

# Žibuoklė Martinaitytė

Richard Whitehouse hopes to hear more of this US-based Lithuanian composer's absorbing music performed in the UK

Although it may have a distinguished history, Lithuanian music was little known until the collapse of the Soviet Union – notable composers such as Vytautas Barkauskas or Bronius Kutavičius having attracted little attention abroad. These past three decades have brought a veritable sea change in terms of Lithuania's wider cultural prominence, and among its composers who have come to the forefront, arguably the most significant is Žibuoklė Martinaitytė, whose wide-ranging output has been performed across the globe, securing for her an international reputation.

Martinaitytė's evolution as a composer is in direct parallel to that of her country's autonomy. She completed her secondary education only a year after Lithuania formally gained its independence in March 1990, and from this period come her earliest acknowledged works. Although these are for the most part modest in scale and limited as to the number of players involved, they exhibit many of the tendencies that she was to develop and refine henceforth – notably her innate feeling for the instrument at hand with a freedom but never any randomness of form.

*The chamber work 'In Search of Lost Beauty ...' makes for a riveting listen. It is immersive in the truest and most enduring sense*

Although her early output focused on smaller ensembles, the role of electronics was already becoming integral – as in its mediatory role between cello and percussion in *Being Without* (1998), or its enhancing of atmospheric tension vis-à-vis soprano and flute in *The Unknown* (2005). *Completely Embraced by the Beauty of Emptiness* (2006), perhaps her most striking piece from this time, unfolds an eventful dialogue which draws a distinctive aura from its 13-strong ensemble and affords coherence through modally inflected harmonies of real paths.

A comparable fusion of expressive fluidity and formal focus is evident in her mixed-ensemble works *Perpetual Pulsing Transience* (2007) and *Polarities* (2008), as well as the orchestral piece that afforded her wider prominence, *A Thousand Doors to the World* (2009). Described as a 'personal reflection [on] and musical offering to the city of Vilnius', this last piece draws on various poetic, photographic or cartographical sources over three continuous sections for an evocation by turns ominous and aspirational. Very different in outlook, if no less personal in idiom, is *Inhabited Silences* (2010), which was one of her first pieces to be premiered in



This resourceful composer leaves us intrigued as to what she might do next

the United States. It is an arresting take on the piano trio medium, informed by the notion of music as a 'continuum of silence inhabited by sounds' in what is an intriguing variational process. *American Hodgepodge* (2011) pits its quartet of woodwind and strings against a recorded montage of speech, derived wholly from the internet, to provide an appealing if oblique perspective on American culture by one who has made a home in New York (Martinaitytė is married to the sound designer True Rosaschi).

Inspired by a variety of cinematic and novelistic sources, *Horizons* (2013) makes a virtue of its seeming disparity with an unfolding whose emotional volatility achieves overall cohesion largely through its orchestral virtuosity. It was with the chamber work *In Search of Lost Beauty ...* (2016), however, that Martinaitytė created an undoubted masterpiece. Conceived for violin, cello and piano with electronics and video, it has 10 movements (two of which derive from earlier works) which coalesce into a 70-minute whole as inwardly intense as it is intensely inward in expression. The skill with which one movement passes imperceptibly into the next, allied to the finesse of timbre and texture, makes for a riveting listen even when this music is heard 'in the abstract' with no visual element. It is immersive in the truest and most enduring sense.

The past decade has seen Martinaitytė consolidating her reputation through a series of diverse compositions across a broad range of media which are often provocative and never less than absorbing. A sure sign of her standing is the number of orchestral works that have emerged during this time. A decade after *Breakthrough* (2006), her 'concerto in three parts' for accordion and chamber orchestra, she returned to the *concertante* medium in *Chiaroscuro Trilogy* (2017) for piano and strings. Each of its parts pursues the relationship between darkness and light from a different vantage as they move from the direct progression of one to the other in 'Tunnels', via the infiltration of light into darkness in 'Meteors', to the shadowing of the former on the latter in 'Darkness of Light'. Cast on a larger scale, *Sielummaisema* (2019) for cello and strings takes its cue from its Finnish title meaning 'landscape of the soul'. Here, Martinaitytė considers what it is to be a Lithuanian émigré by recollecting 'home' through the mediating filter

## MARTINAITYTĖ FACTS

**Birth** May 4, 1973, Leningrad (St Petersburg)

**Studies** 1979-91: Juozas Naujalis Music Gymnasium, Kaunas; 1991-97: Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius (composition with Bronius Kutavičius, 1991-93; with Julius Juzeliūnas, 1993-97), gains bachelor's and master's degrees; 1998: Sixth International Academy for New Composition and Audio Art, Schwaz, Austria (composition with Bogusław Schaeffer, computer composition with Marek Chołojewski, audio art with Horst Rickels); 2004: orchestral music course, Stavanger, with Ole Lützow-Holm  
**Earliest acknowledged works** 1989: *Seven Pieces* (piano); *Piece* (flute)

