

CDs AND DVDs

ALEPH GITARRENQUARTETT, Vol. 2. Huber, Hortigüela, Quero, Spahlinger. Neos 11710

On their first release for Neos in 2013, in new works by Georg Friedrich Haas, Beat Furrer, Manuel Hidalgo, Helmut Oehring, and Markus Hechtle, Aleph Gitarrenquartett demonstrated a plethora of extended techniques and novel approaches to ensemble playing. They also evinced a penchant for second modern style works that, rather than remaining abstract, address some form of narrative component. After the experimental bounty of the first release, one would think that, especially on fretted instruments, the Aleph might have few playing extensions yet to try. However, on their second CD, four different composers – Nicolaus A. Huber, Alberto Hortigüela, Irene Galindo Quero, and Mathias Spahlinger – amply supply them with a bevy of new techniques. In addition, each of the works on Volume 2 also contains a narrative aspect; some oblique to be sure, but each piece has a story to tell.

The most common reference made to the Orpheus myth is from the portion of his journey to Hades to rescue Eurydice. After being beseeched by his beloved, the bard mistakenly looks backward, breaking the rules of his reclamation and consigning Eurydice to return to the Underworld forever. But the climax of the tale of Orpheus is grislier and perhaps just as heart-wrenching. Repudiating the God Dionysus in favour of his love of music (placing music in an Apollonian opposition to the wine god's reveries), Orpheus is punished by being ripped to shreds by the Maenads. The only parts of him that are left are a disembodied head and his lute. Orpheus continues to sing, floating through the air to Lesbos. It is this violent action that opens Huber's piece *Der entkommene Orpheus* (2001), depicted by fortissimo snapped pizzicatos that seem to symbolise the Maenads's desecration of Orpheus's instrument. Gently articulated harmonics, florid angularity, and the use of various objects to pluck the strings follow, giving the impression of the dismembered Orpheus having to relearn, and repair, his instrument. The coda of the work is a surprising turn of events; it devolves into periodic thwacks with objects and the aforementioned pizzicatos. Live, one

witnesses all four guitarists spitting out chewing gum at the audience, a regurgitative ending to an already visceral experience.

For his piece *Die Sprache ist die Strafe* (2015), Hortigüela references both the instrument of execution in Kafka's *The Trial* and a famous line from the Ingeborg Bachmann novel *Malina* (from which the composition's title is derived). Glissandos, including chordal glissandos, poly-rhythmic combinations, juxtapositions of microtonal intervals (achieved through quartet-wide scordatura), and a fair number of pizzicatos of its own typify the piece's language. These are cleverly used to musically depict the winding down and ultimate destruction of Kafka's infernal machine. The fluidity of rhythmic relationships and interwoven playing styles give this piece a darkly comic cast, which is certainly a legitimate reading of *The Trial* as well. In referencing Bachmann, Hortigüela is expressing his own Apollonian and Dionysian conflict: that between the objectivity of language (in this case, musical means) and the hedonism of personal expression. Based on *Die Sprache . . .*, one tends to think that his Dionysian side wins, perhaps eight rounds to four.

Ziffer h Hut (2011) is based on a sci-fi fantasy of Quero's. The idea of the story being that archaeologists from the future find the symbol 'h' and interpret it variously as a figure, a letter and a picture of a hat. Instrumentally, this is realized by creating a single 'string' out of the four guitars (a stand-in for the story's 'h'). The idea of an ensemble embodying a single long line is nothing new, but the way that Quero suggests this is most ornate, with rustling percussive sounds, glissandos, altissimo register flurries and microtonal sounds made by the implementations of alternate bridges that turn the guitars into faux-koto hybrids. While the tendency of this piece to have single utterances as opposed to polyphony suggests to Quero the unifying idea of a 'single' string, the varied colours and textures contained within *Ziffer h Hut* would seem to beg the argument of colloquy as a unifying principle instead. Either way, the composition is absolutely fascinating, and Quero's imaginative aesthetic is eminently absorbing.

