CONCERT REVIEW BY MATTHEW GOODHEART

lachenmann at mills

In January of 2008, German composer Helmut Lachenmann visited Mills College as the Jean Macduff Vaux visiting composer-in-residence. In addition to lecturing in music classes, he gave a public lecture on Thursday, January 24th, and a concert of his works was performed on Saturday, January 26th. The following article is the first of two installments, the second of which to be published in April issue of the Transbay Creative Music Calendar.

Part I - Lecture

Saturday night, the concert is over. I see one of my friends, a local guitarist, composer and improviser. A semblance of our conversation, as I remember it:

What did you think?

I think I prefer his music on CD. I can lie on the floor and crank it. I know the sounds aren’t really that loud, but I love it that way.

Thursday night, Lachenmann stands behind the podium, beautifully crafted from Hawaiian hardwood by a carpenter whose daughter went to Mills, and lectures. Art, what is art, what is art about. What is and isn’t. His daughter loves house-music. He says they argue over whether it is art, and subsequently enters into a lengthy description of the clamorous nature of his dishwasher. At first we think he is making a comparison between the sound of house-music and the sound of a dishwasher, an observation I find startlingly acute. (I say this as a firm advocate of listening closely to one’s dishwasher.) However, it soon becomes clear he is talking about something else. Approximately; “Art is not something you can listen to as your dishwasher is making noise, it requires your full concentration, since every element is essential. If I can listen to it while putting away the dishes, and not miss anything, then it is entertainment, not art.”

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CD REVIEW BY PHILLIP GREENLIEF

jon raskin quartet: the landmark quartet review

On Jon Raskin’s newest Rastascan Records self-titled release, the Oakland saxophonist has made an emblematic statement of recent activity on the local creative music scene by utilizing a variety of graphic scores and free improvisation to push his band mates in new directions.

By adapting his compositional methods to the classic quartet lineup ushered in by Ornette Coleman in the early 1960s listeners can trace the development of improvised activity since the dawn of free jazz into an era where improvisers are asked to compose on the spot with a variety of iconic stimulus. Raskin’s compositions use visual elements found in nature (color-copied flora in organized and collage forms), fragments from paintings and visual art, icons embedded with game strategies or compositional motives, tone rows, or traditionally notated melodic phrases. By offering the musicians basic tools and open-ended forms to assemble on their own free will, the quartet is able to compose with clear motives that can be moved in modular fashions. New performances of old works can always be re-visited in new ways.

The results are more than satisfying. It is particularly nice to hear a group that has chosen to wait to record after having played quite a lot over the past few years. Deep group communication and an expansive sound vocabulary among the players are evident from the first phrases of the opening track Cracked Earth and remain in tight focus on group improvisations like Disdrometer Reading.

It isn’t a surprise to hear such astonishing results when you have a quartet that features some of the finest players on their respective instruments in the bay area scene (and beyond). Liz Allbee careens from the most gorgeous pure-tone trumpet motifs to crusty deconstructed noises at a moment’s notice.
Tuesday March 4
Climate Theatre • 8pm $7-$12
8:00pm Lance Burden
9:00pm Go-Go Fightmaster with Vijay Anderson, Lisa Mezzacappa, Aaron Bennett, John Finkbeiner
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts • 8pm $25
9th Annual SFJAZZ Spring Season Presents
Travis Sullivan’s Björkestra; Realistic Orchestra
Luggage Store Gallery • 8pm $6-10
Outsound Presents New Music Series
An evening with Jack Wright with Tom Djll, Aurora Jacobson, and Ava Mendoza
Mills College Lisser Theatre • 8pm Free
Signal Flow
work by Mills Music Department MFA and MA students. 7pm installations, 8pm concert
Friday March 7
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts • 8pm $25
9th Annual SFJAZZ Spring Season Presents
Nik Bärtsch’s Ronin; The Frequency
Signal Flow
An exhibition of contemporary sound art devices including installations, interactive devices, performances, and quiet evocations. Performances by Katrina Lamb, Jeff Ray, Rafael Canedo
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts • 8pm $25
9th Annual SFJAZZ Spring Season Presents
2 Foot Yard; Iron & the Albatross
Mills College Lisser Theatre • 8pm Free
Signal Flow
work by Mills Music Department MFA and MA students. 7pm installations, 8pm concert

