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**WORKSHOP FREIE MUSIK**  
BERLIN, MARCH 19-23, 1980

MARK LOCKETT

The contribution and importance of the Workshop Freie Musik, devoted to improvised music by piano-percussion duos, to a not-so-small minority-appeal area of German musical life was undeniably great, and was very much more than simply a promotional venture for FMP records.<sup>1</sup> One strong impression left by the five-day workshop is the extraordinary diversity of musical languages lumped together under the heading of 'free jazz', and their even more extraordinary interactions. The tense, dissonant avant-gardism of the free jazz of early 60s America is just one aspect of this. Another is the conglomeration of styles and ideas about sound production and the theatre of performance, which ten years ago might have raised the perennial and pointless question 'But is it jazz?' Well maybe not; but it is a multi-faceted language in which hidden axioms, diverse references and implied old codes suddenly stand revealed and are subsequently dropped.

'Out of creative anarchy emerges the new synthesis', wrote Koestler in *The Act of Creation*. The duo is perhaps the ideal medium for a clash of different styles as it is analogous to the most basic cell of relationship. The possibilities offered by the diversity/unity of the duo are comparable to the advantages of binocular vision, of a second language, of binomial-theory mathematics, or of the double proofs of geometry; for relationship is always the product of double description. The interaction of the improvising duo is similar to that of two eyes: each can give an independent monocular view; combined they give a single binocular view in depth. The members of a duo can play 'together', against each other (consciously), or quite independently: in the case of the last, a third 'vision' may belong exclusively to the outside listener, the players themselves being unaware of the music's composite direction. But most importantly, the duo has at its disposal the gamut of varied and unpredictable phenomena of relationship which cannot be internal to one person.

The solo, the monologue (and in jazz the monologue often predominates in larger, less intimate situations), when presented to an audience, is usually a theatre of formality, a considered statement delivered with a certain self-confidence. The dialogue is immediately less stable. Californian composer Robert Ashley has been concerned with exploring this precarious intimacy in his 'conversation pieces' - spontaneous conversation, including all its errors, ineloquence and embarrassed silences, as performance. In the duo, unlike the monologue, there is a mutual interference whose friction itself creates material for the continuation of the improvisatory process - a self-perpetuating chain of stimulus, response and reinforcement.

The workshop took place in the spacious ideal setting of the modern Akademie der Künste in the Hansa quarter of Berlin, in a bare white room with low ceiling and wooden-tiled floor, which looked as if it may actually have been a workshop at one time. The five consecutive evenings all followed the same format: four duos each played for about an hour. Despite this uniformity of presentation, each evening had a remarkably different character, from the rather awkward and tentative beginnings of the Wednesday to a peak of exuberance and intensity on Saturday. The last night, Sunday, felt by contrast curiously subdued and expectant, but produced some of the most refined and articulate, if not the most ebullient, music of the entire festival.

The duos:

Keith Tippett - piano Louis Moholo - drums	Bobby Few - piano Muhammad Ali - drums
Ulrich Gumpert - piano Günter Sommer - drums	Misha Mengelberg - piano Han Bennink - drums
Martin Theurer - piano Achim Goeke - drums	Irène Schweizer - piano Paul Lovens - drums
Bernhardt Arndt - piano Manfred Kussatz - drums	

The percussion playing was extremely varied, ranging from the typical free jazz 'drums-as-energy' sound to the continuing exploration of anything that can be struck, scraped or dropped. It was interesting to note the often very clear division into 'drummers' and 'percussionists', who

marked out very different territory for themselves, the 'drummers' sometimes becoming increasingly experimental. Manfred Kussatz demonstrated this particularly, and by his last performance (perhaps inspired by observing his fellows) had added some corrugated plastic sheets, wooden balls on strings and a beaten-up cymbal to his immaculate Premier kit.

It became more and more noticeable that there exists an inherent imbalance between the limitations and monochromy of the piano and the freedom and variety of the percussion. The pianists were restricted to one instrument and its particular timbre. (The piano itself was, in any case, totally inadequate and deteriorated markedly with each successive evening, needing more and more frequent tuning. It was unfortunate that a better instrument could not have been provided, especially since some of the sessions will no doubt feature on future FMP releases.) The imbalance was extended by the dynamic nature of much of the percussion playing and the percussionists' use of acoustical space (Günter Sommer's spinning gongs, Achim Goeke's running about the hall with thundersheets, and the antics of Han Bennink), by contrast with the necessarily static nature of the piano, and the fact that it is a more or less fixed sound source with only one acoustical perspective.

