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Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear
BVHaast

By Ken Waxman

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Strings in multiples sets are the focus of these CDs, which match electronics to traditional instruments in programs that in most cases could only be created in the 21st Century. Featuring musicians from five European countries and the United States, they also suggest that globalism can be beneficial – when it involves sounds rather than commercial trade. All the discs feature strings manipulated in different fashions, although the majority of musicians are playing some variation of the world's most popular string set – the guitar.

Sticks and Stones highlights all that can be done with the six-string, when the 11 [!] members of the British-based London Electric Guitar Orchestra (L.E.G.O.) combine forces. Even more sound-oriented, Fibre matches up the six-string guitars and electronics of Zürich-based Thomas Korber and Keith Rowe of the United Kingdom with the ipod and electronics of Günther Müller of Itingen Switzerland; while Uotha is a first-time meeting between Chicago drummer Hamid Drake and Sardinian Paolo Angeli, whose cello-sized, guitar from North Sardinia, has extra strings and a bridge and is played with either fingers or a bow.

More minimally, Amsterdam-based Jozef van Wissem extends the timbres of his 10-course lute with electronics and pre-recorded airfield sounds on Objects in Mirror are Closer than They Appear. Finally, showcasing the most labor-saving method of preparing an instrument, No Heroes features both Charles-Henry Beneteau and Christophe Havard from St-Nazaire, France playing the same guitar, remotely controlled with a computer and mixer and extended with installations.

Concentrating many of the machine or man-made vibrations and pulsations that a full-sized electro-acoustic band would display, the 10-year-old L.E.G.O. runs through three semi-improvised/semi-notated tracks in less than 20 minutes. An augmentation of many of the sonic experiments art schools lecturer and conductor John Bisset has advanced with only one guitar partner – Alex Ward – or German drummer Burkhard Beins, the buzzing, clinking, tapping and slack key effects create one 66-string instrument, that here is played by Christopher Evans, Simon Williams, Perry, Viv Dogan Corringham, Michael Rogers, Ivor Kallin, Nigel Teers and Jon Lever; plus Jem Finer and Darryl Hunt of the Pogues band, as well as Bisset.

Extending ring modulator whooshes, delay, zooms and drones, the massed strings can sometimes be so overwhelming that they nearly suck all the

available air from the compositions. Recurrent tremolo whammy-bar excursions and modulated feedback buzzes make things even more claustrophobic. Alternately by attaching alligator clips or raising the strings horizontally, then using knitting needles, the massed plectrumists produce bell-ringing, aviary-styled chirps that scramble upwards from metallic scrapes and widely-spaced harmonized strokes to whines and flanges. At times, as well, chromatic licks that could come from old-timey banjos are transformed into slurred finger picking and superseded by steady rasgueado strums – then reprised in different combinations.

Related to this sort of guitar retuning and rethinking but on a micro scale are Abs (.) Hum and Korber/Rowe/Müller, whose conceptions resemble one another's. A maximum of two guitarists are involved in Fibre and No Heroes, with both aggregations using electronics and distinctive preparations to create wave forms that rarely relate to standard guitar sounds. A self-described tinkerer, who recorded on soprano and tenor saxophones with Rowe and the members of AMM, Havard has found the perfect partner for guitar à distance in the initially self-taught Beneteau, whose background encompasses rock, blues and multi-guitar chamber music.

Using small engines, and chord-pulling-initiated vibrations and tension, the two players glide among the strings without colliding with one another, diffusing distorted tones that range from walloped drones to bell-like sideband whooshes. Using delay for repeated effects, at points Havard and Beneteau resonate folksy strums ad infinitum and build up to jet plane-like quivering resonance elsewhere. Sometimes electronically triggered facsimiles of sounded timbres are immediately mixed with primary signals so the number of phantom guitarists multiples as well. Sharp, near ear-piercing noises shrill as do pseudo-cymbal cracks. When these blend with concentrated buzzes and drones, the texture suggested is that of a constantly revolving dust-encrusted turntable.

