

Re views

Barre Phillips
(contrabass), Frederic
Rzewski (piano), Richard Teitelbaum
(computer, sampler, electronics),
Carlos "ZINGARO" (violin, electronic
processing) at Fundação Calouste
Gulbenkian, Lisboa, Portugal,
November 28, 1992.

This concert reminded me that, sometimes, for the spectator, near-absolute improvisation and the conscious critical function do not always mix. (I am able to infer with fair certainty the fact that there were no pre-conceived structures (other than those mentioned momentarily) only by witnessing the type of sonic and body language used (and not used) by the musicians (no apparent audio or visual cues, no comprehensible parallel or sequential structures, etc.) (If I could have spoken to them afterwards, this would have been the first and easiest of the two questions I would ask them.)) In other words, it is probable that the only pre-conceived material brought to the performance was twofold: familiarity with each other, and the intention to perform one long improvisation (with or without any silences that might have occurred—it was 53 minutes long, without silences), though the second part is only a guess.

What does one criticize? One tactic is to be objective, using only objective verbs, just describing what was observed. Objectivity? Even to say, "X used a double bass that was tinted black" is inexact (in the super-objective setting) unless it was a black hole (in the presence of which, the duality objective/subjective disappears quickly with the observer.) So that is useless.

Especially in the case when music which is improvised (towards the greater extent of the measure) is to be reported on.

The
second question I
would put to the musicians is:

what was your experience during any moment, i.e., is the psychological/physical process that facilitates the next sound describable? ("No," the easiest answer, may be correct; but I enjoy more most other longer, negative or affirmative, attempts.) The answer to this question is complicated regarding group improvisation, where comprehensible melody and rhythm are not dominant factors, where there are no hierarchies of any sort.

I hope it is becoming clear why the criticism is difficult or irrelevant in this situation: my criticism is a list of my personal tastes and distastes only, which utterly fails to express the most important elements of a music built on illogic, especially when one attempts to do within a logical framework (syntax.) Yes, I know it is an old problem that did not start with improvised music, but possibly with metaphysics (or fear of unknown forces) (No, I know (logically) that improvisation and metaphysics are not automatically linked by this affinity.) Also, in this case I might respectfully avoid the basic pedagogical criticisms (listen, try to understand what masking means, etc.), considering that the total years the four of them have been working in the medium probably approaches 150. For example, my list might look like: the group work (blending of timbre and loudness) was quite astonishingly seamless most of the time (the only exception I noticed was because Rzewski was the only player without electronic sound reinforcement so that he was lost in the mix a few times, and I could hear certain ranges of the piano unnaturally better than others); each of the musicians displayed the highest virtuosity and versatility with their instruments (for example, passing rhythmic pulses note-by-note amongst each other), they were capable of very sudden, low-inertial mood

changes, and the music was carefully-paced; if I was granted the opportunity to perform a duet with any one of the musicians (though I would gladly have an exchange with any one of them), it would be Rzewski, because he performed as if he was having tea with you, with as much casual intensity (tea is a ritual in some places, after all), and was content to wait for precisely the right moment (i.e., observed silences) to put his well-chosen sounds in; I can contrast a criticism of each string player: Phillips only stopped playing once (for more than a few seconds) during the performance, limiting the amount of solo, duo, and trio activity (in general, I would have

liked more solos and duets), and "ZINGARO", while I enjoyed some of his electronic processing, at other times it sounded like simplistic, distracting "stomp-box"-type effects, and the number of materials used with the violin-triggered sampler was perceptibly limited (though he showed an immaculate control over them), with a great compliment to each: a duet they performed together, something like one instrument from a Carter string quartet playing along with the violin part of an Ives violin sonata, was a highlight of the evening (plus "ZINGARO" had a great Paganini stance); Rzewski twice brought in an ostinato (though he brought in ostinatos more than two times) that was completely out-of-character with the rest of the music occurring at the time (once subverting a Stravinski ballet-like moment he had been contributing to) and fit it perfectly; there were lots of tone and timbre matchings and other indications that all of the performers worked often (at least in the past) in ensembles, such as those that might play precomposed music, that would require such precision; I was annoyed by some of Phillips' hand percussion sounds, which were clumsy in com-

