

CHRISTOPHER FOX

# TOPOPHONY

WDR SINFONIEORCHESTER

ILAN VOLKOV

JOHN BUTCHER &

THOMAS LEHN

AXEL DÖRNER &

PAUL LOVENS

Improvisation and composition mostly follow their own paths in the world of contemporary music. But not all the time. In recent decades many improvisers have involved compositional elements in their music, just as composers have embraced improvisation. The influences from this mutual exchange can be quite varied. Improvisation can operate at the heart of the compositional process, for example, providing the foundations on which a piece is built. But it may also be hard for listeners to detect. Christopher Fox is a composer in whose work ideas from both improvisation and experimental music are often juxtaposed. He has also drawn them together on a number of occasions, testing out ways of combining these different approaches to making music. In *Topophony* he has embarked on an experiment in which he has provided an orchestra with a through-composed and relatively conventionally notated score but invited other musicians to improvise at the same time.

*Topophony* was written in 2014 and 2015 and was first performed at the 2015 Tectonics Festival in Glasgow by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Ilan Volkov, with Rhodri Davies as the improvising soloist. The idea of combining orchestra and improvisers came from Volkov although, as Christopher Fox says, he didn't initially find it particularly inspiring: *'The details of the commission had only recently been worked out and then one evening in May 2014 I got a text from Ilan, suggesting the possibility of adding an improviser to the piece. My first response was to think that it was impossible, even foolish, but within a day I had realised that the difference between composition and improvisation could provide the foundation of the music. In particular I wanted the orchestral music to become a landscape within which the improvisers could play, rather*

*like when we walk in the mountains. We can choose this path or that path, we can camp here, swim in this stream, eat over there and each time it will be different for us, but the mountains don't change.'*

Fox's imagery is already quite poetic and on this CD there are three versions of this musical landscape, two inhabited, one uninhabited. On the second track the WDR Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Ilan Volkov play *Topophony* as a work for orchestra alone, but before and after it they play two different versions, each with two improvisers whose backgrounds are both in jazz and contemporary music. Sustaining Fox's imagery, one might describe these first two versions as migratory duos, each pursuing their own particular paths through the same territory. As the orchestra begins it is a little like the moment when one checks the map or Google Earth; a few moments later and the improvisers can be heard setting out on their way.

Christopher Fox has composed a serene orchestral soundscape. As he explains, *'underlying the music is a series of thirty-nine interconnected harmonies and, as in the formation of a natural landscape through eruptions and erosions, fragments of the harmonies are layered on top of one another, so that across the piece as a whole there are all sorts of further connections, congruences, similarities'*. Soft, radiant harmonies move almost imperceptibly, like drifting sand dunes in the desert, or slow moving clouds in the skies far above the mountain peaks. We're a long way from hustle and bustle, from noise and chatter. If this music was projected onto an imaginary screen what landscape would it depict? Wherever it is it's a long way from the main road and in the stillness we can savour

the air, feel the breeze. It's these sort of associations that the opening of *Topophony* seems to trigger: a territory, a sonic landscape called into being by the orchestra through which one, two or three improvisers can move.

Whereas the orchestra's music is fully notated the soloists have no instructions except that they should start playing after the orchestra's music has begun and finish before it ends. Since the Glasgow premiere Christopher Fox has heard several rehearsals and performances of the piece with different soloists and has discovered that they tend to ask similar questions about the relationship between their sounds and those of the orchestra. In particular, Fox says that the improvisers want to know *'whether to ignore the orchestra music completely or instead to sometimes echo it; whether to play sometimes as a duo with the other improviser (so far, four of the six performances have had two improvisers, the other two had one); and, perhaps most difficult of all, how much to play.'*

Both pairs of improvisers on this CD are well known on the improvisation scene. Trumpeter Axel Dörner and percussionist Paul Lovens form one pairing, saxophonist John Butcher and the analogue synthesizer player Thomas Lehn the other. The first version of Christopher Fox's *Topophony* on this CD is a recording of a concert performance given by Ilan Volkov and the WDR Symphony Orchestra in which trumpeter Axel Dörner and percussionist Paul Lovens were the soloists. The drummer and percussionist Paul Lovens is based both in Aachen and in Nickelsdorf, not far from Vienna. He has been a pioneer of free jazz in Germany, almost from its very beginnings, active as a free improviser since the 1960s. His colleague Axel Dörner is also a jazz

musician who quickly moved into the field of free playing. He plays in dynamic free jazz formations and is also part of the sonic reductionism of Berlin Echtzeitmusik, a scene with which he was particularly associated in the 1990s. For him improvisation is not about either/or but about what each new context, each new project, requires.

Axel Dörner and Paul Lovens weave their sounds into the orchestra's sonic tapestry, Dörner mostly with slowly changing sounds, Lovens with short interjections and commentaries. After a while the soloists' entries become rather more frequent, more like little commentaries than contrasts or sonic collisions. The orchestra texture is always subtly varied, but so too are the paths made by both soloists through the landscape as they stop to take things in, to be surprised, before going round the next bend, pausing again for a moment.

