

MADELEINE ISAKSSON  
INFILTRATIONS



ENSEMBLE  
GAGEEGO!  
REI MUNAKATA

1. **Infiltrations** (2022) 14.10  
for instrumental ensemble, organ and electric guitar
2. **Fibres** (2004) 12.21  
for flute, viola and 10-stringed guitar
3. **Sondes** (2009) 19.03  
for instrumental ensemble
4. **Far ...** (2011) 11.07  
for 11-stringed alto guitar and electronics
  
- Ici est ailleurs** (1998) 19.52  
for instrumental ensemble
5. *Prologue* 2.39
6. *Ici* 2.27
7. *Intervalle 1* 3.31
8. *Est* 5.45
9. *Intervalle 2* 1.32
10. *Ailleurs* 3.58

In 2017, in the programme booklet for the Nordic Music Days festival in London, Madeleine Isaksson wrote a short text explaining how she begins a composition. 'Each new piece should be unique, having its own identity, so I always try to begin from nothing', she wrote. 'I start a piece by exploring the sounding instruments by, among other things, drawing a map in which each instrument (or instrument family) has its own colour. The next step is to make another drawing, of the approximate total duration of the piece and its division into parts or sections.'

These observations may seem wholly pragmatic. But they offer clues to the aesthetics of Isaksson's

music as much as they do her practical working habits. The key words here are 'map', 'colour' and, especially, 'drawing'. They suggest ideas to do with lines and relationships, as well as forms of movement and spontaneity: means of navigation and orientation, the connecting of points, and the articulation of vertical and horizontal space. When one talks at greater length with the composer, these are the concepts that the conversation keeps coming back to. And although some aspects of Isaksson's style and technique have evolved over the years – particularly her early use of microtones, which have been more or less absent from her music since the early 2000s – the fundamental

elements have remained relatively constant. From *Ici est ailleurs*, from 1998, to *Infiltrations*, composed in 2022, this CD presents an opportunity to examine the development and stability of those elements across almost the full span of Isaksson's career.

*Ici est ailleurs*, for flute, percussion, violin, viola, cello and double bass, is one of two works on this recording that features that earlier microtonal language. It was inspired by a photographic triptych – with the abstract title *M 96* – by Isaksson's partner, the artist Jean-Louis Garnell. From left to right, the photographs are of: a view of fields and trees, taken outside the couple's home in Châtenay-Malabry; the composer, heavily shadowed, sitting in thought; and a square of light on a domestic interior wall. Landscape, portrait,

abstract, each cropped to different dimensions: the three images do not immediately suggest a harmonious grouping. But then different, less formal connections become apparent. Stillness, domesticity and familiarity, but also distance and strangeness.

Isaksson's composition is structured around three movements, separated by two intervals and introduced by a Prologue, as though the white space surrounding the photographs is given the same emphasis as the images themselves. But after this point any direct relationship between the music and the photographs ends. The composer attaches no programmatic meaning to her work, but instead uses the photos as springboards from which to consider ideas of spatial relation and distance: *here*, but also *elsewhere*, with *being* as something

in between. This is articulated in various ways. Different microtonal scales (based on a fifteen-note division of the octave) serve to differentiate instruments from one another, while changing tone centres serve to articulate distance and movement on a larger scale. But most important is a change in the work's orchestration. In *Ici*, the music is led by the string trio of violin, viola and cello; in *Ailleurs* their role is taken by flute and double bass. The percussion (which includes a tub of water into which air is blown, a tam-tam is lowered and gravel is poured) continues throughout as an independent voice, but is most prominent in the central, *Est*, movement. The piece was composed some years after Isaksson made her home in France in the early 1990s, and its title – presented bilingually in

both French and Swedish (as *Här är annorstädes*) – alludes to the state of living in and between two cultures simultaneously, sensations anticipated in the contradictions and connections of Garnell's photographs and enacted by the music's intertwining, mirroring structure.

