

*"No matter what we contribute, there is a powerful rhythm in life that drives people to be more than their individual selves - it is a sum of parts. And no matter what our role is - it is an important one."* Hamid Drake

It is no coincidence that this performance happened during the 2018 Konfrontationen Festival in Nickelsdorf, in the far East of Austria, only a stone's throw from Hungary. When Christof Kurzmann visited Hans Falb's Jazzgalerie for the first time in 1981, he couldn't have known what was in store for him. It opened up a treasury of music, but it probably also taught him a lot about extra-musical things. That is what I *presume*, at least, based on my experience of attending seven festival editions since 2012.

Very few places extend the core values of free music to so many aspects of their existence. "*No boundaries, no borders, no limits*" was the shirt logo for the second edition I attended and that philosophy seeps into every detail. The program, for instance, balances historical awareness with an embrace of new sounds and evolutions. The same is true for the social interaction: there is no backstage area and this manages to bring together people from all over Europe as equals. And there is the political commitment. It has always respected the voice of other cultures and minorities, not only by programming music stemming from those 'traditions', but also by grassroots actions, like those to support the refugees that were suddenly crossing into Europe.

Five minutes into the mesmerising performance of Disquiet, Kurzmann introduced part of the "*not in my backyard*"-speech by Belgian Member of the European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt addressing Council President Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Kurz. He insisted that the so-called 'migration crisis' was nothing but a *political* crisis, with nationalists from several countries bluntly refusing to respond with decency. Throughout the concert, further explicit references to that European failure pop up, a.o. via a re-dressed Swedish pop song and a poem by Joe McPhee.

You could call this a political record. Hopefully that doesn't come with too many negative connotations. It shouldn't, as politics seeps into our everyday lives and shapes the ways in which we organise ourselves as societies. It is also tempting to describe music, especially of the free/improvised kind, with a political vocabulary. The performance situation is often considered as some democratic ideal, with separate individuals proposing ideas, looking for renewal, agreement or solutions. Sometimes they also disagree, refuse to cooperate, dispense with the old or even radicalize.

A concert is also an artistic polyphony of voices and temperaments, and there is something special going on here. It is in the way these musicians balance abstraction with direction. It is in the way Martin Brandlmayr carefully uses those thin sticks and that extended drum kit, and Joe Williamson that bow, the strings and body of the bass, to create this ever transforming, detailed rhythmical and textural flow. It is in the way Sofia Jernberg uses her voice in the subtlest of ways, her breath, soft moans and occasionally voluminous siren call joining the four-way discussion. Or in the way Christof Kurzmann guides this quartet with his *Iloopp* software, a restless web of textures, mirror and echo effects, sonar pulses, discreet and alienating hums. Even in its quietest moments, there is a tangible tension at work, a disquiet perhaps, but one affected by an untamable beauty and iridescent poetry.

It makes you think about the ways to react to injustice, violence and everything that makes you feel embarrassed for your fellow people or government. Do/can/should you react with the same weapons? Revolt is sometimes unavoidable to bring about change, but in order to pull it off, to put into practice what you believe in, a receptive attitude is indispensable. That is what I hear in this performance. The musicians weren't just reacting to what is out there, but on a 'smaller' scale also observing what was in front of them and reacting to that in beautiful and creative ways. Solitude only gets you so far, and each worthwhile collaborative endeavour - whether it is political, musical or anything else - starts with a simple but crucial act: listening. Listen for yourself.

Guy Peters, Geraardsbergen, 26 September 2020