textura

Wayne Horvitz: *The Snowghost Sessions*
Songlines

Wayne Horvitz: *Those Who Remain*
National Sawdust Tracks

Ample ground has been covered by Wayne Horvitz in the decades since he first made a name for himself as part of the ‘80s downtown scene in New York and compadre of John Zorn, Bobby Previte, Bill Frisell, and others. Versatile and adaptable by nature, the Seattle-based keyboardist has shown himself to be comfortable in any number of contexts, whether it be playing in a raucous outfit such as Naked City or leading one of his own ensembles in material encompassing bebop, gospel, country, and funk. That his latest releases present such different sides, one a piano trio outing and the other a collection of classical works, is business as usual for Horvitz, who when not programming music for the Seattle performance venue The Royal Room might be found teaching composition as a professor at the Cornish College of the Arts.

His first trio record since the ‘80s (and first featuring piano, bass, and drums), *The Snowghost Sessions* came about in interesting manner. Having recorded years earlier at Brett Allen's SnowGhost Studios in Whitefish, Montana, Horvitz was contacted by him in early 2015 with an enticing offer: a week of free recording time in exchange for a private concert for guests of Allen's. Having summarily accepted the terms, Horvitz soon found himself cozily ensconced at SnowGhost with contrabassist Geoff Harper and drummer Eric Eagle in tow and acquainting himself with the studio's Steinway B grand piano. Intent on simply enjoying the process of making music together, the three brought a relaxed

mindset to the stay, the leader arriving with tunes and sketches and ready to supplement the piano's sound with live processing and other keyboards. Being mostly live takes, the tracks exude an improv feel, and though the compositions are credited to Horvitz, they're fundamentally collaborations. If there was a goal, it was, in his words, to realize an “organic marriage between the idea of a piano trio and some ideas I'd been exploring with amplified and processed piano.”

By his own admission, he's more comfortable as a collaborator or ensemble member than principal soloist, a role the piano trio tradition typically calls for. Given that, it's understandable that his playing on the recording would tends towards the restrained rather than imposing. One advantage of that tendency, however, is that music of nuance and texture is often the result, making for a recording whose intimate character invites the listener in. Harper and Eagle accentuate that quality further by following Horvitz's lead and supporting his playing without overpowering it.

Purely acoustic tracks dominate the fourteen presented, but there are also ones where non-piano elements are subtly incorporated. The faint whisper of mellotron is audible behind the trio interactions during “The Pauls,” for instance, the instrument's presence an appealing enhancement. Elsewhere, electric piano strengthens “No Blood Relation #1” in bolstering its mood of brooding mystery, and the addition of Hammond B-3 doesn't detract from the laid-back lope of “Northampton” either.

When heard alongside a thoroughly appealing and melodically distinguished acoustic setting such as the contemplative blues ballad “Trish,” those dominated by electronics fare less well; though “IMB,” for example, does boast strong uptempo playing by Harper and Eagle, its focus on electronic noisemaking makes for a gimmicky and shallow result; the pitch-bending squeal warbling through the background of “For James Tenney” is likewise more distraction than anything else. Moments like these, few though they are, make one wonder whether Horvitz might have been better to omit the non-acoustic elements altogether and treat the album as a pure piano trio affair. A composition as appealing as “Yukio and Nao's Duet” certainly suggests the recording wouldn't have lacked for anything had it been a purely acoustic trio date. Caveats notwithstanding, *The Snowghost Sessions*still very much rewards one's time, if for nothing else granting the opportunity to hear Horvitz playing piano in a trio context and doing so in semi-improvisatory manner.

In contrast to the relaxed approach adopted for the trio outing, the approach to the classical release involved a fairly methodical amount of preparation. For the two-movement title work, which drew for inspiration from the writings of Richard Hugo, a Seattle-based poet who traveled the Pacific Northwest, Horvitz undertook a road trip through Montana, going so far as to stay in a cabin frequented by the writer. The immediate result was the 2015 release *Some Places Are Forever Afternoon*, featuring instrumental treatments of Hugo poems, and now there's the 2015 concerto *Those Who Remain*, which Horvitz composed during a Wyoming residency near Ten Sleep, a town referenced in both Hugo's "Three Stops to Ten Sleep" poem and the title of the musical work's first movement. Whereas *These Hills of Glory* (2004), the four-movement string quartet that follows the title composition, has been performed by the Seattle-based Odeonquartet with a number of different soloists, among them Frisell, Ron Miles, and Peggy Lee, on this recording the quartet's paired with clarinetist Beth Fleenor.

Like *These Hills of Glory*, *Those Who Remain* features a soloist, in this case Frisell, who performs with the Northwest Sinfonia. It's not the first time the guitarist has acted in such a capacity, one memorable and somewhat comparable precedent being his contribution to Gavin Bryar's 1991 release *After the Requiem*, which features Frisell performing the title work with violinist Alexander Balanescu and two cellists.

"Three Stops to Ten Sleep" initiates *Those Who Remain* with an agitated, fast-paced episode that suggests the movement will be an aggressive allegro. But once that opening salvo ends, the material turns meditative, the orchestra dropping to an atmospheric hush that allows Frisell to emerge with fluid, textural patterns emblematic of his style. Gradually the music builds in intensity, its initial ponderousness morphing into dramatic, forceful expressions that see the soloist and orchestra operating at equivalent dynamic pitches, be they subdued or aggressive. Horvitz's writing here feels very much part of the American classical tradition, the work exuding qualities that in places suggest commonalities with Ives, Copland, and John Adams. If Frisell's playing on the sixteen-minute piece seems at times restrained (the noisier turn in the final seconds aside), the approach is nevertheless complementary to the material itself.

Twice as long as the concerto, *These Hills of Glory* ventures through four movements, with the contrast between the strings and Fleenor's clarinet pronounced. Of the two compositions, it seems like the more substantial, though that might be in part attributable to length. There's no denying the conviction of

Fleenor's performance, however, and Odeonquartet (violinists Gennady Filimonov and Jennifer Caine, violist Heather Bentley, and cello Page Smith) are as engaged. Tempo contrasts are plentiful, and passages alternate between languorous and aggressive episodes, the playing begging comparison to Bartok in its more intense moments. The piece is at its most memorable during its adagio-styled third movement, where high-pitched strings inhabit the upper regions, and the equally stirring resolution that follows in the sombre fourth.

Horvitz is no classical dabbler, by the way. Over the past couple of decades, he's written five string quartets, an oratorio, two chamber orchestra works, and numerous chamber pieces, and the assured pieces on the National Sawdust release show him to be perfectly comfortable in the milieu; of course a jazz dimension of sorts is also present in the inclusion of an improvising soloist, a move that adds an interesting element of unpredictability to the performances.

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