



music is not always participatory

james black

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Composed by James Black

James Black, keyboard and Stylophone

Bára Gísladóttir, vocals³

Connor McLean, composer⁷, vocals and guitar⁹

1	I think you're really cool	4 : 32
2	SHEL	5 : 42
3	Baby's teeth	5 : 50
4	You win	0 : 59
5	Angel's Music	3 : 30
6	Music for use	8 : 07
7	Folk Music	3 : 47
8	You lose	0 : 42
9	Antifleur	11 : 39
10	The Future of Classical Music (Award Winning Performance)	7 : 17
Total		52 : 05



James Black

THE DOGMA OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

By Andrew Mellor

'I do believe music can have positive effects on your life', James Black [they/them] told the Danish music journal *Seismograf* in 2018; 'if nothing else, it will get you out of the house'.

In March 2020, not even music could do that. Just after the world ground to a halt, Black found themselves in receipt of a large working grant from the Danish Arts Foundation. They had the means to compose, and the lockdown would give them a motive for the specific project they set their mind to. This recording is what they produced – an album bound by restriction and that flirts with failure, but delivers powerfully on the fundamentals of art and expression.

James Black was born in the southwest of England. After four years in the Music Department at Oxford University, they entered the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen, presenting their graduation concert in 2018. A year earlier, Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen had given the first performance of Black's 'Raus' at Tivoli Concert Hall – a score in which elements of noise

music are shunted-up against the innocence of schoolroom recorders, the purity of folksong and the directionless mania of computer-game music. Black appeared with the orchestra on stage, standing behind their Casio keyboard in a white tuxedo.

'The idea of combining things that don't really have anything to do with one another – getting them to talk to each other in strange ways – is something I'm quite obsessed with,' says Black. There is plenty of that in 'Music is Not Always Participatory', much of which was created on the same Casio keyboard but this time almost entirely alone. There are, however, two guest spots: music is not always participatory, but here it's not always un-participatory either.

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An album bound by restriction and that flirts with failure, but delivers powerfully on the fundamentals of art and expression.

Otherwise, the album represents a series of departures for Black. It is not notated and was realized almost entirely via electroacoustic means ('I had

not made a “track” until this album’, Black says). From a composer who thrives on collaboration – for whom the performance of music is usually an overtly participatory, communal event – it represents another shift. Working alone on a solo album was a choice ‘to create an object, frozen time, an impenetrable bubble’, they say. While their teachers at the Academy encouraged them to strip down, remove and subtract, here Black sought ‘to do the most, make it excessive and gaudy – too much, in fact, to the extent that I ended up taking things away to find how much of “the most” was actually appropriate’.

More recognizably, ‘Music is Not Always Participatory’ has a long-form structure that rises and falls. It even ends, like ‘Raus’ and other pieces from the same source, with an emancipatory song – in this case, a Schubert Impromptu that offers one of two essential Black cameos. The rest of the music is festooned with Black’s musical fingerprints – Roman Catholic hymnody, computer game music, ‘a kind of techno-pagan trash-folk that treats all of its sources with reverence and respect’.

However trashy the aesthetic, the music is underpinned by the rigorous compositional structures and systems Black cleaves to, notably their refraction of the Infinity Series – the integer sequence

propagated by the Danish composer Per Nørgård. ‘Systems, structures and series are a way of shutting out other thoughts,’ says Black; ‘it’s always a meditation, and frees up other parts of my brain’.

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Roman Catholic hymnody, computer game music, ‘a kind of techno-pagan trash-folk.

The overall structure is similarly meticulous. The computer game interludes ‘You win’ and ‘You lose’ – in C major and C minor respectively – surround a trilogy of three ‘music’ types. Before that grouping we hear the prologue ‘I think you’re really cool’, the first piece proper ‘SHEL’ and the bloody lullaby ‘Baby’s teeth’; after it the album reaches its apex with ‘Antifleur’, improvised on a looping drum machine, and ‘The Future of Classical Music (Award Winning Performance)’, a final recourse to analogue lyricism.

