

TIM HODGKINSON - PRESS

SKETCH OF NOW CD mode 164

Clarinetist and composer Tim Hodgkinson had a well misspent youth in Henry Cow, the radical rock band that fused a taste for asymmetrical time signatures with hard-left politics. Since they disbanded, Hodgkinson has devoted his time to composition, although his engagement with improvised music and an instinctive agitprop attitude gives his scores an edge that's forever rock'n'roll.

In fact Hodgkinson's music is so intense and fiercely independent I don't think I've ever seen him programmed at a London new music gig. The language he occupies has surface similarities to so called New Complexity composition (Finnissy, Ferneyhough, Barrett et al) but each gesture feels liberated by its notation, and here are six pieces crammed with the sound of surprise. The opening work Vers Kongsu II (2003), for ensemble with solo clarinet, gives notice of what's to come. Punchy ensemble writing that strains at the boundaries like an over-exposed photograph is underpinned by cosmic gong rolls that make the tam-tams in Messiaen's Et exspectio resurrectionem mortuorum seem like mere triangle pings. The ear is obliged to cope with an information overload until a structural bombshell: Hodgkinson chops the flow, and a long fragmentary non-sequitur clarinet solo follows that's intriguingly out of proportion to everything we've just heard.

Hodgkinson's understanding of the DNA of the clarinet is complete, and De Yoknapatawpha for two clarinets and piano (2004) presents a uniquely parched, microtonal landscape. Frigor (2003) and Aici Schiteaza per Acum (2004) involve a telling meditation between acoustic and electronic forces - music that recklessly occupies the present.' - Philip Clark, Gramophone, Feb 2007

"All music divides a continuum into, for example, discrete notes or contrasting sounds, but in this piece I used the idea for dismemberment ..."

*The above description, written by Tim Hodgkinson concerning the opening piece on this new Mode collection, highlights, as well as any verbiage can, the dialectic underlying every composition on **Sketch of Now**. As soon as a boundary is established, delineated at length or in the most cursory fashion, a disruptor affects enigmatic but palpable change. What separates Hodgkinson from the myriad others that work in similar modes of musical construction is a unique attention to recurrence, both of sound and of silence. His palette is that of the contemporary classicist, but his cyclic deployment of sound and its apparent antithesis - his explorations of the genesis, motion and fruition of each sound in context - reveal many layers on repeated listening that render any notion of classicism irrelevant.*

The opening moments of "Further into Hard Stone" (2004) demonstrate the simultaneous expansion and dismemberment of an ensemble sound. Each element is clearly audible as it rises from the collective ensemble iteration, the recurrent swells providing much of the differentiation. The multiple overtones hearken back to what Hodgkinson states to be the original concept of the work, involving ring modulation; the clarinet stands out above all else, different shades of vibrato momentarily disconnect the timbre from environment and preconception.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, "Aici Schiteaza pe Acum" (2004, for ensemble and tape) is built on larger and more violent contrast. Hodgkinson describes the work's origin: "Here as a 'Sketch of Now' is how the Romanian translates. Always I try to return to the blank emptiness when I start a piece. That there should be nothing, except what comes. In this case the commission was for an ensemble piece that had to use tape. I tried to push that out of my mind. Nothing happened. I walked. I sat. Nothing came. In the

afternoon I became aware of an enormous sound: a violent thunderstorm had started up. Taking this as a sign, if not from god, at least from the complex unpredictability of being, I rushed out to record it."

The act of sitting, of willful anti-reflection, in contrast with the big bang of inspiration, is subjected to continuous return in this timbral fireworks display, as geysers of activity burst forth, exuberant but controlled, only to vanish abruptly into the uneasy rustling with which the piece opens. A particularly harrowing moment involves what sounds like piano strings being stroked at great speed, any sense of attack smoothed out. At first transparent, the sound swells until it's pierced by a percussive intrusion; the moment of disillusion is brought about, however, by the airy staccato of a flute, the gesture seeming almost humorous in its destructive power.

I have concentrated on moments of this music, leaving many, many others untouched. Special mention must, however, be given to the players of Rumanian composer/philosopher Iancu Dumitrescu's Hyperion Ensemble, without whose complete absorption of the tradition of exploration this music would surely suffer in translation. All of the playing is masterful, and this is certainly now among Hodgkinson's best recorded offerings. - Marc Medwin, Dusted, Sep 4th, 2006.

