

Linda Catlin Smith – *Drifter*
(Blog post for OUT-TAKE Ensemble concert, 23/4/18)

Pianist Harry Matthews and I have been working together with OUT-TAKE for quite a while now, and enjoy playing music together very much. However, this concert is the first time that we will perform together purely as an electric guitar and piano duo, without any other instruments. Harry and I have both, through various circumstances, ended up moving to Bristol recently, and this isolation from our colleagues has inspired us to explore the possibilities of our slightly unusual combination of instruments. The piece we have chosen to begin this project with is the Toronto-based American composer Linda Catlin Smith's *Drifter* (2009).

I first heard *Drifter* in a recent recording made by the group Apartment House. Their CD, released on the Another Timbre label, features a lush, reverberant performance by Philip Thomas on piano and Diego Castro Magas on classical guitar, that demonstrates the piece's ethereal, yet somewhat mysterious beauty. Although I enjoyed listening to the piece, I did not consider the possibility of performing it with OUT-TAKE, as I am very much an electric guitarist, with no classical guitar training. Later, however, when I was looking for repertoire for our duo, I discovered that the piece was actually originally commissioned and performed by the electric guitarist Tim Brady, with Brigitte Poulin on piano. We decided that this would be an ideal piece to work on together, and contacted the composer immediately to get hold of the score.

Speaking as a guitarist, my part in *Drifter* is not overly technically difficult in isolation (although Harry has some pretty tricky passages with a lot of jumping around the keyboard), but rehearsing the piece together has provided some interesting challenges for us as a duo. The piece involves a lot of musical material that is passed back and forth between the instruments, and the rhythmic coordination is sometimes rather tricky to get right. Sometimes we have to play in rhythmic unison, while at other times our parts will be offset by very subtle rhythmic values. It takes some concentration to not only get this coordination right, but to play with enough conviction that the discrepancies between the parts sound intentional! However, when we get it right, the results can be very striking indeed.

The piece makes particularly effective use of the piano and guitar's middle and lower registers to explore rich harmonies that hint at familiar chords, while remaining tantalisingly ambiguous, drawing the listener in to the resonance of the instruments. The meandering nature of the melodies reflects the piece's title and creates a 'timeless' quality, that allows the listener to enjoy the sonorities of each moment in the piece without feeling overly drawn into a more intrusive musical narrative. Nevertheless, when we reach the final chords we do feel that we have gone on some sort of musical 'journey', although the finality of the destination we have arrived at is somewhat uncertain.

If you would like to hear a taster of *Drifter*, there is an extract from Apartment House's acoustic performance of the piece available to listen to here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2syoxUGYcm8>. We hope it will inspire you to come and hear our version next week at the Talking Heads.