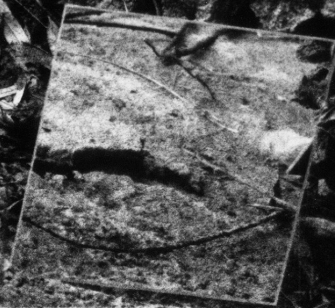# Polwechsel & John Tilbury
Field

Field

"Presence of sound", exploring "sound as such", probing into silence, reduction – these were some of the catchwords used to try to define the new type of music that many improvisors and composers had made the focus of their attention towards the end of the 20th century. Though these musicians came from different backgrounds such as new music, the electronic community, jazz or experimental rock, there was one thing they all had in common: they believed that unprecedented and untrodden paths could not or should not lie in topping the existing complexity of tone systems, structural concepts or intercultural syntheses but in focusing on quiet, coincidental, delicate, singular, whispering, almost inaudible sounds, the single note, the smallest element, the subtle nuance, the extended stasis. And so they excluded traditional musical parameters, such as melodic, rhythmic or harmonic organisation, and dramatic expressiveness.

The reductionism of the 1990s was certainly not created *ex nihilo*. It was an independent radicalising synthesis of the post-war avant-garde's creative canon – and it's telling that it was fuelled by ideas sprouting up in new music, conceptual art and improvisation alike. By Morton Feldman's ascetic rejection of all climactic development, dynamic changes and motivic logic, for instance; by Alvin Lucier's abstract exploration of repetitive sequences and laminate structures; by John Cage's transcendence of subjective expression or motivic work, generating "free sound", which is not "produced" by following a logical system but simply "is"; by Giacinto Scelsi's microscopic illuminations of the timbral variants of one central note; but also by Helmut Lachenmann's obsessive concentration on instrumental noises. Now shifted to the fore were single notes and sounds that were perceived as disturbances or background noises in the classical and Romantic tradition of sound production – but it was not about more expressive intensity, nor about the emphatic rejection of facile formulas, as with Lachenmann. The reductionists, rather than destroy, discovered something, and they discovered it where our listening habits end: in the systemless physicality and spatiality of sound, in volume, in texture, in the blending of gestures.

All this is reminiscent of the aesthetic approach of the first generation of 1960s' free improvisors – but today's generation radicalised these ideas, all the more so to distance themselves from the density and expressiveness that characterised improvisation in the 70s and 80s, and from groove and melody that still predominate traditional jazz. In this light even the name of the group, originally formed in the early 1990s, is

has always been an alternative to the neo-Romantic variant of "new simplicity" in composition, and to the persistent structural complexity in mainstream new music.

Still, Polwechsel have a lot in common with the first generation of improvisors from the 1960s: a longstanding working collective is not nor ever was merely a form of collaboration, but reflects the way music is understood, or literally lived. An understanding that refuses to accept the traditional division into performer and composer just as it rejects the listener's fixation on the instrumental skills of the virtuoso. Consequently, all of the Polwechsel members are accomplished improvisors who (in this lineup) only play their own compositions. Their notion of composition draws on the experiences in – individual and collective – improvisation. In this respect, the ensemble follows more in the footsteps of the improvising pioneers of composed music, Musica Elettronica Viva, or even more of Franco Evangelisti – the members of his composer-improvisor collective Nuova Consonanza maintained that their improvisations had the status of *works*. Even though they never notated their pieces, the improvisors committed themselves to extensive and systematic practice sessions to develop their musical language. But it was probably the British improvising collective AMM, with its members coming from completely different stylistic backgrounds, who were the strongest inspiration for Polwechsel's idiomatic and aesthetic approach. This holds true not only for the anti-dramatic, anti-expressive stance, but also for the importance of graphic scores: AMM played "free" improvisations as naturally as they "interpreted" the graphic scores of ensemble member Cornelius Cardew in the 60s. The novel and epoch-making thing Polwechsel created was marked above all by the outstanding and radical way in which they transformed the classical ideas of the 1960s into an independent and fully contemporary synthesis.

