

Brainwashed - Sarah Davachi, "Pale Bloom"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Sarah Davachi's tireless campaign to subvert expectations with each fresh release shows no signs of slowing down, as the label-hopping composer's latest opus partially revisits her formative years as an aspiring pianist. While it would be fair to characterize *Pale Bloom* as "neo-classical" and a logical progression from 2018's

Gave in Rest

, Davachi has never been content with pastiche, reverent homage, or returning to previously covered territory. Instead, she seems like an artist increasingly unfixed in time, drawing from the past to give her forward-thinking experiments in harmonies and overtones a foundation that feels temporally ambiguous and self-assuredly independent of contemporary music trends.

While there is not any particular piece on

Pale Bloom

that makes it

tower above any of its predecessors, it is unquestionably a uniformly strong collection of new work that studiously avoids the familiar and hints at intriguing new directions to come.

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I sometimes feel like I bring up Erik Satie too much, as his work is an enticingly easy and effective reference point for simple, melodic piano miniatures. To be fair, however, he definitely cast quite a large and long-lasting shadow, as his style was accessibly anti-virtuosic and has aged extremely well. Consequently, it yielded a hell of a lot of descendants and it is hopeless to pretend otherwise. Davachi is not a particularly pure example of those spiritual children here, as the mood of the opening "Perfumes I" is a bit more elegiac and loosely structured than classic Satie fare, but she certainly shares the Parisian iconoclast's penchant for elegant simplicity, space, and unhurried languor. While that aesthetic is a fundamentally likable one, the true beauty of "Perfumes I" unexpectedly blossoms forth around its midpoint, as Davachi's melancholy sonata plunges into considerably more compelling harmonic territory when backwards melodies start swelling and streaking through the piece. The two other parts of the "Perfumes" trilogy that follow are similarly grounded in a meditative, loosely structured procession of minor chords, yet each offers its own particular twist on that theme. The more ambitious and unexpected of the two is definitely "Perfumes II," as intertwining and overlapping classical vocals twist and float over the piece in a kind of sensual lament. It is a hauntingly melancholy piece, but the mood lightens a bit for the more modest third act, as the tender

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somberness of the piano is warmed by some rich organ drones. Sadly, Davachi did not have a third rabbit to unexpectedly pull out of her hat, but "Perfumes III" is quite lovely nonetheless, as the sustained organ tones blur together into some gorgeously shifting harmonies.

The album's second half continues that neo-classical bent, but takes it in quite a different direction, as the epic "If It Pleased Me To Appear To You Wrapped In This Drapery" is built from a shifting bed of sustained tones. It recalls some of the more experimental and abstract fare from *Gave in Rest*, but it is a considerably more expansive and sophisticated iteration of that aesthetic, as a slow-motion flow of differing timbres smears and bleeds together to yield a host of oscillations and uncomfortable dissonances. The album's description curiously mentions Eliane Radigue and La Monte Young as touchstones, which makes some sense given that "Drapery" is a longform minimalist drone piece. However, the overarching mood is a very far cry from the work of either, as Davachi uses a battery of strings and other instruments to weave something uniquely timeless, impressionistic, and uncomfortably queasy. The overall effect seems akin to experiencing a visionary glimpse of transcendence at a medieval mass, then having it quickly curdle into a sickly and nightmarish grotesquerie. As such, it is quite an interesting (if difficult) piece that is far darker than what I have grown to expect from Davachi. I suspect it is entirely possible that future occult historians will point to "Drapery" as the first hint that she had begun to fall prey to an unusually evil and tenacious bout of demonic possession.

Of *Pale Bloom's* four pieces, I am most fond of the comparatively modest "Perfumes I," as it is a masterfully understated triumph of elegant simplicity and ingenious symmetry. However, it is definitely the more ambitious "Perfumes II" and "Drapery" that make this album a memorably singular entry in Davachi's discography. While the latter could perhaps portend the dawning of a new phase of malevolent minimalism, it is the former that offers the most intriguing possibilities, particularly since Eduard Artemiev's score for *Solaris* is name-checked as one of the album's inspirations. I do not particularly see much overt similarity to that myself, though

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certainly shares some of the actual film's sense of existential dread and ghostly unreality. That said, "Perfumes II" does seem like the kind of strange and striking work that an iconoclastic filmmaker might be drawn to (like Brady Corbet was to Scott Walker's oeuvre), so it is quite possible that Davachi might have a bright future as a soundtrack auteur. Perhaps not though, as her career is increasingly characterized by restless flux and creative evolution. As such, it is difficult to imagine her staying in one place long enough for her vision to ever become a tightly defined and easily graspable one. Fortunately, the silver lining to that is that trend is a steady stream of inspired reinventions and bold stylistic experiments like this one.

Samples can be found [here](#) .