parison with his more standard double bass techniques (you know, the arco and the pizzicato on the strings,) but impressed by some of his other percussion, especially one technique using the frog of the bow in the f-holes and various other places on the instrument; I liked Teitelbaum's voice samples (they were shocking when they first appeared from underneath a tense violin and piano field, sounding like a choir of children (but were really manipulated adults)) and his facile handling of phoneme-part manipulation, and samples of many other sounds not immediately identifiable, occasionally bringing in distorted sounds (from his computer/sampler and a miniature theremin-like squeeze toy) that I welcomed, but have a distaste (most of the time) for sampled (non-human) instruments, such as his Kurzweil piano sound, though his flute sound was a beautiful timbral match at one point; the overall form of the entire improvisation was varied and rapidly changing.

And finally, breaking from my list but not my mis-matched (fraction of all relevant) subjectivity: there was something extraordinary about the concert. My interest and fascination never broke. I can listen to my (official) reviewer's bootleg again and again as I can certain orchestra pieces by Xenakis.

If you believe my perceptions to be true (truly mine), then you may have an idea now of some physical aspects of the concert (or at least what I like), and may even infer some other, important, aspects (taking into account a reasonable error propagation.) But I fear the art of paratactic criticism has not been advanced.

And so, improvisation is not totally dead in Lisboa, though I am here for three weeks and this is the only event (other than dinner club jazz) involving improvisation that has occurred (fortunately I didn't come here just for that.) This concert occurred in the fourth year of an annual series called Nova Música Improvisada, arranged by the

Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, which also houses the modern art museum. The fado is dead (as I am told by a Portuguese friend, musician, and record distributor): it is only kept alive in imitation for the tourists. I am also told, despite the wealth of extremely energetic youths that roam our neighborhood between midnight and 4 a.m., that critical art- or noise-based music (i.e., relevant to the present socio-politico-economic situation) does not do well here, the energy being wasted on English-language pop music or co-opted technoise groups. "ZINGARO", though Portuguese (one of 4 out of 15 artists total in the series), now lives in France where he is paid the respect due a great artist by the public and the government. My contact tells me that he had to leave Portugal for these reasons; he cannot survive practicing his art there. I mention this because the country this article will be published in has a similar problem that might be defined as a fear of the abstract. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Phillips, Teitelbaum, and Rzewski are all in exile from the United States, all now living and working in Europe.

—Michael Gendreau, Lisboa, 12/29/92

*Post Script on Criticism: I now have a book with images drawn by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferriera in the 18th century of animal species "discovered" in Brazil on a Portuguese imperialist adventure. I especially treasure two drawings of what are now thought to be *Bradypus tridactylus*, the pale three-toed sloth, and *Cavia porcellus*, a guinea pig. At the time these graphs were objective and scientific. Now, 2 centuries later, the drawings are beautiful and "naive," but not very accurate representations to my eye; indeed, now they are kept framed and treasured for their esthetic value (upon that value I purchased the book), and objective value to only a minor extent. See how much was lost in the translation from 3 dimensions of observed reality to 2; I like to imag-*

ine the result of the translation of some abstract dimension, sent back to the king.

[editorial addendum: Freeway has just received an announcement for upcoming CD releases by the label SPH (Mic's contact mentioned above.) The bands listed are Telectu, Nuno Rebelo ("Improvisações Cristalizadas"), and Vitriol, the first two confirmed improvisors. If you are interested, they can be contacted at SPH, Apartado 223, 2780 Oeiras, Portugal.]

INSIDE MANTRA'S HEAD

The Laurie Petrie Show:

A Fictional Interlude

Laurie Petrie made her way through the smelly dimness of the half-empty nightclub. Some white guy in a new-looking black leather jacket twisted around in his seat and said something. It sounded like he had either met her someplace or thought he had or was pretending to. Laurie wondered whether to act dumb, profess to be in a big hurry to get somewhere, or seem not to hear. She chose to ignore him and walk past quickly, using techniques sharpened through years of urban encounters with destitute, hungry street people. Given the proper signal, her heart hardened on command. She made it safely to the Women's toilet, where she took stock of the situation. It's Thursday night, she thought grimly. I am all dressed up in my sexiest clothes—to do what? Come to a smoky room in a dangerous part of Oakland and listen to music that I don't