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The composition of emotion:
Rose Riebl

By Zoë Morrison



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The pianist and contemporary classical composer bringing a virtuosic touch to minimalism

Pianist and contemporary classical composer Rose Riebl, whose debut album *Do Not Move Stones* is being released by Icelandic label INNI this month, spent hours as a child playing beneath a gum tree at the back of her family's property in Tallarook, Victoria, making cities for fairies in its buttress roots. Her mother thought imaginative play was important for children, and in the evenings, instead of reading books to her four kids, she made up stories. One was about a fairy that could protect its wings from water damage so it could swim as well as fly.

Another story – this one nonfiction – is about the time their uncle, a professor of viola at the Mozarteum University Salzburg, visited Tallarook. He began, lightheartedly, to test the children's musical ability on the upright piano, playing an excerpt and asking them to play it back. All the kids did well, but when it came to five-year-old Rose's turn, she played the whole thing back – two hands, note perfect – and she'd never been taught. This one's got it, he said, get her lessons.

Part of Riebl's gift was that she could play most things put in front of her. At eight she was performing Beethoven sonatas. She was also jotting down compositions in the back of her sonatas book. An early work for piano, violin and cello was performed and praised, but she composed in secret after that: she was too busy practising and doing eisteddfods. Also, "this music needed a long time to be ready," she says. When her mother took her as a child to a tailor for a concert gown – the standard was pastel satin with

short sleeves – Riebl requested black crushed velvet, long sleeves and, tellingly, a cape. “I was very good at flying,” she says of her playing back then, “the sinking came later.”

When she says sinking, she’s not referring to having both her arms put into splints at the age of nine due to repetitive strain injury so bad she was unable to play for months. She recovered fully, changed teachers, and by 14 was flying to Vienna to study piano full time. She experienced an immersion in the world of traditional classical music, which continued at the Australian National Academy of Music.

In the stories we tell about the lives of pianists, there’s often a dramatic pivot in the narrative when a performance goes wrong (such as in the film *Shine*, about pianist David Helfgott, Sergei Rachmaninov’s biography, Virginia Lloyd’s memoir *Girls at the Piano*). It’s an understandable device: concerts can mark progress for musicians, and they also represent the switch between the public and private experiences of being an artist, which can be very different. But in real life, pivots, though they may have a catalytic moment, tend to be long in formation – internal processes rather than external events. For Riebl, who was on course for a career as a classical pianist, “something else was always brewing that needed years of study and listening and reverence for classical music”. Riebl recalls forgetting some notes during a performance of a Chopin scherzo for legendary pianist Imogen Cooper, and while it didn’t matter to Cooper (“It happens to everyone!” she said. “It happens to me.”), Riebl wept afterwards, “like someone had died”.

She went on to refuse offers to attend The Juilliard School, and other conservatoriums, studied literature instead, worked front of house at a circus and stopped playing the piano entirely.

“Someone Will Remember Us” was composed when she was playing a Chopin scherzo at home one night and she had another memory lapse. She kept playing the two notes she had reached – an interval of a 10th – repeating them, and some beautiful new music began to form, her own music.

Written for piano and cello, the bottom note of the interval is repeated throughout, providing a gentle beat, the top note catches the light, the melody is slow and reassuring. It resists a predictable dip to the relative minor, staying in place instead, gifting stasis, despite all the movement, asking us to hold right here where it’s warm.

“When I’m composing, I’m not remembering someone else’s lines,” she says. “Because I am writing it, I am in it ... When I sit down at the piano [now], I feel more natural there than walking ... When I’m playing, it’s like an extension of my body.”

The title of Riebl’s forthcoming album, and several of its tracks, are quotes from a book by Anne Carson called *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, a translation of the surviving work of the 6th-century-BC poet and musician. The book resurrects Sappho’s work in all its passion and vivacity.

Riebl recorded the album at the back of her mother’s house in Carlton, inner Melbourne, on the upright she played as a child. She put the microphone right inside the instrument, and the sound of its mechanics add an incidental percussion part. In “Over Salt Sea”, the even, running triplets sound like lapping, shimmering water, while the back and forth of the piano’s hammers are like a distant runner’s feet slapping on wet sand. Three piano parts have been layered on top of one another and the climax of the piece comes when the time signature changes from triple (1–2–3, 1–2–3) to duple (1–2, 1–2) and all the notes come tumbling down. Then it rights itself; back again come the triplets, the steady rhythm, pacing feet, glimmers of sun. “It’s like getting dumped by a wave,” Riebl says. “That feeling of tumbling backwards under water but then coming back up again.”

