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Concert Report: Merzbow & Richard Pinhas & Das Synthetische Mischgewebe

Live at Stadtgarten, Cologne, November 11th 2008.



Organising a gig on November 11th at first sounds like an insider joke. The date marks the opening of the carnival season and no other city in Germany, except for its traditional rival Essen, celebrates

this fact as ecstatically as Cologne: Metros and busses are filled with perfectly grown-up model citizens dressed up as dogs, cats, cowboys, the flintstones and Harry Potter and even underground, you can hear the momentous drums and maddening shouts in the distance. In comparison to the joyful frenzy raging on the streets, the cozy Stadtgarten seems like an oasis of silence – at least while its intimate medium-sized hall is still quietly clogging up with people. At the counter, however, a small cardboard sign warns that the concert could be hazardous to your health, strongly recommending the use of freely distributed earplugs.

This then, is not only no joke but no regular concert in any way. While in the old part of town the masses are already dancing to mindnumbing Schlager on clouds of beer and Schnaps, an audience of about 150 people has gathered in ardent anticipation, clad in black and eager to exchange the alcohol-happy hysteria of the drugged mainstream party with an evening of lucid and relentless Noise. Even a larger venue like the Stadtgarten has sold out quickly on the

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promise of witnessing one of the more congruent collaborations this year has brought about and the crowd comprises of fans of all age groups – Merzbow and Pinhas are two of the few acts who have managed to sustain large portions of their fan base over the years, while continually winning over new ones.

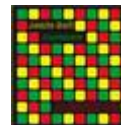
Before the congenial twins enter the stage, however, it is time to celebrate for Das Synthetische Mischgewebe. After a seemingly endless period of preparations („about 157 years“ according to the press info), their double 10 inch „neunundvierzig entgleisungen“ has finally been released on local label Auf Abwegen and tonight's event represents a release party of sorts. Decimated to 2/3 of their original line-up, it is up to Guido Hübrner alone to bring a table filled with the most diverse objects, complex micro-installations, electric circuits and mixing consoles to life. With his back to the audience, his eyes fixed to a milky felt screen catching grimly glowing projections from the back, he goes about the task in full concentration.

There is plenty to enjoy for listeners tonight: The sound of Das Synthetische Mischgewebe is an intriguing melange of the abstract and concrete: Rhythmical bell tollings fade out into sonorically ringing waveforms, crackling patterns enter into dialogues with softly swooshing electronic winds and the beats of a miniature toy machine gradually melt into nervous high-end drones. Their approach makes use of the constant yet everchanging organic qualities of elements like fire and water as a backdrop for their own, carefully measured improvisations. As a result, no moment is the same here and the music moves through an evolving continuum filled with wondrous constellations and both alien and fiendishly familiar timbres. The low volume of the performance forces one to listen very closely and underlines the character of the show as a charmingly naive and stimulatingly serene event, which makes for a colourful and discreet counterpoint to what is to follow.

The transition between the two acts is drastic and once again proves how



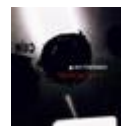
🇯🇵 Richard Pinhas & Merzbow: 'Keio Line' Collaboration Live and on CD



🇯🇵 CD Feature/ Jamie Saft & Merzbow: "Merzdub"



🇳🇴 CD Feature/ Nordvargr: "In Oceans Abandoned By Life I Drown/To Live Again As a"



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pointless the term „Noise“ as an all-encompassing genre definition really is. It takes nothing but a short break for Merzbow and Richard Pinhas to prepare for their sonic assault and the scene before the very first note looks more like a relaxed jam session between two experienced improvisors than the dawn of a sonic thunderstorm: Pinhas has taken his seat on a comfortable chair, balancing his Guitar on his left leg, effortlessly leaning forward towards a single, compactly sized case holding his effect- and looping devices. Masami Akita is seated to his left, glancing onto the glowing monitors of two powerbooks plastered with „Meat is Murder“ and „Fur is Dead stickers. It is an image which promises subtle pleasures, secretive smiles and discreet exchanges and yet, I can feel my earplugs shaking in the auditory canal when the first wave of Noise crashes on the shores of my alarmed attention.

Somehow, my reaction to this full-on attack is one of surprise and recognition. Excerpts of „Keio Line“, their recent double CD and triple Vinyl release on Cuneiform Records, suggested a powerfully measured sound, infused by a shared understanding of their respective aesthetics and the will to push and beckon the other into unknown territory. Pinhas is quoted as regarding their first encounter as „incredible“ and it is easy to see why their album project extended well beyond the usual file sharing and remixing practised by 99% of their colleagues: It was created live with both partners present in the same room and it relied on both sides listening attentively and respectfully to the other without wanting to drown him out. This was not a competition, but a collaboration in the true meaning of the word.

If „Keio Line“ could be appreciated both with the volume knob all the way up and in a low position, the sonics of tonight's gig firmly and forcefully engulf the auditorium. In the opening segment, Merzbow lays down cascades of tweeterings, chirpings and bubblings, amassing a crunching foundation of static and distortion, which seems all but immobile at first. Pinhas counters this stupendous sonic still life with melodic bass motives,

jazzy melodic lines and rhythmic offbeat staccatos to match the cracks and chinks of the harsh noise patterns. The interaction of the duo is not geared towards thematic or timbral development, but towards shaping an anthemic aural environment for listeners to enter into.

In a second stage, the psychedelia subsides and gives way to deep Dub basses and wood log snare drums, to which Atkita adds ferocious Metal tremolos. Pinhas' harmonics, meanwhile, are stacked to form a choral dome of drone, which towers high above a pitchblack mass of grinding sonic debris. It seems as though his contributions are additionally transmitted to the Merzbow laptops, fed into the system and spewn out again as angry echoes on the other side. Pinhas takes plenty of time to contemplate his next move, then lashes in determinately to await the result of his spontaneous actions with concentrated curiosity and focussed anxiety. His technique of a few well-dosed strokes is an enticing antipole to the ongoing permutations performed by his partner.

Safely sheltered underneath one's earplugs, this is no concert of shock tactics at all. Pinhas and Merzbow don't just randomly throw their ideas into a hotpot, but mutually support each other on a functional level instead: Broken chord patterns pave the way for smooth and seamless transitions, while minimalistic licks lend a mesmerising momentum to otherwise amorphic assaults. Vice versa, the granular, ferocious Noise lifts these simple structures to an anthemic level.

The public reacts to these sounds with much more than just passive submission, watching attentively, headbanging or even gently rocking their body to the groove. When the music over, there is a pervasive sense that the encounter could have gone on for some time without repeating itself. Even though it was not intended as a joke, this concert certainly left its audience all smiles.

By Tobias Fischer

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By Tobias Fischer, published 2008-11-13

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