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This weekend's cornucopia of contemporary classical music

Posted by Peter Margasak on 12.13.12 at 01:15 PM



For fans of forward-looking, contemporary classical music, two concerts this weekend offer a bounty of exciting, rarely performed works. Both take place in venues that serve booze and aren't the sort of tony spots you'd expect to hear string quartets, but on Friday Ensemble dal Niente presents "Hard Music Hard Liquor" at Mayne Stage, while on Sunday afternoon the Empty Bottle hosts the latest installment of the (Un)familiar Music Series, curated by Doyle Armbrust of Spektral Quartet. The second

is a benefit for the great New York label New Amsterdam Records, whose offices and most of its stock were decimated by Hurricane Sandy, and it just happens to function as a veritable roll call of Chicago's new music community.

I appreciate Ensemble dal Niente's frankness in naming Friday's program; the music the group will be performing isn't easy—at least compared with what one might encounter at a concert by the Chicago Symphony or Music of the Baroque—but I chose to believe *hard* conveys the jagged contours, visceral attack, and cacophony of the work more than it does difficulty on the part of the listener. The program is marked by sanguine material, whether it's the austere architecture of Brian Ferneyhough's slightly harrowing solo piano piece *Lemma—Icon—Epigram* (1981) or the rigorous yet vaporous solo vibraphone of Philippe Hurel's *Loops II* (2002). The program features North American premieres for pieces by Malin Bang and Chis Fisher-Lochhead and a world premiere for a new work by Ray Evanoff, along with older compositions by Gyorgy Kurtag, Frank Zappa, and Lee Hyla, but for me the highlight of the diverse program promises to be the North American premiere of *Piano Hero #1* (2011) by Belgian composer Stefan Prins.

Earlier this year the 33-year-old Prins released *Fremdkörper* (Sub Rosa), a dazzling selection of his mind-melting work spread over two discs. It's easily one of my favorite recordings of the year, partly because its contents have kept me both on edge and exhilarated. Prins studied piano as a child, but he turned to math and science as a teenager, earning a degree in engineering—yet not long after that he returned to music with a fury. Unsurprisingly, his music makes great use of technology, often commenting on its invasive, ubiquitous role in contemporary life. On his vicious piece *Infiltrationen* (2009), for example, four electric guitarists sit in front of computer screens following a score produced in real time; they're able to exert some influence on that score using certain keys, but it proceeds whether they like or not. The musicians are also required to remember and replicate certain passages, mere supplicants to the computer. When any of them stops playing, the computer program produces electronic sounds to fill the space, an extra comment on the scarcity of silence in today's world.

Prins's piece *Fremdkörper #3 [Mit Michael Jackson]* (2010) features abstract electronic sounds based on the introductions of various Michael Jackson songs, which harshly interrupt the admittedly dissonant, abrasive acoustic arrangements played by Klangforum Wien, but as the piece unfolds it's the acoustic instruments that start to sound rude, abstract, and weird. Prins can work free of electronics, too. His grueling solo cello work *Ensuite* (2008, rev. 2010/2012) was written as a kind of analog translation of the granular synthesis in the heavily electronic piece *Fremdkörper #1*, with astringent arco swipes, loud and tactile pizzicato damage, and low-end drones creating a roller-coaster ride of texture and noise.

"Piano Hero #1" takes this collision of modern composition and technology much further. Rather than try to condense Prins's ideas for the work, I'll just quote his own words, followed by a video clip of a 2011 performance by pianist Frederik Croene, who commissioned it:

The "modern" grand piano, perfected in the nineteenth century, consists of a keyboard, a set of metal strings and an ingenious mechanism of hammers and dampers, which serves as the transmission between the pianist's muscles and the strings. The wooden body of the piano amplifies the vibrations of the strings when they're hit by a hammer. In Piano Hero this configuration is "updated" and placed in today's context, using some of the typical artifacts of the 21st century: the keyboard now is an electronic one, the computer serves as the transmission and the strings are played by a virtual pianist -the avatar of the pianist of flesh and blood sitting on stage- while the wooden resonating body is substituted by a set of electro-mechanical speakers.

But not only the "piano" is recontextualized. The mechanisms of "observing", as done by the audience, is also taken into the equation. The act of "observing" underwent a radical change of meaning in a society which is ever more being "monitored", either by the millions of security cameras in public places, a network of geo-stationary satellites which can zoom in to human dimensions or the world wide web on which every day millions of homemade videos are posted and watched by millions of anonymous visitors.

Piano Hero #1

(Stefan Prins, 2011) from Stefan Prins on Vimeo.

Sunday's concert is even more sprawling stylistically, with terse 15-to-20-minute sets by 17 different Chicago new music groups—a virtual who's who of the local scene, including CUBE, Fifth House Ensemble, Access Contemporary Music, Eighth Blackbird, Ensemble dal Niente, Fulcrum Point, and Third Coast Percussion, among others. It would be too much to list the entire program here, but among the composers featured are Tom Johnson, Beat Furrer, Marcos Balter, John Cage, Bela Bartok, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The event is a remarkable act of solidarity by Chicago musicians for a label that's not even from here. But in a musical world so often marginalized and ignored by the mainstream, it's heartening to see its community working together and helping each other.

New Amsterdam is a super artist-run label that's released plenty of terrific recordings by composers and ensembles like Tin Hat, NOW Ensemble, Janus, itsnotyoutisme, and Darcy James Argue's Secret Society among others, most of which ignore tidy genre lines. It's still reeling from losses incurred by the wrath of Sandy. Tickets are a mere \$10, with the proceeds going to New Amsterdam.

Today's playlist:

Mads Vinding Trio, *Open Minds* (Storyville)

Mark Wastell & Lasse Marhaug, *Kiss of Acid* (Monotype)

Arnold Dreyblatt and the Orchestra of Excited Strings, *The Adding Machine* (Cantaloupe)

Elvin Jones, *Illumination!//Dear John C.* (Impulse)

Galina Ustvolskaya, *Composition No. 2 "Dies Irae"/Sonata No. 6/Grand Duet* (Wergo)

Tags: Ensemble dal Niente, Hard Music Hard Liquor, Mayne Stage, contemporary classical music, Brian Ferneyhough, Philippe Hurel, Stefan Prins, Fremdkörper, Ensuite, Infiltrationen, Piano Hero #1, Doyle Armbrust, Spektral Quartet, New Amsterdam Records, Empty Bottle, (Un)familiar Music Series, Video