SEATED OVATION

CRITIC, SCHOLAR, PERFORMER (NOT NECESSARILY IN THAT ORDER)

maerzmusik, part two

This is part 2 of 3 of my MaerzMuzik review; part 1 is here; I'll post part 3 later this week.

Perhaps the oddest MaerzMusik event (and that's saying something) took place on a Sunday afternoon at Radialsystem: a performance by Luciano Chessa's Intoarumori ensemble, a noise orchestra based on the designs of the Italian futurist composer Luigi Russolo. Chessa, a scholar of Futurism, reconstructed Russolo's devices, large acoustic boxes with cranks and speakers, and commissioned an intriguing variety of composers to write for them. The MaerzMusik concert presented these commissions as well as Chessa's realizations of Futurist works by Russolo and his contemporary Paolo Buzzi.

Alas, despite a smart concept and excellent execution, the concert fell somewhat short of expectations—in practice, the noise machines cannot do much more than create a small range of whirrs and roars. The scrapes of Buzzi's music didn't sound particularly different from the moaning swagger of a Paolo Ortiz commission or the creaks of Pauline Olivero's brief Waking the Intonarumori. Luckily, many works featured extra musicians to contribute to the spectacle. In Amelia Cun and Werner Durand's Gramophone Saraswati, the composers joined the ensemble singing gibberish through bullhorns and creating Dada nonsense with unusual woodwind inventions; a work by Margareth Kammerer featured her wistfully jazzy voice; and Chessa's own piece included the low bellows of baritone Nicholas Isherwood. What stole the show, though, was a new work by Blixa Bargeld of the legendary German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten. Bargeld, accompanied by the loud grinds and crackles of the Intonarumori, recited inane recipes ("Feel shrimp"), gradually gaining in intensity and lunacy, eventually becoming a violent rant ("Cut the shrimp paper into heroic shapes!").

The next day, Alarm Will Sound made their Berlin debut at the Kammermusiksaal, an event I almost wish weren't sandwiched in with the rest of MaerzMusik. Though AWS presented a lively set of representative music—jittery pieces by Birtwistle and Rihm, audacious remixes of Dowland and Aphex Twin, and John Adams' Son of Chamber Symphony—it would have been nice to hear one of their more ambitious events rather than a retrospective. The combination of Stockhausen and The Beatles in the ballsy theater piece 1969, which premiered recently in New York, could have been a perfect fit for the festival. Still, they gave an intuitive, raucous performance and presented my first opportunity to hear Adams' relatively-new work. Significantly better than its father, Son of Chamber Symphony bounces through the composer's stiff ostinato grooves achieves a surprising, almost Grieg-esque arabesque in the middle movement, with lithe woodwind solos floating over plucked strings—an oasis in the midst of the experimental madness of the festival.

The festival took a bit of a tumble on Tuesday with TablesAreTurned, an unsuccessful collaboration between composer Bernhard Lang and multimedia artist Philip Jeck. Lang's tight, hyperactive instrumental writing (given a delicate, precise reading by chamber ensemble Alter Ego) could have made an entertaining ten-minute work, but with Jeck's live remixes the piece dragged on for over an hour. Often the work simply alternated between large instrumental sections and Jeck's hazy playback of that same music, a self-indulgence which seemed better as an idea than in actual practice.

Two events at Berghain, Berlin's hottest club, also disappointed. In Yutaka Makino's "performative installation" Conflux, the artist pumped a vast amount of smoke into one of club's rooms while blaring grinding electronic sounds (I was given earplugs and a half-page of health warnings at the door). Though for a few minutes, the room and audience disappeared into an otherworldly cloud, the work did not offer much more than this magic effect. The following night, Berghain presented ROAD WORKS, combining music by saxophonist/composer Christoph Gallio and video by photographer Beat Streuli. Gallio's quintet, which blended a traditional jazz combo with electronics and an amplified set of piano strings, performed a constantly cycling score of sharply juxtaposed styles, from loose, minimal swing to glassy piano repetitions to hardcore electronic freakouts. Streuli's two screens played non-narrative footage of street life in New York City, perhaps the most clichéd possible choice for any video art. The pluralistic music made a glaring disparity with the monostylistic images. Fortunately, when Conflux and ROAD WORKS weren't in motion, one could take in the guttural shine of two newly-commissioned Phil Niblock sound installations, vibrating the walls of the entire building. Niblock's abrasive awesomeness, always a delight, was a highlight of the festival.

