

review music

this week's essential reading

'How Gucci Mane made his new album in six days' by Andrew Nosenitsky, The Fader

'I don't know how Tupac worked, I don't know how Biggie worked. I wasn't able to be there to witness it. But I'm here to witness Gucci Mane and he's making history'



Experimental musician Claire M Singer is music director of Union Chapel, London, home of Henry Willis's 1877 pipe organ. Courtesy Martin Gray

The pipes of Brexit?

Two avant-garde albums hark back to an ecclesiastical past to make sense of the present, says **Andy Battaglia**

We tend to think of technology in an ever-present state of the gleaming and the new. In the age of now, anything in the realm of the technological is digital, miniaturised or plastic in either a literal or figurative sense. And so it must have always been, at least in a way that would have pointed forward to the mono-directional march of history.

But what of the organ? What of that huge, heaving machine from a distant past when machines weren't anything like what the notion of machinery calls to mind now? There's an organ of the sort in London, at Union Chapel, that is nothing if not a technological marvel – even at an age approaching 140 years old.

Built in 1877, its legacy owes to a number of distinctive features. It was designed by Henry "Father" Willis, a pivotal figure among those who admire masterful Victorian-era organ builders of yore. It's the sole remaining example in England of an organ with a fully operating hydraulic power system, meaning the air coursing through its pipes can be blown by water. Of the pipes, there are more than 2,000, ranging in sizes from a few inches to the height of three people standing on end, with extra reach for arms at the top. Emblems of archaic church ser-

vices and rituals from before the advent of electricity, organs of the sort sound old, almost ancient in a way. But then they also sound beamed back from some distant time that has not yet transpired, a signal from the future and a past still stirring in our bones.

The organ at Union Chapel, historic but actively played, features prominently on a new album by Claire M Singer, and it would be hard not to hear it in mind of the news roiling England of late.

England never lacks for a certain pull between the present and a deep past, but there has been no escaping it in recent weeks, after the Brexit vote upended a nation and threatened to break apart allegiances and detentes ages-old.

The Molendinar, a standalone 25-minute track that takes up one of two CDs for Singer's album *Solas*, showcases the Union Chapel organ in a grand fashion. The song was recorded in the chapel (as songs involving enormous and thus immobile organs must), and there is an otherworldly power in hearing several, many, even dozens of drastically different musical moods being expressed all at once, in any one cluster or cloud of notes being summoned in any one given moment.

That's what pipe organs are uniquely suited to do: scramble the signals of what might in-

form an elementary musical language of tidy binary sentiments like happy or sad, dark or bright, quiet or loud, mournful in a minuscule way or celebratory in a scale fit for the high heavens. A note on an organ summons all of those couplings simultaneously and complicates what it would mean to consider any one without the other.

The Molendinar opens with a spell of silence slowly filled out by a sound that patiently, portentously rises. It's like you can hear the air making its initial way through hollow metal pipes of gigantic size, the early digestive stirrings of an instrument that will spew. From there it's a methodical folding-in of notes in a droning manner, with an interest in subtly undulating masses of sound and ethereal overtones. It is an organ of incredible stature and Singer knows her way around the instrument as the acting music director of Union Chapel and public programmes offered there.

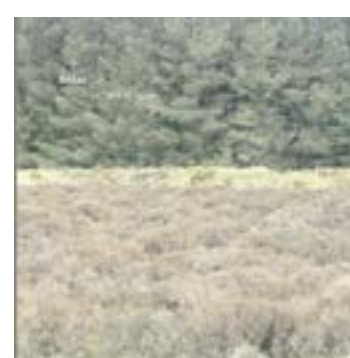
Singer is also an avant-gardist, as suggested by *Solas*'s release on the UK label Touch, one of the premier labels for experimental music and sound-art in the world. Other tracks show her range, such as *A Different Place*, a tense and swooning swirl of strings from a cello recast abstractly in an electro-acoustic fashion. Cello and organ sounds come in for electronic

treatment in places, but the whole of *Solas* maintains a grounding in the past as much as intimations from a musical future.

A certain reliquary air hangs around experimental electronic music of late. *Love Streams*, the new album by ace Canadian agitated-ambient artist Tim Hecker, is said to have been inspired by 15th-century choral scores, particularly ones with origins in polyphonic composition (read: many musical voices at once). It comes with an irresistible quotation line from Hecker aligning it with a stated curiosity in "liturgical aesthetics after Yeezus", imagining a kind of postmodern church music after the famously brash and electronically antagonised album by Kanye West.

Hecker's music, made with computers and analogue gear, has little to place it in the past, with textures and habits of movement that could only come from technologically abetted compositional means. But the atmosphere of *Love Streams* suggests a kind of strategic anachronism and mustiness, too, a way for new music to explore a curiosity about eras unfamiliar to more contemporary musical understanding.

Castrati Stack, a haunting track with high-pitched, angelic voices floating and flitting through a densely data-mapped soundfield, alludes in its title to a long-aban-



Solas
Claire M Singer
Touch
Dh78



Love Streams
Tim Hecker
4AD
Dh49

doned practice of binding male singing voices in Italy by castrating singers before puberty. It's a centuries-old phenomenon and the thought of it is enough to make one wonder, backward, through the puzzle of time.

The organ in Singer's music makes for similar occasions. Falling under the sway of its entrancing effects, rising and dropping in time with its waves of melancholy and exaltation, offers a poignant accompaniment to thinking through the prospect of England's fated present and past. No one knows how it will all play out. But there's little question that, even among voters who vociferously supported it, the move to leave the European Union has aroused a crisis of identity and conscience on all sides. Is the makeup of England changing irretrievably – not to mention what has for so long constituted Great Britain and the United Kingdom? Is history happening right in front of us, as it always does, in messy, irrational real-time?

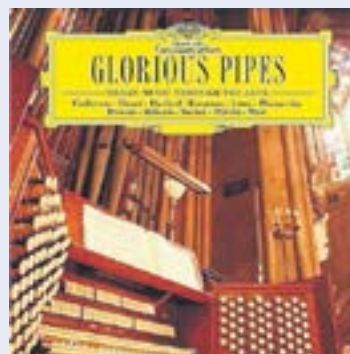
One more question to mull, for the road: can the churning of tectonic plates in the geopolitical firmament be heard in the airy utterances of old organ sounds?

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze,

the playlist offbeat and unusual sounds

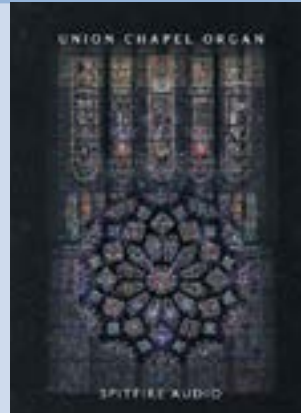
Glorious Pipes: Organ Music Through the Ages
Various Artists
(Deutsche Grammophon, 2004)

This collection by the vaunted classical music label Deutsche Grammophon gathers classics by Bach, Brahms, Franz Liszt and Olivier Messiaen, among many more.



Union Chapel Organ Sample Pack
(Spitfire Audio, 2016)

For aspiring organists from afar, this offers 3,099 samples of sounds from the Union Chapel organ for use in whatever production-minded kind. Fill almost 8GB of computer space with the sounds of history.



El Tren Fantasma
Chris Watson
(Touch, 2011)

This transporting work of sound-art typical of the UK label Touch features "field recordings" of a train ride across Mexico. The title translates as "The Ghost Train", with the sounds of nature creating a wild kind of music.