It was Hume who first distinguished between two basic forms of association: association by similarity and association by contiguity, the former creating a world of resemblance, closed systems and paradigms, the latter processes of logic (such as those of Western linguistics - words are formed by combinatory permutations of letters and phonemes). The Western mind is contiguity-biased because of its reliance on language: as signs are felt to acquire 'meaning' only through transliteration into the verbal code, it follows that the rational mind works by contiguous association. Indeed, when dealing with analogy, 'scientific' minds are extremely cautious, as this type of free association - by similarity - is almost (dare it be said?) non-scientific. Simile and metaphor are the devices of poetry and defy rational explanation. In the words of Paul Valéry, 'To summarise a thesis is to retain its essence, to summarise a poem is to lose its essence'.

Will anti-rational music defy our ingrained logocentrism? In some circles, reading a musical score is considered a comparable experience to actually hearing it - a useful skill, maybe, and one that makes it more possible to abstract the musical process to an idea or concept. However, the music of the workshop was a music of continuously evolving and unrepeatable process, not in any way fixed or 'edited' on the time domain through arbitrary substitutions. The sets often involved an hour of continuous playing, seamless, epic structures which were not concerned with economy or brevity (such as is sometimes found in the work of Fred van Hove or Iskra 1903) - the only way, I suppose, that an improvisation can be conceived as an 'object'.

Despite our insatiable desire to convert experience into words, a work of art will mutely resist description and analysis. Perhaps it is for this reason that much music of recent years, in overcoming the extreme formalism of an earlier generation, has retreated into a cosy world of self-reference. The similarity association seems to be highly favoured in new music: it can be found not only in repetitive and minimal/process musics but also in more academic styles of contemporary composed music, in the abundant use of pitch-matching and masking, and the use of homogeneous groups of instruments. It can also be found in improvised music: instrumental combinations of similar timbre and - the cliché sine qua non - close imitation between players, which often leads to a false feeling of security. Is this not contrary to the notion of music as language? Homogeneity of material fosters an unhealthy emphasis upon relationships internal to a given structure at the expense of communication of aesthetic substance. Furthermore, it shrinks the limits within which a player may bring an idea to its proper fruition. Of much greater interest in the improvising situation are the potential differences between diverse sources and ideas. Within whatever sensational range is adopted, discontinuities - forms of material opposition - are crucial to the clarity and communicability of the end result.

It was this difference, discontinuity and inherent dialectic, that manifested itself so clearly at the Workshop Freie Musik, within the narrow range of the piano-percussion combination. Differences between the duos, and between the members of each duo and their various kinds of dialogue and interplay, were laid against a background of ambivalent relationship between the instruments themselves, a combination laden with contiguity-based implications: piano



as percussion instrument, drums as melody instrument, common acoustical delay characteristics, the jazz 'rhythm section' or cocktail trio without the bass, and the strong precedents for piano-drums combinations in free jazz, such as many Cecil Taylor groups since 1961, the Don Pullen-Milford Groves duo of 1966 and others. However, such acoustical and historical points of contact did not overshadow the value of the work done here, but rather gave it greater depth. (In a common alphabetic/phonetic code there will always be shared forms and semantic cross-references.)

So to consider some of the duos individually: Martin Theurer and Achim Goeke represented the characteristic brand of German free jazz, using elements derived from contemporary American jazz and the European avant-garde, with emphasis on speed and nervous energy. Despite the feeling of having heard it all in different form before – the energy and density of free jazz, the metreless rhythm, and the abrupt contrasts introduced by echoes of European art music – the listener was struck by the closeness of the relationship between the two as an improvising duo. Although not widely known over here (Theurer's first record, *Moon Moods*, has recently been issued by FMP), they have played together as a duo for six years and during that time have sought to explore and develop points of correspondence between piano and percussion. Thus Theurer's piano playing is deliberately percussive, with a lot of fast alternating-hands technique, powered by wrists and forearms rather than finger articulation. This technique developed from a conscious decision to play percussively, to imitate stick technique (Theurer likens his stiff fingers to vibraphone mallets) and to make use of the key-action noise and high partials that come from loud playing. The main disadvantage of this, as Theurer pointed out in conversation, is the inability to gauge intervals and play scalic runs. However, it is clear that Theurer thinks in terms of blocks of sound rather than in sequential abstract pitches or harmony. Though he claims that the music is 'atonal' (an atonality derived from ballistic accident rather than from the deliberate avoidance of all that is 'tonal'), the dynamic extremes, unusual use of pedal washes, and simple but very effective piano preparations, coupled with a leisurely progression from one sound area to another, lent an epic quality to the music purely on the sound level, quite overshadowing any conscious manipulation of pitch content, if indeed there was any at all.