A pair of new Finnish monodramas provided a jolt of theatricality to the festival, combining directorial ingenuity with sharply-etched and engaging music. Perttu Haapanen's Nothing to Declare (directed by librettist Tomi Paasonen) paints a portrait of routine-induced madness: baritone Nicholas Isherwood muttered, frothed, and stuttered through nonsense patter text while performing monotonous office duties, clad in a bizarre yellow suit covered in musical notes. A trio of accompanying cello, accordion, and clarinet acted like psychological demons, pestering him with bubbly little licks. Happanen's music runs through all the possible alternate instrumental techniques, but has a certain flighty glint to it—experimental but never harsh. Isherwood had an obsessive glow to his stentorian bass, as he mulled over an egg timer, rubbed sheet music rhythmically together, and scatted the names of the keys on a typewriter; the trio not only played their music with vigor but threw themselves around the stage, at one point playing while lying on the ground, at another lurching around with boxes on their heads. The result was a heaving, ecstatic insanity of theatrics, a chamber-like musical tantrum illustrating how endless bureaucracy can snap the mind.

Lelele, Lotta Wennäkoski's short opera directed by Anna-Mari Karvonen, produces similarlypowerful drama by replacing psychosis with rage. Soprano Pia Freund gasped the stories of anonymous women forced into sex slavery with an almost Straussian piercing anger. Instrumental scurries and sneers (played by the same accompanying trio) as well as Elina Brotherus's video of doleful Eastern European women generated a growing sense of frosty vengeance. Near the end, the four musicians unrolled mats which have accordions inside, and each squealed the instrument desperately while shouting the names of victimized women. Wennäkoski's libretto, composed of true stories by unwilling prostitutes, is at once testament and lament, and her music cries out for those who cannot.

maerzmusik, part three

Three events at TRAFO, a cavernous two-story power plant which could go toe-to-toe with the Park Avenue Armory, strongly addressed the festival's multimedia theme. Licht-Zeiten, a collaboration between composer Michael Wertmüller and video artist Lillevan, merged a dense industrial wail with flickering shafts of plasmatic light. The ensembles Steamboat Switzerland and courage teamed up to perform Wertmüller's ballistic, pounding score, a mix of strident string counterpoint, extreme oboe shredding, sawing cello solos, and an absolutely killer dissonant

organ sermon resembling a strung-out Bach prelude (courtesy of organist Dominik Blum). Lillevan projected his visuals directly on the actual performers, so that the entire stage shimmered with light, abstract geometric shapes shifting in tandem with the music. Though the piece lasted a little too long, the frantic top-speed mania was almost always engaging, a potent combination of image and sound.
It would seem impossible to kick it up a notch after Wertmüller's sonic blast, but the following set by Carsten Nicolai, aka alva noto, did just that. With earplugs in (provided upon entry), the sheer volume of alta noto's pumping, teeth-shaking beats still overwhelmed. Nicolai combined overlapping, heavy electronic bass crunches with flowing, pulsating multicolor rays thrown up on a gigantic monitor—a forty-five minute techno phantasmagoria, with hundreds of people bouncing along in TRAFO's massive hall.

The next night, Ryoji's Ikeda's datamatics audio-visual show provided an even more staggeringly loud but somewhat stiller, roomier experience, with jackhammer pulses punctured by moments of pure, ringing tone and crackly subterranean noise. Though the huge screen provided an overflow of information, with rapidly moving vectors reminiscent of 1980s arcade games, the music dwelled, with beats that lay back instead of pointing ahead.

