sound youth

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on location: istanbul
bell orchestre
frank gratkowski
pontiak

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sfSound and guests rehearsing Robert Erickson’s Pacific Sirens; top: Kjell Nordenson, 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 starchy collars of academic support. Today, with a track record of residencies and grants, sfSound remains refreshingly un-tuxedoced 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 collaborative programming has included the brightest stars of the new-music world (Babbitt, Ferneyhough, Xenakis, Lachenmann), little-known or unexplored 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 sfSound, has a firm foot in the improvised-music scene, and this year sfSound convened a major mashup of composed and improvised music and invited two international improvising groups of note: the Lé Quan Ninh/Michel Doneda duo, and the trio of Gene Coleman, Marina Petersen, and Domenico Scaino. The festival’s programming mixed groups and methods thoroughly over three nights of challenging music.

Night one showcased: The International Nothing (clarinetist Kai Fagaschinski and Michael Thieke)—not an improvising group, though the players are both members of the improver-heavy Berlin Zeitgeist scene of minimal means and maximal control. Some of The International Nothing’s compositions are even supplied with a score, although none were presented this night. As a clarinet duo, they create dreamy multiphonic phrases 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 twitter and foils outshine 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 displeasure Cage himself, of course.

More successful was Morton Feldman’s Projection II, presented in the second half of Friday’s program. Pitted against 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 Lé 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 variety of bass drum set horizontally, with a changing menu of objects placed on its head—sticks, small chairs, 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 on Saturday’s program was sfSound member Kyle Bruckmann’s Tarpit. You might expect the mordant leader of ensembles like Drak, 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 heater-kettle codicil: “false union.” “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 etude-like passages. “Inescapable”—may be a fugue (or set of fugues) the instruments presenting a limited gamut of noises rotating into ever-new juxtapositions in kaleidoscopic fashion. Scaino’s Korzo for the sfSound ensemble started off with a light touch before crashing into a thicket of red-tinted multichorals 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 Scaino’s patent electronic screams, 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 changing 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 it into 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... involving various contrasts, conflicts and reconciliations,” the composer notes. What results is a cut-up
Christopher O’Riley
Miller Theater, NYC

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 and Elliott Smith. During O’Riley’s three-recital series at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre, each evening juxtaposed a duo 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 songs. 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 pianists’ arrangements were adept at highlighting this component of Thom York’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 song’s 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 folk singer’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 ephemerality of the music on the program, the audience for this recital was a bit more subdued in their reactions—less howling 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 the programs, this was the most integrated, both in terms of musical details and biographical resonances. Key relationships were frequently apparent, as were gestural synchronicity; 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 retained a subtitle undercurrent of inner anguish that O’Riley eloquently explored. Indeed his traversal of “I Didn’t Understand” and Kreisleriana’s “Sehr Imnig” were both heart-rending. Although projections by artists Stephen Byram and Jonathan Rosen had not clicked with the music-making on the preceding recitals, 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 exquisitely performed series had come to its conclusion. Christian Carey