

POLWECHSEL & JOHN TILBURY: Field - REVIEWS

Polwechsel want to have their cake and eat it too. On the one hand, they're clearly a highbrow, mittel-European 'project', on a mission to infuse reductionist trends in improvised music with a nose-to-the-noise-grinder extended techniques of Helmut Lachenmann. Their albums only recently conceded to the frippery of actually having titles, and their sleeve notes feature cerebral essays, painstakingly positioning the group in the New Music landscape. On the other hand, like AMM, they make records that can be listened to with pleasure by people who can't tell Alvin Lucier from Alvin Curran, and who think Scelsi plays at Stamford Bridge in blue strip.

When Werner Dafeldecker (bass) and Michael Moser (cello) founded Polwechsel in Vienna in 1993, the group included guitarist Burkhard Stangl and trombonist Radu Malfatti, who was on a journey from hard-blowing rattle-rouser in Chris McGregor's Brotherhood Of Breath to ultra-austere Pope of reductionism. Dafeldecker and Moser devised the compositions (graphic scores, verbal instructions, stop-watch timings) for the first album (title: 1), and for all it's worthiness, the music was kind of fun. The phrasing was crisp and every note felt necessary. However much Polwechsel cloaked themselves in knotted-brow solemnity, there was a bounce and a brio in the actual playing that pulled you in. In 1997 Malfatti was replaced by John Butcher, who stayed for ten years. *Field*, Polwechsel's sixth release and recorded in 2007, represents his final contribution. Stangl is gone, as are all the computers. This is an all-acoustic sextet, with two percussionists, Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr, and a guest soloist, pianist John Tilbury. Tilbury's contribution is outstanding - if the whole record glows, it's down to him - but he's also a neat choice in terms of historical influences, as he is both a leading interpreter of Morton Feldman's pieces and an improvising member of AMM.

The only Polwechsel album to be wholly improvised was 2002's *Wrapped Islands*, a collaboration with Christian Fennesz, and this time out there are just two tracks, both composed: "Place/Replace/Represent" by Moser, and "Field" by Dafeldecker. Now, Butcher has on occasion been called a 'scientific' player for his chilly, rigorous approach, but his low register, fur-clad purring on this opening track is downright erotic. There's enough sensuous bowing going on for a viol consort: not only the heavy breathing and moaning of lightly bowed bass and cello, but yet more bows

stroking cymbals and rubbing drumskins. It's a pavane of frottage, and Tilbury picks his way through with aplomb - a dash of virtuoso piano pedal technique here, a rainbow of under-the-lid bottleneck glissando there. A distant recording of piano chords is piped into a second piano, serving to highlight the tactility of the live playing. The title track is built from more schematic blocks. Individual voices are less clear - instead there's an extraordinary group noise, as if sheltering from heavy rain inside a working wind mill. The group's compositional approach to Improv means they can turn on a sixpence - Polwechsel means pole-switching - and several times a sudden plunge into silence serves to expose some fresh subtlety from Tilbury's piano. With it's switches from ensemble textures to sparse soloing, "Field" is a kind of piano concerto. Tilbury takes a toolkit inside the instrument and explores the echoing caverns there, as if shining a torch up on the walls and showing us precious stones. Behind the austere, monochrome sleeve photo, which appears to show mirrors in the mud, this is an album of warmth, sensuality and inspiring attention to detail. Polwechsel handle sound gently, as if it were a baby.

Reductionism as a musical process, a way of working things out, has been around now for a decade and a half. It's effects can still bewilder: some concerts are inaudible from further than three rows back, though an eventually released recording shows plenty of activity. Certain composers specialise in acres of silence, and audiences learn that one performer's silence is for some reason more engaging than another's, as if there's a difference between composed silence (Cage) and improvised silence (Seymour Wright). Then there are instrumentalists doing their damndest to sound like computers, and wind players who avoid all notes as if they just got banned by papal encyclical. Some listeners may feel that reductionism has also reduced the musicianship, and that some musicians are stuck in a holding pattern dictated by current fashion, afraid to let themselves go in a climate hostile to expression.

In this context Polwechsel sound an encouraging note. An old criticism of Improv was too much dead wood: you wait too long for a good bit, or musicians briefly enter exquisite territory only to rush off too quickly. Through rigorous focus and composition, Polwechsel aim to maintain that territory and map it thoroughly. Reductionism may have resulted in less high-energy, physical playing, but there's a new valuing of delicacy and detail. Improvisors are aware of the danger of going stale, and the need to constantly renew. The worst charge you can level at

improvisors is that they're simply repeating themselves - and yet, in order to find their own voice, they have to establish a recognisable style. Polwechsel tackle the repetition problem on two fronts: first, by steadily refining their project and using timbral contrast more and more as a means of structuring lengthy pieces. Secondly, by inviting guest musicians. *Timbre and Tilbury* - the result is a particularly warm, inviting record. The sheer sensuality of Polwechsel's ensemble playing, and the care they take in recording it, are reasons for celebration. And maybe this sensuality is in the air just now. A few years ago I used to spend much concert time listening to the slightly opaque, but definitely very hygienic, workings of computer software. These days I'm enjoying the sound of Lee Patterson setting fire, live on stage, to tangerine pips and hazelnuts. Sexy, no?

Clive Bell, The Wire -