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sfSound and guests rehearsing Robert Erickson's *Pacific Sirens*, l to r: Kjell Nordeson, Alexa Beattie, Kyle Bruckmann, John Ingle, Matt Ingalls, Monica Scott, Marina Peterson, Christopher Jones, Lê Quan Ninh



## sfSound microFestival

various venues,  
San Francisco CA  
2/27-3/1/2009

The sfSound Group was launched around 2001 with the aim of sustaining a professional-level new music group without the starched collars of academic support. Today, with a track record of residencies and grants, sfSound remains refreshingly un-tuxedoed in its presentations of top-shelf 20th- and 21st-century music, even as the overall standard of performance has embraced the highest levels of professionalism. The group's co-operative programming has included the thorniest composers (Babbitt, Ferneyhough, Xenakis, Lachenmann), little-known quasi-improvised gems by the New York School of Wolff, Brown, Cage and Feldman, as well as works by young Bay Area composers. Clarinetist Matt Ingalls, the instigator of sf-Sound, has a firm foot in the improvised-music camp as well, and this year sfSound convened a major mashup of composed and improvised musics and invited two international improvising groups of note: the Lê Quan Ninh/Michel Doneda duo, and the trio of Gene Coleman, Marina Petersen, and Domenico Sciajno. The festival's programming mixed groups and methods thoroughly over three nights of challenging music.

Night one showcased The International Nothing (clarinetists Kai Fagaschinski and Michael Thieke)—not an improvi group, though the players are both members of the improv-heavy Berlin Echtzeit scene of minimal means and maximal control. Some of The International Nothing's compositions are even supplied with lyrics, although none were presented this night. As a clarinet duo, they create dreamy multiphonic phases that recall Feldman's time-lapse tableaux. This music would cease to exist in the hands of other players; and in that sense, it is exactly like improvisation. Without Thieke and Fagaschinski, there's not much else. Except maybe the motorcycle groaning somewhere in the street below, tossing in an unintentional ball of industrial fuzz.

The two clarinetists joined sfSound for one improvisation, and its ever-fermenting twitters and foofs outshone the Cage composition that followed. In that instance, the assembled Music

for Ten gathered together ten of the seventeen available solo pieces in the set, "any number of which can be performed together, with the chosen number of participants completing the title." I don't know if there's an ensemble around with a greater predisposition to interpret Cage's later music; that being said, it came out as music more to be admired for its conceptual challenge to classical music tropes than as a sound-object to be listened to. Which wouldn't displease Cage himself, of course.

More successful was Morton Feldman's *Projection II*, presented in the second half of Friday's program. Poised between The International Nothing's feathery clarinet clearings, the reading given Feldman's 1951 "box notation" score was a gently rolling landscape suffused with light and air, played with precision and commitment.

Saturday night's concert opened with an uninterrupted 38-minute-set by percussionist Lê Quan Ninh and soprano saxophonist Michel Doneda which had the clarity, changing facets, and cutting hardness of a diamond. The percussionist's apparatus consisted of a parade-size bass drum set horizontally, with a changing menu of objects placed on its head—sticks, small chains, cymbals, gongs, and, unforgettably, a pine cone, which he dragged over it in evolving gestures ranging from guttural to serene. Doneda wandered the stage, sometimes correcting the natural imbalance in their loudness with greater distance. A wonderful set overall, yet Doneda seemed more inventive the weekend before in a scintillating duo at Oakland's 1510 Studio with percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani.

Robert Erickson's *Pacific Sirens* (1969) added a precomposed electronic soundtrack to the sfSound ensemble. It's a programmatically evocative work, taking recorded sounds of breaking ocean waves and adding them over the ensemble's "siren" voices. The frankness of its exposition and all-natural conception was charming and brought to mind San Francisco in the late sixties. sfSound gave it a respectful turn, allowing the taped sounds to completely wash out the instruments in thick, crackling waves of white-noise foam. The occasional rudeness reminded one that sometimes the flower power era had thorns, too.

