

## LIVE REVIEWS

"The viola da gamba rarely makes an appearance on programs influenced by metal and Xenakis, but both composer and performer (Mr. Cahn-Lipman) proved their versatility with the premiere of "Sumna," whose title, Mr. Diaz de Leon said, means "prayer" or "hymn" in Sanskrit. Delicate gestures quickly morphed into more aggressive, slashing figurations, with arpeggiated motifs leading to a baroque-sounding conclusion. The highlights were the two pieces written for winds. In "The Flesh Needs Fire" (2007), hypnotic exchanges between the flutist Claire Chase and Mr. (Joshua) Rubin sounded both solemn and frantic, their soulful utterances unfolding over an enigmatic electronic canvas."

*Review: Mario Diaz de Leon Plays Selections from 'The Soul Is the Arena'*  
Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times, August 12th 2015

"She (Claire Chase) also tore into Mario Diaz de Leon's "Luciform," which has a trace of heavy metal in its helter-skelter, electronically enhanced cadenzas."

*Outsiders: The Ojai Music Festival*  
Alex Ross, New Yorker Magazine, July 6th 2015

"Nothing gives a concert a sense of occasion like the buzz of a capacity crowd, a point that holds just as true at small experimental spaces as it does at marquee destinations like Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. You could see it in action on Friday night at Roulette, a venerable new-music institution now in a SoHo storefront of modest size, when a concert featuring works by Mario Diaz de Leon, a young New York composer working on his doctorate at Columbia University, attracted an audience that packed the room. (...) Otherwise, what you noticed in pieces like "The Flesh Needs Fire," for flute and clarinet with electronics, was that the boundary between foreground and background disappeared; instrumental gestures and lines melded with synthetic sounds in restless strands of ever-shifting color and vigor. The best came last: In "Gated Eclipse," for sextet and electronics, a pulsating D passed among piano, winds and strings served as a gravitational root for a dreamlike sequence of hallucinatory intensity, which lingered well after the last note had faded."

*One Emerging Composer (With Laptop) and Players From Two Ensembles*  
Steve Smith, The New York Times, September 27th 2009

## CONCERT PREVIEW FOR "CYCLE AND REVEAL" ALBUM RELEASE EVENT

What happens when you mix elements of contemporary classical, moody electronics, and grim black metal? If you're as inventive as the composer and instrumentalist Mario Diaz de Leon, what results is chamber music that buzzes with remarkable textures and vivid atmosphere. In this concert—produced, in Ridgewood, Queens, by the arts laboratory The Kitchen—Diaz de Leon opens with electronic works, after which members of the International Contemporary Ensemble and Talea Ensemble present pieces from his newest album, "Cycle and Reveal."

Steve Smith, New Yorker Magazine, October 2019

### **PRESS FOR “CYCLE AND REVEAL” (Denovali, 2019)**

For years, New York composer Mario Diaz de Leon has toggled easily between the worlds of contemporary classical, black metal, and electronic music; rather than compartmentalizing those pursuits in different projects, he’s frequently blended them together in new hybrids. Such collisions usually work for him because he possesses a genuine ardor and depth of understanding for each style. This impressive new album is clearly contemporary classical, but those other elements are certainly present.

On “Sacrament,” slithering, cycling arpeggios voiced in ever-shifting iterations and phrase lengths on marimba, flute, and clarinet by members of Talea Ensemble are interlocked with meticulously-charted electronic tones, both serene and floor-rattling. The electronic interplay is no less gripping on “Labrys,” a piece featuring bassoonist Rebekah Heller, where spry electronic tones shadow and prod the snaking double reed patterns. Heller’s bassoon fractures into terse stabs, long tones, and turbulent melodies, while sub-bass swells and gaseous electronic textures swirl around her. “Irradiance” is an intense showcase for cellist Mariel Roberts, whose pitched-down instrument produces howling, viscous lows and shrieking, harmonic highs swaddled and buffeted by darkly ambient cloudbursts. The intertwined lines of Heller, clarinetist Josh Rubin, and flutist Claire Chase convey Arabic heterophony on the closing piece “Mysterium,” but things break apart ritualistically and reunite amid needling vintage synthesizers.

Peter Margasak, Bandcamp Daily, October 2019

### **PRESS FOR “SANCTUARY” (Denovali, 2017)**

“Mr. Diaz de Leon sells his vision with aplomb on a new album performed by the TAK Ensemble and the composer himself (on synthesizer, naturally). The edgy electronic timbres can serve a range of compositional functions: contrasting dramatically with the purity of a soprano’s sound, in one moment, before finding, in the bass clarinet, a partner in grain.”

-Seth Colter Walls, The New York Times, October 6th 2017

### **PRESS FOR “THE SOUL IS THE ARENA” (Denovali, 2015)**

“21<sup>st</sup> century chamber music that couples crystalline clarity with the disorienting turbulence of a sonic vortex.”

