

Encounters

The Swiss Music Days in Belgrade, Serbia (13 to 19 October 2013)

Under the somehow clumsy banner 'Swiss Music Days' lies a festival of contemporary music that took place mainly in Serbian capital Belgrade, but also spread around the capitals of various Balkan countries (Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia), thus connecting various artists, local promoters, places, institutions, NGOs and independent cultural organizations in a temporary network. Temporary because unfortunately this kind of connections are rare between the aforementioned countries and are usually established precisely through projects like this one, from the outside as it were, and paradoxically connecting various artistic fields that were brutally torn apart by the recent wars in the Balkans. This probably explains the clumsiness of the name in the general context of the festival. It remains true that the programme (curated by Swiss accordion player Jonas Kocher and well known Serbian promoter Bojan Đorđević) was mainly focused on Swiss musicians of various generations (veterans such as Hans Koch, Jacques Demierre, Norbert Möslang, a slightly younger group including Strotter Inst, Stefan Thut, Paed Conca and even younger musicians such as Gaudenz Badrutt, Diatribes, Jonas Kocher himself) coming from freely improvised music, jazz, contemporary classical music, electronic music, sound poetry, etc... But at the same time the festival was not only about presenting Swiss music (which is a doubtful term in itself, considering the different types of musical expressions presented on the festival that do not originate from any kind of identified national idiom). Indeed it also built, at least in Belgrade, a connection with local musicians through a series of improvisations named *Improv Encounters*. This was beyond a doubt the most important element of the festival, not just because it provided a space for local musicians (Blank Disc, Snežana Maraš, Woo, Igor Čubrilović, Lukatoyboy...) to play with some of their more established Swiss colleagues, but it also connected various spaces together (studio of national TV and radio station, gallery for contemporary art 12 Hub, concert space REX and cultural centre Dom Omladine). This break in the established dichotomy between institutional

and non-institutional contexts is important from the point of view of local and regional cultural policies. Even more importantly, this encounter brings the whole project out of the context of 'cultural imperialism' or patronising positions that most Eastern countries feel subject to when participating in such projects. *Improv Encounters* took place in the rather ebullient gallery 12 Hub, where all the concerts were accompanied by noise coming from the busy street. This environment put all the performances in a rather contemporary sound environment of background noise – an issue reflecting in music itself our contemporary world's relationship between noise and silence. Ad hoc gatherings and first time encounters can be problematic, but also proved exciting, providing us with situations of discomfort, misconceptions, aesthetic misunderstandings, etc, and also with a general sense of surprise, unforeseen accidents and even strong musical statements. We had bits of everything but most of all (and therein lies its true value) there prevailed a feeling of discovery, excitement and, most importantly, of new potentialities in the music heard. This has paradoxically shown to listeners that there is a strong scene of improvised music in Serbia. One composition by Paed Conca and his clarinet trio Porta Chiusa (with Hans Koch and Michael Thieke) also reflected a situation between East and West in Europe (although its subject is also global one) through the question of identity and migration. Using video along the sound of long tones and gentle harmonics between players he perfectly created the feeling of disinterest that prevails when facing the subjects of immigration today. Music didn't provide comment nor just aesthetic accompaniment but strong statement. A statement that was present in a room especially well-read on the subject, given the context of political and economic migration from Ex-Yugoslav Republics to Switzerland today and in the past. The issue of background noise was most magnificently present in the performance of Stefan Thut (otherwise a member of Wandelwaiser). With his performance he entered the field of performance art, a field of action and concept characterized by the historical art movement Fluxus, where sounds, gestures, action all enter into the performance space and transform it. Thut does this with minimal means – dragging cardboards on the floor, playing long, subtle tones on the zither

and almost silently inserting sounds of field recordings in the space, thus constantly altering and shifting our perception. This is achieved by never-ceasing movement on stage and by the displacement of intentional and non-intentional sounds in the silent environment, creating an intense listening experience. By contrast, Strotter Inst has put us right in the centre of his noisy, dense layers of circular, repetitive movement of sounds, broken beats, pops and hums, abrasive and sometimes disjointed even if not too aggressive, coming from his modified turntables. If that put at the heart of his musical experience the dynamics of background noise, Strotter faced us with its confrontational, penetrating nature. Turntables, loops and layering of sounds were also a structural background element in the performance by Norbert Möslang (of Voice Crack fame) who took all the advantage of the sound system in Dom Omladine. And although he created an intense environment of carefully placed layers of sounds his limited performance on turntables (instead of on his cracked everyday electronics, due to his injury) sounded rather like his own catalogue of sounds, playing with his archive, which was disturbed only by some occasional pulsation from flickering lights. If we take noise as a metaphor, it was put in language through the form of sound poetry. This last thing can be put in striking parallel with Jacques Demierre and Vincent Barras, who performed their own compositions (and one by a British maestro of sound and concrete poetry, Bob Cobbing, that situated their performance in a larger international tradition), a deconstruction and decomposition of language in the line of Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* as well as lettrism. They performed it with mesmerizing presence and focus, turning language and letters into a consistent composition. Silence, slowly developing textures of sound and minimal gestures played an important role also in the workshop concert by Diatribes and local musicians from the ImprovE collective, creating a 12 members ensemble. Together they created a soft, ever-changing drone in constant flux, a sort of liminal music in the tradition of legendary British group AMM that was based on a display of restrained collective playing, but this restriction also sadly overshadowed any real group dynamics in the ensemble and in music, thus not creating the same environment that was

present on *Improv Encounters*.

Some of the concerts on the programme were rather misplaced. A solo piano recital by pianist Vera Kappeler playing the music of Swiss composer Paul Burkhard sadly drowned in the general sound of the event. Placed in the studio of national TV and radio station and broadcast live on both, the piano was amplified and the sound coming in the room through speakers was distorted, mixed with constant hum and without any dynamics that could provide the much needed nuances for evaluating the interpretation by Kappeler. From the programme's point of view the displacement was felt also on the concert by a rather awkward looking group Imperial Tiger Orchestra (no pun intended), playing modern interpretation of mostly Ethiopian music, that has become quite fashionable in recent years. Of course (don't get me wrong), the band played the music with passion and conviction, but the general context of the festival didn't allow their music to develop its celebratory nature to a full extent. Maybe also because before them there was an intense concert by a trio Plaistow who successfully deconstructed the sound legacy of Australian group The Necks but on their own terms, through the shorter compositional structure and a delicate mixture of piano overtone harmonics and Eastern shadings of the pianist's melody as well as strong drumming that circled in and out of rhythms. Overall the *Swiss Music Days* was a festival with a strong programme. I overheard the idea that it should become a biennale. Let us hope so, because it has all the elements to become a powerful platform, which it is not yet fully. For that it really has to become a festival of encounters, creating a space for collaborations and projects on both sides.

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