Spatial relationships have always been a central component of Isaksson's work; she describes an earlier, larger ensemble piece, *Tillstånd – Avstånd (States – Distances)* (1992) as a kind of 'manifesto' on this topic. But the necessary counterpart to distance is continuity: a map, for example, shows not only the different points in a landscape, but also the lines in between them. This aspect of Isaksson's imaginative world is explored notably in the trio *Fibres* of 2004, the second work on this album to make use of microtones.

6 Although its three instruments – flute, viola and ten-string guitar – are distributed widely on the stage (the score asks for the musicians to be spaced several metres apart, in a triangular arrangement), the music is concerned with the idea of spinning a single continuous thread, as if the space were a giant spindle. The line’s integrity may be threatened by the deep-plunging harmonies of the guitar, with its four bass strings, but it never breaks. The work was planned in the form of five ‘microludes’, each focusing on a different instrument, but in practice the transitions are imperceptible. The process of composition, like walking a path, has turned a list of checkpoints into a continuous route.

A different type of line is addressed in the septet *Sondes* (2009). While its title (‘Sounding

lines’) suggests a similar theme to *Fibres*, the sense here is of ‘sounding’ in the nautical sense of ‘depth sounding’, and reflects a greater focus on the vertical properties of register and of overlaid tempi. Now, Isaksson does not create separate instrumental spaces through the use of different microtonal scales but instead uses superimposed tempi to achieve a similar effect. The first of her works to be written in this way was *Rum (Rooms)* (2000) for alto flute, bass clarinet, cello and percussion, and it is a technique she has returned to many times since.

*Sondes* is divided into four main sections, preceded by a Prélude and separated by interludes between sections 2 and 3, and 3 and 4. In her pre-compositional planning, Isaksson devised a patchwork of pulse relationships that distributed

up to nine different tempi among her seven instruments and across the seven sections. The patchwork is complicated (Isaksson's sketch is a riot of coloured rectangles, one for each tempo, and is accompanied by a table of tempo calculations), but it gives every instrument its moment as a soloist (when it typically has the simplest tempo division) and allows for the network of relationships across the ensemble to be in a state of continual flux. This ties in well with Isaksson's ongoing interest in blurring the timbres between instruments, such that it is often not easy to tell which instrument is playing at any moment.

In her pre-compositional phase, Isaksson assigned certain basic 'roles' to her seven instruments: so oboe/cor anglais and alto saxophone/clarinet were 'visitors';

violin and cello were 'companions'; the bass flute was a 'receiver'; and the percussion and piano acted as frames on either side. To be clear, these roles were not devised in order to structure a narrative or instrumental drama (in the manner of, say, Elliott Carter) but were simply a way to establish some fundamental characteristics, which could then be subject to the relational fluctuations mentioned above. Nevertheless, certain aspects remain in the finished work. When the oboe's first solo arrives (rising urgently against a rapid piano ostinato), it is possible to hear it in the sense of a visitor arriving, generating excitement and then a change in the situation. And just past the midpoint of the work, the bass flute can be heard in a still atmosphere, responding to what it has heard and feeding that back to

8 the ensemble. Isaksson first used this idea in *Tillstånd – Avstånd*, in which she placed an accordion in the middle of constellation of instruments as a listener, more than a soloist, and returned to the concept for *Îlots* (2005), again placing a solo accordion amongst several spatially distributed ensembles as a way to approach the challenge of writing for a large orchestra.

Isaksson's ongoing interest in lines, and especially in how they interact with one another to create spaces and relationships, means that she has written less often for solo instruments. *Far ...* is an exception, although even this uses electronics (themselves a rare presence in Isaksson's output) to add a second corresponding voice to the solo guitar. The electronic track was created at the Conservatory of Châtenay-Malabry with the

assistance of Sebastian Rivas, and contains two main components: recordings of the guitar and whispered texts, both of which are transformed using time-stretching, reverberation and pitch bending to create a cloudy soundscape.