Spahlinger's *entfernte ergänzung* (2011) is a work for modular instrumentation: either four,

three or two guitars. Spahlinger's concept is that the processes set in order by the music can withstand multiple densities in their execution; the listener is merely receiving more or less of the aggregate information. Of course, the quartet version is the most fully enfolded and the one that appears here. Microtones, achieved through closely related scordatura tunings, abound, as do glissandos, smaller interval string bends, and ringing high notes at the end of the bridge. Cast in multiple short sections, the juxtaposition of these various sounds, along with a host of noise effects, evolves throughout the composition. While one can imagine Spahlinger's processes at play with one another in a smaller collection of instruments, it is riotous fun to hear them ebulliently ricochet in the thickest of possible prescribed ensemble configurations.

Rainer Nonnenmann supplies copiously informative liner notes, and while David Babcock's translation contains some infelicities of prose, for the most part the analysis of the pieces is quite clear. The sound is uniformly well detailed and the quartet's overall playing is superlatively prepared. Contrary to first impressions, Aleph seems poised to tackle even further vistas on Volume 3.

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RICHARD CRAIG, *Vale*. Johnson, Järnegard, Fitch, Barrett, Croft, Pauset. Metier: msv 28540

Every so often one encounters an object whose message brazenly challenges the medium through which it is communicated. Even more seldom does this antagonism in fact work to positively recuperate both the medium and its message. And so it is with Richard Craig's recent release, *Vale*, the virtuoso compilation of recordings, pieces and performances that bring together a myriad of personas, and not just those who had a direct hand in the making and production of this CD. The figures of Johann Quantz, Jean Tardieu, Paul Celan, Evan Parker, David Smith, Johannes Ockeghem and Eurydice hover in the middle distance as dialogical counterparts to the pieces presented.

The CD recording, as an object, stands in productive tension with the pieces gathered into this collection. But it is not the pieces *as such* that challenge the practice of recording, pieces that would in some circumstances turn inside out an imported hierarchy of the Work Concept,

but the physical exigencies of the interpreting and performing bodies (which then have a heavy hand in the room of giving shape to what the piece '*as such*' is) that destabilise the recorded medium. It bespeaks the conceptual and musical vivacity of those composers presented by Richard Craig, the members of Distractfold and vocalist Cora Schmeiser, and to Craig's own microscopic gaze and caring movement through ecstatically amassed detail, that this destabilisation does not exert its forces in the opposite direction.

All of these pieces address in some way liveness, the musical poetics of distance and nearness, and the materiality of the performing bodies as instrumentally musically significant aspects of the inner rhetorics of each piece. This grinds against the grain of a medium-specific approach to recording (as in pieces that would only be possible through the mechanics of recording). An auscultative longing is set up: the dynamic of imaginative reconstruction by the listener plays the shadow role of the performative reconstruction of these pieces given by Richard Craig. Granted, a listener in this case has the privilege of hearing much farther into detail than would have been possible in live performance – a performative hearing/listening itself would perhaps stumble along the *hirsutes* of virtuosic ornamentation and the ripples of density that comprise the richly confounding soundscape of each piece.

In Evan Johnson's *émoi*, a bodily-somatic composition unfolds, one that could be read as an extension of Quantz's treatise on the bodily manipulations toward proper flute performance. What stems from a performance practice rooted in tradition reconfigures itself anew through Johnson's development of the somatics of playing as a material for composition. Articulation, head resonance, the use of the throat (voice), lips and air direction and pressure develop the actual mechanics of flute playing into this aforementioned material. Through this precise but defamiliarizing twisting of the body, Craig moves fluidly through subtle whispers and whistles, clicks, coloured breaths and multiphonics that one realises lie as a latent potential in the flute-with-body relationship. What appears to carry most rhetorical significance is the instrumentalisation of the breath, inhales and exhales that consume and insufflate the eccentrically hermetic *émoi*. If one thinks of the hermetic in terms of hermeneutics, and the magical origins of the act of interpreting a text (the idea that therein lies a dark conceit to be de-/re-coded), then Craig's recording works to exegise in fine detail