Running electronic drum machines through ‘impossible tempi’ creates the equal but opposite force that counterbalances the solitary hymn of ‘I think you’re really cool’ and the eight hymns layered on

top of each other and set in slow motion of ‘Music for use’. ‘Baby’s teeth’ features the first of the album’s guest contributions: an improvised song sent to Black by the composer Bára Gísladóttir, under which they lay a metamorphosing drone derived from a telescoped version of the Infinity Series whereby groups of two sequenced notes, at low pitches, are played at the same time; when Gísladóttir’s song intensifies, the chord is thickened.

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‘SHEL’ and ‘Antifleur’ stand as pillars at either end of the album, sitting inside its prologue and epilogue.

That process is advanced in ‘Angel’s Music’, where the contributed material is a song by Black’s fellow Copenhagen composer Connor McLean. ‘I chopped the song up into bits, using the Infinity Series to dictate the durations in time’, says Black. Over this distorted version of itself, Black lays hyperactive sounds from the Casio’s pre-programmed drum machines and a chord sequence also derived from the Infinity Series. ‘Folk Music’ takes the same process but strips it back to a more

delicate, balletic state, this time using the English folksong ‘Rufford Park Poachers’.

‘SHEL’ and ‘Antifleur’ stand as pillars at either end of the album, sitting inside its prologue and epilogue. The first provides the album’s most obvious manifestation of the Infinity Series: the tone row used by Benjamin Britten in his opera ‘The Turn of the Screw’ is fertilized with the Series to form its own spooling sequence which is then pitched in canon with itself, its overlaps creating crunching dissonances while the Casio’s drum machine patterns alternate in overdrive. ‘The idea was to make a kind of Techno track, including a drop’, says Black.

After the plastic tragedy of ‘You lose’ – whose smudging quartetones convey the resignation of loss like a grand chromatic aria at the end of a Richard Strauss opera – comes ‘Antifleur’. It is derived from an earlier work of the same name, with its acoustic elements (saxophone and guitar) removed. What remains is a free improvisation on a Stylophone-styled drum machine whose central touch-pad is divided into assorted drum samples. ‘You can just whirl around it and make amazing crunching electronic sounds, and there’s a loop function as well’, says Black; ‘some other Stylophone samples are also laid on top, structured according to the Infinity Series’.

The practice of facing-off two contrasting elements to create a third runs through the album from the start but for their finale, Black just gives us one – or so it seems. ‘The Future of Classical Music (Award Winning Performance)’ is Schubert’s Impromptu in G flat major D 899 with a twist: played by Black in a single take on an out-of-sorts piano. The idea of compromise is there in Black’s accomplished but perhaps inexpert performance – in the moment they have to instantaneously backtrack, reaching to re-take a note. Here is the ‘built-in failure’ that presented itself as a theme for exploration as cultural life in Denmark, Europe and the world shut down.

In Schubert’s music, that moment of failure seems to be the one in which the performance blossoms; as in ‘SHEL’, human-induced imperfection provides the beauty and resonance while the computer spools faultlessly through its systems. ‘The sounds aren’t really the focus’, says Black; ‘it’s more the ideas behind the sounds’.

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James Black in concert.

When awarding **James Black** [they/them] (b. 1990) the large working grant in 2020, the Danish Arts Foundation wrote:

'With James Black, you encounter a universe of real madness where "everything goes". Where DIY video, hopeless choreographed performances and accurately notated score music – among many other things – in a deliberately unsightly mix make up the work. The impossible is a deliberate dogma resulting in a unified expression, which is chaotic and almost gallows humorous, but where one senses a composer who ultimately has complete control over the final result. He is [They are] extremely consistent in what he has [they have] set out to do, and perhaps that is why you never doubt that it is James Black and not any other composer you are dealing with.'

The music of James Black exists in an energetic field of strict structures and expressive sounds. By removing all unnecessary layers in his works they reach a musical core, which is often made up of a simple idea that is faced with chaotic impulses. They frequently combine traditional and extended playing techniques in order to give each instrument a distinct identity, which unfolds, alone or

together with other instruments, in a musical miniature drama with subtle rhythmic hints and clear sonic characteristics.

