



Heile, Bjorn (2012) Sam Hayden's Presence/Absence [CD liner notes]. Sam Hayden: Presence/Absence [CD] .

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Sam Hayden's music is not ingratiating. It does not demand to be loved and it does not flatter listeners by allowing easy recognition of models or technical procedures. It does not lead them by the hand from moment to moment, nor does it caress or seduce them with slick or glossy sonic surfaces. There are no knowing nudges here, no 'I see what you're doing there'. The music does not set out to please anyone in particular: although Hayden does not obscure the formative influences he has received as a student of, among others, Michael Finnissy and Louis Andriessen in his music, he is also a connoisseur of such genres as jazz-fusion, prog-rock, free improv, metal and electronica, and has worked with the Swiss 'Avant-core' trio Steamboat Switzerland – aspects of his musical personality that are just as audible as is his indebtedness to the so called 'complexity school' or European minimalism. While it would be wrong to claim that his music is entirely *sui generis*, unlike any other, Hayden is evidently not content with simply following a pre-established path. He has no interest in becoming the standard-bearer for this school or faction or to win the acclaim of that influential group of critics.

*The energy of the performance gestures is much more important than the literal interpretation of the notation.*¹

Instead, his music is deeply serious. This word has become rather old-fashioned, so that it almost requires, if not an apology, at least an explanation. Hayden's music is serious because he takes it seriously himself: it is painstakingly constructed, without shortcuts and without the 'painting-by-numbers' routines of models and techniques that can be readily recycled from piece to piece. Every composition is genuinely different and unique. It is serious because it takes performers seriously: this is no virtuoso fodder for conservatoire competitions; it takes time, effort and dedication to master, but it repays those labours by involving the musicians' individual creative contributions. But most important of all, it is serious because it takes listeners seriously.

The music addresses each listener as an individual. There are no preconceived ideas about what listeners want or expect, no references that the cognoscenti can congratulate themselves on recognising (while excluding others), no shibboleths that only the select few can overcome. It is open to anyone who, in turn, is serious in willing to encounter it.

'Serious', then, does not mean 'difficult' (at least not for the sake of it) or 'forbidding'. Nor does it necessarily aim for the profound, sublime or rarefied. *system/error* on this CD has an admirable lightness of touch and *misguided* is, at times, riotously funny. At the risk of sounding facetious, Hayden may have learned something from his eighteenth-century Austrian near-namesake about the serious business of light-heartedness. Hayden's music is nothing if not enjoyable: full of sparkling wit, sensuous gestures and, for all its many grating, piercing, even abrasive moments, beauty.

...(noisy and dirty sounds are preferable). Precise pitches are less important than creating interesting, noisy timbres.

Throughout this text, I have ascribed agency, subjecthood to Hayden's music; this is because I think that is the best way to describe it. It is indeed like a person, an other one encounters. Like with

¹ The insertions in this text are taken from the performance guidelines in the score of *Die Modularitäten*. They refer to specific details of that piece rather than Hayden's music as a whole, and they should therefore not give the impression that the precision of notation and performance is of secondary importance in Hayden's music. They are however indicative of his compositional aesthetics more widely.

actual people, one has to adjust to the music, accept its idiosyncracies, respect its otherness. It may not be familiar at first hearing, but it demands to be listened to in all senses of the word. Yet, like the best music, it opens up bit by bit and gradually reveals its secrets before us, and each time we listen we find something new to admire, like we discover new features on the face of a good friend or lover every time we see them. And, like with love and friendship, our changing perception of the music may be simply the result of greater familiarity, but it could also be a reminder that we ourselves are changing, not least due to our encounters with others – and with music.

It should sound like a time-traveller from the 1950s has invaded the concert hall.

Like people, the music has distinct characters and ‘moods’, from the violent eruptions in *Die Modularitäten* through the occasional tender gestures of *schismatics* to the rumbustious humour of *misguided* (needless to say, compositions are not confined to just one emotional expression). That music contains affects or expresses or depicts human emotions is admittedly hardly a novel phenomenon. Yet, we are often told that modernist music lacks these human, expressive aspects, a claim that is not without justification with regard to at least a tradition or strand *within* modernism that sought objectivity or even what the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset called ‘the Dehumanization of Art’. Hayden’s music is as committed to the legacy of musical modernism as any; indeed, his programme note for *Die Modularitäten* calls for a ‘1950s *Neue Musik* revival’ – although what is meant is surely a critical, creative reappraisal with an element of irony (time-travellers and all), rather than a simple recreation or reconstruction. And, surely, we wouldn’t do Hayden’s music justice if we were to associate it with the reassuring emotional balm familiar from neo-romanticism. This music knows of and speaks to the alienation of subjectivity in modernity or its decentring in postmodernity. And yet, not unlike the philosophy of Adorno, it refuses to give up the idea of subjectivity, however mediated, altogether.

