

Philip Tagney

Thoughts on Alwynne Pritchard as performer/composer

She used to be a dots-on-paper composer - her first CD was of hermetic, knotted, sparse chamber music. She wrote a piano concerto for Nicolas Hodges and the BBC Scottish SO - again, stark & sparse music with a strong character. But also back then I remember her telling me about a performance she did at a concert where she wore a latex catsuit, and possibly had to crawl out of a box? which was an early indication of an interest in physical performance. Then she started working in a number of semi-improvised groups; I saw her perform with Fat Battery, where she spoke & sang, and I was impressed by the tight structuring of what seemed nevertheless to be an improvised piece. I also saw her improvise vocally in duet with a visual artist, drawing on a huge sheet of paper hung on the wall of the Foundry at Old Street, her voice skidding and swooping and scribbling as freely as the artist's pens.

The Langham Research Centre, of which I am a member, asked her to collaborate with us on a piece for voice & electronics. Alwynne came into a studio one weekend in her pajamas, with words that I'd culled and minced from the speeches of Obama, and she proceeded to sing passages that we'd composed for her, and also improvised lavishly on these materials, using the full range of her extraordinary singing voice (her top end is powerful, pure & very high) she groaned, shrieked, muttered and crooned. From these rich materials, we were able to construct a half-hour electronic piece, using only her vocal sounds as material, called *Obamix*. Subsequently we performed the piece live, with Alwynne taking a solo vocal part, and adding to it a theatrical performance that was detailed, stylised, and striking - referencing various sorts of world leader in modes from the hectoring to the preaching to the paranoid.

Then I saw Alwynne's new piece for the BBC Scottish SO, at the Tectonics Festival in Glasgow in May [2016]. Her orchestral writing here was still spare, but fuller than before, confidently exploring a very simple motif of descending pitches, though in no way minimalist. And this time she was the soloist, performing in an extraordinary zipped & velcro-ed dress/soft sculpture that she manipulated & reshaped as she sang. I loved the piece, inspired by late Beckett, and I admired the use of two Foley artist/percussionists at front of stage, amplifying & colouring the sounds of her costume & providing a layer of Brechtian distancing from the potently corporeal contortions of Alwynne. Her performances never strike me as Expressionist depictions of agony, even though she sometimes seems to suggest agony. There is a playfulness, almost a twinkle in the eye, though she is deadly serious and controlled. She looked like an angel of death, a gothic horror haunting the stage. But when you pay attention to her, she is articulating an ordinary person's dilemmas and puzzlings.

My most recent experience of Alwynne performing was at a Bastard Assignments gig in a ruined chapel in Peckham. Here she did solo pieces that were the most extreme I've seen so far - as much dance/physical performance as music - not that putting a label on the art form matters much. Her physical performance now has the strength & discipline of her musical chops - she has been refining her physical skills over a number of years, and it really has paid off. The intensity of her movement combined with her vocals was transfixing. I was reminded fleetingly of Butoh, of Sudden Infant (the provocative Berlin-based Noise artist), and of sinister automata. And like her piece with orchestra, there is a Beckettian sense of the absurd, of us poor struggling feeble creatures trying to get by in a difficult world. Whatever she does next, it's likely to continue to surprise & excite me.

Philip Tagney is a radio producer and member of Langham Research Centre.