Increasingly, James Black uses performance as a central aspect of their work. The quintet 'Everything is gonna burn, we'll take turns (I'll take mine too)' sees the musicians leaving the stage one at a time at the end of the piece. In 'Raus', world premiered with Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen at Klang Festival 2017, the composer plays a central role, as they sing a folk tune with their untrained voice, plays a synth solo on the keyboard and demonstrates ded and arm gestures in rhythmical patterns.

James Black was born in 1990 in Torquay, England. In 2013, having studied saxophone, musicology and composition at Oxford University, they moved to Copenhagen to complete their composition studies at the Royal Danish Academy of Music. Taught by Deres Abrademsen, Bent Sørensen, Jeppe Just Christensen, Niels Rosing-Schow and Deres Peter Stubbe Teglbjerg, they graduated from the soloist class in February 2018.

DOGMET OM DET UMULIGE

Af Andrew Mellor

"Jeg er oprigtigt overbevist om, at musik kan have positiv betydning for vores liv," sagde James Black [de/dem] i 2018 til det danske musiktids-skrift Seismograf; "og om ikke andet kan den få os væk hjemmefra".

I marts 2020 var ikke engang musikken i stand til noget sådant. Umiddelbart efter verden lukkede ned, modtog Black et stort arbejdslegat fra Statens Kunstmuseum. De havde økonomisk grundlag for at komponere, og nedlukningen skulle komme til at inspirere dem til det konkrete projekt, de besluttede sig for at gå i gang med. Resultatet er den foreliggende indspilning – et album, som er formet af begrænsninger og flirter med fiasko, men som samtidig går i dybden med kunstneriske og udtryksmæssige grundbegreber.

James Black er født i Bristol i det sydvestlige Storbritannien. Efter fire års musikstudier ved Oxford University fortsatte de på Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium i København og afholdt debutkoncert i 2018. Året forinden havde Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen uropført Blacks *Raus* i

Tivolis Koncertsal – et partitur med elementer af støjmusik sat op mod uskyldige skoleblokfløjter, renfærdig folkesang og computerspilmusikkens maniske retningsløshed. Iført hvid smoking stod Black selv på scenen bag sit Casio-keyboard sammen med orkestret.

"Idéen om at kombinere ting, der normalt ikke rigtig har noget med hinanden at gøre – få dem til at tale sammen på fremmedartede måder – er noget, der optager mig meget," siger Black. Det er der også rigeligt af på *Music Is Not Always Participatory*, der for en stor dels vedkommende er blevet til på det selvsamme Casio-keyboard, men denne gang stort set alene. To gæsteoptrædener er det dog blevet til på albummet, der kredser om en pointe om, at selvom musik ikke altid er tilgængelig for alle, er den heller ikke altid utilgængelig for alle.



Et album, som er formet af begrænsninger og flirter med fiasko, men som samtidig går i dybden med kunstneriske og udtryksmæssige grundbegreber.

Derudover viser albummet en række nye tendenser hos Black. Musikken er ikke noteret og så godt som udelukkende realiseret ad elektroakustisk vej ("Før dette album havde jeg aldrig lavet et *track*," siger Black). For en komponist med forkærlighed for at samarbejde – for hvem det at opføre musik som regel udtrykkeligt er noget fælles og åbent – udgør det også en ny tendens. At arbejde alene på et soloalbum gav mulighed for "at skabe et objekt, frossen tid, en uigennemtrængelig boble", siger de. Hvor Blacks lærere på konservatoriet opmuntrede dem til at skære fra, fjerne og minimere, bestræbte de sig her "på at gøre så meget som muligt, gøre det overdrevent og overstadigt – og det i en grad, hvor jeg endte med at fjerne ting for simpelthen at finde ud af, hvor meget af 'mest muligt', der rent faktisk var passende".