MaerzMusik's most beautiful mystery came in the form of Just_ Janulyt_'s Sandglasses, a transcendent piece fusing music, light, video, and electronics. Janulyt_ surrounded four amplified cellists each with floor-to-ceiling translucent columns, onto which artist Luca Scarzella projected images which rippled between the pillars. Spiraling cyclones slowly swirled across the room, providing a visual manifestation for the whispery, twinkling drones of the cellos and electronics. Occasionally, the clouds of light crystallized into frozen sheets, turning the pillars opaque before gradually dripping with water and shattering apart. Over the course of the fifty-minute work, the music gradually crescendoed to a supersonic, organ-like roar and the murky purples and blues of the meek twisters transformed into blood-red storms and then explosive, fiery typhoons—mystical, benign forces of nature densified into apocalyptic portent.

Ken Ueno's portrait event, presented by the American Academy in Berlin, exemplified the typical new music concert: a glacial piano piece (Disabitato, given an exacting performance by Heather O'Donnell); a world music piece (the tranquil, slowly unfurling Kizu for Japanese koto and Kyoto Kawamura's dipping, intimate voice); a crazed, extended technique-laden woodwind piece (the tactile I screamed at the sea until nodes swelled up, then my voice became the resonant noise of the sea for clarinet, played grippingly by Greg Oakes); a radical improvisation (a duet of sustained, expanding growls sung by Ueno himself with Robin Hayword, a specialist in microtonal tuba); a timbral large ensemble work (the eerie, spectral Talus, a concerto for violist Wendy Richman and string ensemble).

The typical new music concert, though, acquires its variety from featuring works by a number of composers. Ueno, as he explained in an on-stage interview, sees his compositional process as a kind of channel surfing between styles, in which each piece embodies its own set of distinct rules. Rather than building towards perfecting a certain style, with individual pieces acting as stepping stones, Ueno captures a certain artistic spirit in each work and moves on. The result is eclectic but also unified, a multiplicity of rhetorics which somehow always feel like Ueno's own. The best piece of the bunch was Two Hands, a placid work for violist Kim Kashkashian and percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky, a success as much for its compositional rigor as for its luminous performance—Kashkashian, the dean of American viola, gave each individual gesture a sense of inevitability, the kind of radiant deliberateness one hears in a great reading of Mozart or Bach.

MaerzMusik ended on a somewhat sour note, with Michael Nyman's gleeful, saccharine score to Dziga Vertov's 1926 Šestaja cast' mira. The film, a sort of Soviet propaganda collage, tours the riches of the early USSR while indicting Western capitalism; the Nyman band's bright, driving lyricism, though a lively accompaniment, didn't distance itself particularly from Vertov's problematic politics. A shaky ensemble end, in which a violinist seemed to miss the final cut-off, could have been in homage to the abrupt end of Einstein on the Beach but was more likely a result of insufficient rehearsal. The lusty booing which followed made an unfortunate conclusion to the otherwise well-received festival.

To generalize about an extraordinarily diverse festival unified by a broad theme would be trivial, so trivial I will be. The swath of works performed over the ten days exemplifies more of the Berlin sensibility about music than any overlapping commonalities of style. Composers wrote in a variety of genres and media, paying careful attention to blending acoustic with electronic, musical with visual, and classical with non-classical. MaerzMusik divided evenly between musicians trying to break out of classical traditions, musicians trying to break into classical traditions, and those who had nothing to do with classical traditions whatsoever. The variety of tastes and habits resembles less the current New York post-classical scene than an overall sense of different artists all working on the edges of each other's genres. With the decades-long prominence of electronic music in the city's experimental university studios and techno clubs and the overall prevalence of modern music on the concert stage, Berlin has had much less angst than New York about merging the old and the new, so the inattention to what was classical or non-classical at MaerzMusik did not feel particularly unusual or newsworthy. What was unusual and newsworthy was the sheer amount of focused, intensely-wrought new works, each of which forged organic and elegant bonds among multiple artistic media: a vision not of what could be possible in a future tomorrow but what is already present in a radical today.