"Vers Kongsu II" features Vinny Golia on bass clarinet and Gustavo Aguilar on percussion, plus the Hyperion Ensemble conducted by Iancu Dumitrescu in a spectacular contrast between a series of thunderous blasts and an adroit elaboration of skeletal solo clarinet playing. The Hyperion is also featured in "Aici schiteaza pe acum" (a Rumanian expression comprising the disc's title), probably the most emotionally involving work of the whole album, an aggregation of orchestral uncertainty imposing its will with engrossing splashes of indetermination, and in the final "Further into hard stone", an enigmatic structure where the chance of locating the author's ego is next to absolute zero, just like everywhere else. The most aggressive track to these ears is the aptly named "Fragor" for computer-modified cello and electric guitar, which lives off its inherent qualities of semi-disharmonious refractions and functional distorted radiance, managing to subvert a preimposed order without necessarily sounding "revolutionary". This release brims with music that's riding on the threshold of inacceptability for most (unprepared) listeners yet is dense with profound messages, repeatedly trying to deliver us from the aural and mental straitjackets that even the most advanced sonic physicists sometimes force us to wear. Unconditionally recommended.- Touching Extremes

Three of the six pieces on **Sketch Of Now** were recorded in Romania, with Iancu Dumitrescu and Ana-Maria Avram's Hyperion Ensemble. Hence the Romanian translation of the title track *Aici Schiteaza pe Acum*, a scary nine minutes of "accumulation and discharge" of sonic energy for ensemble and tape. Hodgkinson plays the solo clarinet (and bass clarinet) parts himself in *Vers Kongsu II* and *Fighting / Breathing*, the former an energetic tussle with the Romanians (plus Vinny Golia, making a guest appearance on bass clarinet), the latter a sparring match with pre-recorded percussion. The split-second timing and fresh unpredictability of Hodgkinson's music owe much to his skill as an improviser, but he's got a sharp ear for orchestral timbre too, and puts it to impressive use. It's not easy listening though; *Fragor*, for computer-modified cello and electric guitar (both performed by the composer, it seems - there's no mention of personnel in the booklet) is what my mother would call "nasty modern music". In fact she calls just about everything written after 1950 "nasty modern music", with the exception of a few Benjamin Britten things, but in this case she's got a point - *De Yoknapatawpha* is a thorny affair, brilliantly executed (I use the word deliberately) by Jacques di Donato and Isabelle Duthoit on clarinets and pianist Pascale Berthelot, but hard to love. But they used to say that about Henry Cow, too. - Dan Warburton, Paris Transatlantic Magazine Oct 2006

Although he is working here within classical composition, Tim Hodgkinson clearly retains the sensibilities of an improviser, as well as bringing an electroacoustic quality to some of his ensemble scoring. These six recent works average out at around ten minutes apiece, and offer a deliberately wide range of settings.

Hodgkinson uses the Hyperion Ensemble on half the pieces. *Vers Kongsu II* places his clarinet centre stage, precise flutters, growls and high squeals completely exposed, until the ensemble lunges in at strategic points, imparting a ritualistic aura, with Gustavo Aguilar playing what sounds like large thin sheets of metal, alongside conventional gongs. Hodgkinson has been inspired by shamanic Korean music, channelling savage energy with an exact attack.

Written for tape and ensemble, with Hodgkinson conducting the Hyperions, *Aici Schiteaza Pe Acumul* sculpts a huge contrast between near silence and massive, ripping flare-ups. The composer's first step was to spontaneously record a violent thunderstorm. *Fighting/Breathing* is written for bass clarinet and taped percussion, once again making much use of silence and expectant pauses. The percussion has a plopping character, and the clarinet makes effective use of percussive fast-tonguing. The most conventional piece is *De Yoknapatawpha*, for two clarinets and piano, again alternating between fiercely rhythmic outbursts and reflective pools.

Hodgkinson succeeds in letting the listener hear his music as a whole piece, without being distracted by divisions between soloist and ensemble, tape and players, composition and improvisation. His methods become invisible, so the works sound organic and personal, calm and tense, as is fitting for the music of ritual. If Hodgkinson's instinct is academic, his training is intuitive. - Martin Longley, *The Wire* 274, Dec 2006.

SANG CD ReR TH2

Hodgkinson's music occupies a lean and aggressive space between compositional abstraction and body gesture. It's an abrupt and exposed environment without mathematics, group dynamics or Cagean meditation to support it. Instead, it draws upon the violent visions and curative rituals of body magic. At times you sense that the guttural strokes and high pitched spectral rasping of shamanic ritual are presiding over a Western aural body in pieces. Thus, it's no surprise that MA arose out of conversations with Santoro about art brut and Butoh dance. Perhaps the most involving of the pieces, its oozing interplay of soundworlds (montaging wind orchestra, percussion, double basses and string quartet) condenses and parts to make way for Santoro as she squeezes emotionalised sound out of her body. Groaning, weeping, laughter and surreal vocal strains are spliced into an opaque, sonically unguent message over turbulent woodwind flurries and deftly handled large scale instrumental settings. - Matt Fytche - *The Wire*, 195, May 2000.

