

Thomas Bartlett

Shelter [Modern Recordings / BMG]

Eight disarmingly beautiful piano nocturnes from the composer and producer on his solo debut album, recorded over two days following lockdown in New York City.

The day after lockdown began in New York City was a surreal one. Thomas Bartlett walked the five miles to his studio in Manhattan and passed maybe five people over the course of 100 blocks; Times Square was illuminated but empty. One day earlier, March 20, Bartlett had said goodbye to his English partner, Ella Hunt, who had to fly back to the UK. And now? “I was getting flashes of, Am I dreaming? This can’t quite be right,” he recalls, “And wait, did Ella actually just leave yesterday? It just felt insane.”

The eight piano nocturnes that make up Shelter play as a love letter to his partner, as well as a love letter to New York City itself – Bartlett’s home for 21 years. Being in the city when so many people had left, and the streets were mostly silent except for the sound of ambulance sirens, was, he says, “wrenching”. For Bartlett at that time, and for listeners now, Shelter offers an invitation to be immersed in the flow of the music – to let go of plans and expectations – and lean in to what actually is.

Spanning nearly two decades, Bartlett’s career has seen the producer and composer travel all over the world, performing with the Gloaming, the National, David Byrne and Anohni, among (many) others. He has produced records for St Vincent, Sufjan Stevens, Rhye, and Yoko Ono. By his own admission, such collaborations give him a break from his own thoughts and anxieties, allowing him to get inside somebody else’s head.

But with his studio now empty, Bartlett found solace in a musical form dear to him since childhood: the nocturne. Traditionally inspired by the night, the nocturne offers an entry into what is understood in the heart rather than the head; it is a way of assimilating what can’t be put into words. There is a stirring romanticism in Frédéric Chopin’s nocturnes that was revelatory to Bartlett, as a kid – one that seemed to spin entire worlds into being. But he’s been deeply wary of composing in such a style himself. “In the total strangeness of the moment and the lockdown, I gave myself permission to do a thing that I don’t usually do,” says Bartlett, “in terms of how these pieces to me are kind of shameless in their sentimentality.”

The mood on Shelter, Bartlett's first solo album, is one of dusk turning to inky evening blue. Lullabies for the heart, its pieces are multi-toned – from Xanthina, which seems to unspool before your ears, suggesting Cole Porter dreaming Satie, to the Ravel-esque Multiflora, which has the feel of water, shimmering, gurgling and tumbling. There are exquisitely deft melodic turns, as well as darker trills and runs. You may hear distant echoes here of some of Bartlett’s big musical loves: Keith Jarrett and late-era Talk Talk.

What is so striking, besides the beauty of the compositions, is Bartlett’s tender way with tone – informed in no small part by his time studying with celebrated Italian classical pianist Maria Curcio in London, as a

teen. “The thing she prized, and what I feel I really learned from her, was how to invest in *every* tone,” says Bartlett, “especially the quiet ones.”

For all its romanticism, however, the album is firmly rooted in reality. The day that lockdown came into effect, Bartlett was not feeling creative; rather, he wanted to sink into watching TV (specifically, the BBC show *Line of Duty*). But his studio setup means that he’s able to sit at the piano and watch TV on the computer he records into, letting inspiration slide in softly. (“If I stumble on something interesting on the piano, I’ll pause and record.”)

In his own words, these pieces are self-soothing, arising from an instinct to look after himself at an intensely vulnerable time, both in his own life and in terms of what was happening around him. “Nothing has felt like this,” he says. “The only thing that has any resonance with it for me at all is right after 9/11.” Bartlett had only been in New York City a couple of years in 2001, and his response to the trauma was to make a solo piano work in his bedroom, never to be released. “It was definitely a precursor to this,” he says, “and in some ways, maybe the exact same thing.”

He named that record *Little Blue*, after a childhood nickname: “When I was little, anytime anyone was mean to me, I would say, ‘But I’m just a little blue baby!’ – which I’d taken from Dylan, *It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue*. So, when I talk about self-soothing now, I think there’s also some kind of taking care of small, young, hurt me, somehow.”

It makes sense, then, that *Shelter*’s eight pieces are all named after types of roses – the symbolic gift of the heart. Bartlett was obsessed with roses as a kid, so it was inevitable that they would find their way into his elaborate track-naming system in his grown-up studio. He recalls his early attempts to cultivate roses at home in Vermont, and of a summer spent in Nova Scotia where he took it upon himself to make rose-petal jam. “I spent the days kayaking among the islands and denuding them of every single fucking rose petal,” he says, laughing. (There are probably still some jars of the bright pink jam kicking around somewhere.)

The notion of lazy sentimentality alarms Bartlett, however, to the point that he experienced serious misgivings about releasing *Shelter* at all. “There’s a space that I really love to be in, as a listener, and as a player – and it’s a feeling of arrival, and comfort, and peace”, says Bartlett. “It’s an easy place for me to get to, but one that I’m suspicious of because of that.” So, he sent the album to trusted friends Sam Amidon and Annie Clarke to seek their honest opinions. Their response? “They both wrote back and were like, Get over yourself, put them out, they’re really beautiful!” says Bartlett, with an embarrassed laugh.

In these extraordinary times, there is perhaps less space, and less need, for being cryptic and ruthlessly self-analytical. “This is where I can let go a little bit,” says Bartlett, “and I can say, Okay, stop worrying about whether you’ve earned the prettiness. You didn’t need something to overwhelm, you needed something to calm – and so that’s how I’ve come to peace with it.”