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COMPANY 6

Incus 29

COMPANY 7

Incus 30

Obtainable from Incus Records, 112 Hounslow Road, Twickenham TW2 7HB

RED BIRD (Trevor Wishart)

YES 7

BEACH SINGULARITY and **MENAGERIE** (Trevor Wishart)

YES 8

Obtainable from Trevor Wishart, c/o Electronic Music Studio, University of York, Heslington, York YO1 5DD

THE SOLO TRUMPET 1966-76 (John Wallace with Lysis)

SOMA 781

DUALYSES (Lysis)

SOMA 782

Obtainable from Soma Distribution, 23 Westfield Terrace, Longford, Gloucester GL2 9BA

AWAKENINGS (Tim Wheeler)

Reflection Records RR 0101

Obtainable from Reflection Records Ltd, 11 Pond Street, London NW3 2PN

DESCRIPTIVE IMPROVISATIONS (Dave Maddison)

MADD 1

Obtainable from Dave Maddison, 5 Andrew Street, Easington Colliery, Co. Durham

FROM SCRATCH PERFORM RHYTHM WORKS (Philip Dadson)

From Scratch PRA 905

Obtainable from Scratch, PO Box 6298, Wellesley Street, Auckland 1, New Zealand, or Philip Dadson, 16 Glenfield Road, Birkenhead, Auckland 10, New Zealand

THE LONGEST NIGHT (John Stevens, Evan Parker), Vol. 1

Ogun OG120

Obtainable from Ogun Recording Ltd, 35 Eton Avenue, London NW3 3EP

MUSIC FOR CONTRABASS QUINTET (John Voigt)

Baker St. Studios BSS 101

Obtainable from Baker St. Studios, 1072 Belmont St, Watertown, Massachusetts, USA

VICTORIAN TIME MACHINE (Richard David Hames, Barry Conyngham, James Fulkerson)

MOVE MS 3028

Obtainable from Move Records, Box 266, Carlton South, Victoria 3053, Australia; individual copies £4.00 from Jim Fulkerson, Barton Workshop, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EJ

HILARY BRACEFIELD

After Keith Potter's philosophic survey of the improvisatory music scene in his review of Bead records in *Contact 21*,¹ I have, I'm afraid, space for short reviews only of this mixed bag of records. The notes to Keith Potter's review refer to many previous *Contact* record reviews and in those you may read several other views of the wisdom of committing modern experimental music to plastic. I will not add to that discussion,

merely observing that my main feeling after I had listened to all twelve records was one of wonder and admiration for all those who launch themselves into a business so risky nowadays that even the record giants are teetering. I note, however, that the Arts Councils here and in Australia and New Zealand are prepared to support some of this activity – Company, Trevor Wishart, From Scratch and Victorian Time Machine all acknowledge help.

I start, for the reason that I enjoyed them the most, with the Company records. Here we have the two final records of the Company series made during Company Week 1977. (Again, see Keith Potter's *Contact 21* review for details of information on this group in *Musics*.) The ten musicians who came together in that week are all featured on these two records, although the most that perform together at any one time is five – unless an occasional one has slipped in uncredited: it's not always easy to tell. Each record has one side of music played in front of audiences and one of music played without an audience – there's no discernible difference; some tracks are 'selections' from longer pieces; all are free improvisations. The immediacy of live performance is, of course, lost, and if one is not prepared to listen very closely it's likely that the lack of organised form allows the attention to drift; but I found I wanted to play this music more than once. It certainly does not work as background music – a definite compliment.

The extracts appearing on these two records exhibit a high degree of rapport between the players (occasionally, though, antipathy sparks off material, as in *Company 6*, side 2, track 1) and may have been chosen for that reason. The editing procedures are, of course, a mystery, and it's sad that there must be lots of other music not being released. The 'manic' nature of the work of Han Bennink, Tristan Honsinger and others is not as evident as I expected, but this could be a consequence of not *seeing* what the percussion player is doing or of being able to control the sound volume oneself. So on record it's the music that matters, and most tracks bear repeated hearings. Try the long extract on *Company 6* featuring Leo Smith, a Braxton – Parker duo on *Company 7*, a quintet on the same disc with Honsinger talking away, or the four saxophones taking off on side 2.

