Book Review

echtzeitmusik berlin: selbstbestimmung einer szene / self-defining a scene

Edited by Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, and Andrea Neumann
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Reviewed by Christopher Williams

"Echtzeitmusik," literally translated as "real-time music"—and described variously by contributors here as "the great period of the Protestant hissers," "acoustic microscopy," "Party-killer music," "a medieval village," "an attempt to give the 'Other' another form," and "just a word"—is a scene centered around improvised music that emerged in Berlin after the fall of the Wall, well-known today through the www.echtzeitmusik.de concert calendar. As the diversity of this volume's 50+ authors reflects, the term connects several aesthetics, methodologies, and subcultures. Readers may already be familiar with echtzeitmusik through the editors, and contributors such as Rhodri Davies, Axel Dörner, Franz Hautzinger, Robin Hayward, Sven-Ake Johansson, Annette Krebs, and Ignaz Schick; equally unique (if less emblematic) artists including Johannes Bauer, Diego Chamy, Hanna Hartman, and Antje Vowinckel are also represented alongside organizers, critics, and a host of related personalities.

The book is a grass-roots effort conceived, organized, and edited by committed practitioners and musical activists. In the vein of the first volume of John Zorn's *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, it portrays a dynamic scene from the inside out through investigations of personal practice, critical reflection, storytelling, photos, and creative texts. This "kaleidoscope" is presented in five sections: History and Stories, Discourse, Theory and Practice, Critical Impulses, and Two Conversations. As these rather vague headings suggest, most contributions resist neat categories. Though this makes *echtzeitmusik* difficult for unfamiliar readers to corral, it also offers an honest and engaging account of the phenomenon under study.

Reductionism

A handful of recurring subjects provide points of contact between different authors. One such thread is "reductionism:" a style characterized by quiet unstable sounds, subdued group interaction, renunciation of gesture, and structural uses of silence adopted by younger improvisers in the mid- 1990s.[1] As critic and musicologist Björn Gottstein states in "An aesthetics of refusal: an attempt to summarize stylistical characteristics between 1998 and 2002," these traits had much in common with the Onkyo movement in Tokyo (Otomo Yoshihide, Sachiko M, Toshimaru Nakamura, et al); and, as Schick and Christof Kurzmann echo, with a variety of artists in Vienna such as Radu Malfatti, Werner Dafeldecker, Bernhard Günther, and Kurzmann himself. In "Berlin London 1997-1999," Rhodri Davies points out the growth of similar approaches among English artists including Mark Wastell, Phil Durrant, and John Bissett; likewise, American "lowercase" musicians Bhob Rainey, Greg Kelley, James Coleman, Sean Meehan, and Steve Roden can also be mentioned as part of this global trend.

Why do so many Berliners take up the subject? Kurzmann says of reductionist improvisation, "I don't think anyone invented it: it existed in Japan, in Berlin, also in Vienna, London, more or less everywhere" (348). However, he continues, "Berlin has an advantage, since more musicians are here, there's more space (for experimentation too), and so on" (348). At least in terms of sheer volume of activity, the city did seem—for some—to be the first to institutionalize the aesthetic. One senses this in Davies's "discovery" of the Berlin sound world in 1996, in Nakamura's "Some Things That Didn't Work," a story of personal transformation during summer pilgrimages, and in Ulf Siever's wryly titled "At a Certain Point I Thought It Was Too Holy: A pub conversation with Ulf Sievers," which criticizes the style's reification into an -ism.

Regarding this last point, Robin Hayward's short but incisive piece "What's in a Name? The Problematic 'Reductionist' Label" presents a compelling argument for both the community's initial fascination with reductionist characteristics, and its eventual drift away from them. He frames the issue compositionally: "'Reductionism' is a problematic term because it tends to imply reduction to be an end in itself, rather than a strategy, a means to an end. One such end might be to shift focus onto areas that might otherwise be obscured" (222). For Hayward, the act of reducing dynamics, development, pitched material, and gesture was a way to highlight subtle, local changes in individual sounds, reorienting performers and listeners to otherwise marginalized elements of their musical and acoustic environment. By contrast, Lucio Capece's romantic description of Radu Malfatti's music in his brief article "Outer"

transforms the means into the end: “Malfatti builds a humble house with a few matchsticks that protects me from the cold and extreme heat better than a strong castle could. And it feels just as spacious as the huge and strong castle because the whole space, including the outside, is perceived from within the house” (258) Undoubtedly, it is this attitude to which Sievers takes exception, and which ultimately brought about the end of the aesthetic's “classical period” in the early 2000s.