Achim Goeke's playing makes little or no reference to the conventions of jazz drumming, 'free' or otherwise, but instead takes sound exploration and timbral contrast as its starting-points. He uses a conventional kit in conjunction with other pitched instruments of varying degrees of resonance and sustain, including crotales and an enormous rack of home-made or found metal objects, and various mobile instruments – spinning gongs, cymbals to be thrown, sheet metal to be dragged across the floor, and, at one point, a thundersheet at which the audience was invited to throw stones. Though his playing tends to be more disjunctive, often demarcating the larger structural changes as well as contributing to its busy surface texture, he, like Theurer, leaves much to kinetic chance. Both of them use gestural motion, variations on simple body movements which have a high degree of unpredictability and randomness as to the actual notes that result, but their playing retains its cohesion (albeit one step removed from the physical involvement) through the strong musical intent and motivation.

The other West German duo, Bernhard Arndt and Manfred Kussatz, worked from the same starting-point of effusive energy, speed and contrast, but their approach was more overtly 'jazzy', and I think their music suffered because of it. It sounded rather like 'genre' music, as though they had defined for themselves the free jazz idiom but were uncomfortable with it. The random, ideo-kinetic playing of Theurer was quite different from Arndt's deliberate chromaticism, where the extensive use of seconds, sevenths and ninths and other patterns of obviously gestural origin seemed to have settled into clichéd formulas of notes. He tended to use the right hand for atonal runs or repeating patterns and the left hand as a harmonic support, often with chromatically shifting fourth chords sounding like rather aimless McCoy Tyner pastiche. Kussatz played a conventional drum kit, creating a continuous barrage of tensile and metreless rhythm, but it was all much too loud for a proper balance with the piano, particularly the high-pitched bass drum whose persistence gave the music an unintentionally monotonous underpinning (a drawback with some of Cecil Taylor's live recordings from the 1960s). The constant turbulence had a

strange effect on the ears. After not many minutes the music would seem quite flat and monochrome; it was only when this prevailing condition was left behind that other things stood out. Some of the most interesting moments occurred on the Sunday night, when Kussatz brought in additional percussion instruments to augment his kit, opening up possibilities of timbral contrast and abrupt changes of texture. Also the use of vocal sound (a lengthy monologue delivered into the piano), long silences between rapid bursts of sound, and a remarkable hand-percussion duet (drums, clapping, piano case and interior) developing from an infectious three-against-two rhythm, made this their most memorable performance.

The Lovens-Schweizer duo were, by contrast, a model of poise, balance and gracefulness and, arguably, were the most accomplished both expressively and technically. Although they came together as a duo only very recently, their improvisations sounded polished, almost like pre-structured pieces. The music was powerful yet never overbearing, avoiding the condition of perpetual restlessness of some of the other duos. I think the reason for this was partly that each change was very clearly articulated and that sound material for a section was used selectively yet explored thoroughly. The diathesis of free jazz as fast and loud was not taken for granted; when this type of movement was favoured it seemed to be the result of a conscious decision. Above their natural empathy as sensitive improvisers, they remained surprisingly individual and different from each other. Lovens's playing is quite linear in conception and non-repetitive, commanding a huge and constantly changing dynamic range. His kit is comparatively small and is made up almost entirely of Chinese and Indian drums. It also incorporates a number of small instruments and objects strewn over the floor around his feet – miscellaneous cymbals, pieces of wood, metal, bamboo, etc. – which are picked up, placed on drums or piled on one another. This modular arrangement and Lovens's own style seem geared to exploring dichotomies of flow/stasis, sustain/decay, and continuity/disjunction. Thus texturally dense and varied passages are interpolated with periods of sparsity, dry sounds with sustained sounds, timbral richness with functional drum-strokes. There was a curious contrast between the non-resonance of the drums used and the varied and refined techniques of sustain, such as very even rolls (often with one hand) played on the riveted casings or rims with notched sticks. Irène Schweizer's playing, on the other hand, was more episodic: having defined a particular area or idea, she explored it exhaustively, often by means of repetition, before moving on to the next. I sensed a certain uneasiness on the part of Lovens at Schweizer's bold use of syncopated and 'jazzy' sections, stolidly refusing to play time, but these sections worked nevertheless.