**Residency** 2001: Künstlerhaus Lukas, Ahrenshoop, Germany

**Significant premieres** 2006: *Breakthrough* (original version for accordion and chamber orchestra), Vilnius, October 26; 2009: *A Thousand Doors to the World*, Vilnius, September 26, commission to mark Vilnius as European Capital of Culture, broadcast throughout Europe by Euroradio; 2011: *American Hodgepodge*, Other Minds Music Festival, San Francisco, March 2; 2013: *Horizons*, Gaida Festival, Vilnius, October 18; 2023: UK premiere of *Hadal Zone*, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, November 19

**Awards** Lithuanian Composers' Union Award for Best Orchestral Performance 2009 (*A Thousand Doors to the World*);

Best Album and Best Composer for 'In Search of Lost Beauty ...', Global Music Awards 2019; Lithuanian Government Award and Guggenheim Fellowship (both 2020); Lithuanian National Prize for Arts and Culture 2022; American Academy of Arts and Letters - Goddard Lieberon Fellowship 2024

**Album facts** 2017: 'Horizons', first portrait album, released (orchestral, choral and chamber music); 2021: 'Saudade' listed in NPR Top 10 Classical Albums

of the seasons; its sequence of winter, spring, summer then autumn results in a traversal whose ending could only ever be its beginning.

Of the full-orchestral scores from this period, *Millefleur* (2018) refers to the horticultural aspect found variously in French tapestries, Chinese ceramics, Indian carpets and Italian glassware – all of which may be perceived in a sonic texture whose evolving from generalised to graphic imagery then back again is accomplished through translucent harmony and a rhythmic clarity which makes for alluring as well as pleasurable listening. In contrast, *Saudade* (2019) takes the Portuguese idea of longing (in the face of absence) for what was or might have been (or what might never have been) as a basis for the composer's own yearnings in what she terms her 'blue period' – though there is nothing wantonly sentimental or self-indulgent about this music, shot through as it is with a sense of striving for a fulfilment that can never be reached.

Such striving took on a whole new meaning at the time of the pandemic, from out of which emerged *Nunc fluens; nunc stans* (2020) for percussion and strings. Its point of departure is a quote from the Roman philosopher Boethius which concerns the ever-present 'now' and those ways it can obliterate our accepted notions of time; in this case, through a diptych in which the dynamism of time passing sets up a contrast with the stasis of time standing still – in both parts, the soloist melds with subtly differing emphases into the overall texture. Continuation of sorts is provided by *Ex tenebris lux* (2021), an expansive work for string orchestra

## LISTEN TO MARTINAITYTĖ

Here's just a taster of her extensive recorded output

**In Search of Lost Beauty ...**

FortVio; Žibuoklė Martinaitytė *elec*

Starkland (4/19)

Martinaitytė's first large-scale conception

is remarkable not merely for the cohesion

between its interdependent works, but also for the cumulative intensity that she achieves across the whole.

**Chiaroscuro Trilogy. Horizons. Millefleur. Saudade**

Gabrielius Alekna *pf* Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra;

Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra /

Giedrė Šlekytė

Online (4/21)

A persuasive overview of orchestral and *concertante* works from Martinaitytė's maturity, not least in the way that it demonstrates her evolving musical thought at its most imaginative and evocative.

**Ex tenebris lux. Nunc fluens; nunc stans.**

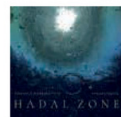
**Sielunmaisema**

Rokas Vaitkevičius *vc* Pavel Giunter *perc*

Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra / Karolis Variakojis

Online (8/22)

Martinaitytė's most recent *concertante* works are heard alongside a major piece for strings, and between them they mine a deep vein of emotional intensity in addition to showcasing her customary virtuosity.

**Hadal Zone.**

Eric Alatorre *bass* Volti / Robert Geary; Synaesthesia

Cantaloupe

This May 2023 release comprises another ambitious composite – focusing on the lower instruments and drawing an impressive range of timbres from its various live or sampled forces – that is immersive in the fullest sense.

whose 'darkness to light' trajectory is achieved via the gradual stratifying of initially dense textures into the clarity of individual lines – bringing if not a revelation, then certainly an epiphany. A likely culmination of this period, *Catharsis* (2021) takes up the ancient Greek concept of healing through means of purification (or purging), and, in musical terms, a visceral process that suggests perhaps affirmation, or at least conveys the promise of a new beginning.

At much the same time, Martinaitytė wrote a second chamber cycle, *Hadal Zone* (2020-21), focusing on instruments in their lowest range for music that is meditative and other-worldly (or should that be 'under-worldly?'). A listening experience of rather greater tangibility is that provided by *Enbeduana* (2023), a song-cycle for mezzo-soprano and orchestra to fragmentary texts by the Sumerian priestess of the title, who is also the earliest named author. Its premiere in Vilnius just a year ago came some 35 years after those earliest performances, and in its unfailing emotional depth and sensitivity, the work makes one anticipate the more keenly where this always imaginative and resourceful composer may next be heading. Martinaitytė's discography is now extensive and constantly expanding, and perhaps a greater number of hearings for her music in the UK might also be forthcoming. 🎧