The final entry in Saturday's triptych was sfSound member Kyle Bruckmann's *Tarpit*. You might expect the mordant leader of ensembles like Wrack, EKG and Lozenge to provide an ironic title for his sfSound showpiece, but *Tarpit*

was indeed sticky, black, and—inescapable? "Sticky" in the sense of instrumentalists paired off in furious or sinking duos, each ending with a helter-skelter "false unison." "Black" in the sense of Bruckmann's humor and ever-effacing manner: applied to ensemble playing, this spirit turns inside out into a fester of virtuosic extroversion. "Inescapable"—maybe not, but impetuous, eccentric, postpunk and careening, yes. The players bounced off each other in the assigned duos and other non-designated liaisons, mocking and/or lewdly caressing each other's lyricisms and declamations. Out of this motley stew grew a slight return of the Lê Quan Ninh/Doneda voo-duo, overlaid by prerecorded noise and rising feverishly into a cataclysmic, ear-bleeding climax with all instruments joining in, two by two, on a repeating written line that jumped and jiggled and finally wound itself into a hissing death spiral.

The third and final night presented the trio of Gene Coleman, Marina Peterson, and Domenico Sciajno. Coleman dominated his own piece *Black in White*, for bass clarinet, cello and koto (Monica Scott and Kanoko Nishi provided the latter voices). "Open time" sections of improvised spaciness alternated with "closed time" spastic clusters—the instruments presenting a limited gamut of noises rotating into ever-new juxtapositions in kaleidoscopic fashion. Sciajno's *Korzo* for the sfSound ensemble started off with a light touch before crashing into a thicket of reed-biting multiphonics and squawks. A second section brought out more of the ensemble in a drone-based passage that evaporated into bright pointillist flurries. Finally the featured trio improvised a pair of pieces, the first characterized by Sciajno's patient electronic scirms, Coleman's nervous clarinet harlequinisms, and Peterson's scratchy string sounds; the second seemed less episodic and more muscular, the electronics taking over more of the sound-space and driving the thing along.

sfSound opened the second set with Elliott Carter's *Triple Duo*, an "improvised" score (in the form of a free fantasy) from Carter's "opening" period in the early 1980s. Having mastered the piece over a number of performances, sfSound can really rip into it with gusto while keeping the requisite precision and finesse. The ensemble is grouped in three dyads: clarinet/flute, violin/cello, and piano/percussion. "Each of these pairs has its own repertory of ideas and moods... invol[ving] various contrasts, conflicts and reconciliations," the composer notes. What results is a cut-up



(in multiple senses of the term—Carter likes to characterize *Triple Duo* as “comic”) of melodic counterpoint, clashing duo counterpoints, and counterpoint derived of sound-production—the ringing piano and percussion passages, the breathy wind interludes, and the groaning double-stops in the strings. sfSound made all this easy to hear and a delight to watch.

As if inspired by Mr. Carter, the final all-hands improv that finished the night was by all measures the most spirited, witty, and colorful of the festival. Opening with a tip-of-the-tongue duo between saxophone and percussion (John Ingle and Kjell Nordeson), the mood simultaneously dipped and opened out into a dark field of electronics, clarinet and piano (Scaijno, Ingalls, and Christopher Jones), sprinkled here and there with Andy Strain’s trombone, Marina Peterson and Monica Scott’s cellos, and Graeme Jennings’ violin. Jones and Ingle stomped all over this, creating an opening for Coleman’s bass clarinet, Alexa Beattie’s viola, Stacey Pelinka’s flute, and Kyle Bruckmann’s oboe. The horns entwined and growled, percussion ping-pronged, strings gasped and fainted; dainty pointillism rubbed shoulders with macho free-jazzisms and electronic pyramids. It’s not easy to get a large ensemble to collectively improvise at these stratospheric levels, and keep it alive and kicking for over fifteen minutes. But doing hard music well has come to be sfSound’s stock-in-trade. Here’s hoping the microfestival becomes a standard issue as well. **Tom DjiI**

## Christopher O’Riley

Miller Theater, NYC

3/27, 4/17 & 5/1/2009

**Christopher O’Riley is an arts presenter** (he hosts the public TV and radio show *From the Top*) and a virtuoso pianist who has never been content to limit himself to a mainstream concert career. While his repertoire includes masterpieces from the classical canon, O’Riley has branched out, embracing both contemporary composers and popular songwriters. In recent years, he’s explored the latter in a series of albums of his own transcriptions of songs by Radiohead, Nick Drake, and Elliott Smith. During O’Riley’s three-recital series at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre, each evening juxtaposed repertoire by a classical composer with selections from a particular pop figure’s oeuvre.

