



# In bits

Composer **Kara-Lis Coverdale** ditches the composer's rulebook to explore excess and violence in the digital realm

**Kara-Lis Coverdale** wants to build bridges between musical worlds. "There are two worlds I care so much about," she explains from her home in Montreal, referring to classical and electronic music, "and I don't see them communing very often. I'm always thinking about the bridge, how I can be building the bridge, or creating other bridges. And there's just so much resistance, especially from the classical world."

Coverdale began playing piano at the age of five. She was taking a master's degree in classical music and composition at Western University, Ontario, when she got interested in electroacoustic music. "I like to use music as a gateway to explore or see the world," she says. "And this was a good way to begin doing that."

The outcome of her curiosity is truly compelling music. Recent releases include *A 480*, a series of process studies centred around repeated vocal loops played at different speeds, and *Sirens*, a collaborative LP with LXV, aka producer David Sutton. She wrote and recorded *Aftertouches*, her first solo album proper, while working as the organist and choral conductor at her local Estonian church in Montreal. Its omnivorous approach to sound – Coverdale happily calls it "a lot of things all at once" – was also partly informed by her work in Tim Hecker's studio, which she says helped her imagine "the totality of the work to be melodically contributory rather than a product of hierarchical layering".

There's a playful, rebellious sensibility to Coverdale's work, particularly in the interplay between the sacred and the profane throughout *Aftertouches*, where gorgeous choirs and organ melodies intermingle with MIDI instruments and jarring processed samples. It follows that she sees ivory tower notions of purity

and inaccessibility as out of date, the antithesis of bridge building. "Someone like Arvo Pärt – this cult monk figure, a totally fabricated personality – speaks to a certain period of time. What even is sacred now? Sacredness as an untouchable state is collapsing rapidly." The graphic .nfo scores that come with purchase of *A 480* exemplify that outlook. Rather than presenting a set of precise directions, they "offer clues of access to the means of re-production and provide creative visual cues for arrangement". Coverdale calls them "bad scores".

That desire to kick against purity and so-called high art is always present in Coverdale's work. "In the church where I perform, I don't like to take traditional requests. It's 2015 – I'm not going to play Handel's *Hallelujah!*" Fittingly, it was a "filthy interpretation" of Chopin's *Raindrop* prelude from the soundtrack to *Shine*, the 1996 biopic of pianist David Helfgott, that moved Coverdale to seriously pursue classical music. "It might have been sacrilege that way," she says, "whereas to me it was just beautiful."

Despite the complex, packed sound world of *Aftertouches*, there's still a playfulness at its heart, and her approach to sound is egalitarian to the point of bathos. "Digital music is a very freeing space for me and I like to approach it with a sense of newness. I don't read the manuals, put it that way! I like trying to push the limits of what should or shouldn't be together, like putting absurd sounds from ridiculous MIDI instruments over a really big, dense organ buried in the mix."

Citing Robert Fink's book *Repeating Ourselves*, she declares, "A 480 is kind of minimalist. In the same way that minimalism indexed first-gen repetitive machinery or mechanistic behaviour, I'm just trying

to create a musical ecology that reflects sonic and cultural saturation." The internet as a site of such saturation, a place where "people go from *The New York Times* to Liveleak", is a source of endless fascination. For *Sirens*, initially titled *Savages*, she and LXV took the concept of violence in digital spaces as a starting point. "We wanted to archive the body through samples, so we took punching bags, bodies slamming on mats, fleshy sounds, and processed them." Digital violence, she points out, exists mostly in the imagination, so she and Sutton set the percussive sounds of the body in "an imaginative landscape, a cerebral headspace to index where the body has gone".

Over the course of a year of Coverdale and Sutton swapping parts online, *Savages* became less punishing and "more emotive, almost electro-romantic" and was retitled *Sirens* for Debussy's nocturne. Its unsettling, rather beautiful contrast between romantic elements and samples processed into unrecognisable smudges and clashes climaxes with the claustrophobic "Subfall (to)", all silvery vocals and ominous clangs, "Borrowed Memory (from)", where choirs jostle with digital spit, hiss and rumble, and finally "Informant", a cloud of electronic buzzes intermingled with soaring melody.

Although *Aftertouches* and *Sirens* speak to the cultural saturation and anxiety of the contemporary digital landscape, they aren't necessarily critiques. Coverdale tries to be "as optimistic about the internet as possible" and as such, her music mimetically documents both the violence and beauty of the digital era. Or, as she puts it, "I think there's a light at the end of the tunnel." □ *Aftertouches* is released by Sacred Phrases. *Sirens* is released by Umor Rex  
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