



## The Sounds of Exclusion

The Polish label Bôlt Records

John Tilbury; For Tomasz Sikorski (BR 1014)

Tomasz Sikorski, Julius Eastman

Unchained (BR 1026)

Zeitkratzer; Zeitkratzer Plays PRES (BR ES03)

Although Bôlt Records is not even ten years old, it has already grown into one of the most original and influential independent labels specializing in contemporary and experimental music from Eastern Europe. Established and programmed by Michał Mendyk (born in 1981), run by the Warsaw-based Foundation 4.99, it creates an alternative to the fossilized and insufficient new music institutions in Poland. Its aim is to restore the forgotten names, aesthetics and history of local progressive music before and after the iron curtain era. The starting point in 2008 was to work on the vast heirloom of the Polish Radio Experimental Studio (PRES), founded in 1957 as one of the very first of such studios in the world. For decades it functioned as international laboratory for generations of composers. The output of the PRES consists of long hours of electroacoustic music. It is hard to believe, but until Bôlt's inception the Polish Radio archive was the only place where this music was stored. Nobody except from radio presenters or very few music professionals could gain access to these historical recordings. Many people interested in experimental culture dreamed about illegal copies of the recording of this of that piece they had read about in books, but nobody hoped the Polish Radio would ever release them.

Thanks to Bôlt Records these famous and unknown recordings were legally released in several dozen of CDs, reaching a large audience in Poland and abroad. Every year one or more new recordings see the light of day. Moreover, Bôlt commissions young artists to make

modern remixes of original PRES pieces, bringing them to life again. There is for example one CD containing an instrumental reinterpretation of electroacoustic music signed by zeitkratzer. The extension of the PRES collection are radio plays – a genre popular for decades, now also revived thanks to Bôlt patronage. There is a separate series dedicated to radio pieces combining sound and word produced by pioneers of avant-garde music as well as young composers.

Another interesting series is called New Music in Eastern Europe and Polish Oldschool. The first one is dedicated to the latest music and the youngest representatives of composers and performers born in Poland, Romania and Lithuania (so far). The second one presents historical names of new music heroes of the so called "Polish School" of the 1960s and 70s (Kazimierz Serocki, 1922–1981 or Witold Szalonek, 1927–2001), among others. The most prominent personality is Tomasz Sikorski (1939–1988), a composer of minimal music, pushed to the margin of new music in Poland by official institutions and its decision makers, but now having a comeback as a cult figure. His music is presented by English pianist John Tilbury, who met Sikorski during his studies in Warsaw in the 1960s. A very original idea was to combine Sikorski's piano compositions, dealing with very few sounds and resonances, with the warm and nevertheless fully neurotic repetitions of Julius Eastman (1940–1990), a little known African-American composer, who left the conservative academic circles in order to fight for human rights. As a black homosexual composer of minimal music he was himself victim of a homophobic and racist American society, but to some extent also of academic circles favouring the post-serial music of white heterosexual men.

At first glance, political and aesthetic exclusion seems to be a crucial key of Bôlt Records selection. Minimal music, the personal interest of the curator Michał Mendyk, was actually banned in music academies and underrepresented in new music festivals, at least in Poland. The same happened to the improvised and experimental music by talented amateurs, who couldn't find access to the official new music scene. Their recordings appear next to those of professionally trained composers. Thus the label fills also the lack of communication between different avant-garde music scenes across social borders.

The only reservation we could have concerns the curator's choice of favouring minimal music from male composers, over than female 'new complexity' pioneers, as the excellent and unfortunately completely forgotten Barbara Buczek (1940–1993). For many she is as cult a figure as Sikorski.

Perhaps the most distinct and eccentric series of the label is called Populista, and is curated by Michał Libera. It documents conceptual music projects, like nonclassical interpretations of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* and Schubert's *Winterreise*, remixes of pieces written by Harry Partch, Luc Ferrari or Mauricio Kagel, as well as field recordings of street demonstration in Warsaw against (or for) Rodrigo Garcia's controversial spectacle *Golgota Picnic*. The CDs distinguish themselves by the covers presenting naive, disturbing, surrealistic drawings of zombies without faces, with opened bodies... Their maker is the well-known Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewska (born in 1976) – one of the few excellent Bôlt cover designers – who transforms every CD into a unique object, inviting the listener to fantasise about music in a different, conceptual way.

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