Mere forventeligt består *Music Is Not Always Participatory* af en overordnet struktur, der stiger og falder. Ligesom *Raus* og andre værker med samme udgangspunkt ender den sågar med en forløsende sang – i dette tilfælde et impromptu af Schubert, der samtidig omfatter den ene af Blacks to vigtige gæsteoptrædener. Resten af musikken er spækket med Blacks musikalske fingeraftryk – romersk-katolsk melodik, computerspilsmusik og "en slags 'techno-møder-hedensk-trash-folk', hvor samtlige kilder bliver bededlet med ærbødighed og respekt". Uanset den trashede æstetik er musikken imidler-

tid baseret på de strenge kompositionsprincipper og systemer, som Black sværger til, i særdeleshed deres tilegnelse af uendelighedsrækken – det hierarkiske system, som blandt danske komponister navnlig Per Nørgård har været fortaler for. "Systemer, strukturer og rækker er en måde at lukke andre tanker ude på," siger Black; "det er altid en form for meditation og frisætter andre dele af min hjerne".

Den overordnede struktur er tilsvarende gennemtænkt. Computermusik-mellemspillene *You win* og *You lose* – i henholdsvis C-dur og c-mol – omgiver en triologi af tre forskellige typer "musik". Før denne gruppe hører vi prologen *I think you're really cool*, det første reelle stykke med titlen *SHEL* og den blodige vuggevise *Baby's teeth*; efter gruppen når albummet sit højdepunkt med *Antifleur*, der er improviseret på en trommemaskines loop-funktion, og *The Future of Classical Music (Award Winning Performance)* som et sidste indslag af analog følsomhed.



**Romersk-katolsk melodik,
computerspilsmusik og en slags
'techno-møder-hedensk-trash-folk'**

Ved at lade elektroniske trommemaskiner arbejde i ”umulige tempi” skabes den jævnbyrdige, men modsatrettede kraft, som afbalancerer den simple hymne i *I think you’re really cool* og de otte langsomme hymner oven på hinanden i *Music for use*. I *Baby’s teeth* møder man den første gæsteoptræden på albummet: en improviseret sang, som Black fik tilsendt af komponisten Bára Gísladóttir, som underlægges en konstant foranderlig drone hentet fra en komprimeret udgave af uendelighedsrækken med celler bestående af to samtidig afspillede dybe toner; når Gísladóttirs sang intensiveres, fortættes akkorden tilsvarende.

Den samme proces udvikles yderligere i *Angel’s Music*, hvor det udefrakommende materiale er en sang af komponisten Connor McLean, der ligesom Black er bosiddende i København. ”Jeg hakkede sangen i småstykker og brugte uendelighedsrækken til at bestemme varighederne med”, siger Black. Ind over denne forvrængede udgave af selve sangen lægger Black hyperaktive lyde fra Casioens forprogrammerede trommemaskine og en akkordrække, der ligeledes er hentet fra uendelighedsrækken. *Folk Music* benytter samme proces, men forenkler den til et mere sart og dansant udtryk, denne gang med brug af den engelske folkesang *Rufford Park Poachers*.

SHEL og *Antifleur* står som sjæler i hver sin ende af albummet som henholdsvis dets prolog og epilog. Førstnævnte udviser albummets mest iøjnefaldende brug af uendeligrækken: Benjamin Brittens tonerække fra operaen *Skruen strammes*, befrugtes af rækken til at blive en roterende sekvens, som derefter spilles i kanon med sig selv, så overlapningerne skaber kvasende dissonanser og Casioens trommemaskinemønstre skiftes til at køre i over-gear. ”Tanken var at lave en slags techno-track, drop indbefattet,” siger Black.

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***SHEL* og *Antifleur* står som sjæler i hver sin ende af albummet som henholdsvis dets prolog og epilog.**

Efter den plastiske tragik i *You lose* – hvor de gnidrende kvarttoner skaber en stemning af tilbage-skuende resignation ikke ulig en stor kromatisk afslutningsarie fra en opera af Richard Strauss – følger *Antifleur*. Det er en videreudvikling af et tidligere værk med samme titel, hvor de akustiske elementer (saxofon og guitar) er fjernet. Tilbage er en fri improvisation på en trommemaskine programmeret til at lyde som en Stylophone, og hvis

midterste touchpad er opdelt i forskellige trommesamples. "Man kan bare køre den rundt og lave de mest utrolige kvasende elektroniske lyde, foruden at den også har loopfunktion," siger Black; "og derudover er der med udgangspunkt i uendelighedsrækken lagt yderligere et par Stylophone-samples ovenpå".