Wednesday March 5

Thursday March 6

MARCH

Friday March 8

Saturday March 8

Sunday March 9

3pm Donation

outsound presents...the simm series

signal flow
work by mills music department mfa and ma students. 7pm installations, 8pm concert

venue information

111 Minna Gallery
111 Minna Street, San Francisco
1510 8th St Performance Space
1510 8th Street, Oakland [West Oakland BART]
21 Grand
416 25th Street, Oakland [at Broadway]
24th Street Theater Works
2405 24th Street, San Francisco [at Vermont]
5lowershop
992 Peralta Avenue, San Francisco
Anno Domini Gallery
366 S. 1st Street, San Jose
artSF
110 Capp Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco [at 16th]
Black Gate Code 500
Artists Television Access
992 Valencia, San Francisco [at 21st]
Avonova Studios
417 Avon Street, Oakland
Berkeley Arts Festival
2213 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley
Berkeley Piano Club
2427 Haste Street, Berkeley [at Dana]
The Brainwash Cafe
1122 Folsom St. San Francisco
Central Perk
10086 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito
Chapel of the Chimes
4498 Piedmont Avenue, Oakland
Climate Theater
285 9th Street, San Francisco [at Folsom]
CounterPULSE
1310 Mission Street, San Francisco
The Exploratorium
3601 Lyon Street, San Francisco
First Church of the Buzzard
2601 26th Street #150, Oakland [at Adeline]
Freight & Salvage
1111 Addison Street, Berkeley
Heco’s Palace
705 Peralta Avenue, San Francisco
Hemlock Tavern
1311 Polk Street, San Francisco [near Post]
Hotel Utah
500 Fourth Street, San Francisco [at Bryant]
Hunter’s Point Shipyard
Innes Street Terminus, San Francisco
Jazzschool
2087 Addison Street, Berkeley
Jewish Community Center of the East Bay
1414 Walnut Street, Berkeley
Johansson Projects Gallery
2300 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland
Kimo’s
1351 Polk Street, San Francisco
The LAB
2948 16th Street, San Francisco [at Capp]
Luggage Store Gallery
1007 Market Street, San Francisco [at 6th]
Mama Buzz Cafe
2318 Telegraph Avenue, Oakland [at 23rd]
Maybeck Studio
1300 Hyde Street, San Francisco
Meridian Gallery
535 Powell Street, San Francisco
Mills College Ensemble Room
5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland
Musicians Union Hall
116 9th Street, San Francisco [at Mission]
No Cover Revolution Cafe
3248 22nd Street, San Francisco [at Mission]
Noe Valley Ministry
1021 Sanchez Street, San Francisco
NOHspace
2840 Mariposa Street, San Francisco
ODC Dance Theatre
3153 17th Street, San Francisco [at Shotwell]
Pearl Alley Studios
120 Pearl Alley, Santa Cruz
The Exploratorium
1310 Mission Street, San Francisco
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Pearl Alley Studios
120 Pearl Alley, Santa Cruz
the san francisco bay area monthly publication for experimental/improvised/noise/electronic/freejazz/outrock/21st century transgenred music and sonic art
Luggage Store Gallery • 8pm $6-10
Outsound Presents New Music Series
RTD3 with Ron Heglin - trombone Tom Nunn
- sonic original inventions Doug Carroll - electric cello + TBA

Friday March 14
Central Perk • 7:30pm Free
Zap Guru with Cliff Moser-Guitar, Alex Cory-Keyboard, Rob Waxman-bass, Dr. Dave Rogers-drums
Avonova Studios • 8pm $8-15
“Makings”
a musical performance piece based on unpublished writings by acclaimed writer/activist Tillie Olsen, created and performed by her grandson, composer Jesse Olsen. Drawing on North American folk and blues music, contemporary classical and jazz, and traditional Jewish and Eastern European sacred and secular music, Jesse explores words and themes from Tillie’s poetry, journals, and letters. Voice, piano, guitar, percussion, toy instruments, and household objects create a palette of sounds and through which Tillie’s words and ideas can speak. Visit www.deconstructmyhouse.org for more information.