While these first-hand accounts of reductionism are sure to intrigue readers interested in a snapshot of core echtzeitmusik musicians, it is disappointing that so few of the authors consider the question of style in a broader historical context. This gap is grounded in reductionism's newness to authors such as Margareth Kammerer, who states that “this 'music of quiet noises' created a complicity between the musicians and the audience” that “helped to create a new musical language” (94), or in Schick's suggestion that the “sole importance” of “sound qualities and materiality” represented a “paradigm shift” (235). These problematic views are supported by the predilection of authors such as Gisela Nauck, Kai Fagaschinski, and Thomas Millroth to define reductionism in opposition to free jazz, on the one hand (especially older musicians such as Alexander von Schlippenbach and Wolfgang Fuchs), and to “composed” New Music (such as Lachenmann and Mahnkopf) on the other. Such negative positioning eclipses a discussion of precedents, and obvious parallels with artists such as Cage, Nuova Consonanza, or Keith Rowe remain unexplored. Given the authors' demonstrable knowledge of the history of improvised and experimental music, one wonders if their failure to critically evaluate such influences is not a conscious, and thus vain, effort to underscore the aforementioned “originality” of the aesthetic.

Composition and Improvisation

A second recurring theme, which connects a far greater number of echtzeitmusik artists than the reductionist label, is the dialectical relationship of composition to improvisation; for many contributors, there is a constant bleed between formal constraints, material, and “real-time” music-making that challenges musical and cultural boundaries between in-time and over-time methodologies. Approaches are wildly diverse. Composer Ana-Maria Rodríguez, for one, describes a transformation in her relationship to interpreters through working with Berlin-based improvisors: “Aside from the questions of material, I feel connected to the musicians of the Echtzeitmusik scene through the question of the instrumentalist's role within processes of composition and performance” (273). On another note, light bulb wizard and percussionist Michael Vorfeld's article “On Sounds and Other Waves,” and installation artist and electronic musician Serge Baghdassarians' “Carrying the Door into the House,” explore the symbiotic relationship of visual thinking to live performance. Coming from a completely different background, radio and sound artist Antje Vowinckel points to the priority of material as a bridge between improvisation, which “lives in the moment,” and her work in the “illusionistic/representational” work in the Hörspiel genre. A particularly dynamic variation on the theme is Kesten's account of composing *ja es ist plötzlich wärmer geworden* [yes it suddenly got warmer] with Steffi Weismann in the article “Fields Spaces Layers.” Integrating weather diagrams, improvisors, actors, video, and song fragments by Shania Twain, the piece shows poetically how notation, individual performance practices, and a collective work process form a “field” that is methodologically inclusive and, at the same time, aesthetically and conceptually precise.

This panorama of personal statements is complemented by theoretical considerations, of which the round-table discussion “Labor Diskurs” provides a bird's eye view. Many participants emphasize the importance of the “composer-performer”—“that we make our own music, that 'the musician only' or the 'composer only' doesn't exist within this kind of music-making” (Fagaschinski 135), “that this 'I perform my own music myself' is really a very essential trait of this scene” (Ercklentz 139). This notion is further developed in individual essays by Haenisch, Neumann, Renkel, Rother, and others. Questions regarding notation also turn up frequently, opinions ranging from Ehlers' blunt assertion that “Whether something is notated or not is utterly irrelevant to what comes out as a product, be it a concert, be it a CD, be it an mp3” to Baltschun's and Streich's subtler descriptions of notation's potential to interrogate the materiality of instrumental technique and temporal structure (134). Such debates also naturally lead to other considerations, such as echtzeitmusik's connection to the experimental tradition. Some contributors such as Kesten see notation (especially graphic notation) as a point of continuity, while others such as Fagaschinski cite echtzeitmusik musicians' “low motivation to work with scores” as precisely the dividing line (139).

Whatever the reader may think of individual arguments, this conversation shows precisely how composition and improvisation commingle in a unique way in the echtzeitmusik scene. The “score” provided by the topics and discussion format; Kesten's flexible, expert moderation; a polyphony of opinions; and unprescribed temporal evolution provoke the imagination together in a way that neither a completely scripted lecture, nor completely undirected pub conversation, can offer alone.

What's (in) a scene?

The third theme—explored as sub- or supertext in nearly every contribution in the book—is the notion of "scene." Indeed, the title itself asks: is echtzeitmusik a "sound," a "place," a "practice," a "community"? How, if at all, does the use of this term distinguish echtzeitmusik from any other group of musicians with common interests working together in a given place and time? Musicologist Marta Blazanovic's "Social History of the Echtzeitmusik Scene in Berlin" offers an engaging take on these questions. As she argues,

> Echtzeitmusik doesn't stand for a new musical genre or anything like that . . . it rather points to a certain attitude or approach to music-making, marked by reflection, affinity for the unusual, curiosity, and musical radicalism . . . inseparably connected to Berlin, where it marked the evolution of a new, independent music scene, which in the meantime has gathered numerous musicians exploring musical limits in various genres within a free, noninstitutionalized context. (29)

