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Stefan Prins: Fremdkörper

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Rating: 4.25/5

While Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were all virtuoso improvisers and such modern composers such as Claude Debussy, Darius Milhaud and Milton Babbitt flirted with jazz-like forms, there has been a century-long antagonism between composition and improvisation in the world of so-called "classical music." Theodore W. Adorno's relentlessly vituperative attacks on jazz reflected a prescient fear of encroaching popular culture and a defensive maneuver which sought to barricade "art music" behind a wall of academic elitism—and it worked. In the 1950s, John Cage famously quarreled with Pierre Boulez over "indeterminacy" and "aleatory" music,

compositional techniques which might introduce an element of freedom to the interpreter. Yet neither concept allowed for actual improvisation; the performer may, perhaps, rearrange pages of the score or be forced to confront unconventional notation but their role is strictly subservient to the composer's ultimate sovereignty. Cage might have talked about "purposeful purposelessness" and said, "Everything we do is music"—but he was wholly intolerant of musicians who might take this as a license to improvise.

One positive aspect of our postmodern condition has been the gradual erasure of such well-worn artistic battle lines. The collapse of rigid, modernist ideologies has opened up a space for a new generation of composers to loosen the shackles of their interpreters and, in turn, young musicians have learned to create music themselves as well as re-create from a composer's score. Stefan Prins (born 1979) is one such composer who has taken advantage of the current situation, utilizing his training as both a pianist and electrical engineer to create (mostly) electroacoustic music which emphasizes collaborative, improvised performance practice within stringent yet flexible compositional structures. Currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Harvard under Chaya Czernowin, Prins was awarded the 2012 "Young Belgian Musician of the Year" award by the Union of Belgian Music Journalists and, in commemoration, the venerable Sub Rosa label has released a specially-priced two-CD set of Prins's music. It is a fascinating document of a new kind of new musical thinking.

The title, *Fremdkörper*, means "foreign body" in German and refers to a series of pieces which examine the complex and highly fraught relationship between humans and technology. On "Fremdkörper #1" (2008), each instrument is individually amplified and that signal is then further manipulated by Prins via laptop to create an eerily alien soundscape. "Fremdkörper #2" (2010) goes even further by introducing elements of excoriating noise and damaged audio files he found on the internet which "infiltrate" and gradually upend an ensemble of soprano saxophone, percussion, electric guitar and piano. On "Fremdkörper #3 (Mit Michael Jackson)" (2010), Prins samples the intros to numerous Michael Jackson songs to construct an electronic world in which the human, acoustic sounds seem to be the "foreign body," an inversion of the idealized relationship between mankind and technology. This idea of technological subversion is taken to its extreme on "Not I" (2007): a "black box" is inserted between an electric guitar and its amplifier which contains a digital signal-processing environment designed by Prins to divorce the physical aspect of guitar playing from the resultant sound, creating a "hall of mirrors," he says, "which continually plays with our perception of reality."

Even the purely acoustic pieces reflect an interest in the disorienting effects of technology, however crude: on "Étude Intérieure" (2004) the pianist plays on the inside of the piano using a handful of marbles while on "Ensuite" (2008, revised 2010/2011) the cellist attacks the instrument with all manner of tools, from the top of the bow to balloons. Other works use technology to explore human memory and forgetfulness such as "Erosie (Memory Space #1)" (2005), whose micro-structure was determined by a software algorithm with an

intentional “forgetfulness factor”: as the piece progresses, older musical elements are “forgotten” as new

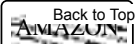
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score. In all of Prins’s work, polyphony is generated not through the interweaving of melodies but rather the layering of timbre and textures, the harmonic language (such as it is) firmly rooted in the ultra-chromatic style pioneered by Schoenberg. Even the heaviest of signals, the instruments oftentimes buzz, whirr and sizzle, the electronic counterparts.

ast of musicians has been assembled for the recording of *Fremdkörper*, including Klangforum Wien, Ensemble 22, Matthias Koenig, Nickel Ensemble, Peter Matthysens, the Zwerm electric quartet and Prins himself on piano and live electronics. The music is not the kind of what might ordinarily be forbiddingly austere and difficult music. Most of these compositions were written expressly for the ensemble and their exact proficiency at navigating the idiosyncratic scores is astounding. Moreover, the sense of joyful play that clearly derives from being in the liberty to realize their own creativity as a composer’s work—that is to say, improvise. Prins improvisation as “a compositional tool in order to achieve a sort of ‘hedonistic’ way of making music”—an interesting choice of words pointing to the undeniably sociable pleasures inherent in group improvisation. Combined with his compositional rigor, the result is a kind of edge contemporary art music that is as enjoyable to listen to as it is to perform.



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