Saturday March 15
Avonova Studios • 8pm $8-15
“Makings”

Wednesday March 19
21 Grand • 8:30pm $6-10
The Fucking Ocean + New Bloods

Thursday March 20
21 Grand • 8:30pm $6-10
Cosa Brava: Fred Frith, Zeena Parkins, Carla Kihlstedt, Matthias Bossi
Mills College Lisser Theatre • 8pm $12
Connections with Thomas Buckner, Baritone, Joseph Kubera, Pianist, Electronics
Luggage Store Gallery • 8pm $6-10
Outsound Presents New Music Series
8pm: Pykrete (Chuck Johnson - electronics/noise/drone)
9pm: Chen Santa Maria (George Chen/Steve Santa Maria - instruments/electronics)

Friday March 21
21 Grand • 8:30pm $6-10
Allbee/Nakatani/Greenlief

Monday March 24
21 Grand • 8:30pm Donation
Club Sandwich Presents
Married in Berdichev, BDRMPPL, Dreamboat
Yoshi’s Oakland • 8pm $25 & 10pm $18/10pm Benefit Concert for Christopher Rodriguez
John Santos, Narada Michael Walden, Roger Glenn, Kai Eckhardt, Carol Albin, Jose Neto, John Schott, Anton Schwartz, Frank Martin, George Brooks and others

Thursday March 27
Luggage Store Gallery • 8pm $6-10
Outsound Presents New Music Series
8pm Nathan Hubbard/Noah Phillips (San Diego)
9pm Schriffisch (Berlin DE), experimental ambient noise with Julian Percy & Farahnaz Hatam

Friday March 28
21 Grand • 8:30pm $6-10
Industrial Jazz Group
Heco’s Palace • 9pm Donation
Club Sandwich Presents
Deep Jew, Cellblock, Tanks, Talbot Tagora, God Willing

Saturday March 29
Trinity Chapel • 8pm $12/8
Trinity Chamber Concerts
Pianist Davide Verotta presents an exciting program of piano works from the 18th to 21st century.

Sunday March 30
ArtSF • Noon Donation / NOTA
Godwaffle Noise Pancakes
Late Severa Wires-(NM), Kanako Nishi, Take Up Serpents
lachenmann at mills

For Lachenmann, it seems, the test of serious art is the attention required to grasp the details and their relationship to the whole. He gives examples; Webern’s Op. 10, fourth movement. The analysis is loose; the mandolin plays six notes, the violin five, the trumpet four: something is going on, an order disordered throughout the score. But it is not just mathematics. The mandolin would evoke to Webern’s contemporaries something else as well, the amorous young man beneath his beloved’s balcony, plucking out his nocturnal longing. Her voice in the final violin line, falling and rising: “Go away.”

Inevitably, it is on to Beethoven. He pulls out analytical sketches of motifs from the Harp Quartet, op. 74, first movement; What is this strange introduction? These big silences? It inevitably leads to our big chord in ms. 25, which is then arpeggiated, forming the touchstone for the whole movement. See how it transforms, into pizzicato, and into those repeated notes. Oh, and look at the tonal scheme: we are in E-flat Major, the end of the Exposition moves us to expectedly to B-flat Major, but the Development starts directly in G-Major (surprise!), and look we’ve outlined our triad again . . . He highlights his points by interspersing short passages, from memory, on the piano. He does not delve too much into detail: it is all there; the first motive of the introduction, the instability of the descending base line through a V42/IV chord leads to the pause, the pause leads to other pauses, which erupt into the forte chord, which finally leads to the clearly established tonic harmony and the arpeggio. All these elements remerge, into and out of that chord. A neat, organicist package, to which we must pay absolute attention if we are to apprehend it. The dishwasher must be off.

And then we listen to it, the whole first movement.

It is a particularly odd, and perversely pleasurable experience, sitting here among the West Coast avant gardists of Mills, listening for motivic development in Beethoven, led there by what we all feel is one of the more hip and underappreciated composers (at least in the US). The audience is filled with Mills students and faculty, local improvisers, students from Stanford, the SF Conservatory. Lachenmann’s music has been largely unperformed in the Bay Area, and those few performances have been largely through the efforts of Matt Ingalls and the sfSoundGroup, whose Christopher Jones performed his massive Serynade for piano last summer. But apart from that diligence, a single piece on Marino Formenti’s piano recital in 2007, and a CD or two at Ameoba, his music is largely absent from the Bay Area scene. While legendary in Europe, his obscurity here lends its own aura of mystique; and now we can hear him speak! Perhaps he will reveal some inner secrets . . .

And in a way, he did.

