

Extended Listening

On the evening of October 17th Philadelphia Sound Forum, an organization dedicated to presenting concerts of experimental music and run by Jesse Kudler and Ian Fraser celebrated its first birthday at Vox Populi gallery. Joining established organizations such as Bowerbird and Ars Nova Workshop in showcasing both local and touring musicians, Philadelphia Sound Forum is now contributing to a healthy scene here in Philadelphia.

This occasion is worth marking because experimental music, a term loosely grouping together various appropriations and fusions of avant-garde rock, post-free-jazz improvisation, psychedelic mind-destruction and the classical avant-garde, is rarely visible within either the art or music world. Although consumers of contemporary art have long been accustomed to contemplating (and “understanding”) visual and spatial abstraction, an analogous large-scale recognition of the validity qua art of abstract sound has not followed. The same can be said for the record-buying public as a whole, even those who get off on relentlessly searching out the latest indie-rock darlings or hipster dance phenomena. Musicians exploring the nature, limits and potential of abstract sound decoupled from both the “natural” requirements of harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, temporal, decibel, affective and instrumental legibility and of the overly academic formal experiments of much of the 20th Century avant-garde exist, for the most part, in oblivion, victims of an impoverished aesthetic ideology (one curious exception to this rule is the recent attention paid to the “noise” “genre” by the Pitchfork set. Arguably, though, this attention is not because of noise’s admirable affirmation of and willingness to tarry with all that is shitty about contemporary life but rather for the unfortunate way its focused brutality and mystique can produce frivolous incredulity, life-style scenesterism and communal outbursts of machismo).

We should not be quick, however, to chalk the lack of recognition of experimental music up to a genuine lack of criteria as to what constitutes the success or failure of the organization of abstract sonic elements, one sentiment voiced by some at the concert. Though prima facie, many performances or recordings of experimental music might seem like chaos, undifferentiated blocks of noise, or mere screwing around by technology obsessed gear-heads, this opinion is simply false, and the four sets of the PSF first birthday concert, each occupying its own distinct sonic domain and aiming at its own distinct musical ends, should be enough to refute it. The first performance, for instance, was by Kudler and Fraser themselves, both established local musicians. Their set was a practiced, if often tentative piece of abstract duo improvisation. Just as much as traditional jazz-based improvisation has always aimed at producing the “new” in music through the interactions of musicians operating without a given roadmap, abstract improvisation seeks to create a contingent and collective musical happening, here and now, through the selections and choices made by individually autonomous players. Though not revelatory this evening, at their best the pair’s juxtaposed layers of sound did produce a sense of reassuring, unanxious tension.

Another, different example of what this music can do was provided by the duo of Jim Haynes (San Francisco) and Murmur (London). An education in experimental music opens the ears up to an infinite world of sonic detail and put us in relation to the everyday sonic environment that we largely ignore. On this occasion, the two visiting musicians crafted a world in sound, a perpetuum mobile built up out of layers of tuning fork, prayer bowl, bells, metal balls, the sound of crashing waves and desiccated electronic drones. This sound universe took on a fragile life of its own, presenting, as it unfolded over an extended period of time, a shifting multiplicity

of aspects. Increasing the full sense of immersion within a three-dimensional sound environment, were the bells placed throughout the audience. The performers also invited the participation of those sitting and standing at the back of the space by pouring out bottle caps and metal balls onto the wooden floor. Soon these objects were being tossed and rolled around, the dull sound of rolling balls mimicking waves as the twinkling caps blended indistinguishably with the chiming bells. Although this sonic sleight-of-hand served to remind us that no, we had not been transported out of Vox’s post-industrial gallery space to some idyllic garden by the shore, it gave the gallery back transformed, now a place teeming with sound.

West Philadelphia’s Beemask, on the other hand, provided the audience with a sort of auditory endurance test (not unlike watching a horror-film and wondering just how bad things are going to get), easily the most physically punishing set of the night. At first, the audience was maliciously lulled into thinking the set would be a mellow cheese-fest: think worn-out beats pillowed by happy, friendly drones. Happily, the music soon exploded into an lsd-nightmare of high-pitched pulsating energy occupying a volume-level well beyond the comfortable. Fingers were in ears in short order, only the most masochistic (and reckless) abstaining. All this would have been a bad thing had the music not been worth the pain, and if only the pretty can be beautiful; however, after wallowing in the shimmering tones filling up the gallery and playing tricks on the eardrums, one felt a sense of loss when they began to disappear, slipping away gradually over the course of a long outro, never to be heard again.

The closing set of the evening, a duo by headliners Brendan Murray (Boston) and Richard Gareth (New York) was a virtuoso collaboration, presumably enough to convince even the most skeptical of the validity of abstract music. Whereas the sound world of Haynes and Murmur had seemed like a living entity unfolding according to its own law, its existence only contingent upon the length of time its authors wished to maintain its perpetual creation, Murray and Gareth were not content to simply let theirs unfold organically. The pair pushed each other to re-invent their musical gestures on each occasion that the present juxtaposition of warm drones and electronic hums had taken its course. Often subtracting the primary element served to bring new elements previously serving merely as subtle details to the fore, accomplishing a novel reorganization of the sonic field and showing each musician’s respective technical ability and collaborative sensitivity.

Although obscurity can be salutary for the health of a genre (experimental musical practices are rarely if ever inserted into the vast art-school/museum/gallery institutional network, allowing for true creative “freedom”) it creates illegitimate barriers for a larger reception. Moreover, the fact that abstract experimental music exists, as a rule, off of aesthetic map only reinforces our own general inability and/or unwillingness to comprehend any organization of sonic elements not given in the form of the pop song. Owing to groups such as Philadelphia Sound Forum, Philadelphia is more and more becoming an exception to the rule. www.phillysoundforum.org.

- Chris Noble