-Julian Cowley, The Wire, July 2015

“The Soul Is the Arena is Diaz de Leon’s latest chamber-music album since Enter Houses Of, and it’s both shorter and more all-encompassing. In three different pieces that collectively stretch just over 40 minutes, he gives listeners two riff-rollercoaster duos and a 20-minute, chamber-band essay of grim, beguiling beauty. The opener, “Luciform”, is a duo between Diaz de Leon’s electronics and flutist Claire Chase (a recent MacArthur “Genius Grant” awardee). Over the course of its 13-and-a-half minutes, Chase’s flute sometimes often carries the melodic line, while the electronics swoop in big, sine-wave-surfing curves behind her. At other points, Chase’s breathy sound is just a complement to the rampaging crunch of the composer’s programming. The fast switches are what keep the piece interesting. The second duo piece is the album’s title track, and it asks for Joshua Rubin’s bass clarinet to go into reed-squawk mode. (Rubin manages this risky, awkward move with impressive grace.) Later on, the instrumentalist and the pre-engineered sounds partner up for a memorably precise and glitchy passage. The work packs a hell of a lot into

nine-and-a-half minutes—so much so that you might need a little bit of a breather. Diaz de Leon has you covered on that count with the album-closing “Portals Before Dawn” (on which he plays synths alongside a sextet of instrumentalists from the International Contemporary Ensemble). The composer tried a similar strategy to close out *Enter Houses Of*, but this longer, more gradually surging and receding composition gets more out of the composer’s ambient fascinations. Diaz de Leon hasn’t put out an uninteresting release yet, but this compact and wide-ranging album is now the best introduction to his refined feel for instrumental extremity.”

-Seth Colter Walls, Pitchfork, July 23rd 2015

**PRESS FOR “KIASMA” (Denovali, 2013)**

“With *Kiasma*, the New York-based composer Mario Diaz de Leon brings an interesting twist to his *Oneirogen* project by amping up the metal elements included on his debut album *Hypnos*. In fact, the fifty-minute set takes no time at all in announcing that move when the full six minutes of the opening cut “*Numina*” are dominated by guitar distortion, shuddering six-string textures, and an overall death metal-styled sense of foreboding, desolation, and doom. But *Kiasma* is far from one-dimensional, and that’s what makes it interesting. The second track, “*Pathogen*,” while featuring no shortage of molten guitar textures, counterbalances its metal leanings with sophisticated soundscape design of dark ambient character. Put simply, *Oneirogen* wisely balances the metal and electronic sides in a manner seldom attempted, and the effect proves to be arresting, especially when drums are wholly eschewed. The album is often epic and grandiose in tone, never more so than during pieces of intensity so great they verge on harrowing, such as “*Mutilation*” and the album’s centerpiece, “*Katabasis*,” which finds *Oneirogen*’s lethal chords lurching like some diseased monstrosity across blasted ruins for fourteen doom-drenched minutes. At album’s end, “*Mortisomnia*” changes things up by adding Mario Diaz de Leon’s vocal growl to the tune’s guitars-and-synths landscape. Yes, *Kiasma* is heavy, of that there’s no doubt, but it’s also refreshingly different from the norm. It’s rare indeed to hear someone, as *Oneirogen* does, using multi-layered guitar shredding to craft nightmarish dark ambient set-pieces. Doom-laden material never sounded as musical as it does here.”

-Textura, 2013

**PRESS FOR “HYPNOS” (Denovali/Shinkoyo, 2012)**

“There are moments of artificial ethereality, where plasticized washes of synthetic sound recall the antiseptic calm of new age music, but they’re routinely upended by rapidly pulsing arpeggios, extreme lower-register growls, and rudely distorted, striated tones. Diaz de Leon nods to low-rent horror-film soundtracks (à la John Carpenter or *Goblin*) but also incorporates whiplashing bursts of power electronics and the ambience of doom metal—all of which wafts, rips, and splatters through these drifty instrumentals. “*Faithless*” opens like a Tangerine Dream outtake from *Risky Business*, then suddenly takes a satanic-sounding detour, only to return to a kind of weird calm, like a post-nightmare awakening. Diaz de Leon’s real accomplishment with *Hypnos* is the unexpected directions the pieces take—they hit you with one surprising shift after another, without ever sounding haphazard or goofy.”

-Peter Margasak, The Chicago Reader, March 2012

**PRESS FOR “ENTER HOUSES OF” (Tzadik, 2009)**

“Electronics have been part of classical music since at least the 1930s, the conservative programming of most mainstream presenters notwithstanding, but aside from Iannis Xenakis I can’t think of a composer who’s pushed harsh noise like young New Yorker Mario Diaz de Leon (he also plays in an experimental metal band called Mirrorgate). On last year’s fantastic Enter Houses Of, he juxtaposes relatively conventional lines played by acoustic instruments—some of which are quite lovely—with abstract electronic sounds that can be confrontational, even brutal. On “Mansion” the gracefully twining alto flutes of Claire Chase and Eric Lamb are surrounded by sputtering low-frequency digital pulses, haunting waves of ambience, lacerating bursts of synthetic shrieking, and explosive drumming by Nathan Davis that alternates between ceremonial gravitas and psych-rock fury. On “The Flesh Needs Fire,” Chase and clarinetist Joshua Rubin engage in swooping, acrobatic interplay while electronic noise builds in force, density, and nastiness. Diaz de Leon’s writing for acoustic instruments tempers dissonance with flashes of serenity, and his rhythmic sensibility likewise balances frenetic intensity with near stillness. The electronic element of his music is much more than merely decorative—it’s fully integrated, and alternately jostles, caresses, and dominates the other voices.”

-Peter Margasak, The Chicago Reader, November 2010