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## Densités Festival

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Fresnes-en-Woëvre, France  
October 23 to 25 2009

A rural French hamlet in the Lorraine countryside isn't the setting you imagine for a world-class festival of unadulterated Electronic and Free Music. Yet the Densités Festival in Fresnes-en-Woëvre – population 500 – about 80 kilometres from Nancy, is that. During three days in late October, the 16th Edition presented a sonic banquet of unstoppable Free Jazz, minimalist improv, sound installations, electro-acoustic meetings, poetry recitations and interactions between instrumentalists and dancers.

Equally fascinating were the duets between American bassist Barre Phillips and French dancer Emmanuelle Pépin opening night and French saxophonist Eddy Kowalski and the body movements of Alain Sallet the next. Both performances used wooden chairs as props, but while Kowalski rested in his to comment on Sallet's elasticized movements, Phillips-Pépin were more proactive.

With the chair serving variously as body support, dance partner and booty to be used and or withdrawn from one by the other, Pépin also balances on it or swept the chair in circles – that is when she isn't miming anger or marching robotically stiff-legged mocking the bassist's sul ponticello squeals. For his part Phillips sometimes strums his four-strings guitar-like, scrapes the strings on the neck near the scroll while mumbling or yodeling. He seems to spend more time brushing the stage with his bow, dragging the bull fiddle across the floor or pulling sounds from the bass's back and belly than sounding the strings.

On the other hand, except when Kowalski resonates his sax notes parallel to the ground or sticks the bell upwards, he doesn't subvert his sonic role. He confines himself to simple pinched vibrato trills or propelled pure air through the horn's body tube. In contrast, Sallet is in perpetual motion; at points crawling crab-like on his hands and knees, at others repeatedly leaping and grasping for something unseen; other times throwing himself down and up from the ground like a rag doll. Wobbling on bandy legs or exposing a hollow-legged gait with arms askew, Sallet suddenly pauses to pant dog-like, cough, retch, gasp, or, in response to a spiraling atonal line from Kowalski, dance a solitary tango. Finally as the saxophone whistles altissimo, Sallet leans backwards, slithering along the floor.

This sort of cross-platform improvising was expressed differently in two electro-acoustic meetings; one with German synth-manipulator Thomas Lehn, Austrian trumpeter Franz Hautzinger and French saxophonist Bertrand Gauguier; the other a Gallic admixture of Sophie Agnel's prepared piano plus the electronics of Lionel Marchetti and Jérôme Noetinger. The later trio's extended improvisation balances on sped-up and decelerated ostinatos from Noetinger's electronics, which infrequently accelerate shrilly to interrupt the pianist's lyricism. Prepared with plastic drinking glasses and rubber balls, the strings on Agnel's piano echo smacked and stopped arpeggios, knife-blade scrapes and resounding wooden clanks. When he wasn't recording piano sounds to play back in real-time unison with Agnel's improvising, Marchetti manipulates a tape-wrapped, telephone extension among his equipment as if he's a doctor using a stethoscope to probe a patient. In the performance, electronic loops, and flanges eventually give way to Agnel's march tempo, Marchetti short wave-styled

static and Noetinger rumbling what could have been a primitive blues tune.

Reversing the number of plugged-in and hand-held sound sources, Gauguet/Lehn/Hautzinger's interface sounds no more or less acoustic than Agnel/Marchetti/Noetinger's. However Lehn's rumbling vibrations, quivering wave forms and occasional ring modulator-like clangs steady the improvisations, as Hautzinger complements the saxophonist's unaccented puffs. Circumscribing his soprano saxophone in the air, Gauguet produces high-pitched reed bites as Hautzinger's horn yelps and barks and Lehn burbles sound waves swollen to chunky vamps. Eventually the keyboardist's jabs simmer unhurriedly as the horns' double counterpoint dissolve into multi-syllabic, tremolo runs from the trumpeter and overblowing peeps from the saxophonist. Sonic equanimity is achieved when Gauguet's over-extended rubato runs are superseded by pinging crackles and wiggling oscillations from the synthesizer.

