

Chez Steve Review, Vinyl Arts MN, 1987

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Toot Suite

By Michael Kosch

*The Jazz/Improvisational
Influence*

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Musical improvisation is a tricky business, for it requires musicians to

explore a given set of materials—chords, melodies, textures—without knowing where it will take them. While this sometimes leads to ear-opening experiences, it can also end up as a jumble of unsatisfying bits and pieces. But it is the excitement of this very risk which makes the highs so high and the lows so low: risk is at the heart of improvisation.

A recent Minnesota Composers Forum concert entitled *The Jazz/Improvisational Influence* encompassed its share of risk taking and fortunately, reached many more peaks than valleys. Homer Lambrecht's *Turtle Turn* opened the concert. Spiky with dissonance and rhythmic energy, *Turtle Turn's* taut dichotomy between structure and freedom was admirably conveyed by the Pat Moriarty Ensemble and computer/MIDI system. As Composer-Trombonist Lambrecht stated in some introductory remarks, the piece was a nod in the direction of the Free Jazz movement, especially the work of Jazz Pianist Cecil Taylor. Beginning with unison lines in the winds, the piece quickly branched off into contrasting section of busy textures and dynamic extremes, highlighted by Pianist Ellen Lease's incisive solo. The role of the computer was questionable, however. The brittle digital sound of the computer seemed out of place with the acoustic instruments, and another "live" player would have interacted with the ensemble just as well, if not better.

The idea of contrasting forces, of tension between opposites, carried through most of the succeeding works in the concert. *Stop Thinking or Get Out of the Way* by John Devine grabbed listeners' ears with its stark juxtapositions of bouncy, minimalist lines with sustained, bluesy phrases. Structured in a quirky, question/answer format interspersed with solos, the piece was rendered in a no-fat, no-frills fashion by the John Devine Saxophone Quartet. Whereas the well-defined musical blocks drew listeners into the form, the unpredictable recurrence of the solos slapped you against its walls. To a degree, the solos weakened the work's flow and intensity; the single instruments didn't quite hold up to the hypnotizing effect of the tutti ensemble. Nevertheless, *Stop Thinking* was distinctive in overall effect.

The improvisational orchestra IMP ORK performed two pieces, the

most intriguing being Michelle Kinney's *Drag Scene*. Also constructed in a sectional, block-like manner, *Drag Scene's* brash free-wheeling texture and refreshing tongue-in-cheek mood set lively "spy movie" refrains in quintuple meter against improvisational segments. Though Kinney's slide whistles worked to further enhance IMP ORK's already colorful timbre, the abundance of instruments led to a lack of focus at times.

IMP ORK's second piece, an unstructured improvisation, was less than successful. Though interesting in some respects, it was fraught with busy textures, loud dynamics, and predictable climaxes. At one point, Bassoonist David Edminster brandished his instrument at fellow performers—possibly attempting to encourage less playing and more listening.

Composer-Trumpeteer Robert Rumbolz offered an unusual work rooted in improvisation, but molded by an overt plan. Entitled *After Math*, the piece was interpreted by an ensemble consisting of sax/bass clarinet, trumpet, trombone, cello, and percussion. The mellow opening bars—repetitive pulse patterns in the winds—soon gave way to driving African drum rhythms led by Ghanaian Sowah Mensah. Though quite sectional, the piece moved effortlessly from one idea to another, eventually building to a wall of sound underlined by a relentless cymbal roll. Rumbolz's wealth of material held together well, and was even enhanced by its diversity of ideas.

Chez Steve was a collaborative effort by a trio of "improvisationalists": Patrick Scully, dancer; David Edminster, woodwind player; and Eric Coursen, percussionist. The least jazz-influenced piece on the program, *Chez Steve* was the only work to approach total improvisation. Everything seemed fair game to the three performers. No apparent structure surfaced, though actions seemed to follow one another logically. The work reached a climax of sorts when Scully seized Edminster's bassoon and pointed it menacingly at the audience. When Edminster attempted to recover his instrument, Political Pundit Scully protested, "It's not your bassoon anymore. . . . It's a Contra-bassoon!" *Chez Steve's* whimsical, no-holds-barred approach proved a perfect closing to an invigorating program.▼