

## Review: *For*

Úna Monaghan

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Drawing on her interdisciplinary background, Úna Monaghan's practice and research investigates the boundaries between art and science. Therefore it is not surprising that in her debut solo album, *For*, she explores the combination of her creative practice as a harpist, composer, improviser and sound engineer with her research interests in experimental sound art and interactive technologies.

The album synthesises contemporary Irish traditional music and experimental music, and combines live harp performance with interactive and fixed electronic and electro-acoustic sounds. The harp is recorded live (except for an overdub in the opening track) and therefore the listener is experiencing the artist reacting in the moment to both pre-determined and less predictable moving soundscapes. She also responds with both her own pre-composed tunes and improvisatory harp episodes, and in several tracks manipulates the live electronics through motion sensors, pitch detection and Max/MSP patches. Short solo harp tracks are interspersed throughout the album and provide a welcome focus on the artist solely as a harpist and composer. Recorded by Tim Matthews in Shetland and mastered by Stuart Hamilton, Monaghan impressively assumes the roles of composer, performer and producer.

In her extensive liner notes, which are available in English and also in Irish (translated by Breandán Ó Fiaich), she speaks of the personal influences for each track, nearly all with a dedicatee, hence the album title, *For*. There is a very personal sensitivity throughout, with one track dedicated to herself, others to her parents, grandparents and previous musical collaborators. There are also harder hitting dedications, such as a poignant solo harp composition entitled "For Her" written in response to hearing of a murder of a girl of her own age, and in "The Choice", she effectively utilises harp melodies and live electronics to explore the multiplicity of addiction: the keeping it together, the disintegration and distortion. The sense of people and of place is very evident throughout and particularly in her choice of source material, for example, the street sounds of Belfast in "An Dearcadh" and the evocation of the west Kerry sea in "Ómos do Sheamus", albeit that the sea sounds were recorded in Shetland.

"Réalta", dedicated to herself, is a harp improvisation superimposed on her first electroacoustic tape piece (2006) and based on harp source material, which represents for her the point when her creative practice took priority. In a sense, the album takes us from her early harp compositions (one of her first compositions is heard in the opening track) and her early experiments as a sound artist in "Réalta", through to the expansion of her creative practice more closely integrating her work as a harpist and sounds artist.

Collaboration is also prevalent and two tracks in particular draw on material from larger-scale collaborative projects: "Owenvarragh, a Belfast Circus on The Star Factory" (2012) and "The Bodélé Project" (2016). In "An Dearcadh", written in memory for Belfast traditional singer, Éamonn Ó Faogáin, the recorded sources of her soundscape composed for "Owenvarragh" are reused. For "Owenvarragh" Monaghan collaborates with Martin Dowling, in a new realisation of John Cage's "On Circus" (1979), which is an iconic work in the context of this album as it represents an early example of Irish traditional music being brought within an experimental sound art context. In this case, it is a reimagining of Cage's score with Ciaran

Carson's book *The Star Factory* that the collaborators set within a very distinctive Belfast framework. The Belfast soundscape that Monaghan recreates in "An Dearcadh" is a poignant tribute to Éamonn Ó Faogáin, who performed as part of "Owenvarragh". For me, this track is the highlight of the album, as Monaghan carefully selects her favourite sounds from an extensive array of her recorded source material, including a whistling kettle, street and community voices, the distinctive cadences of Belfast childrens' voices, the tolling clock, and the wonderful deep sonorous horn sounds of ships in Belfast Lough. These are combined to create a characterful Belfast sound world to which she sensitively layers live harp with three melodies composed specifically for the dedicatee. The power of this track is that it seems to transcend the exclusively aural listening experience.

In the final track of the album, she highlights a more recent collaboration with visual artist, Mark Clare, who she met during her artist residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in 2015. "The Bodélé Project" is distinctive in that it moves away from both the harp and Irish traditional music. This is a tape composition derived from the larger-scale work, which she explains is a concert adaption, whereas the work's "natural habitat" is an installation in a gallery. The source material for this track is based on weather systems, adapted radio and morse code sounds, in combination with sounds directly from nature, including bird song. In this work, the artists explore the unseen ecological processes within our natural environment, and indeed the theme of art articulating scientific phenomena.

The album is very much built around the Irish harp, with eleven of the twelve tracks showcasing Monaghan's crisp melodically driven harping skills, and in doing so, she places an instrument with a strong sense of heritage and tradition within a more contemporary aesthetic. However, her Irish traditional music roots are very evident, and within her interactive and fixed sound art investigations, there is still space for a clear focus on her accomplished harping skills and that of a composer and improviser within the Irish traditional music genre. The Irish harp is currently enjoying a vibrant multi-faceted resurgence in practice, transmission, and scholarship and this recording provides scope for a new view and evaluation of the instrument and its repertoire, by embracing both tradition and experimentation.

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