

Contemporary album of the month

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Arandel: InBach review – Bach through 100 electronic kaleidoscopes

★★★★☆☆

(InFiné Records)
Techno artist uses period instruments to reshape Bach's mutating melodies into minimalism, ballads and synth-pop



▲ Bach disorientated ... Arandel. Photograph: Julien Mignot

More than the work of any other composer, Johann Sebastian Bach's music seems to be genre-neutral. Over the past three centuries these pure, uninflected melodies and mutating harmonies have been endlessly interpreted by jazz, bossa nova, samba, synth-pop, flamenco, electronica, ambient, rave and drum'n'bass musicians - sometimes, as on Uri Caine's 2000 interpretation of the Goldberg Variations, all on the same album.

The latest set of interpretations comes from French artist Arandel, a rather mysterious figure on the fringes of the techno scene who preserves his anonymity at festivals by DJing in a sealed booth. Like Matthew Herbert, he has a Dogme-style manifesto for making music, never using samplers, sequencers or pre-programmed synthetic sounds. InBach started as a collaboration with the Musée De La Musique, a rather wonderful treasure trove of antique instruments on the outskirts of Paris, which gave Arandel access to the likes of a vintage viola da gamba, an Erard square piano, a clavichord and a 1940s ondioline proto-synth, once played by Jean-Jacques Perrey - all of which are put through a 21st-century electronic filter.

Aux Vaisseaux turns the repeated harmonies from the 14 Canons on the Goldberg Ground into a hypnotic piece of minimalism. Crab Canon plays the endlessly cycling counterpoint of the 2 Cancrizans canon on a vintage celeste, then plays the tune backwards and reverses the tape, to wonderfully disorientating effect. Passacaglia and Hysope both turn organ works into throbbing pieces of synth-pop, like Wendy Carlos joining the Pet Shop Boys, accompanied by a choir of angels.

Arandel is also helped by numerous guests. A version of the C Minor Prelude features Petra Haden leaping through the rangy melody - like a one-woman Swingle Singers - over a bleepy synth backing; while French chansonnier Barbara Carlotti transforms a Bach choral prelude into a Serge Gainsbourg-style ballad called Blulette. There are some moments of banality, but Arandel's Bach pastiches are quite good - his Homage to JS Bach sounds like the first Prelude in C Major refracted through a hundred kaleidoscopes.

Arandel: InBach is released on 7 February.

Also out this month

Wacław Zimpel is a Polish multi-instrumentalist whose excellent new album Massive Oscillations (31 January, Ongehoord Records), mixed by like-minded minimalist James Holden, features slow-burning, ever-mutating drones and clarinet freakouts, accompanied by drums that shift from the hypnotic to the thunderous.

Joachim Kühn & Mateusz Smoczyński - Speaking Sound (25 January, ACT Records) sees the German pianist and the Polish violinist engage in nine duets that lurch from mournful ballads and spiky abstractions to Bartók-like mutations of eastern European folk themes.

Worlds Within is the self-released debut solo album by Canadian cellist Raphael Weinroth-Browne. Using looper pedals, drones and special effects, he creates 10 atmospheric soundscapes - all in the same key - that occasionally move into odd time signatures or edge towards ambient house.

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