Mostly unplugged connective voltage was on display via the Hairy Bones quartet of German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann, the trumpet and electronics of Japan's Toshinori Kondo, Norwegian drummer Paal Nilssen-Love and Italian electric bassist Massimo Pupillo. Operating full blast, the reedist's floor-shaking bawling and nephritic split tones are hypnotically matched by the trumpeter's screeching tremolo pitches, the bass guitarist's grinding flanges plus the drummer's clobbering back beat that impresses head-bangers.

This wall of sound is occasionally breached when Kondo uses foot-pedal action to extend his triplet overtones or during Brötzmann's unaccompanied breaks, where the sounds seemed to issue as much from his solar plexus and stomach limning as his lungs. During its Sunday afternoon set the quartet divides into duos or trios without slacking its sonic wallop. For instance, Pupillo's thick strums match Nilssen-Love continuous stroking; Brötzmann's altissimo cries face off with the rhythm section's relentless beat; or Kondo's pitched squeals join bent saxophone note for a balladic approximation. Smears, scrapes, rubs and trills shrilly echo during the set's climatic moments, almost literally shaking the stage before concluding.

No stages are shaken during the festival's other outstanding acoustic set a day pervious. Trumpeter Birgit Ulher from Hamburg and alto saxophonist Heddy Boubaker from Toulouse push foreshortened air current through their respective instruments, frequently pianissimo, but often studded with key percussion, tongue slaps and reed cries. Boubaker, who at times plays his horn at a 180 degree angle, also places his mouthpiece perpendicularly, the better to expel wide expanses of pure air. Ulher amplifies some of her mutes through a small radio, but the resulting splintered timbres and watery slurps don't alter the minimalist note construction. Rewarding attentive listening, the two expose the partials and extensions of many notes with their laser-focused improvising.

More spectacular, but as dedicated to wringing the least obvious textures from his instrument(s) is Australian percussionist Robbie Avenaim. Theatrical in presentation, his solo set Saturday evening finds him seated behind a regular drum kit surrounded by four additional bass drums, three extra snares plus another drum stick hanging from a stand designed to strike the cymbals and snares beneath it. Using a motorized voltage controller, Avenaim programmed the auxiliary percussion to play a pre-determined rhythm, follow his live strokes or create random beats. Strokes, volume and tempi varied; while his soloing concentrates on rim shots, sizzle cymbal tonality, drum-top patterning and abrasive whacks on the drums' unyielding sides.

Sonic inventiveness extends to a spatial installation, as Berlin's Burkard Beins demonstrates Sunday afternoon in the foyer of the village's ornate city hall. Plastic string was linked to Styrofoam boxes mounted on the walls at different angles, another box filled with flashlight batteries on the ground. Beins conjures alchemist-like unmistakable percussion and string timbres from the set up. By stroking, plucking, pulling and twisting the strings the contrapuntal results resonating through nearby speakers include extended textures along with designated tones. Resembling a marionette when his hands are simultaneously attached to more than one string, Beins is no puppet but in complete control. Highpoint of the performance is when he uses a sanding motion to rub together two Styrofoam boxes, about the size of transistor radios, to create first a low-pitched buzz for a few measures, then by moving them along the strings, cello-like sustained textures.

Verbal improvisation wasn't neglected at Densités. During two very different recitals, Paris poet Damien Schultz dramatically demonstrates the onomatopoeic and homonymic qualities of various French words and phrases. Appropriately his poems are enlivened by word and sense play, with subtle layers of meanings.

The out-of-the-way location of Fresnes-en-Woëvre often made it feel as if the participants were trapped inside an improvisational bubble. Yet the majority of Densités' performances compensate for any isolation.

-- Ken Waxman

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