Read in English the work's title refers to Isaksson's common interest in ideas of difference. But in Swedish it is also a pun on the word for 'father', and *Far ...* was composed at a time when Alzheimer's disease was taking Isaksson's own father away from her. The words included in the electronic track are chosen not only for their timbre (their fricative [f] sounds adding to the nebulous texture) but also for how they point to a cluster of terms connected to the fading of memory and identity: *flou* (Fr. 'blurred'), *fou* (Fr. 'crazy'), *fara* (Swed. 'to travel/leave'), *fissure* (Fr. 'fissure/crack'),



*dimman* (Swed. ‘fog’), *vänta* (Swed. ‘wait’), *issue* (Fr. ‘exit’), *in i dimman* (Swed. ‘into the fog’), and *foutu* (Fr. ‘damned’, ‘finished’). The addition towards the end of the Finnish *isä* (‘father’) points to the native tongue of Isaksson’s father.

As well as these autobiographical references, *Far ...* also draws upon a pre-existing musical source: the rondeau *Fumeux fume par fumée* by the fourteenth-century French composer Solage. Yet its enigmatic title (‘The smoker smokes smokily’), to say nothing of its own abundance of fricatives, relates it to the general condition of fogginess that pervades Isaksson’s piece. (Isaksson’s use of an 11-string alto guitar in this piece is also relevant: the instrument was invented by the Swedish luthier Georg Bolin as a means for modern guitarists to play Renaissance lute

music.) *Far ...* follows the shape of the Solage relatively closely, but extensively filters and transforms it to leave only a hazy outline: a harmonic framework; the occasional arpeggio figure; a few fragments of melody, deeply hidden. It too constitutes an identity that has almost completely faded from view.

Isaksson continues to map out the structure in her early preparations for a new work, but in recent years she has allowed herself to be more spontaneous, and not to rely on extensively detailed plans. *Infiltrations* is a good example of this. Still its impulse is polyphony; still it is concerned with relations between instruments in a musical space (both in a physical sense but also in the sense of the vertical register); still it is concerned with line, timbre and the blending of instrumental colours. Yet its

10 realisation of all these aspects is freer and more flexible.

The idea for the piece began in an organ work, *Span*, composed in 2021 to celebrate the inauguration of the new organ of the Gothenburg Concert Hall. Soon after this, the opportunity came from Gageego! to combine the organ with a chamber ensemble. Isaksson was particularly interested to explore how to blend the organ with acoustic instruments, and how to situate a small ensemble within a large concert hall: these were ideas of space and relationship that emerged directly from the circumstances of the commission. She conceived the organ as surrounding the five acoustic instruments (flute, clarinet, percussion, viola and cello), which could then dissolve into that border; and then added an electric

guitar which could act as a kind of mediator or infiltrator that moves equally between the inner and outer spheres.

The work begins with the alto flute unfurling a melodic thread of semiquavers, which is gradually passed from one instrument to the next, while the organ and other instruments sustain a soft accompanying bed. The melody's momentum ebbs and flows with changes in timbre, but the overall shape of the music remains relatively stable. That is until the guitar begins its infiltration just past halfway through the piece with a slow swell of distorted noise. It emerges from that soft accompaniment but quickly reveals itself to be something different, infecting the ensemble's energy and confidence. From here on, the ensemble becomes cautious and fragmented,

as though it is guarding against a traitor.

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Yet this fragile balance can only be maintained for so long, and once again the distorted guitar is able to inject itself into the work's empty spaces. This time it swells to climactic levels, overwhelming the ensemble and creating room for its own improvised cadenza. Thoroughly inundated, the ensemble's bonds fall apart, and the map gradually dissolves into nothing.

*Tim Rutherford-Johnson*

Tim Rutherford-Johnson is a writer and critic, based in West Sussex, UK. He is the author of *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989* and *The Music of Liza Lim*.

MADELEINE ISAKSSON was born in Stockholm in 1956. Her initial studies at the Nordic Music Conservatory (1977–79) and Royal College of Music, Stockholm (1979–83) were in piano, and she worked for several years as a ballet accompanist and piano teacher. In 1983, however, she directed her attention to composition, entering the postgraduate diploma class of Gunnar Bucht and Sven-David Sandström, studying also with Pär Lindgren, Arne Mellnäs and Bo Wallner. After graduating in 1987 she studied for a year with Louis Andriessen at the Royal Conservatory of Hague and participated in numerous courses across Europe, including at Darmstadt, Centre Acanthes in Grece, Abbaye Royaumont and IRCAM. Sholarhips allowed her to move further to Paris, exploring

contemporary music and art, and to compose. Since early 90's she share her living as composer with the artist Jean-Louis Garnell.

