Reviews

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Recordings

Masayoshi Fujita and Jan Jelinek: Schaum

Compact disc, 2016, Faitiche fait-13CD, available from Morr Music Distribution GmbH, Raumerstraße 39, 10437 Berlin, Germany; telephone: +49 30-440-447-90; www.morrmusic.com/.

Reviewed by Seth Rozanoff
Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Schaum is the title of a recently released compact disc by the duo of Masayoshi Fujita and Jan Jelinek. Fujita plays the vibraphone, small percussion instruments, and everyday objects played as percussion instruments and used to augment the vibraphone. In the liner notes, Jelinek explains that Fujita “prepares” his vibraphone with “automotive objects, motorized screws, chains, and aluminum foil.” Jelinek himself performs on an Akai MPC 1000, first released in 2005, using it to create loops and textural sound layers.

Jelinek’s setup includes standard processing gear such as ring modulation, reverb, distortion, and equalization. Jelinek’s sound design aims to produce a “multi-layered structure, in which every layer has an individual clock.” His statement refers to how we might hear individual streams of material, existing in their own time framework.

Both players demonstrate a well-rehearsed control over their respective setups—nevertheless, the resultant layering can sound spontaneous or improvised. Jelinek describes their method thus: “It may sound not very subtle, but all pieces conform to the same principal: agglomeration. Expanding figurines, which grow within ten to fifteen minutes and come rapidly to an end.” Each track starts with what Jelinek calls a “proposal”—“a simple loop based on the MPC, which could be a simple bass line . . . [while] Masa [Fujita] is reacting in the form of a textural layer or melody. I react with another layer.” This process of reacting to one another is strengthened further when they come together in the studio to re-layer selected sections of the performed material. Most of the time the initial loop introduced by Jelinek continues throughout each track, and then disappears “under the weight of all the additional layers.”

The first track, Cin, is a good example of this procedure. The initial loop is almost consumed by the accumulation of new layers. The listener needs to absorb the perceived weight of the music because it is structured in a way that draws the listener into a dense combination of sounds. Listening directly to the mass of sound as it develops, one might envision oneself performing the material. Once so engrossed, you might focus your listening to more subtle aspects of the developing sound mass. Its development is completely improvisational, made up of two concepts: live improvisation, and then studio treatment. The duo’s utilization of improvisation is based on an antiphonal arrangement of reacting to each other, whether live or in the studio. Although the duo stays close to this formula of interacting, each piece generates nuance from the dense figurations of sound. The resultant series of patterns moves in and out of focus as the players switch from accompaniment to leader.

The players complement each other well. Jelinek describes Fujita’s performance as based on “a clear, precise language . . . almost no overtones, no chords.” Jelinek is committed to his “multi-channel setup of loopers” in order to provide “a rich textural setting.”

In track 2, Helio, the duo’s interaction highlights the use of acoustic sound sources. This piece can be heard as a study in timbral color, wherein each performer colors the patterns of the other person. The patterns used seem uncontrollable, although the sustained music in the background provides stability for the glitch-like figures in the foreground.

It may be more accurate to describe the glitch-like elements against the background of sustained music as a mixture of large washes of sound, along with small, granularized fragments. These textures interact in the same way that the players directly determine each other’s performance.

In track 3, Urub, Fujita’s percussion comes through with machine-like precision. In contrast, track 4, What You Should Know About Me, showcases another variation of

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the duo’s looping techniques. It becomes difficult to distinguish the source of these loops, thanks to the complex layering of material in this track. But this music creates a sense of forward momentum, not hampered by the dense counterpoint these two create. The machine-like sounds in this track occur after an initial introduction that transitions without warning. The result can be heard as a series of interlocking layers.

Track 5, *Vague, Yet*, exhibits an ambient sensibility, which reflects another aim of the music. Jelinek suggests that the “unstructured agglomeration creates a symbiotic unit.” What he means by this is that the emergence of interdependency within the duo is a result of a method of slowed-down improvisation. This concept relates to the track’s subtle nuances of color, which emerge over time, similar to the way Luc Ferrari develops his sampled instrumental material in *Petite symphonie intuitive pour une paysage de printemps*.

Track 6, *Botuto*, offers a static sound-world with hints of jazz elements. The diffused attacks from Fujita’s vibraphone suggest the way this instrument is utilized in jazz practice, as do the subtle harmonies and inflections. I get the impression that Fujita is simply expressing his natural tendencies on his instrument, not consciously trying to create a type of jazz–noise hybrid. This track was refreshing. With the chaos of the complex layering subsided, one is enticed into listening more closely to melodic elements.

By the time we reach track 7, *LesLang*, we realize that both players are also interpreters of the technology they use. They are stretching their resources in very personal, idiosyncratic ways. They use obvious musical devices including counterpoint, layering, and repetition, yet their language is formed from their ability to shape sound in the moment, as evidence of a collaboration between systems and humans.