Bobby Few and Muhammad Ali were the only Americans among all the Europeans, and their approach was very different – free jazz as ritual or ecstatic communion rather than 'musical genre'. Musical rapport seemed coincidental to the extraordinary energy and abandon which they possessed as individuals, converging on an emotional level rather than a musical one (perhaps this explains the often amusing non-correspondence of tempos and transitions). They used their voices for much of the time as part of this communion, and the shouts and cries were a natural extension of the instrumental music. This particularly cast doubt on the idea of vocal and instrumental music as being quite separate, each having its own autonomous history and culture – an idea propounded by Curt Sachs and later taken up by writers in *Musics*. Here, as in many tribal cultures, the singing was an integral part of a refined muscular activity. The music moved fluently from metred to non-metred sections (the latter usually the result of the former no longer being able to be 'contained'), and incorporated fragments of composed material, mostly from an open-ended piece by Bobby Few called *Continental Jazz Express*, which consists of sections in diverse styles and moods, connected by a simple theme representing a train on its journey from one place to another – a type of free jazz *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

The work of Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink as a duo is now fairly well known through their FMP recordings. There were three opportunities to hear their bizarre incidental music; incidental, that is, to a spontaneous and hilarious theatre (but perhaps the question of which comes first is not really important). The absence of this visual theatre is the one – unavoidable – fault of their records. Their performances were, needless to say, the most visually entertaining of the whole festival, and brought to the fore, even parodied, the



dynamic (in both sound and movement senses) imbalances of piano and drums. Bennink not only used the whole stage area for hitting, throwing, bouncing, rattling and jumping, but the entire hall. Mengelberg, on the other hand, spent much of the time in comparative inertia, hunched at the piano with coffee and cigarette, just contemplating the keyboard, sometimes tentatively trying a few notes, a snatch of tune, listening thoughtfully. His languor and subtle changes in facial expression were totally opposite to the vivacity, slapstick aggressiveness and enormous spatial distribution of Bennink's playing, and that arrant disconnection between two people who were meant to be playing as an ensemble was perhaps the funniest thing of all. When unable to compete, Mengelberg walked around, did keep-fit exercises or encouraged audience applause and participation. At times their disparity seemed positively antagonistic – Bennink's yells and loud crashes came at Mengelberg's quietest moments, and once Mengelberg stomped off the stage to retaliate by rattling the cloakroom coathangers noisily, returning only to find Bennink applying sticks to the keyboard – yet beneath all this there was a strange unity and moments of perfect synchronisation which made them both smile in spite of themselves. The music was a pastiche of different gestures, clichés, styles and idioms, haphazardly but authoritatively assembled. Mengelberg's playing included snippets of Beethoven sonatas, perverted cocktail pianism, jazz standards with curiously elongated changes and unresolved cadences which would take on their own ridiculous form, and fantastic parodies of practising and of fists-and-elbows free jazz pianists. Bennink likewise parodied the more exuberant free jazz drummers, knocking over most of his kit in the process, played swing on floor and biscuit tins, stamped out rhythms on the resonant makeshift stage, played his drums with wet towels, other peoples' with showers of dried beans.

