

Mark Fell: Intra

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Mark Fell, the Yorkshire musician late of Y2K-era clickers-and-cutters SND, has spent most of his solo career making beguiling algorithmic music. He typically starts out by typing some numbers into a program. Then he lets the hand of fate guide what happens. The results are often too weird and too complex to have been conceived by the human imagination alone, and while this kind of hyper-conceptual computer music can be more interesting to read, write and wonder about than to actually listen to, Fell consistently avoids this trap. How his music's made isn't as interesting as how it sounds, how it feels.

So it's interesting to see him add a human element on *Intra*. This is an algorithmic piece written for the sixxen, a microtonal percussion instrument invented by composer Iannis Xenakis. Each sixxen, furthermore, is slightly out of tune with the others. The piece wasn't properly notated; rather, Fell relayed information to the performers through headphones and tasked them with recreating it as accurately as possible. Mistakes are part of the work, and it's (probably deliberately) hard to tell if the willy-nilly way this weird music moves owes to its unconventional notation or errors on the part of the performers.

Does this sound arcane? There's nothing to "get" once the mallets make contact with the

metallophones. Each instrument is designated a different corner of the stereo field, so the drums sound like they're falling around you. There aren't any melodies to hang onto, and the rhythms are slippery. This music moves in tumults, in cascades. There's not much like it, at least not in Western music. You can let your mind wander through it, your attention switching from drum to drum as it twists itself into Seussian architecture. Or you can let it engulf you, each clank and clang like a droplet of water running down your face.

Only eight pieces appear here out of the ten written for the project, and if the numbers in the track titles are any indication they're out of order. Could Fell have determined the content of the album itself with some algorithmic devilry? If so, fate is on Fell's side. *Intra* has an almost classic-album arc, coming on strong with swarms of sound ("Intra-5," "Intra-8") before letting some air in on "Intra-3." "Intra-9" even plays the role of the slow-burning climax, a sound-art "No Quarter," its bells and whistles landing miles apart from each other over eight vast minutes that feel like an abyss at the heart of the record.

This isn't to say that *Intra* is anything close to accessible. To most, it'll sound like nothing so much as a bunch of ball bearings being dumped in a toilet. To others, it'll be a sublime experience, a psychedelic treat for an ear trained in the more esoteric schools of electronic music. Either way, it's hard to think of any other music that sounds like this, and it's even harder to think of an artist for whom that can be as consistently said as Fell.