In spite of piezo pickups isolating individual string tones and split-second sound loops, flat-picked tones and palm-tapped string distortions are audible as well as are staccato finger-picking not to mention constantly rotating rasgueado rubs and associated echoes. The coarse overlay from the preparations allow triggered loops of sound to disappear, then appear and augment in volume and intensity until the two human performers subside into infrequent metallic clanking.

Linked even more to electronic fluttering and delays, Fibre extends first-generation electro-acoustic diagnostics from Rowe, whose playing partners have ranged from percussionist Beins to British saxophonist Evan Parker and Müller, who has partnered the Swiss cracked everyday-electronic band Voice Crack and British soundsinger Phil Minton among many others, with concepts from 27-year-old computer scientist Korber, whose collaborators range from ex-Voice Cracker Norbert Möslang to Japanese no-input-mixing-board specialist Toshimaru Nakamura.

During the course of two 20-minute and one shorter track, triggered sequences and droned static often complicate and stabilize the results, nearly stripping them of all string references. One example is the second track which, like the others, is untitled. Broadened with envelopes of buzzing motor-driven twists plus percolating watery billows, these high-pitched almost inaudible squeaks are resequenced into bell-ringing and thumping pulsations. More than half-way through, a single guitar chord reverberates as fingers slide up-and-down the strings only to have dial-twisting radio static – most likely from Rowe – divide the ensuing textures into faint drones.

Another echoing guitar chord and the occasional chromatic thumb picks characterize the primary scene-setting of the third track. But generated sounds accumulated from Müller's ipod and the others' electronics soon transform into dense, near hisses and pulsations, solid enough to slide up against immovable objects of equal hardness. Conclusively, a single organ-like chord subsumed all other noises into watery drones which eventually become a regularized sequence of gradually fading, well-spaced pings.

Comparing Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear to these other

sessions makes its 10 brief tracks appear to be a mixture of musique concrète and the early multi-string experimentations of non-jazz guitarists like Sandy Bull and John Fahey. Using backwards reading palindromes, repetitive flat-picking and flamenco-like strumming as his base, van Wissem adds loudspeaker announcements, passenger cross talk and luggage car wheel squeaks to his double-picked bass string passages – and inserts supplementary tension with percussive whacks. Using fretting hand pressure to vibrate nylon-string squeaks, by the conclusion he has reshuffled his string resonance in such a way that found sounds and created notes are nearly indistinguishable.

Percussionist Drake – the one non-string player featured on all these albums – constructs distinctive responses to anything Angeli's mammoth strummed and stroked guitar can create during Uotha. Considering Drake's musical associates have ranged over the spectrum of powerful and individualistic players from German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann to New York bassist William Parker, there's little doubt that he wouldn't have been equally unfazed by Abs (.) Hum and Korber/Rowe/Müller's electronics, van Wissem's palindromes and all of L.E.G.O.'s 11 guitarists improvising simultaneously.

Not that he isn't willing to cooperate with the Sardinian guitarist. Especially instructive is "The Many Faces of the Beloved", which features Drake chanting and rattling a frame drum in response to Angeli's bowed cello-like continuo plus the plucking of multiple strings. In this case, undercurrents link Sardinian, Arabic-tinged sounds to North African memories present in Drake's solos. As the American vocalizes, the surrounding musical gestalt is transformed in such a way that Drake could be playing a bata and Angeli a 21-string kora. The guitarist's double-stopped accents easily complement the drumming, and introduce finger-picked vamps when Drake harshly vibrates his lathed cymbals.

Pieces such as "Fuga dal Mouse" and "Specchi d'Arancia", may have traditional sounding titles. Yet resonating chromatic guitar lines and sharp bowed arpeggios augment to winging, Jimi Hendrix-like feedback as the drummer rams and plops intense flams and ruffs hard beats from his kit. While Drake's American background can't – and won't – deny a jazz history, except for the odd, perhaps inadvertent quote, the guitarist stays clear of that music. Nor, despite an extended section of authentic-sounding chant-vocalizing mixed with string-snapping picks from Angeli is this unaltered ethnic music disc.

Instead, the end result is yet another example of the adoption of new patterns and new thinking to the playing of conventional stringed instruments. This leitmotif unites all these sessions.

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