Though at quite the opposite pole from the extrovert theatricality of Mengelberg and Bennink, the Keith Tippett-Louis Moholo duo were among the best actual performers, being musically varied yet qualitatively consistent in spite of unfavourable circumstances – Tippett's illness with flu, and the fact that they were, in all three appearances, the last duo of the evening, starting at a time when most of the audience was ready to leave to catch last trains or because of plain (and understandable) saturation. Nevertheless, they felt responsibly obliged to provide – and succeeded in providing – on each occasion a marked contrast with the rest of the evening's performances, never sacrificing their stylistic integrity. While making occasional reference to modal playing, fragments of blues, dense and heavily disguised chord changes, and the 'rhythm-as-energy' school of free jazz drumming, this was no tribute or pastiche, but rather an acknowledgement of common roots which have put forth strikingly individual growth. They demonstrated the quality, often lacking in free jazz, of musical strength without violence, control and quiet insistence rather than eruption and ferocious density, and avoided typical shock tactics of loud sounds dramatic crescendos and cut-offs and abrupt changes. This is not to say that the music was relaxed; just the opposite in fact, it was very dense in terms of numbers of notes, but it was a density that built and declined slowly in huge waves, balancing urgency with a sense of epic design. The performances generally followed a distinct format: periods of exploration, in which ideas were thrashed out – dealt with one by one, sometimes tentatively and disjunctly – alternated with periods of dynamic or tonal stasis, in which repeating or slowly transforming patterns of rapid notes, often distilled from the preceding exploration, became hypnotic or obsessive. These passages had a tendency to become longer and longer and increasingly selective in the use of material, while the exploratory passages assumed the function of transitions between them. Whereas free jazz piano style has often stressed the essential independence of the hands, both from jazz cliché and function (left hand for harmony, right hand for melody) and from each other, Keith Tippett's technique is largely derived from investigating their mutual interdependence. Both hands are almost always involved in the same task, whether this be 'locked-hands' chordal playing (echoes of Brubeck and Garner) or building up a single complex line by means of alternate notes or note groups in each hand. Much of his playing involves interlocking isometric patterns with the hands on top of each other (a technique associated more with the playing of process music than with free jazz), which can also develop freely in any number of directions. Their last performance, on the Sunday night, which also concluded the whole workshop, was a

curiously haunting example of this free jazz process music, where instrumental patterns merged with vocal sounds echoing nocturnal animal calls and emerged again to create a continuum of unpitched noise (prepared piano and cymbals), providing a quietly fitting end to the night.

#### NOTE:

<sup>1</sup>Free Music Production (Behaimstrasse 4, 1000 Berlin 10; tel. 030 341 5447) is a specialist label issuing recordings of European improvised music. Its main outlet in the UK is Collets Folk/Jazz Record Shop, 180 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2; tel. 01 240 3969.

#### SELECTIVE DISCOGRAPHY:

*Ovary Lodge*, Keith Tippett (piano), Julie Tippett (voice), Harry Miller (bass), Frank Perry (percussion). (Ogun 600)  
*Family Affair*, Keith Tippett (piano), Harry Miller (bass), Marc Charig (cornet), Louis Moholo (drums). (Ogun 310)  
*Keith Tippett's Ark*, 22-piece orchestra. (Ogun Ogd 003/4)  
*Boundaries*, Elton Dean Quintet, with Marc Charig (cornet), Keith Tippett (piano), Marcio Mattos (drums), Louis Moholo (drums). (Japc 60033)  
*The Unlone Rain Dancer*, Keith Tippett (piano). (Universal Productions 2LS 48)  
*Echos von Karolinhof*, Ulrich Gumpert Workshop Band. (FMP 0710)  
*... Jetzt geht's Kloss!*, Gumpert-Sommer duo. (FMP 0620)  
*Hörmusik*, Günter Sommer (percussion). (FMP 0790)  
*Moon Mood*, Martin Theurer (piano). (FMP 0700)  
*Working*, Arndt-Kussatz duo. (FMP 0750)  
*Few Coming Thru*, Bobby Few (piano). (Sun SEB 001)  
*Continental Jazz Express*, Bobby Few (piano). (Jazz Today 5/Vogue 405)  
*Diom Futa*, Bobby Few (piano), Cheikh Tidiane Fall (percussion), Jo Maka (soprano saxophone). (Free Bird FB 209/FRL 001)  
*Mengelberg/Bennink Duo*. (ICP 010)  
*Han Bennink Solo*. (ICP 011)  
*Brötzmann/Mengelberg/Bennink*. (FMP 0670)  
*Einepartietischtennis*, Mengelberg-Bennink duo. (FMP/SAJ-03)  
*Han Bennink Solo: West Ost*. (FMP/SAJ-21)  
*Pech Onderweg*, Misha Mengelberg (piano). (Bvhaast 016)  
*Tetterettet*, ICP-Tentet (ten-piece band with Mengelberg and Bennink). (ICP 020)  
*ICP-Tentet in Berlin*. (FMP/SAJ-23)  
*Messer*, Irène Schweizer (piano), Rüdiger Carl (saxophones), Louis Moholo (drums). (FMP 0290)  
*Hexensabbat*, Irène Schweizer (piano). (FMP 0500)  
*Was it Me?*, Paul Lovens-Paul Lytton percussion duo. (Po Torch 1)  
*The Very Centre of Middle Europe*, Schweizer-Carl duo. (Hat Hut 10)