

Broaching Common and Uncommon Worlds

Between the first downward sweeping chord of the koto—a call to improvisational order and action—and the tender, fading prickles of oddly integrated guitar and koto nearly an hour later, the live encounter documented on this recording illustrates the almost ineffable magic possible in the improvisational realm. On this night, preconceptions were artfully dodged and smudged. Senses were enlivened. And the concert's poetic title, "A chance for shade", provided the ideal image for music based around an inspired convergence of shadowy elements and visceral imagery to which we'd be hard-pressed to affix a meaning or name. In short, the musicians succeeded in conjuring up a world of their own real-time devising.

This momentous world premiere meeting took place in the amicable and familiar laboratory setting of the Cinéma Laurier, during the 2003 Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. There were noisier, more blustery concerts and higher profile musicians in town that week in late spring, but few shows had such a high degree of quiet strength and empathetic grace.

On record, minus the visual aids of a live experience, we are less able to immediately distinguish the sonic sources, to the credit of its creators' experimentalist spirit. Kazue Sawai's skillfully extended koto techniques, which has been deployed in the service of interpreting John Cage and John Zorn, here

leaned into close sonic proximity with Kazuo Imai's guitar. Saxophonist Michel Doneda and double bassist Tetsu Saitoh have a history of playing together, and they share a tendency to avoid definitive, codified usage of their musical tools. Saxophone becomes an expressive vehicle for wind-based sounds rather than a repository of gestures from free jazz or other existing vocabularies. Saitoh's bass, similarly, bridges the worlds of bow-coaxed overtones and percussive tacks, just as the Paris-born and based Lê Quan Ninh uses bows and other means to approach his task with an abidingly coloristic intention, rarely heeding rhythmic impulses at all.

From an outward accounting of the personalities and cultural affiliations involved in this music, one could naturally draw assumptions of a multi-cultural accord at work, a Japanese-French symbiosis, with a Vietnamese aside. There are decidedly elements of those discrete cultural traditions woven into the musicians' instrumental textures and matters of articulation and sense of space and time. Yet it is equally valid to suggest a willful desire for cultural meeting the middle, if not attempting to blur the borders between cultures altogether.

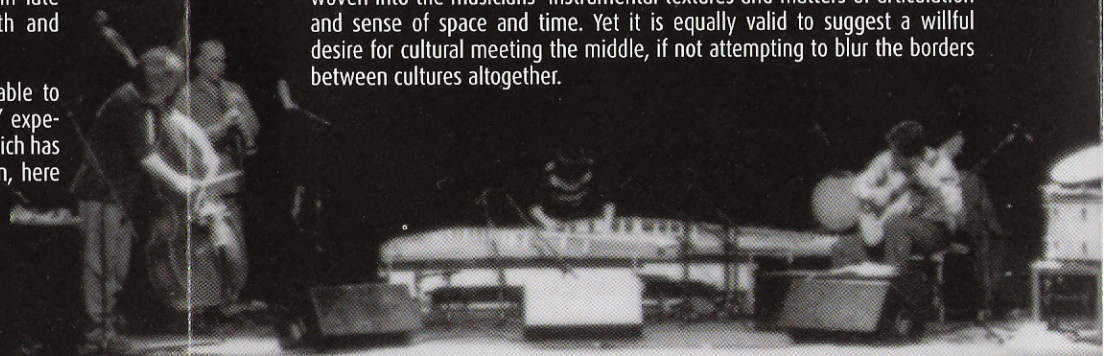


PHOTO : MARTIN MORISSE

Some improvisational summit meetings, especially when it involves multiple parties, can turn into dense thickets and cases of intelligent voices vying for attention. This meeting, however, belonged to an entirely different camp within the universally linguistic improvisational community. The quintet abided by the aesthetic of defensive listening, of patiently waiting for the actions of the Other and finding a path emphasizing the collective voice over that of the individual.

Through the music's varied terrain of dynamics and textural combinations, we come away with an impression not of a bravado display of goods by accomplished free players—though they are also that—but of a painterly group show, arrived at by inspired committee.

The temptation is to view such cooperative and even blissfully anarchic activity as a working paradigm for how to behave in an external world going cold and possibly mad. But that would be an unfair and tainting association. This music is simply and profoundly what it was, and is again in the frozen time frame of the captured moment.

Josef Woodard, Santa Barbara, October 2004