The Road To Erzin is like *Takemitsu*; atonality atoned for with gorgeous colours. Gushe has high-frequency clusters reminiscent of Ligeti, with bad-tempered clarinet at the front. **Sang** makes considerable demands, but right now it sounds fully-formed and durable. Like all Hodgkinson's work it has stellar intelligence allied with absolute emotional honesty. - Hodgkinson's Path, June 7, 2000 - John Halloran

Sang - the most recent addition to a musical edifice aspiring to engage the highest levels of hearing - is the essential floor you mustn't miss. The four luminous pieces that comprise it form two halves. The first half - the first two pieces - incarnates the idea of encounter, with all that that implies of the transitory, of moments of adaptation, of mutual discovery of difference. Hodgkinson lets us in on his attraction for orientally

inspired themes (from Asia, Iran), but via sequenced arrangements where abrupt discontinuities of violin, clarinet, or piano are unleashed with the direct and brutal impact of rock music. Then, in the second, elliptical half, comes a fusing together (The Crackle of Forests) where the sonorities flow together and multiply, confronting the listener with an overwhelming and continuously changing flux of musical information, and generating a multitude of possible interpretations of what is being heard: like a field of grass that a gust of wind or a slight change in light would make seem quite different - to take up Hodgkinson's own metaphor referring to Tarkovsky's film 'The Stalker'. The last piece, MA , celebrates a final convergence, in a form that Hodgkinson baptises 'theatre music', and which amounts in fact to a montage of different recordings - the voice of Italian actress Federica Santoro, and fragments of two of his compositions, Eixam and the Second String Quartet. Calm follows the storm and unity defeats confusion in a landscape of sonic effects craftily orchestrated by a Hodgkinson more demiurge than ever. - L.C. - Octopus

The final work M'A is a very personal and theatrical composition for tape apparently related to Art Brut and Buto dance. The composer utilized recordings of his Second String Quartet, Eixam, a work for wind ensemble, percussion, and double basses, and some improvisational vocalizing by an actress he worked closely with. The result is compelling. Often there is a kind of hushed stillness that threatens to explode and destabilize the composition. Dense textural layers shift suddenly in unexpected ways. In the midst of this one hears the sound of heels on a hard floor, and a potpourri of expressive vocal styling ala Shelly Hirsh or Dagmar Krause.

*Seemingly, the music on **Sang** is about as far from the catchy Brecht/Weill, sardonic tunesmithing of Henry Cow as it is from the dark assault found on HC's 1978 release entitled, Western Culture, which featured Hodgkinson's three-part magnum opus - History & Prospects. On **Sang** we encounter high culture accoutrements of late twentieth century compositional and improvisational practice. For those who believe that these tokens are no less politically or musically persuasive than more overt manifestations, Sang will be a welcome addition to their compact disc library.*

- Ross Feller - Computer Music Journal Vol. 25, No. 2 2001

PRAGMA CD ReR TH1

***Pragma** is to all intents an album of 'contemporary music' but contaminated by electronics and concrète. The tempestuous percussion and strings dialogue in Interferogram, for example, and the very beautiful SHHH for taped voices, with its strange effects of 'unintended' noise. The work as a whole is based on a thorough investigation of acoustic timbre, as in the lacerating tones of a clarinet played into hanging metal plates in Repulsion (with its particularly extraordinary trombone part) and the grating sound of prepared violas in For Looking Insi de. - Ultrasuoni*

Disturbing, fierce modernist compositions...even electing to go for this difficult atonal sound is, in his book, a political statement of sorts in a country where the cultural yahoos in the daily papers are urging modern composers to return to modality, harmony and melody. - Ed Pinsent - Sound Projector

The concepts of distortion, noise and violence take on a new meaning... drums, metal plates and wood-winds ... the clarinet so tangible the sound of the thin reed becomes almost physical in front of us. - Jump Magazine

The music might broadly be categorized as displaying the legacy of the Darmstadt school. He has long favoured its astringent language in his own work. At times his interest in the pioneers of electronic composition also surfaces - Interferogram brings to mind Morton Subotnick's landmark recordings. More generally, Hodgkinson's structures are taut, even brittle. He prefers sound combinations drawn from the upper register and the lower depths, a taste reflected in the disc's instrumentation: harpsichord and organ, clarinet and brass, viola and percussion, electric guitar and prepared piano. A taped piece for voices is also included. - Julian Cowley - The Wire, August 98.

The tape piece -- "Shhh" -- is a collage of found and composed sounds, almost entirely vocal and often interestingly distorted by lo-fi analogue recording methods. With its long silences or near-silences punctuated by frenetic activity, this could have been a lost piece from Berio's Coro. Of course, the odd burst of industrial static or over studio manipulation tells you that this is something from the 1990s, and that's a strength too. - Richard Cochrane