Track 8, *Parades*, reverts to a soothing set of ambient loops to close out this disc. The track demonstrates how the duo can adapt their approach to express qualities in contrast to the harsh materials used. The motoric themes that run through *Schaum* reflect mechanisms of live interactivity. Fujita and Jelinek’s technology choices have pushed their music to the intersection of open and rigid forms, housed within an expressive continuity well worth your listening time.

**Nicolas Collins: Salvaged—Compositions 1986–2014**

DVD disc, 2015, Trace Elements Records, TE-1012015DVD; available from Trace Elements Records, 3500 N. Lake Shore Drive, #10A, Chicago, IL, USA; telephone: +1-773-697-9478; www.nicolascollins.com.

Reviewed by Ross Feller
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Given the numerous slick packaging and marketing efforts by mainstream and not-so-mainstream musicians, it was refreshing to receive *Salvaged*, Nicolas Collins’s first DVD collection, which sports a modest, ecologically friendly, recycled cardboard envelope that looks like its cover was printed with an insufficiently inked letterpress. This do-it-yourself look pays homage to the theme and title of the DVD. At the same time, this disc is an example of high-tech multimedia at its best and most creative.

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**Recordings**

Collins should be a familiar name to readers of the *Computer Music Journal*. His pioneering work with live electronics, computer music, and hardware hacking is well known. His book *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking* is considered by many to be one of the best sources for this type of approach to music-making.

Recorded and produced at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Collins teaches and serves as chair of the Sound Department, *Tall Poppies*, the first piece of this collection, begins with an enticing, close-up, high-definition visual of three sparklers alight. This piece was originally part of a three-channel video installation for a gallery in Brooklyn, New York. The DVD version reformats the video into a single screen image.

*Tall Poppies* is firmly ensconced in the tradition of conceptual, process-oriented works, but realized with high-quality video and audio systems. Contact microphones were placed on the sparklers’ stems to amplify the resultant sounds. This close miking amplifies what can be described as a stochastic, timbral array that sounds like what one might hear inside a large glass jar as small kernels, or pebbles, are slowly drained from it.

In the second half of the piece, after the sparklers go out, one sees a black
The Royal Touch
Computer Music Journal

The sounds we hear in The Royal Touch are similar in sound, if not essentially a "soulless" circuit board. There is also the sense that the circuit board is groaning, iconically represented in sound, in pain or delight, as the fingertips "massage" its solder points. This is similar in sound, if not in approach, to David Tudor's well-known live electronic pieces such as Hedgehog.

In the next piece, Waggle Dance, we see the faces and necks of walking performers lit by the solid colors of their laptop screens, which they carry while slowly walking in circular pathways. This work was written for the Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk). Without reading the program notes for this piece a listener might assume that the sounds heard—which sound like aliasing, distortion, or noisy artifacts—are coordinated somehow with the performers' body movements. And in fact this is the case. According to the liner notes, "the sound material consists of feedback between the internal mikes and speakers in the laptops, triggered by crackle noise extracted from antique cylinder recordings."

The overall effect is poignant and ghostlike. _Imperfekt (The Simple Past)_ is an audio-only work, a category that some say will become obsolete before too long. I've even heard millennials admit to never having heard music without a visual accompaniment. Presumably, Collins selected this piece for his DVD to showcase its spatial qualities at a higher sample rate than that found on another currently obsolete object: the compact disc. When we play this piece from the DVD we encounter a quick title screen but hear soft popping sounds as each stick's temperature begins to fall back to room temperature. These popping sounds are spatialized and mixed in such a way as to suggest human intentionality. The composer has carefully placed his sounds in a vibrant, three-dimensional field, effectively emphasizing their irregular pulsations. There is a poignant moment just after the sparklers die out in which the brightly lit image is "burned" into our retinae, continuing to be seen even after it disappears from the screen. At almost 2 minutes in length, this piece might be thought of as an insignificant contribution to the DVD, but the opposite is the case.

According to the one-sheet for this DVD, _The Royal Touch_ reanimates "deceased, discarded electronic circuitry." The piece begins with a close-up shot of two hands lightly depressing twelve tiny lead balls soldered to the ends of twelve wires, placed atop a familiar green computer circuit board. The balls are actually repurposed fishing weights. The hands we see in the video are middle-aged, weathered hands that clearly represent a wealth of experience. As we see this image, which may remind some readers of a YouTube instructional video, we hear a familiar sound: the crackling sound that occurs when a circuit is weakly, or only partly, connected, not unlike what happens when a guitarist plugs in his or her quarter-inch cable to a guitar amplifier whose gain is not fully attenuated.