In both versions of *Topophony* with soloists the improvisers are placed within the orchestra and separated from one another, as instructed in the score. The score also stipulates that the improvisers should listen to not more than one orchestral rehearsal and that they should not rehearse with their orchestral colleagues. So for composer and players alike *Topophony* is a piece in which it is impossible to gauge what impact the improvisation will have. In theory at least, every interpretation could be very different, in the way the soloists present themselves and locate their improvisations within the composed landscape. Do they consider the orchestra as a reference point, as a polar opposite, as a garnish, as a passive playmate, or just 'accompaniment'? Should they think of their role in the traditional sense of a soloist or as an equal partner with the orchestra? And so on.

In the second version with soloists we hear John Butcher and Thomas Lehn. Butcher's roots are in jazz but his reputation is as one of the great figures in English free improvisation. He works both in densely energetic groups and in settings which favour finely crafted sound textures, his playing ranging from conventional saxophone sounds to minutely differentiated constellations of noise, rich in intensity and colour. He is fascinated by unusual spaces and loves to explore their acoustic properties, testing them out, incorporating them as a musical partner – in churches, in a gasometer, in the open air – and in *Topophony* he becomes a soloist in a landscape made of sound.

Thomas Lehn studied classical and jazz piano before discovering the analogue synthesizer and its potential for sophisticated, virtuosic performance. He and John Butcher have collaborated for many years in a wide range of free improvisation settings and together they travel through Christopher Fox's sonic landscape. Mostly they move independently of one another, occasionally together, carefully finding their way. To sustain the metaphor, they take care sometimes to be still, to listen in. Both dip into the pool of orchestral sounds, mixing them with their own sounds, sometimes so subtly that it is hard to distinguish within the overall sound what it is that they have added. At other times they are clearly playing an oppositional role, offering counter-currents, interjections, sometimes softly, sometimes more stridently. A brief flurry of saxophone sounds from John Butcher or electronic tones from Thomas Lehn may sound like an exhortation to the orchestra to respond, to elicit some sort of reaction in this acoustic environment. But this cannot be: the orchestral musicians'

music is fixed, defined by the notes in their parts. Yet although they and their conductor play from a clear, unambiguous score it never sounds rigid.

Two versions of *Topophony* with soloists. Each at first sounds quite similar, but after a while subtle distinctions emerge, both in sound and in the way the soloists choose to travel through this calm, expansive landscape. Between them is a version for orchestra alone in which it's possible to hear the subtle interaction between players and conductor, the finest gradations of dynamic and tempo. The conductor has some degree of freedom, or at least choice: the score instructs him to vary his beat continuously and so he has the freedom to shape the length of each chord.

Improvisation and composition as forcefield. The conundrum remains: how can one combine these two approaches to musical forming without one or the other being compromised or diluted? Christopher Fox has decided to have the best of both worlds. The soloists and the orchestral musicians are assigned roles that enable them to play to their strengths. The conductor mediates. The forcefield is maintained. Just as the improvisers are told not to study the orchestra music, to avoid coming to a fixed idea of that soundworld, so too are the orchestra and conductor confronted with the sonic, dynamic and gestural unpredictability of the soloists. Improvisation and interpretation meet head to head.

Nina Polaschegg, January 2018,

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L'improvisation et la composition comme un champ de force. Le casse-tête demeure : comment combiner ces deux approches de conception musicale sans compromettre ni affaiblir l'une ou l'autre ? Christopher Fox a décidé de tirer le meilleur des deux mondes. Une rencontre frontale entre improvisation et interprétation.

*Nina Polaschegg (Translated by Benjamin Mouliets)*

CHRISTOPHER FOX  
**TOPOHONY (2015)**  
FOR ORCHESTRA  
WITH OR WITHOUT IMPROVISING SOLOISTS  
WDR SYMPHONIEORCHESTER CONDUCTED BY ILAN VOLKOV

1 **Topohony** 23:40

with Alex Dörner, *trumpet* & Paul Lovens, *drums*

ISRC CH 130.1800822

2 **Topohony** 23:45

for Orchestra only

ISRC CH 130.1800823

3 **Topohony** 21:12

with John Butcher, *saxophone* & Thomas Lehn, *synthesizer*

ISRC CH 130.1800824

Total Time 68:55

DDD *24*  
*Bit*

Track 1 recorded 29 January 2016, Philharmonie, Köln; Tracks 2 and 3 recorded 22 May 2017, Philharmonie, Köln; Executive producer: Harry Vogt; Recording producer: Stephan Hahn (1), Günther Wollersheim (2, 3); Recording engineer: Mark Hohn; Eine Produktion des Westdeutschen Rundfunks Köln. Lizenziert durch die WDR mediagroup GmbH; Liner notes by Nina Polaschegg; CD-master by Peter Pfister; Graphic concept by fuhrer Vienna; Executive production by Christopher Fox, Bernhard "Benne" Vischer, Christian C. Dalucas & Werner X. Uehlinger.

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CHRISTOPHER FOX · TOPOPHONY