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Audio Review

Christopher Luna-Mega: *Time's Arrow*. Other Minds OM 1031-2, 2022.

Performers: Kelly Sulick and Diego Villaseñor, flute; Rachel Condry, clarinet; Christopher Luna-Mega, electronics, guitar, piano; Jacob Pek, electric guitar; Aaron Oppenheim, Jeanie Aprille Tang, and Maxwell Tfirm, electronics; Jennifer Wilsey, Nava Dunkelman, and Ian Antonio, percussion; Laura Berger and Ning Yu, piano.

The music of Christopher Luna-Mega reminds me of my definition of music: any sound to which you decide to pay attention. His music benefits from spectralists like Gerard Grisey in that it uses audio analysis of sounds to recreate their granular complexity through various combinations of instruments and various playing techniques. He extends this idea through what he calls *environmental sonic translation*: starting with various natural sounds in different locations and listening to them repeatedly (like a mantra, he says) to translate these sounds faithfully into musical form. This is not the same as Messiaen's meticulous use of birdsong, for instance, though it started in a similar way. Whereas Messiaen's birdsong is transformed through the technique of his musical language, the source of the original in Luna-Mega's music actually remains as some sort of implicit or explicit presence in the music. The closest parallel, perhaps, are the nature pieces of John Cage, for example *Inlets*, where musicians move about conch shells with water in various ways to produce sounds that are picked up by microphones. Luna-Mega's approach, of course, is much more complex, and frankly more elegant and far-reaching than Cage's.

La Torre de Chitor refers to a short story by Borges involving "an ascent towards the perfection of a spiritual being," as the liner notes put it. Its spare material begins with the D above middle C played by the flute, which is doubled with a flute sample undergoing electronic processing (I believe) that sometimes moves flatter or sharper than that note. Other higher flute passagework involving breath appears periodically as the lower-register note expands to more pitches. Both textures continue to expand, with the electronic modifications in the high register frequently beginning to resemble birdsong; thus, the environmental source is clear without the music simply representing it using approaches/devices that are traditional within music composition. In other pieces, the original environmental sounds are far more explicit.

The first of the two *Water Studies*, according to notes at Luna-Mega's [website](#), uses a recording of drops of water falling into a bowl—it is a direct transcription of what he hears for an ensemble of clarinet, piano, electric guitar, two percussion parts, and two parts for live electronics. In *Water Study 2*, Luna-Mega recorded a stream in Mexico, again translated into music for the ensemble; they play in an indeterminate fashion these ideas alongside the stream recording. *The Arrow of Time*, the longest work here, derives from the sound of the han,

a heavy wooden board hung by the front door of Buddhist meditation temples and struck three times each day as a signal for times in monastic life. Each strike, if I understand correctly, begins with separate strokes that gradually become closer and closer together. Using an ensemble that comprises various tuned percussion and two pianos, Luna-Mega overlays this sonic principle with a recurring rhythmic cycle of shorter and longer values, suggesting the Buddhist notion of recurrence. It is sonically alluring and deeply expressive.

My highest praise for a composer is when I feel he creates compelling music that I have never heard before. We have just that with Luna-Mega. I hope to hear more of this enchanting work in the future.

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