed here.

“Jeu de Tarot” is based upon seven cards (one per movement) from a tarot deck. Each is, in a sense, sounded out by the soloist, ensemble, and electronics part. This piece is chock-full of unexpected