Of course, he had been lecturing for the past days in several Mills classes, and apparently talked more about his work then. But he has chosen this face to present to the public; the traditionalist. I think of this as the quartet moves into the development section, my favorite part of the Harp, where the rapid elaboration, distillation, dissolution, and reassembly of motives is particularly . . .good. One of those passages that reminds me that Beethoven, the composer we love to hate, was . . .well . . .a really great composer.

So I look around, at all of us assembled here, and wonder: What does this mean? Lachenmann here has allied himself with the core principals and works of the Western Canon. There is no mention of what Mills more often represents: contemporary aesthetics, iconoclasm, the challenging of what music is, the underdog, the school for artists for which the world has no place. The contradictory experimental tradition. Rather, this lecture smacked of that great patriarchal, oligarchic tradition that those many of us in the audience feel is our want to overthrow: What Would Beethoven Do?

Of course, it may be just me. The twenty-four year old Mills student that I was sets fire to the lecture hall. The thirty-nine year old that I am douses that fire out, but saves an ember to take home. (Truthfully, I always liked the music of Beethoven, though not Beethoven the God of Music.) But the question remains:

Do we claim the music, or do we claim its embodiment as a school of thought? A fundamental, and hopeless, distinction.

Read the continuation of this review in the TransBay April issue: Part II: Concert

Sound files relating to this essay can be found at matthewgoodheart.com/lachenmann.html

Image from photograph credited to Hugo Gleddining

The saxophone - drums/percussion duo has stood as a model for free improvisation since the first pairings emerged from the free jazz scene in the late 1960s. Since then numerous duos of this kind have produced a range of recordings that allow winds and percussion to play off each other in the moment. Some players have tried to access thematic material to drive their projects while others have explored new forms that can emerge in the process of improvisation. Some have explored harmonic language, as in the John Coltrane/Rashied Ali duets where Coltrane, freed from any harmonic systems implied by a bassist or pianist, was able to explore his sheets of sound approach to tonal harmony in great depth.

The new Dijkstra/Hollenbeck recording Sequence has surprises even for the seasoned ear that is well familiar with this territory. The alto saxophonist also works with a lyrcicon that triggers live electronics and it can be difficult to determine at times who is responsible for any given sound. In contrast to the harmonic exploration of Coltrane/Ali, Peter Brotzman's recordings with Han Bennik or Hamid Drake, or the explorations into form by musicians like Anthony Braxton and Max Roach, the Dijkstra/Hollenbeck duo is more concerned with sculpting sounds and examining textures.
John Hollenbeck Duo:

This kind of sound exploration has been going on for more than a decade, and Sequence deals with the problem of spontaneous form and sound sculpting in beautiful and daring ways. Andrei Tarkovsky, the Russian film-maker known for his theory of film as a process of “sculpting in time,” was known for taking viewers outside the usual negotiation of film narrative. In the process, he was able to delve into psychological and philosophical elements in ways that filmmakers and countless fans could not help but envy.

The free-floating negotiation of time also works in favor of Dijkstra and Hollenbeck. The listener becomes aware of something beyond time in these improvisations. This is certainly music outside of traditional elements of rhythm and pulse and yet the sounds move along as if they were propelled by invisible (or unstated) pulses. There is always motion in the music, but rarely are the signposts of that motion clearly stated or even necessarily detected.

To further explore the reference to Tarkovsky, the music seems to sculpt time into landscapes that remind me of the Russian wilderness. It can create both a chaotic feeling that Werner Herzog exploited in Brazil while making Fitzcaraldo and Aguirre, the Wrath of God. But the duo can also have a dreamlike quality that is more remnant of a film like Tarkovsky’s Stalker. Not unlike Herzog, the duo seems perfectly comfortable documenting the most banal and ecstatic events with a patient and potent power of observation. All of the duo’s observations seem charged with meaning and emotional depth.

It should go without saying that these two musicians are really at the top of their game in terms of mastering techniques on their respective instruments, along with their ability to shape that technique into abstract yet lyrical improvisations. Because of the depth of the inquiry into sound and the resultant possibilities of sculpting those sounds into unique shapes and forms, the music on Sequence seems a powerful statement on the potential for improvisation and the surprises it can bring. It is hard to remember a recording that sounds so effortless and yields so much music. Sequence should be held up as an example of the current investigation into the new language of sound and the wondrous results it garners in the process.
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