JAZZIZ
MAGAZINE

Q&A with Wayne Horvitz: The Beauty of Implication

by MATT MICUCCI | October 19, 2018

This October, pianist-composer Wayne Horwitz released two new records – *The Snowghost Sessions* (Songlines) and *Those Who Remain* (National Sawdust Tracks). Given the extent of the variety of his oeuvre thus far, it should come as no surprise that each of these albums stems from different sides of his multifaceted musical personality while displaying his remarkably singular and distinguishable sound.

The Snowghost Sessions, recorded with bassist Geoff Harper and drummer Eric Eagle, is Horvitz's first trio record since the '80s, and was recorded in the title Montana studio with no set list of pieces to record and no agenda. *Those Who Remain*, on the other hand, features Horvitz's first large-scale concerto, commissioned and premiered by the Seattle Symphony and inspired by the writings of Northwest poet Richard Hugo.

JAZZIZ spoke with Horvitz about these new records, as well as his approaches to composition and performance. Below is an excerpt of our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity.

JAZZIZ: *The Snowghost Sessions* and *Those Who Remain* are quite different albums. Was the decision to release them in the same month taken on purpose?

WAYNE HORVITZ: Part of it is coincidence. I'd been working on them for a while and they were both ready at the same time. But I also kind of like the idea of people hearing different sides of my music at the same time. So, first and foremost I just wanted to put the music out. But in addition, I wanted people to hear both the contrast and the commonality between the two projects. I mean, to me the greatest difference between the two projects is that I play on one of them and I don't play on the other one. And that's more important to me than the difference in the sound of the records and that one could be called classical and the other jazz. I think aesthetically they have a lot in common, but the approach is very different.

What prompted you to record *The Snowghost Sessions*, your first trio record since the '80s?

This is actually really my first trio record with bass, drums and piano; my trio with Bobby Previte and Butch Morris wasn't like a traditional rhythm section. Geoff, Eric and I play with each other all the time, but not in a trio. And to be honest, we had free studio time in Montana and it's a ten-hour drive there from Seattle. I didn't have a project in mind. I knew I wanted to make this simple and easy. To keep it stripped down. And I knew that Geoff and Eric would be great to play, and fun to hang out with and to travel with. It was all done very informally. I had no idea whether I was gonna be interested in the result. But once we started playing and once I started hearing how beautifully the recording sounded, and how interested I was in the music, that changed. It was a pretty unintentional trio, honestly.

What did you take to that Montana studio with you?

I brought in a bunch of sketches. Some of the themes and motifs from the album are only a few measures long. For instance, I had done a piece that was actually an installation piece where I recorded very short chamber music pieces for three strings and I thought some of those might translate into little piano pieces. But I also brought in some tunes that I had mostly played in larger ensembles – some of which I don't even play. For example, "Trish." I'd heard it many times in my arrangement but never played it myself. Four of the pieces were sketches from two silent film scores I did for works by the Japanese film director [Mikio] Naruse, who wasn't as famous as [Yasujiro] Ozu but he was next in line. So, it was kind of a mix-up.

On *The Snowghost Sessions*, you elaborate on some ideas you'd been exploring with amplified piano. How would you define your interest in electronics and the impact it has on your music?

I've been working with what I would call "chamber music electronics" for a long time. When I was in New York in the '80s, I did some things with amplified piano. I've also done a lot of improvising, maybe without piano, but with electronic set-ups I've been using for years, which just involves some keyboards and pedals that I'm particularly fond of – but none of it in a loud context. Electronics are often used in a higher volume music. But even when I had the 4+1 Ensemble, and Tucker Martine did the audio processing for that, I was really interested in keeping the electronics sort of subtle and nuanced. Sometimes I like it when you don't even quite realize there are electronics there, but that if the electronics went away the spirit world of the music would be transformed. I like it when the electronics kind of re-articulate the music instead of when they are in front of the music or are the main feature of the music.

You mentioned that for you, the main difference between *The Snowghost Sessions* and *Those Who Remain* is that you play on one of them. Can you explain why?

In recent years, I've done more projects where I'm just the composer. That's a great relief, I don't have to practice. Composing is something you can do and you can take a week off and when you come back, you're still a good composer. When you play piano or any other instrument, you take a week off and you really feel it. There is a relationship to the athletic part of playing an instrument. I've always been confident about being a composer. Being a

pianist, I started pretty late. So, I'm always much more neurotic about it, to be perfectly honest.