At various points in this piece the hands are briefly removed and then placed atop the small heap of balls and wires. In addition to the crackling sounds, we hear a variety of squealing sounds that seem related to the amount of pressure being applied, as well as the location points of contact. Whatever the case, the level of sonic variety is engaging.

In addition to the streams of high-frequency sine waves, sounding like fireworks as they blast off into the sky (and almost just as loud), we also hear a variety of crackling noises that, given the almost motionless hand movements, conjure up a busy, unseen, miniaturized world.

Anyone who has hacked circuit boards from toys or old cell phones knows that finding "good" sounds can involve a lot of trial and error, as well as much luck. So the sheer variety of sounds and timbres that we hear in _The Royal Touch_ is something to appreciate and savor. It is also worth noting that this piece involves subtle performance aspects such as small amounts of pressure applied by the performer's fingertips, which also move horizontally, ever so slightly. These aspects are not necessarily obvious even when viewing the close-up video footage of this work.

With an overall duration around 15 minutes, one might legitimately assume that, given the pared-down nature of the visuals and resultant sounds, this work might become monotonous minutes before ending. But this is not the case. The challenge of matching sound to finger placement, or movement, is an intriguing exercise in patience and discovery. There are also sections in which the fingers fully, or partially, disappear from view, making the listener wonder if they have been moved off-screen to attend to other tasks such as panning, or whether they are simply leaving the lead contacts to make sounds on their own. This is difficult to determine because so much of the sonic content does not follow a direct or linear path from the physical movements of the fingers.
Imperfekt (The Simple Past) presents us with a view of a computer motherboard from above and a process of using electronic probes to amplify and "coax" sounds from the motherboard. One performer begins with a probe in each hand, precisely touching various parts of the board. Gradually more performers are added until six are all probing at once. We hear a rich cacophony that gradually builds in textural density with the addition of each new performer. Occasionally, there are unexpected pauses even though the probes continue moving. At other times it appears that the performers seem to respond to each other's probes, building to a continuous stream of sound as they interfere with each other more and more. There are also sections in which all twelve probes suddenly freeze, cued by lighting operated by a seventh performer. In these sections, the textural density diminishes. Each performer initially explores one quadrant of the board, eventually "invading" the others' quadrants. For the last 30 seconds, the amplification drops out, leaving only the sounds of the probes themselves as they move around on the board's surface.

In Memoriam Michel Waisvisz uses a flickering candle to control the tuning of four oscillators. The oscillators are overdriven, producing some very harsh and distorted sounds. As the candle flickers from air currents, the oscillators respond by producing sounds like simple frequency modulation, i.e., vibrato. Like the other works on this disc, In Memoriam Michel Waisvisz engages physical processes that interact with circuitry or computer processing. This piece is a fitting tribute to a pioneer in experimental electronic instruments and artistic director of the Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music [STEIM] in Amsterdam, who passed away much too soon in 2008 at the age of 59.

The last piece, Tobabo Fonio, dates from 1986, a fact that is made obvious by the faded, grainy video footage. But although the video looks dated, the audio does not sound as such. This may be because video standards have changed so much during the past 30 years. Or perhaps the piece was shot with substandard equipment. Even if this is the case, the "look" certainly matches the overall salvage aesthetic so prominent on this disc. Tobabo Fonio uses brass band samples from the Peruvian Andes. These samples are digitally transformed and played back via a modified trombone "performed" by the composer. In addition to what looks like a button-infested circuit board attached to the slide, Collins also installed a speaker into the body of the trombone. This enables the performer to create highly directional sounds via dance-like body movements. The trombone is cleverly used not just to trigger sounds but also to transform them through its tubing, adding resonance to the raw samples. It is not until late in the piece that the source materials are finally revealed in unadulterated forms, like a theme-and-variations piece that begins with variations, slowly revealing the theme by the end.

Overall, the pieces on this disc offer partial-view, close-up visuals along with accoutrements of sonic distortion, the result of physical processes. In one respect, each piece showcases a process or set of processes, with the results being determined by the boundaries of each process. This is the composer's first DVD of his work, and his first attempt at mastering a 5.1 mix. Unfortunately, I did not have access to a working 5.1 system. The spatial effects would certainly have been more pronounced in a 5.1 system. Nevertheless, they are still powerful and highly effective in the stereo mix also supplied on the DVD.

One criticism of the music on this disc might be its over-reliance on sprawling, through-composed formal structures. Given the fact that most of the music was generated from...
processes, mostly analog processes interacting with digital hardware, this type of formal structure is, perhaps, to be expected, as it seems to be the norm. One usually can grasp the opening logic in work of this stripe, but the endings, more often than not, sound arbitrary or are completely dependent on some physical process winding down. But this is a small issue compared with the intriguing work found on this disc. It contains some highly compelling experimental work by an important figure in the computer music world of today.