Already on their last CD *Archives Of The North* (hatOLOGY 633) Polwechsel began moving cautiously away from their early, almost ascetic embrace of pared-down musical material, single musical moments, and low volume. Aesthetic parameters which they had excluded, such as chords, dynamic contrasts, denser textures, motivic developments or rhythmic structures, were carefully reintroduced. But now, when chord-like constructions find their way back into their music, then only as a reflection of their own reductionist experience and minimalist efficiency: they are scattered memories, premonitions, vague associations, never references to other works, nor mood music. Dynamic contrasts are not demonstrations of emotions, but mere timbral contrasts and a structuring of time. Along the Polwechsel path towards a reflected reintegration of the once excluded musical parameters, the two composers for this CD, Michael Moser and Werner Dafeldecker, have gone one step further while also reflecting Polwechsel's own history: traditional parameters are reintroduced into the original Polwechsel idiom as disturbances, refractions or inclusions. The invitation extended to guest soloist John Tilbury is also part of the reflected reintegration of traditional elements and the extension of Polwechsel's concept, which they develop in their cautious and persistent approach: it is a reference to both the tradition of free improvisation and the reductionist currents in modern composition, for Tilbury is not only a proven Feldman specialist, but also long-time pianist for AMM.

Werner Dafeldecker's integration of pianist Tilbury consistently avoids the pitfalls of resorting to the tradition of the virtuoso piano concerto – and yet there is a subtle irony in

the way Dafeldecker creates after-images of the interplay between solo instrument and orchestral tutti. Michael Moser has a recording of single piano chords played via speakers into the strings of a second grand piano, called the "resonance piano". Like the ruins of their lost (e.g. functional harmonic) meanings, disfigured beyond recognition, these chordal fragments resonate in the playerless second piano, while on the first piano Tilbury improvises rhapsodic-pointillistic sounds to the notated phrases being played by the other musicians. The empty chordal hull of absent tradition literally reverberates in the piano body and blends with Tilbury's very present gestures.

The surprising thing one notices when listening to Polwechsel even today is that the aesthetic rigour of the musical structures and transitions is unmistakable and yet at the same time everything seems open and unpredictable. Though the music is fully structured, the way the instruments are played and how the voices are interwoven are always shaped by the improvisational experiences of the musicians.

"Place, Replace, Represent" by Michael Moser begins with a short, rhythmic, stringent intro. As the piece unfolds the rhythm recedes to make room for various overtone and noise mixtures. At the end, in a coda played by the whole ensemble, metric patterns from the beginning are repeated. Symmetries and proportions are actually what always play an audible role in his piece, and thus they may call to mind certain traditional proportional forms like the arch. Or perhaps the principle of ensemble playing: the two percussionists face the two string players, while over and over again the saxophone of John Butcher recolours the sounds of both duos or adds another layer; the sound of rubbed drum skins blends with the noise-sound mixtures of cello and bass, with individual drum pulses triggering the ensemble to produce precisely defined fields of noise.

Werner Dafeldecker's piece "Field" is also based on contrasts or, more precisely, the harsh sequence of sound blocks, the abrupt changes of two totally different aspects of sound, on pole switching so to speak: solo – tutti; quiet – loud; filigree – dense; tone – field of noise; distinct pitches – isolated sounds from a field, individual noises, impulses; off – on; tension through textural density – contrast of tension through paring down sonorous structures; A – B in respective variations. Here, too, time structure and instructions are fully notated, while at the same time the sound streams of the individual blocks with their minute development clearly refer to the gestures of improvised music. Composition – with its lexical meaning of something "put together" – and improvisation – the unexpected or unpredictable – have become the two sides of the same thing.

(translated by Friederike Kulcsar)

Polwechsel & John Tilbury

Thank you! Whether this is your first recording from Hat Hut Records, or your Xth, we want you to know how proud we are to have you as a member of our growing world-wide community of listeners. We hope that you enjoy this recording; it represents our constant aim to bring you the music of the future to discover. What you hear is what you hear!

Werner X. Uehlinger

Along the Polwechsel path towards a reflected reintegration of the once excluded musical parameters, the two composers for this CD, Michael Moser and Werner Dafeldecker, have gone one step further while also reflecting Polwechsel's own history: traditional parameters are reintroduced into the original Polwechsel idiom as disturbances, refractions or inclusions. The invitation extended to guest soloist John Tilbury is also part of the reflected reintegration of traditional elements and the extension of Polwechsel's concept, which they develop in their cautious and persistent approach: it is a reference to both the tradition of free improvisation and the reductionist currents in modern composition, for Tilbury is not only a proven Feldman specialist, but also long-time pianist for AMM.

Nina Polaschegg

Polwechsel & John Tilbury
Field

Burkhard Beins   *drums, percussion*

Martin Brandlmayr   *drums, percusssion*

John Butcher   *tenor & soprano saxophone*

Werner Dafeldecker   *double bass*

Michael Moser   *cello*

John Tilbury   *piano*

1 **Place / Replace / Represent**   22:12
   by Michael Moser
   ISRC CH 131.0901106

2 **Field**   20:00
   by Werner Dafeldecker
   ISRC CH 131.0901107

Total Time DDD   *24-Bit*   42:18

File under: Jazz/Free Improvisation

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