Riebl’s compositions – rooted in the classical tradition, “but shifting it onwards” – are part of a third generation of contemporary classical music featuring aspects of minimalism. Beginning with composers such as Philip Glass and Michael Nyman, and continuing with the likes of Max Richter (who discovered Glass as a teenager when his milkman gave him recordings), the movement’s new generation of leaders are considered to be Icelandic artist Ólafur Arnalds and Nils Frahm. Technological innovation is central to their work. Arnalds has created a new type of piano, and Frahm a music-generating computer system. Riebl adjusts and expands her work with technologies, but Arnalds and Frahm are thought of as expert technicians as well as multi-instrumentalists. What distinguishes Riebl’s music in this expanding field is – in part – her piano playing.

Perhaps influenced by the advent of digital streaming services, this new generation of artists are usually both performer and composer. Many seem to view minimalist-style music as technically undemanding to play, requiring little if any training. Australian composer Luke Howard, although himself an accomplished pianist, told online arts site *Metal & Dust* that in minimalism technique is “less of an issue, because much of the musical interest comes from less pianistic devices (structure, harmony, rhythm)”.

Yet there is a significant difference in the sound of this music when the piano is played by someone at the beginning of their relationship with the instrument. A passage of repeated running quavers, for example, a common feature, can sound uneven (the thumbs bang harder than the fingers) and harsh (the sound is sharp-edged and two-dimensional), as well as dull (there is little capacity for tonal nuance and expression). Riebl’s sound is three-dimensional. The edges of her notes are rounded. This gives her the capacity to express enormous depth, complexity and variability in tone, emotion and meaning. When she touches a piano it’s with full intent; she’s always saying something.

“An Ending, Go Back to the Beginning” achieves a Rachmaninov-like depth of feeling. It starts with the sound of a distant siren and the static of a microphone, which fades to a repeated A played on the piano. A cello (played with great beauty by Ceridwen McCooey) enters with a simple, haunting melody on harmonics, which has been altered to take out the sound of the bowing, creating one, long sound, echoing the siren. All this builds, subtly, to the addition of a deep melodic theme on the piano, which begins quietly, slowly, each note placed with great care, Riebl’s hands sinking right down into the keys. (This is what she means by sinking.) This melody feels elemental, like water pulled from deep beneath stones and earth: it’s a distillation of decades of engagement with music, literature and art. She began composing the piece at the beginning of a relationship and only finished it later, after the horrific death of her beloved friend from a shark attack. Riebl was unable to remove from her head the thought of his body in the sea at night (although he was recovered in the afternoon) and the music swells to this terrible realisation, then falls, drops, ends.

When I listen to this music, I feel like something has been understood, and I am changed. Anne Carson described this experience in *The Paris Review* in relation to poetry: “A poem ... is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when [the reader] engages it, has to enter into that action ... by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference.” Except with Riebl’s music, instead of a thought captured on a page, it’s a feeling captured in sound.

“I think sometimes people forget to feel, or it’s easier not to,” she told classical and new music magazine *CutCommon*. “So, I like my music to elicit some kind of emotional response. Sometimes, that’s just rest or calm; other times, it’s more intense – there’s fury, rage, longing. We all walk around carrying these things, and if music can act as a bridge back to feeling, allowing us to access those dormant parts of our own little universes, then it’s doing what it’s meant to. I think art wants to wake people up.”

It’s a different intention to much other minimalist music, which aspires to an ambient calm, or “choosing a positive perspective” (as one composer puts it), or even to literally put people to sleep (as with Richter’s eight-hour composition, *Sleep*). This “bridge back to feeling” Riebl identifies “can be pushed quite far”.

“I think art can counter conservative thinking ... Artists have the capacity to say, ‘Look over here at this other thing no one’s talking about...’ Music is a big bridge to things we need to keep looking at and remembering.”

Arnalds has arrived close to this thinking with his latest album *Some Kind of Peace*, which he sees as “a symbol of really pure human expression without any barriers ... It’s the music that needs to be created. We need these kind of closer communities now and we all need some pure unfiltered human connection these days.” He recorded it during the pandemic lockdown in his native Iceland.

Riebl once travelled to Iceland to look for the northern lights. Experiencing insomnia, she found herself driving one night into a vast mass of black, then seeing the moon, right in front of her, a low, golden bulb. She did find the auroras. “They’re amazing,” she says, “because you can’t believe what you’re seeing is real, and it is. Like the magic you feel, but don’t always see. You see the northern lights and you think, *Anything could happen... Fairies could come out...*”

ZOË MORRISON

Zoë Morrison is the author of the novel *Music and Freedom*.

Nothing without context.

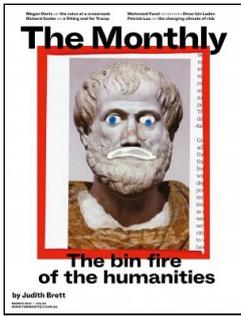
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