The degree of commitment to exciting improvisation that these records show made the disc by Lysis, a group whose work I respect, seem much less rewarding. The eight tracks here are termed 'compositions', but to what extent they are written down pieces or more improvisational structures I would be interested to know. Certainly they all *sound* very like the free improvisation in which Lysis indulge in concert. A problem of Lysis's work is the length of the pieces. On the record they are all between four minutes and eight and a half minutes, and it is that period of time which can make improvisational or experimental pieces seem most nebulous. A lot can be said concisely in two minutes, or to exhaustion in 14 or 20 or so, but often nothing definite comes out of that period in between. As the title *Dualyses* implies, most pieces are duos – Roger Dean and Hazel Smith on bass and violin with some ring modulation, Roger Dean with Ashley Brown (bass and percussion), and one percussion solo piece. Lysis seem wary of exploiting the ranges of tonal possibilities of their instruments or of exploiting an idea to its fullest. What comes across is a timidity, a lack of conviction.

As a complete contrast, and to complement the Company records on which he appears, try Evan Parker on *The Longest Night* in a duo with John Stevens (percussion and cornet). No timidity herel 'Evan and I are two of the most skilled interpreters... of this highly specialised form of improvisation of which this extended performance, covering two volumes, is an excellent example', says Stevens on the sleeve. No timidity in the music either. Three tracks altogether of Parker's obsessed, brilliant exploration of his instrument, with Stevens knowing when to join in, when to accompany, and when to shut up. I don't feel I *like* the soprano saxophone by the end of the record, but I feel I know nearly everything Parker can do with it.

The Parker – Stevens duo recorded their album on the longest night of 1976. A record from the other side of the world features an ensemble, From Scratch, who regularly perform a drumming event in the crater of an extinct volcano in Auckland on the longest night of the year in New Zealand (i.e. in June). It's open to all. This record of their music includes drumming pieces for four people. The pieces are long, the ideas for the use of pitched drums, chimes, tubes and bells carefully thought out, and the permutations gone through. It all comes out, however, rather bland and dull, *too* regular, without the blood-stirring that 26 minutes of

drumming should produce. The group, incidentally, would welcome correspondence, information, and exchange of ideas with others. Write to Philip Dadson, who was, by the way, a member of the Scratch Orchestra, at the address above. On first hearing the end of side 2 of the record I thought that either there was something wrong with my record-player or there was a bird twittering somewhere. Subsequent playings revealed the sound to be high-pitched bells in the music.

In *Awakenings* by Tim Wheeler, however, the bird noises on the second track are real. By the end of this disc I felt as if I had been pulled slowly through a bath of warm liquid turkish delight and then rolled gently over and over in violet-coloured sugar. Wheeler is a flautist who has discovered heights of sweetness that James Galway hasn't yet touched. He plays flutes, bells, gongs, vibraphone and synthesizer himself (over-dubbing used), and is even moved to sing his mystic experiences by the end of side 2. The birds were recorded at dawn, and he is joined on two live tracks by Paul Donovan (guitar) and Yuki Horimoto (bass). The titles - 'Awakenings', 'Perfumed Garden', 'The Wanderer', 'To Ecstasy', etc. - will give you an idea of the sounds of this record and whether it is for you.

Dave Maddison is unknown to me. As an electric-guitar player he is concerned to explore the possibilities of the instrument along paths nearer to the improvisational player than the rock experimenter. He has used his titles to good effect to spark off his improvisations. There's some obviousness about 'Derbyshire Caves' and 'Largo for Whales', and by the end of side 2 one feels that he is repeating material, but there is a measure of real inventiveness in Maddison's work which makes me hope he is continuing his explorations.

A curiosity that arrived at the *Contact* office was the record by John Voigt, bass player from Berklee College of Music. 'Slum Settings for Five Basses?' 'Bingo: A Game for Contrabass Quintet & Chorus of Elderly Women's Voices?' Well, 'Bingo' should be of interest to sociologists. Tape of American ladies playing the game and their phlegmatic caller (no calls of '66, clickety-click' and such-like in the USA) is interrupted by basses responding to the calls with their own musical bingo card instructions. A nice idea, but there isn't enough interest in the bass parts for it to work. 'Slum Settings' presents Voigt's intimate honey-dark voice reading extracts from an Olympia Press book (with bass accompaniment). Your reviewer was quite surprised at this slightly pornographic bonus.