Isaksson's music is concerned with polyphony, spatialization and the blurring of instrumental timbres. She has written primarily for chamber ensembles, both with and without voice. Her music has been recorded by several European labels, notably for Phono Suecia on the portrait disc *Failles* (2005), and in a recording of the extended recorder solo *Les Sept Vallées* for Daphne Records (2022), performed by Kerstin Frödin. In 2012 she received the Saltö Award for *Les Sept Vallées* and in 2019, the Rosenberg Award. The same year she was elected a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.

In 1995 GAGEEGO! saw the light of day in Gothenburg, Sweden. Ever since, the hardworking ensemble has been devoted to contemporary music. Their name alludes to the legend of humankind's very first purposefully, and with great effort, spoken (no, exclaimed!) word: GAGEEGO! The laconic reply was not long in coming: "Huh?!"

And while this is a light-hearted tale about the importance of the human drive to communicate, it also gives a hint at how far Gageego! is willing to go to enrich the aural experience; challenging and enchanting its audience in the process.

Certainly by sheer virtuosity and devotion, but for nearly 30 years, the ensemble has also displayed a mindset of curiosity—embracing their audience while surprising

them with astonishingly diverse musical expressions.

The precision of modern classics from the 60s to the 80s has obviously defined Gageego!'s music, but the musicians, like chameleons, are also known for swapping their instruments for boxes, surgical instruments, drills, and peculiar inventions.

Their concert series at the Gothenburg Concert Hall in a number of guises featured newly written music from every continent. Gageego! is also a regular guest at concerts around the world and they have many a release on domestic and international labels.

Homegrown contemporary music has always been close to Gageego!'s heart and numerous composers have worked closely with them over the years. This album spotlights Madeleine

14 Isaksson, who in many ways personifies the Swedish musical movement that Gageego! has taken a major role in shaping - one that is concise, committed, and responsive while also being playful, joyful, and always headed for an unknown sonorous future - Gageego!

*Esaias Järnegard*



*Madeleine Isaksson  
and Rei Munakata*





## **Infiltrations (2022)**

*Recorded Live at Gothenburg Concert Hall,  
October 21, 2022*

Anders Jonhäll *alto flute, piccolo, bass flute*  
Ragnar Arnberg *clarinet in Bb, bass clarinet*  
Jonas Larsson *percussion*

Hans Hellsten *organ*

Stefan Östersjö *electric guitar*

Tuula Fleivik *viola*

Johan Stern *cello*

Rei Munakata *conductor*

## **Fibres (2004)**

*Recorded Live at Gothenburg Concert Hall,  
October 21, 2022*

Anders Jonhäll *alto flute, piccolo*

Tuula Fleivik *viola*

Stefan Östersjö *10-string guitar*

## **Sondes (2009)**

*Recorded Live at Stenhammarsalen,  
Gothenburg Concert Hall, October 15, 2022*

Anders Jonhäll *bass flute, flute in C, (claves)*

Ragnar Arnberg *clarinet in A*

Joel Vaz *english horn, oboe*

Jonas Larsson *percussion*

Oskar Ekberg *piano*

Helena Frankmar *violin*

Johan Stern *cello*

Rei Munakata *conductor*

## **Far ... (2011)**

*Recorded at Sound Processing Studios,  
August 20, 2023*

Stefan Östersjö *11-string alto guitar, electronics*

## **Ici est ailleurs (1988–1989)**

*Recorded at Spinroad Studios,  
November 1, 2022*

Anders Jonhäll *alto flute, piccolo*

Øyvør Volle *violin*

Jonas Larsson *percussion*

Martin Ödlund *percussion*

Tuula Fleivik *viola*

Johan Stern *cello*

Thomas Allin *double bass*

Rei Munakata *conductor*

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