She follows up with the qualification that

> If we zoomed out a bit more, we would probably discover people in Berlin who also have and have had 'a daring relationship with materials that produce sound' or 'the desire for experimentation and an urge to search for new sounds and ways of expression', but who still have not really been creatively involved in the Echtzeitmusik scene. The Echtzeitmusik scene thus represents a flexible network in which . . . social aspects seem to have at least as important a role as aesthetics or approaches. (31)

This last sentence highlights the double-edged sword that is the echzeitmusik label. On the one hand it truly is a network, whose venues, ensembles, festivals, record stores, and friendships breed constant creativity and change. However, it is also a bubble of complacency that severely limits the network's scope and impact. Blazanovic's problematic use of the word "scene," borrowed from Anja Schwanhäußer's ethnography of the Berlin techno world, pinpoints this ambivalence: "[Scene] is 'a theoretically open concept that, like the cultural practices it describes, stays vague and in motion and thereby corresponds to the strategy of "not-wanting-to-be-located" of its protagonists.' It is also relatively inclusive and neutral . . ." (31).

Some of these characteristics fit, and some not. The scene's "open" and "inclusive" qualities are evident in its astonishing variety of backgrounds and techniques, and in the equilibrium and fluid interaction onstage and off between veterans, newcomers, men, and women (see Steffi Weismann's article "Gender Praxis and Performative Turns at Labor Sonor"). These positive elements shine in "Jericho and Silicon Valley: Johannes Bauer and Christof Kurzmann in conversation with Tobias Herold and Marta Blazanovic" and Bill Dietz' text "-sand and seven, -sand and seven," whose authors' looser connection to the scene provide refreshing insights on the identity of the network as a whole. Echtzeitmusik's "not-wanting-to-be-located," however, is a falsehood: how can a community announce itself to the world by name through a book, a state-funded international festival,[2] and a curated website announcing dozens of events per week, and not want to be located? Clearly, there is an attempt here to present echtzeitmusik to a broader public, to place it in the context of a larger cultural economy.

In itself, this participation in above-ground discourse reflects a coming-of-age; unfortunately, not all authors rise to the occasion. Such is the case in "Werner Dafeldecker—Axel Dörner: A Conversation," in which the authors' rambling anecdotes give the reader little more insight into their life and work than would intermission chit-chat at the *de rigeur* concert series *Labor Sonor*. Other articles, such as Nauck's "Exterior View: Some Reflections on the Freedom of (Not Only) Musical Action, or 'Improvisation and/or Composition'" and Millroth's "The Risk is the Fuel" adopt a more earnest tone, but are crippled by self-congratulatory clichés:

> Comparable to an introverted wind-chime that moves within the context of each preceding and succeeding action, this music contains the disproportion and disharmony, the aimlessness, adventures, freedoms, and itinerancy of our time—unadorned, on the level, in real-time. (Nauck 218)

> When electronic noises by Ignaz Schick, Boris Baltschun, Serge Baghdassarians, and others are compiled, one indeed ends up with quite a few little sounds from different things—whether it be the sound of electricity or a toy. The reason for this lies in the special attention given to the most miniscule of things, each of which is meaningful to the whole. As chaos. Indeed, as chance that makes habit impossible . . .(Millroth 87)

Yet another case of solipsism is Adeline Rosenstein's "Dear Andrea," a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of the early days of Echtzeitmusik: drinking, squat concerts, and kissing. Funny, yes—but as the first entry in the book? Like contributions

by Dafeldecker, Dörner, Millroth, Nauck, and others, this article shows an irresponsibility to non-insiders by defining a scene *to* itself in the mirror, but not reaching out to readers on the other side of the window.

Despite these shortcomings, however, most contributions do rise to the occasion; by and large the authors present provocative insights on a wide range of topics. Furthermore, the collective web they weave portrays something more than a mere scene: a living discourse that encourages, contextualizes, and *challenges* the evolving practices of its constituent artists by taking root from within, but going beyond its native habitat. This, above all, makes it a hip, engaging, and relevant publication that will be of interest not only to specialists and confirmed fans, but to a wide variety of musicians, scholars, and indeed anyone interested in the complexity of contemporary culture.

Notes

[1] Typical examples can be found in the music of the septet *Phosphor*, and other smaller groupings of its constituent members: Burkhard Beins, Axel Dörner, Robin Hayward, Annette Krebs, Andrea Neumann, Michael Renkel, and Ignaz Schick. For more detailed discussions, see Blazanovic (2010) and Wilson (2003).

[2] *Echtzeitmusik Tage*, a monthlong festival in September 2010, celebrating “20 years of Echtzeitmusik.”

Works Cited

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