

## Garrett List's illustrated CD document plunges into post-colonial Rwanda's heart of darkness. By Julian Cowley



### GARRETT LIST WITH JEAN-MARIE MUYANGO RWANDA 94: AN ATTEMPT AT SYMBOLIC REPARATION TO THE DEAD, FOR USE BY THE LIVING

CARBON 7 C7055/056 2XCD + BOOK

"Exorcism merely confers status on the exorcist: who claims, falsely, that he has the power to unmake," observed Iain Sinclair in his novel *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings*. The makers of *Rwanda 94* consign their names to an unassuming corner of the packaging; the tentative subtitle acknowledges openly the need to be cautious in this remembering of unthinkable horrors committed by human beings against other human beings. This play with music, transferred to book and two CDs, is no melodramatic ousting of demons, no delusory unmaking of the past.

The role of art in recording experience of intense suffering and acts of grotesque cruelty is necessarily contentious. Translation of ethical responses into aesthetic objects involves procedures that run self-evident risks, but on the other hand statistics and routine historical accounts are merely anaesthetic, numbing and nerveless. Music commemorating collective trauma and mass death has value when it instils creative action in the space of destruction, not aspiring to document the unspeakable, but to act in spite of what has happened; not unmaking but acting over. In this category we might locate Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps*, Luigi Nono's *Sul Ponte Di Hiroshima*, Steve Reich's *Different Trains* and Frederic Rzewski's oratorio *Le Triomphe De La Mort*.

Garrett List, who played alongside Rzewski in improvising group *Musica Elettronica Viva*, has written most of the music for *Rwanda 94*, with additional contributions from Rwandan singer Jean-Marie Muyango and some traditional material. The recording comes with a 268 page book, registering a collaboration between Rwandan and Western artists over the course of four years, resulting in a stage work premiered in Belgium in April 2000. A Tutsi face, stained blood-red, stares from the cover of this testimony to genocide. The international community has officially proclaimed the Rwanda killings the 20th century's third genocide. Within the book are numerous photographs, largely from the theatrical performance, plus a few harrowing and heart-rending pictorial reminders of actual events.

The project was initiated by Groupov, an "Experimental Centre For Active Culture", based in Liège. Arizona-born List holds a post as Professor of Improvisation at the Royal Music School in that city. Part of the impetus for the production arose from the participants' profound dissatisfaction with the ways in which Western media filtered and slanted information concerning the slaughter, framing it as a 'tribal war' and resurgence of barbarism. It was cast as 'tragedy', with an imputation of inevitability. Groupov, under the direction of Marie-France Collard and Jacques Delcuvellerie, set out to find where real responsibility for the

extermination programme lay and to identify extrinsic factors which set such gruesome events in motion. They sought to counter any suggestion that some form of diabolic possession had gripped this post-colonial state, to discover vested interests, to expose the complicity of outsiders and their apparently strategic recalcitrance in offering vital assistance to the persecuted — they were after the 'why' of it all.

As a student during the mid-1960s, Garrett List formed The Julliard Ensemble to realise music by the Julliard School's resident composer at that time, Luciano Berio, and by post-serialist contemporaries such as Pierre Boulez and Henri Pousseur. He moved on to play trombone with La Monte Young's Theater Of Eternal Music, engaged in improvising contexts with MEV, Steve Lacy and Anthony Braxton, and subsequently performed with David Byrne and Laurie Anderson. He has since pursued what he calls 'New Eclecticism', an idiosyncratic blending showcased on other Carbon 7 albums such as *The Unbearably Light* and *The Voyage*.

The music List has written for *Rwanda 94* is elegant and understated. He has suppressed any urge to mirror the torment undergone through dissonance and shattered lines, reflecting instead, after entering into dialogue with Rwandan musicians, the characteristic melodic counterpoint of indigenous song forms. The ensemble, chosen with deliberate irony, is a string trio, plus clarinet and piano, evoking "a kind of quintessence of European music at the height of the colonial epoch in Central Africa". Two female voices add to the lightness and buoyancy of the quintet's sound. Yet there is sufficient flexibility for dramatic switches to occur — during "The Litany Of Questions", drumming dances around a piano ostinato drawn from the depths of dub. Spoken text, contributed by several authors, recounts bewilderment, alarm, mental and physical agonies of those caught up in the bloodshed and brutality. It also carries important information gathered during Groupov's researches. Yolande Mukagasana tells of her personal experience of torture. Yet all is delivered with quiet dignity, while List's calm, insistent phrases shade the account with suitable nuance: a plangent inflection, a glint of anger, a gasp of disbelief. The words are mainly French; the book offers that text and a parallel English translation. Another important presence is singer Muyango who gives voice to the collective experience of extreme adversity and to individual resources of profound resilience. A section named "If This Is A Man", after the book by Primo Levi, remembers Auschwitz within the shadow of Rwanda.

There is one passage which obtrudes, translating less successfully from stage to disc. "Would You Like To Sing Along With Me?", opens with elephantine bellowing from List's trombone before the colonial legacy is channelled into a caricature voice, and a cabaret style. Theatrically it surely provides trenchant contrast; in sound alone, the interlude seems just a little out of place. That minor reservation aside, *Rwanda 94* is a bold and sensitive response of art to life at its least tolerable and least communicable. Can such an intervention make a difference? That depends of course upon our receptivity. The French writer Maurice Blanchot, in *The Writing Of The Disaster*, advised "Learn to think with pain". The caring intelligence and creativity of this project is a step towards that goal. □

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