



Derengés/Dawn
Grencsó Open Collective (SLAM)
by Ken Waxman

Although he recorded with master improvisers like Roscoe Mitchell, Joëlle Léandre and Anthony Braxton, pianist György Szabados, who would have been 77 this month but died at 71 in June 2011, is little known outside of Hungary. Yet his influence loomed over his country's post-war music as much as the specter of Communism haunted Europe. Like the AACM's Muhal Richard Abrams, Szabados organized workshops where musicians absorbed his mixture of improvisation, jazz and notated music.

Unlike Abrams, though, Szabados' opportunities were limited by his government's Stalin-esque distrust of free music. That's one reason why *Derengés/Dawn* is so valuable. Almost the equivalent of a samizdat novel given mass publication, the two-CD set provides expanded performances of six Szabados compositions. Budapest-based reed player István Grencsó, a member of the composer's ensembles from 1984-2007, galvanizes the project while Serbian-Hungarian violist Szilárd Mezei, who played with Szabados from 2003-09, adds his distinctive string bending to four tracks.

Grencsó emphasizes the jazz/improv qualities of Szabados' work by building on the textures from the

rhythm section of pianist Máté Pozsár, bassist Róbert Benkő and percussionist Szilveszter Miklós. The Open Collective perform an act comparable to cleaning a painting to highlight new vibrancy.

Touched with strands of Magyar romanticism, Pozsár glides along the keys when not relying on the pedals to judder percussively alongside Benkő's unvarying pace. Grencsó's nasal soprano saxophone split tones, sardonic alto saxophone digs or bass clarinet growls mock overwrought Arcadian sentiments while adding requisite (free) jazz affiliations on a track like "Adyton". In quintet formation on "Azesküvő/The Wedding" and "Fohsász/Supplication", the sharp pulse is maintained yet, frequently, cymbals toll as if emanating from the belfry of Budapest's St. Stephen's Basilica to balance the Roma-like flightiness expressed in viola glissandi. Szabados' tension between sonic light and darkness is not without humor. The faux-vaudeville overlay of the concluding "Regölés/Minstrelsy" could accompany a clown's pratfalls, especially after the foreground actions are backed by three additional horn players: Ádám Meggtes, Ábel Fazekas and Gergő Kovás.

The Open Collective honors Szabados' work by giving it a contemporary sheen as well as daubing individual brush strokes onto his canvas.

For more information, visit slamproductions.net



Nihil Novi
Marcus Strickland's Twi-Life (Blue Note/Revive)
by Philip Freeman

It's been five years since saxophonist Marcus Strickland's last album, the self-released two-CD set *Triumph of the Heavy, Vol. 1 and 2*. This disc, his debut for Blue Note (a label exhibiting a shocking vitality in the last couple of years), was produced by Meshell Ndegeocello and features trumpeter Keyon Harrold, organ player Mitch Henry, keyboardist Masayuki Hirano, bassist Kyle Miles and drummer Charles Haynes as the core band, with guest appearances from singer Jean Baylor, guitarist Chris Bruce, keyboardist James Francies, pianist Robert Glasper, bassists Ndegeocello and Pino Palladino and drummer Chris Dave. Strickland's brother E.J., usually heard behind the drums, plays keyboards on the aptly titled 42-second interlude "Cherish Family".

Nihil Novi is more reminiscent of D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* than any recent jazz release, even R&B-oriented releases by labelmates like Glasper, trumpeter Takuya Kuroda and bassist Derrick Hodge (on whose album Strickland played). The tracks are built around grooves that tick and pulse, tight snare drums cracking as electric bass throbs and horns spin out melodies that sound as much like a Greek chorus, commenting on the lyrics sung by Baylor, as soloists seeking to express themselves at length. Strickland can get out there when he wants, but he serves the ensemble just as often, in the process reminding the listener that there were some ferocious solos on James Brown tracks back in the day. But it's not just the music; it's the message in the lyrics and the samples of, for example, Harrold talking about feeling like he's viewed through the prism of others' stereotypes. It's a conscious (to use a term from '90s hip-hop) but not hectoring worldview and perfectly suits the taut but organic beats the band lays down.

There's more going on here than just shimmering jazz-funk, though. "Inevitable" is a lush ballad,

Strickland's bass clarinet shadowing Baylor's vocals the way Lester Young used to slow-dance with Billie Holiday. Ndegeocello takes a lead role on "Sissoko's Voyage", a strutting homage to Afropop, which also showcases Bruce's shimmering guitar. And the album-closing "Truth" sounds like 21st Century Afrobeat. *Nihil Novi* (which translates to Nothing New) might be the most self-abnegating album title of the year. Even if there isn't anything truly new here, the way Strickland and company combine elements adds up to something both unprecedented and thrilling.

For more information, visit bluenote.com. This project is at Prospect Park Bandshell Jul. 28th. See Calendar.

IN PRINT



A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation
John Corbett (University of Chicago Press)
by Tom Greenland

It's hard enough to put music into words, but even harder when it's created without preconceived plans. Kudos then to John Corbett for his insight into how one can gain deeper understandings of and appreciation for such music. Written in a pithy, metaphor-steeped style, Corbett's book is humorous and engaging; he's having a bit of fun with a subject about which he cares deeply. Fond of enlarging on his metaphors, as when he shows the various ways the book is like a field guide for bird-watching, he's equally content to string a series of mixed metaphors together, thereby acknowledging the imprecise nature of such allusions, all merely parts, hints, of the bigger 'truth' he wants to illuminate.

After introducing the subject and defining his parameters—"freely improvised music", as opposed to structured improvisation, free jazz or noise music—Corbett begins defensively, anticipating objections to music lacking a steady pulse and of indeterminate duration. Then he moves to the basic features, or 'facts', discernible to audiences, i.e. who's playing what when, changes in volume, transitions and form. In one of the most interesting sections, he posits a typology of seven types of interactions: dialogue; independent simultaneous action; imitation; consensus/dispute; support/stepping up; making space vs. being tentative; and counterpoint. These are the individual-within-society relationships that we intuitively notice in our day-to-day lives, but Corbett's discussion serves to pinpoint and sensitize us to the nuances of these dynamics in the context of music. He also stresses the importance of learning the "performance vitae" of individual artists in order to place their improvisations in a broader context.

The final half of the book addresses "advanced techniques". For further listening and reading Corbett supplies lists of records (both improvised and "poly-free"), "major" living improvisers and books. He compares one-off gigs with ongoing groups; alludes to elements of mystery and metaphysics; debates group size (trios, he argues, tend to work best); notes the spectrum of free and pre-determined materials within an improvisation; and distinguishes "real" performances from imitative ones.

For more information, visit press.uchicago.edu



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