Hayden’s use of technology is a case in point. Many of the pieces assembled here make use of digital technology to invent or develop musical structures and/or create, modify or distribute sound. However, while engaging with the technologies which perhaps exemplify modern life and culture like no others, the composer’s approach could hardly be further removed from naïve technoutopianism. Rather, he seems to work as often *against* as *with* these technologies. It would be too simple to say that technology is only used as a tool and that the composer’s intentions reign supreme; rather, there seems to be a more dialectic process, driven both by the recognition that absolute control is no longer possible and by the simultaneous unwillingness to give up intentionality altogether. Thus, Hayden describes in his programme notes for *misguided* how ‘the computer-generated materials (mis)guided me towards certain compositional outcomes which may not have otherwise occurred’. A similar critical and dialectical approach is also characteristic of Hayden’s use of formalised compositional techniques more generally. As his programme notes demonstrate, the composer uses procedures for the generation and manipulation of musical materials, such as pitch and rhythm but also formal structures, that are as sophisticated as any, and the resulting scores are bewildering in their complexity, but these intricacies are evidently not ends in themselves. They cannot be said to represent the stuff of composition as such and it is not for Hayden to be congratulated on the complexity of his compositional systems or the awe-inspiring appearance of his scores. Rather, it would seem as if he is constantly (re)negotiating the limits of the imagination and of compositional control as well as probing the interactions between abstract, objective and technological systems on the one hand and subjective volition and spontaneity on the other. As he

has put it in the programme note to *system/error*: '[t]he idea behind *system/error* is the contradiction between the theoretical precision and control of formalized compositional systems and the practical imprecision and accidents associated with the sonic realities of performance and interpretation of notations.'

This quotation points to a quasi-metaphorical relation between Hayden's music and life in late, 'digital modernity' and it is this which makes it so vital.

Die Modularitäten

The composition consists of individual segments for sub-groups of the ensemble from duos to quintets and tutti, which the performers have to combine to form the piece as a whole, a process Hayden likens to the idea of 'open form' prevalent in the late 1950s and 60s. The title alludes to the 'modularity' of computer software, namely the extent to which it is put together from separate parts. The individual components consist perhaps of Hayden's most speech-like, gestural music: the instruments appear like characters in a play, engaging now in violent altercations, now in tender and intimate duets.

misguided

The piece derives its forward momentum from the contrast between rapid, irregular bursts of staccato notes and continuous sonorities, such as glissandi, trills and fluttertonguing. The spectral harmony underlying the piece, whereby the micro-structure of the overtone spectrum of musical instruments is projected onto the macrostructure of the harmonies played, goes hand in hand with a denaturalisation of the conventional woodwind and brass timbres, with frequent use of multiphonics, microtones, slap tongue and the like, often in combination, making the piece a tour de force for the performers and giving it an edgy, gritty quality. One of the aspects that ensures its intelligibility is its construction out of usually short, seemingly self-contained sections, like individual expressive utterances.

schismatics

This is a duet of sorts between the electric violin and its defamiliarised, computer-generated alter ego. All the digitally produced music is derived from the live violin playing, but, while this relationship is clearly audible, the electronic echo is strangely distorted, more a bizarrely flickering shadow than a mirror image and, like most *doppelgänger*, distinctly uncanny. The title, alluding to religious schisms, and, according to the composer, highlighting the separation between the instrumental and digital sound worlds, may have suggested as much. Nevertheless, although there is no shortage here of violent gestures, such as the frequent indication 'scrape!' (with maximum bow pressure) in the second movement, there are also tender gestures and what appear to be attempts at dialogue and conciliation.

presence/absence

Among the pieces presented here, this is arguably the most continuous in terms of texture and structure. The initial sustained, overlapping sonorities in a largely static texture gradually give way to more and more dissipative elements and disruptive gestures, resulting in a state of near-entropy.

system/error

A high-energy interplay between three players, all almost consistently playing at ferocious speeds with astonishing leaps. Only occasionally do they come to rest on sustained notes, like the more common outbreaks of frenetic activity in sudden, unexpected synchrony. Whether they are battling or competing against one another, or whether, like birds flying in formation, the mysterious coordination of their movements is due to an underlying kinship, never quite becomes clear.