THE REHEARSAL STUDIO
A PLACE TO EXERCISE IDEAS BEFORE WRITING ABOUT THEM WITH GREATER DISCIPLINE.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2018

Two Sides of Wayne Horvitz on New Releases

Wayne Horvitz at the piano (photograph by Daniel Sheehan, courtesy of AMT PR)

Paul de Barros, who wrote the liner notes for Wayne Horvitz' *Joe Hill*album, described him as a "defiant cross-breeder of genres." Early last month two new Horvitz albums were released, one of which makes a solid case for his ability to "cross-breed," while the other seems to have emerged from a week of free jazz jamming at its freest. Horvitz established himself in the New York scene in the late Eighties as a member of John Zorn's Naked City; but he has had no trouble blazing his own trails, both musically, and geographically, since he is now based in the northwest of this country.

Perhaps as a result of working with Zorn, Horvitz has never been afraid to venture into that domain that many would call "classical." His catalog includes five string quartets, an oratorio, and orchestral works for ensembles of different sizes. That aspect of his efforts is most evident on the album *Those Who Remain*, which seems to be available from Amazon.com only in digital form for either download or streaming. The title piece is a two-movement composition inspired by the writings of poet Richard Hugo. (The title of the first movement is also the title of a Hugo poem, "Three Stops to Ten Sleep.") Hugo is best known for writing about changing communities in the Pacific Northwest, and Horvitz' music amounts to a reflection on those settings that were of particular interest to the poet.

The remainder of the album is devoted to Horvitz' fourth string quartet, a four-movement composition given the title "These Hills of Glory." Once again, the music reflects the composer's interest in his natural surroundings. However, what is particularly interesting is that this piece was his second venture into augmenting the string quartet players with an improvising soloist. On the *Those Who Remain* album, that soloist is clarinetist Beth Fleenor, playing with the members of the odeonquartet (violinists Gennady Filimonov and Jennifer Caine, violist Heather Bentley, and cellist Page Smith).

Listening to this piece left me wondering about how it had been prepared. Clearly, the quartet had to put in a respectable amount of time on its own, working out specifics of phrasing and intonation that are not necessarily immediately obvious when reading through the score. This then raises the question of when and how Fleenor became part of the rehearsal process.

Put simply, how spontaneous can one player be when, for the other four players, spontaneity has more to do with execution, rather than invention? Obviously, this question cannot be answered by listening to a single recording of a single performance. Nevertheless, there is something about Fleenor's playing that suggests her role as being one of an imaginative observer; and, for me at least, that is enough to encourage me to spend more time listening to this composition.

The jamming album is *The Snowghost Sessions*; and, in this case, Amazon.com has made it available in both physical and digital forms. This is a trio album on which Horvitz plays an impressive variety of keyboard instruments, acoustic and electronic. The other trio members are Geoff Harper on bass and Eric Eagle on percussion. The album title comes from the fact that the trio had a week-long residency at the SnowGhost recording studio in Whitefish, Montana.

(The very idea of going to a remote location in Montana to make use of a high-quality recording studio is more than a little mind-boggling. The tradition of recording engineers inventing their own gear and then building their own studio to work with it optimally goes back at least to the days of Rudy Van Gelder. However, Whitefish is quite some distance from Englewood Cliffs. Oh, brave new world that has such places in it!)

Horvitz' trio did not go to SnowGhost with any well-defined objective in mind. Horvitz would sketch out charts and the group would play. While they were playing, the recording equipment would be running. By the end of the week it was clear that all three players needed to think about whether or not they had the material for an album. To paraphrase the final sentence from Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, they had and *The Snowghost Sessions* is it.