

*Dan Warburton monitors the slow heartbeat and controlled release of pan-European improvisors Polwechsel*

"The Polwechsel project has been exponential in defining new approaches to the composition/improvisation paradigm," writes Dean Roberts in an extended and perceptive essay accompanying Polwechsels fourth release - the first to feature new recruits Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr (Radian, Trapist) on percussion along with old hands Werner Dafeldecker (bass), Michael Moser (cello, computer) and John Butcher (saxophones). "Each phase of Polwechsel has been marked by a defining document and the releases of their recordings have frequently bookended trends and movements in improvisational and experimental music," he continues.

Indeed. One imagines that copies of the first edition of *Polwechsel 1*, released on Cologne's Random Acoustics label in 1994, might one day fetch astronomical prices on eBay. From the outset, it anticipated many of the developments that would characterise the next ten years of improvised music. Namely a retreat from the high octane "gabbiness" (to quote Radu Malfatti, Polwechsel member until 1997) of old school Improv into a world of sustained sonority and timbral nuance, a studious avoidance of unbridled and unruly "soloing" in favour of clearly defined composed - if not traditionally notated - structures. The slow heartbeat of Polwechsel's music became an aesthetic cornerstone of electroacoustic Improv. It was no coincidence that individual releases by Butcher, guitarist Burkhard Stangl (who left the group in 2003), Dafeldecker and Malfatti helped establish the Erstwhile label as electroacoustic improvisation's imprint of reference, and Polwechsel subsequently appeared as a group, joined by Christian Fennesz, on the 2002 Erstwhile release *Wrapped Islands*. With the benefit of hindsight, the four tracks on Polwechsels debut album - three penned by Dafeldecker, one by Moser - marked a defining moment when improvised music began to turn its back on Peter Brötzmann and Derek Bailey and started looking towards Alvin Lucier and Helmut Lachenmann instead.

Lucier and Lachenmann are namechecked in Roberts's sleeve notes, but Polwechsel's music, though clearly indebted to both, navigates a steady course between the complex virtuosity of Lachenmann's self-styled aesthetics of failure and Lucier's pristine "it is what it is" minimalism. The processes at work in Moser's "Datum Cut", which opens the new album, are evident enough if one pays attention, but they're half buried under a textural moss peculiar to the group - "a webbing made of a

hundred roots, that drink in silence", to quote Robert Bly's translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's celebrated poem in *Das Stundenbuch*.

Which takes us to the album title, *Archives Of The North* (Rilke would surely have appreciated it). Unlike its three generically numbered predecessors, this one has a title, and its double reference to archives - library, catalogue, documentation, classification, the weight of cultural tradition - and North, with its attendant associations of harsh climate, Protestant asceticism, cold black lakes and dark forests, resonates perfectly with the music. Polwechsel albums are solemn, sometimes downright forbidding affairs, but compared to the austere Lucier-like harmonic drift of "Toaster" (on *Polwechsel 2*) and the gristle of "Government" (on *Polwechsel 3*), *Archives* is suffused with, if not warmth, at least radiance, thanks in no small part to the colours brought to the group by Beins and Brandlmayr. Percussionists as opposed to drummers, both are here more concerned with continuous sound production than with seeking to impose any kind of rhythmic element, further distancing the music from any distant origins it might have had in free jazz. Even the flurries of log drum clatter on "Core Cut" sound more like Silvio Gualda than Paul Lovens. It's significant also that three of the five tracks on *Archives* have been penned by Moser, a classically trained cellist who works frequently with prestigious New Music ensembles including Klangforum and Ensemble Neue Musik Wien, and Berlin's Zeitkratzer, who have arguably given contemporary classical music at the turn of the 21 century the same shot in the arm that The Kronos Quartet gave it a quarter of a century ago.

Even so, unlike *Polwechsels 1* and *2*, which share shelf space with Cardew, Feldman and Haubenstock-Ramati on Werner Uehlinger's bijou New Music imprint hat[now]ART, *Archives Of The North* is on hatOLOGY, and comes with the (supposedly helpful) instruction "file under Jazz/Free Improvisation". But like the unjustly overlooked *Polwechsel 3*, which Dafeldecker released on his own distinctly user-unfriendly Durian imprint (functional unadorned plastic case, all artist and track info only on Durian's Website), we're a long way from what old school Hat Hut punters would consider "free improvisation" here. Though aficionados of post-AMM laminal/Reductionist/lowercase/electroacoustic Improv will have no difficulty identifying with the Polwechsel aesthetic.

Despite their changes of personnel, Polwechsel are a group with an invisible member: the group itself. Like AMM. ("The three players plus the group itself makes four: AMM is a quartet with an invisible member", Keith Rowe told *The Wire* in 2002.) The group

have retained and refined a sound all of their own. Däfeldecker's low end thuds and gloomy E-string drones are instantly recognisable on his "Mirror", as are Moser's discreet yet exquisite touches of extended technique cello on the closing "Site And Setting", but it's a credit to the group's aesthetic rigour that performers as distinctive as Butcher, Beins and Brandlmayr have integrated so seamlessly into the Polwechsel sound. Listen carefully and you can pick out Butcher's meticulous multphonics, Beins's trademark stone/polystyrene friction and Brandlmayr's ever daft cymbal work, but *Archives Of The North* is, and will remain, a music that is far more than the sum of its parts.

- Dan Warburton, *The Wire* -