On, hastily, to two records of 'composed' music. Trumpeter John Wallace, who appears regularly with Lysis, is heard in music for solo trumpet by Henze, Rautavaara, Wolpe and Justin Connolly (with tape), for trumpet and piano with Roger Dean (Iain Hamilton's *5 scenes*), and Wallace's own *Rhapsody* for trumpet and bass. (There is also a track of Christian Wolff's *Edges* with Lysis.) It is very hard to make solo trumpet music sound unlike trumpet exercises, and most of these pieces don't quite manage it. The Connolly work is the only one to exploit the jazz potential of the instrument, as well as pitting its virtuosity against itself and other elements on the tape, and Wallace's own rather improvisation-like piece also held my interest. I'm glad, in spite of what I have said, that the modern repertoire for solo instruments should be heard and recorded.

Another record from the other side of the world is *Victorian Time Machine*. From the rather messy cover information one gradually gleans that this is an ad hoc group in Melbourne based on the Victorian College of the Arts. Three works by composers working in the city are presented. In Richard David Hames's *Nuper rosarum flores*, Dufay's motet (sung first in a rather breathy performance by the college's Renaissance Ensemble) is used as the reference point of Hames's own meditation on its elements for instrumental ensemble. Slow-moving and beautiful pointillistic sounds cohere in an ending where the motet's own final section for voices merges with the ensemble. *To Be Alone* by Barry Conyngham explores in Ligeti-like fashion semi-improvisatory parts by the soloists (soprano, tenor, trombone and cello) against a tape background of long chordal lines divided up by sharply-struck bell tones. Most of this worked together well, and a live performance would be quite exhilarating, but the characterisations of loneliness by the soloists were often to me embarrassing rather than convincing. James Fulkerson's *Music for Brass Instruments III* is a deliberately unambitious piece which handles the sound of the twelve brass instruments well. It uses a quiet Feldman-like chordal basis

for slow or sudden excursions from the norm, building up to a climax, but tailing off disappointingly. The record is not faultless, most players and singers presumably being students, but it is to be commended for offering work being done in Australia to a wider public.

Trevor Wishart's efforts in promoting his work deserve recognition, but his music can, of course, stand on its own. Of the music on the two records being considered here, I was not happy with the presentation of *Beach Singularity*. The music is too strongly related to the whole events of the day on the beaches on which the performances were done to succeed in this potted form. It can be considered only a souvenir of those events. *Menagerie*, however, I am glad to welcome on disc. If you did not see an exhibition of the collection of assemblages by performance artists for which Wishart composed the tape music, then the record insert gives pictures of and information on the six 'sculptures'. I enjoyed the exhibition when I saw it at the Birmingham Arts Lab in 1975, and still find the music inventive: 'Musical Box' with its cracked record of dreams, the under-water bubbling and breathing of 'Aqualung' (long before Kate Bush), the domestic sounds of 'Still Life', and the wittiness of 'Spam Guitar'.

The appearance of this disc at the same time as that of *Red Bird* brings home how far it was, in fact, an earlier exploration of some of that material. Trevor Wishart's own assemblage for *Menagerie* - 'Vision' - and the music for it, play with the word 'reasonable', as does *Red Bird*; and the nightmares of 'Dreamer', and the eruptions of the real world outside into 'Still Life' are direct links with later work, an earlier manifestation of a political conscience which is concerned to use musical terms for its ideas.

If Wishart's earlier *Journey into Space* took one away from the world's problems, the protagonist in *Red Bird* tries to escape, or for sanity has to escape, in his dreams, but is always brought back to reality. In the context of the piece, the bird sounds, at first seeming rather trite transformations of the vocal sounds, become gradually almost unbearable symbols of freedom. Carefully worked out the whole design may be, and the fascinating accompanying booklet (available for £3) gives very great detail on all of it, but it is the cumulative musical effect which makes this work such an achievement. It is not only the bird sounds that could remain trite, but Wishart, in his determination to make the listener become part of his 'political prisoner's dream', utilises the obviousness of much tape sound, forces it further, and combines it with natural sounds and the potency of words to present a musical document that cannot be ignored.

NOTE:

¹ Keith Potter, 'Free Improvisation: a Review', *Contact* 21 (Autumn 1980), pp.18-23.