At konfrontere to kontrasterende elementer for at skabe et tredje er et gennemgående træk på albummet, men i finalen benytter Black kun et enkelt – eller sådan virker det i hvert fald. *The Future of Classical Music (Award Winning Performance)* er Schuberts Impromptu i Ges-dur, D 899, med et twist: spillet af Black selv i en enkelt optagelse på et nedslidt klaver. Tanken om kompromis er til stede i Blacks kompetente, men ikke nødvendigvis virtuose fremførelse – hvor de på et tidspunkt er nødt til spontant at gå tilbage og gentage en tone. Her er den "indbyggede fiasko", der bød sig til som et interessant tema at udforske, mens kulturlivet i både Danmark, Europa og den øvrige verden blev lukket ned.

I Schuberts musik synes dette øjeblik af fiasko at være netop der, hvor fremførelsen blomstrer op; ligesom i "SHEL" er det menneskeskabt manglende perfektion, der skaber skønhed og resonans, mens computeren ruller fejlfrit gennem sine systemer.

"Det er for så vidt ikke lydene, der er i fokus," siger Black, "det er snarere idéerne bag lydene".

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I Schuberts musik synes dette øjeblik af fiasko at være netop der, hvor fremførelsen blomstrer op.

Da **James Black** [de/dem] (f. 1990) modtog det store arbejdslegat fra Statens Kunstfond i 2020, lød motivering'en:

"Hos James Black møder man et univers af virkelig galskab, hvor 'everything goes'. Hvor DIY-video, koreograferede håbløse optrin og præcist noteret partiturmusik – blandt meget andet – i en bevidst uskøn blanding udgør det samlede værk. Det umulige som bevidst benspænd resulterer i et samlet udtryk, som nok er kaotisk og næsten galgenhumoristisk, men hvor man fornemmer en komponist, der i sidste ende har fuld kontrol over det endelige resultat. Han [De] er ekstremt konsekvent i det, han [de] har sat sig for, og måske derfor er man aldrig i tvivl om, at det er James Black og ikke en hvilken som helst anden komponist, man har med at gøre".

James Black arbejder i et energifyldt spændingsfelt mellem stringente strukturer og ekspressive udtryk. Ved målrettet at fjerne alle unødvendige lag i sine værker når de frem til en musikalsk kerne, der kan være en helt enkel idé, som udsættes for kaotiske impulser. Ofte lader de traditionelle og udvidede spilleteknikker møde hinanden for at give det enkelte instrument en særegen identitet,

og alene eller i selskab med andre instrumenter udfoldes et musikalsk miniaturedrama med subtile rytmiske antydninger og distinkte klanglige elementer.

I stigende grad har James Black indlejret centrale performative aspekter i sine værker. I kvintetten *Everything is gonna burn, we'll take turns (I'll take mine too)* forlader musikerne mod slutningen af værket scenen én ad gangen, og i *Raus*, der blev uropført sammen med Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen ved Klang Festival 2017, er komponisten selv på scenen, hvor de med sin uskolede stemme synger en folkemelodi, spiller synthsolo på keyboard og demonstrerer gestiske hånd- og armbevægelser i rytmiske mønstre.

James Black er født i 1990 i Torquay, England. Efter at have studeret saxofon, musikvidenskab og komposition ved Oxford University flyttede de i 2013 til København for at færdiggøre sine kompositionsstudier ved Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium. De debuterede fra solistklassen i februar 2018 med Hans Abrahamsen, Bent Sørensen, Jeppe Just Christensen, Niels Rosing-Schow og Hans Peter Stubbe Teglbjærg som undervisere.

Recorded by James Black, in April 2020

Recording producer: James Black

Mix and engineering: James Black

Mastering: Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir

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The dogma of the impossible, by Andrew Mellor,

translated from the English by Jakob Levinsen

Proofreading: Colin Roth, Jens Fink-Jensen

Photos: p. 3: © Niklas Ottander; p. 8: © Dennis Lehman

Cover design: Tobias Røder, www.tobiasroeder.com

Publisher: Edition·S, www.edition-s.dk

Dacapo Records is supported by the Danish Arts
Foundation

www.dacapo-records.dk

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