The recitals highlighted certain affinities between the paired composers. Radiohead’s songs were programmed with *Preludes* and *Fugues* by Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. The often stark language of Shostakovich in these strictly contrapuntal yet frequently acerbically dissonant pieces was complemented by the sense of sweep imparted by Radiohead’s dystopian anthems. In conversation, one of the reasons O’Riley indicated for selecting the pairing was that both Radiohead and Shostakovich were skilful at employing irony in their works. The pianist’s arrangements were adept at highlighting this component of Thom Yorke’s delivery through tart dissonances and veiled, cluster-laden harmonies. He clearly articulated the independent voices in the Shostakovich fugues, underlining their often bleak vistas with powerful tone and commanding presence. This was equally true of rousing renditions of “Paranoid Android”

and “Karma Police.” Some may carp that O’Riley’s transcriptions are really distillations; that the studio magic wrought on Radiohead’s albums is impossible to capture on a concert grand, causing the songs to seem more homogeneous; but one could make a similar claim when comparing Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony and *Lady Macbeth* to his piano music! What this reductive critique omits is O’Riley’s musicality, enthusiasm, and careful attention to each songs’ details. Indeed, there’s something thrilling about hearing popular music played so passionately in the intimate setting of a solo recital.

O’Riley’s combination of Drake and Debussy on a single program was clever, taking note of the folksinger’s interest in alternate tunings and imaginative, colorful orchestrations: both aspects which resonated with Debussy’s Impressionist piano works. As with his other transcriptions, it’s clear the pianist did his homework here, ferreting out unusual chord voicings and piecing together aspects of demos, live performances, and studio recordings to attempt a more comprehensive picture of Drake’s musical language.

While it was clear that O’Riley felt just as strongly about this repertoire as he did the other programs, both composers have a tendency toward subtlety that made for a more muted dramatic trajectory. Mirroring the civility of the music on the program, the audience for this recital was a bit more subdued in their reactions—less hooting and hollering—but no less appreciative. Indeed, the conversations in the lobby during the intermission were quite lively, including an animated discussion of alternate tuning resources by Columbia undergrads and wizened hippies and several classical concertgoers engaging in an elevated discourse on approaches to Debussy by various pianists. A thundery encore of Cobain’s “Heart-shaped Box” suggested that O’Riley’s next LP should be exciting listening.

The final recital in the series presented songs by Elliott Smith and Schumann’s *Arabesque* and the cycle for piano *Kreisleriana*. Of all of the programs, this was the most integrated, both in terms of musical details and biographical resonances. Key relationships were frequently apparent, as were gestural synchronicities; the relationships between “Cupid’s Trick” and the third movement of *Kreisleriana*, as well as “Not Half Right” and the suite’s last piece, were particularly palpable. O’Riley also delved into intriguing voicings in his Smith arrangements. For instance, on “Oh Well, Okay” he played the vocal melody in his left hand, evoking a cello solo line, while simultaneously articulating syncopated treble register harmonies.

Both Schumann and Smith struggled with personal demons throughout their lives. Despite uplifting selections such as “Independence Day” and the *Arabesque*, much of the music contained a subtle undercurrent of inner anguish that O’Riley eloquently explored. Indeed his traversal of “I Didn’t Understand” and *Kreisleriana*’s “Sehr Innig” were both heart-rending. Although projections by artists Stephen Byram and Jonathon Rosen had not ‘clicked’ with the music-making on the preceding recitals, here they did an admirable job of presenting a compelling and complementary visual storyline. When O’Riley finished his (appropriately titled) encore “Bye,” many were no doubt saddened that this creatively conceived and exemplarily performed series had come to its conclusion. **Christian Carey**

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