On *Those Who Remain*, your orchestra piece is inspired by two poems written by Richard Hugo. How did they inspire you?

There's a lot of his poems I like. I also have reservations about some of them. But I got to pick the poems I love the most, so that helped. I was also inspired by a piece I wrote for septet about Hugo, that also included Eric, and Ron Miles and Sarah Schoenbeck. I took a few themes from that earlier project and started writing the orchestra piece with those themes. The theme in the middle of movement two, the way the cello is featured, came from a piece I'd written for a smaller group.

I think that Hugo has a particular resonance because he was born right near Seattle and ended up spending a lot of his time here, writing around this area and about Montana. I also think his philosophy of language kind of intersects with the way my philosophy of improvisation and composition intersects. There's a great essay where he writes that when you write a poem about autumn rain, it's a big mistake to think that when you get to the third line, you're still writing about autumn rain. His point is that your writing is inspired by the feel, sound and vibration of language, and you're not writing because you're trying to tell somebody something. I feel the same way about music. I don't have a narrative. The first phrase leads me to the second phrase and the second phrase leads me to the third phrase. So, I will say that I find his poems very musical.

How is that philosophy reflected on from *Those Who Remain*?

Well, for example, Hugo would go into small towns and would observe them and just get a feeling from them. But he wasn't actually trying to accurately describe the towns; he would just use them as what he would call "his triggering." He would say that the bar or the town or the restaurant or the encounters there had "triggered something." And I like that idea. I did the same thing with his poems. I didn't try to be inspired by them; I would often take a single line from a poem and use that as my jumping off point.

What about your entire body of work? How does it reflect this philosophy?

I think that for all the variety of music I've made, I've basically been working with the same three ideas my whole life. And I don't really mind that. Not to put myself in the same company, but I think Thelonious Monk reiterated many of the same things over and over again in different ways, and so did Mozart. Most of us come with a few things that we really want to work with and we keep finding new ways.

Photo credit: James Holt

Do you think the variety of the music or the projects that you take on helps you find these new ways?

Yeah, totally. From my point of view, I think the outside world views my works as being more in contrast than I view them. To me, they seem of the same thing. I just find it challenging to have the different colors and different palettes to use. I also find it challenging to keep learning. I just feel like I have not really ever come to be good at anything. I feel like I'm a student my whole life. So to go from writing for a string quartet, for example, to writing for orchestra is just the student in me. I just want to learn how to be good.

So the same could be said about writing for an orchestra to the spontaneousness of *The Snowghost Sessions*…

Exactly and it's funny you mention that thing about spontaneousness because there could be nothing less spontaneous than the three hours spent recording the orchestra piece. You prepare for a half a year for that and then you have three hours to record. You can't go and waste any time trying to decide if you like something or not. It's extremely expensive, so the recording process couldn't be more opposite.

What about the "touring" process. For example, you will be taking these two albums on the road now. How do you think the music will evolve on the road?

I can't take the orchestra piece on the road, but we are having the string quartet, ["These Hills Have Glory"], which is the other companion piece on [*Those Who Remain*]. I don't think to perform it has a huge impact on it – it's basically the musicians playing the piece well. It's great to experience music live, but I don't think there's going to be that much of transformation from the recorded version. It will impact the trio very much because, firstly, there's a lot of improvisation, so every night it's different. We played in a museum with people sitting very close to us and then the next night we were on a stage with the full PA, and the music had changed considerably because of that space. But the other thing is that some of the music on the record involves overdubs and stuff that I can't recreate live so I have to find other strategies to make the music work. That's been a lot of fun and a lot of work.

Given the variety of your work, which we've talked about, what do you think is the thing that distinguishes you, and that listeners recognize in your music whether – it is in a trio or an orchestra, and whether you're performing it or not?

I think I have certain harmonic ideas that I tend to go towards, certain moods I'm attracted to. I don't really like to define what makes my music sound a certain way because I find it difficult. But I will say one thing – I'm always attracted to music that doesn't say everything, that leaves a lot to the imagination. And it's not just a matter of using space. I am attracted to space, but I'm also just attracted to understatements. It's one of the great things that I felt amazing about the Art Ensemble of Chicago, particularly in the early days when I'd go hear them live. It felt like there was music going on onstage that they weren't even playing along with the music they were playing. There was implication. I tend to be attracted to that in general. And I like that in film, in drama, and so on. I don't like to be told what to think.

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