

# THE REHEARSAL STUDIO

A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 2017

## New Sounds from Old Technology at the Center for New Music

Last night the Center for New Music (C4NM) hosted *Turntable Drawings*, basically a "progress report" on an ongoing partnership of printmaker Jon Fischer and composer Danny Clay. Fischer has been working in the medium of old vinyl records, both twelve inches and seven inches in diameter. He creates designs that are imprinted on the surface using handmade silicone molds. Usually the groove structure is preserved; but the printed surface has new subtle three-dimensional qualities. Clay realized that these objects could still be played on an old-fashioned turntable; but the "content" of the grooves would be lost, replaced by the ways in which Fischer's printed surfaces would induce vibrations of the phonograph needle.

The "core" of last night's event was a performance of three of Clay's resulting compositions. However, the performance took place in the setting of an installation in which many of Fischer's resulting objects were on display, hanging from the walls. There were also a generous number of old phonographs, and attendees were invited to take the records from the wall and play them for their own entertainment and edification. This provided an opportunity for some (like myself) to become acquainted with the available controls on those turntables, which included continuous variation of the rotation speed. Clay himself had selected these players and structured his compositions around their affordances.

The major work on the program was Clay's "Turntable Drawing No. 25," scored for six voices, three saxophones, and three turntables. The voices were provided by Rae Diamond and five members of her Long Tone Choir: Dennis Aman, Joe Kuta, Jocelyn Lawrence, Suki O'Kane, and Eric Thiese. The saxophonists were the members of the Mana Trio: Michael Hernandez on soprano, Michael Mortarotti on alto, and Eric Barreto on tenor. The result was a 45-minute landscape in which the structured noise coming from the turntables served as a continuo for the interplay of both pitched tones and other structured noises produced by the vocalists and instrumentalists.

Thus, the piece began with the choir members articulating a wide variety of sibilants with occasional interjections of vocal clicks. The saxophonists, in turn, were breathing through their instruments without exciting reed vibration, while using their finger-work to engage the pads that cover the holes percussively. That latter effect would then reverberate through the body of the instrument providing a subtle gesture of a distinct pitch. Only after the score had progressed for some time did the vocalists begin to vocalize tones; and the saxophonists followed suit with their reed-work.

45 minutes was clearly an extended duration. However, the sense of time passing tended to be suspended the same way it is when one listens to the longer-duration compositions of Morton Feldman, hence the use of the noun "landscape." Indeed, all of Clay's pieces were performed with visual projections provided by Fischer, each one structured as a repeating loop. For "Turntable Drawing No. 25" the image was one of a burning fire (including traces of embers rising from the flame as portions of the log would dislodge); so the "extent" of the landscape had more to do with time than with space.

Because the sounds themselves tended to be soothing in nature, it was easy for the listener to settle down into them. One could abandon the intensity of sharply focused attention and simply give in to letting things happen. That idea of a concert being an act of accepting what one experiences was key to John Cage's aesthetic convictions; and, while Cage directed those convictions towards organized sound (not caring whether the listener chose to call it "music"), Feldman pursued his own explorations by imposing lengthy and subtle demands on instrumentalists. "Turntable Drawing No. 25" comes off as finding a middle path between those two strategies; and, for the listener willing to accept the aesthetic premises, the result made for an engaging experience.

The issue of organized sound was at its most inventive, however, in "Turntable Drawing No. 8," scored for eight turntables without records. All eight performers used a single stylus (which appeared to be metallic) to rub against the rotating turntable in different ways. One thus discovered that, with that one stylus, one could make a wide variety of noises based on how it rubbed against the turntable. The turntables themselves were distributed around the C4NM space, meaning that the performance had spatial qualities in addition to the diversity of sonorities. Unless I am mistaken, the visual that Fischer provided for this piece involved a cruise liner coming under the Golden Gate Bridge

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and entering San Francisco Bay.

The performance began with "Turntable Drawing No. 16," scored for electric guitar and three turntables. This involved an interplay of structured sonorities coming from opposite sides of the C<sub>4</sub>NM space with Giacomo Fiore exploiting a wide diversity of effects electronics with his instrument at one end of the space, while the three turntables were at the other. The served as a judiciously selected introduction to the longer-duration performances that would then follow.

Overall, there is no doubt that this experience was a unique one, highly inventive and imaginatively conceived to push back the boundaries of what we can accept as a listening experience.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 7:56 AM   
LABELS: CHAMBER MUSIC, DANNY CLAY, MUSIC

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