

MICHAEL MANTLER

EDITIONS

VOLUME FOUR

LARGE AND SMALL
ONE SYMPHONY
AND DUETS

INTRODUCTION

— BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

Followers of the career of the Austrian composer and trumpeter Michael Mantler will know that he embraces extremes of scale, from the intimacy of duets to the formidable resources of full orchestras. Whatever the means he selects, his material passes through the filter of an astringent sensibility, paring away the superfluous until only the hard-won essence remains.

The album titled *Alien* was a duo project for Mantler's trumpet and the various synthesizers of Don Preston, a key member of Frank Zappa's original Mothers of Invention, whose own long career has taken him to some remarkable places, from Nat King Cole to Captain Beefheart. In 1971 Preston was among the cast on the recording of *Escalator Over the Hill*, the epic "chronotransduction" by Carla Bley in which he played the parts of the Doctor and the Lion. It was during those sessions in New York that he met Mantler, whose four-part composition *Alien*, recorded 14 years later, brought them back together.

Mantler's aim here, he has said, was "to use synthesizers in place of an orchestra, but without actually imitating an orchestra." He was pleased with the result, describing it afterwards as one of the records he had made "where I wouldn't change a note." Free of genre, these pieces are a showcase not just for the composer's own playing but for the way

Preston uses the range of available sounds and effects to such spectacular but relevant effect.

Given Mantler's hand-written lead sheets, Preston entered the music utilizing several different synthesizers and together they selected the sounds. The drum and percussion effects, as well as some (guitar-like) "solo" segments, were improvised by Preston, and afterwards Mantler overdubbed his trumpet parts, about half improvised, before working on the final editing and mixing process. The result has often been described as "cinematic", perhaps by those who automatically associate the title with Ridley Scott's blockbuster 1979 sci-fi horror movie of the name, but the album, Mantler says, had nothing to do with the film. A product of his years of living in the United States, "It was rather more of an expression of being/feeling like an 'alien' in many senses: musically, socially, as well, of course, as immigration-wise – since I wasn't American but indeed an 'alien'." (The green card that allowed him to live and work there, he remembers, was officially a "certificate of alien registration".)

Cinematic or not, the music creates its own vivid landscapes. In 2019 he reworked the material into one of the orchestra suites included in the album titled *Coda*. "I found plenty of things to change, shorten and 'improve'," he says,

but the original version retains its value: not many synth-based recordings from the 1980s have survived as well as this one.

A contrast on every level, *One Symphony* (1998) holds a special place in Mantler's career as the first of his compositions to avoid improvisation entirely. "As a composer who has come originally from jazz," he said at the time of its appearance, "I have almost always worked with musicians who have been given a varying amount of freedom of interpreting and even improvising some segments of my music. As I continue to feel the need for more control, I have gradually been reducing that freedom, wanting more and more to eliminate the amount of chance in the performance of a piece of music. With this work I arrive at a completely notated composition without any improvisation whatsoever."

Which is not to say that after completing it in 1998, he would never again find a use for the processes and techniques of jazz. Nor is it to say that *One Symphony* is completely untouched by whatever it was that jazz gave him. The rhythmic fluidity underpinning many passages of the piece may not resemble what we think of as the phenomenon called swing; nevertheless it comes from the mind of a musician accustomed to thinking of rhythm as a living, breathing thing, whatever the idiom. Mantler has called the piece "a 'symphony' in its most elementary form – simply the utilization of a relatively large number and variety of instruments to perform musical materials organized to create a larger whole with a logical continuity." On the surface, this is European contemporary classical music – but with none of the dry, airless, emotionally constrained atmosphere that such a description sometimes evokes. Commissioned by Bernd Leukert, director of the

Forum Neue Musik at the Hessischer Rundfunk, and written for an ensemble featuring strings, woodwind, brass, piano and tuned percussion, the 39-minute piece in four parts was recorded by the Radio Symphony Orchestra Frankfurt under the baton of Peter Rundel. "No particularly unusual compositional methods were used," Mantler says, "and there is no programmatic content or message. It should exist as a piece of pure music, leaving the listeners to arrive at their own emotional interpretations. The neutral title was chosen for that reason as well as to suggest it being one of many possible symphonies."

It opens with surprisingly lush strings, joined by oboe, flute and low brass, and then tuned percussion with harp, blocks of sound moving at different velocities and trajectories, yet somehow falling together. Trumpets stab and soar over a string ostinato before a space is cleared in Mantler's richly ambiguous voicings for an ardent viola and cello duet. Clarinet, oboe and flute take their turns in a triangular conversation as the ground moves under their feet. In an angular dance-like section, the limbs of the instruments seem to be stretching in all directions, gathering speed and intensity, culminating in a brief jig. Throughout the piece, intriguing juxtapositions and contrasts abound, whether in a brooding melody for woodwinds against tolling bells, an explosion of jittery vibraphone and marimba, the cry of a French horn, a swooping solo violin, flutes slashing at strings, bustling bassoons and clarinets, trumpet over vibes, string washes sliding behind a double violin melody, dissonant prods of piano piercing a dense burble of woodwinds, a drift of strings and a thin screech of brass. A solemn finale concludes with something that resembles a resolution but isn't.

A similar refusal to give pieces titles that might influence a listener's response is evident on *For Two*, an album of miniatures for the duo of the Swedish guitarist Bjarne Roupé and the Danish pianist Per Salo, released by ECM Records in 2011. Roupé, a collaborator on many projects over the past 20 years, including the albums *Hide and Seek* (2001), *Concertos* (2008) and *Coda* (2021), and Salo, who also appeared on *Hide and Seek*, are both resident in Copenhagen, where Mantler spends part of each year.

The concise pieces featured on this recording continue Mantler's exploration of music that is in part completely notated, yet also involves improvisation. Here it is reduced to a minimum, possibly his simplest and most economical interpretation of that idea so far: a "classical" non-improvising pianist from contemporary new music, representing his orchestral compositional concept, is combined with a second player —the guitarist — coming from jazz, improvising and freely interpreting.

The shortest of *For Two*'s 18 pieces lasts a mere 73 seconds; the longest clocks in at a comparatively expansive four and a half minutes. They were recorded in 2010, with Salo setting down the entirely composed piano parts at La Buissonne Studios in Pernes-les-Fontaines, in southern France, and Roupé adding his guitar – about 50 per cent written, 50 per cent improvised– to the edited tracks at home in Copenhagen soon afterwards.

"Almost all the melodies for the guitar would have the instruction 'freely', meaning that the player would (and should) invoke a 'human' interpretation of the strictly notated

material," Mantler says. "The improvised sections all have a very specific composed background, to which the soloist should refer."

The join between written composition and reactive improvisation is effectively invisible throughout, a satisfying consequence of the composer's skill and the sensitivity of the players. As each piece is bathed in a clear, warm light, Roupé and Salo capture a variety of moods, from the pensive to the playful, while exploring this particular iteration of Mantler's musical terrain.