

## Phonomanie IX: Paul Lovens "Vermogen"

Shortly after the 2007 Nickelsdorf Konfrontationen, I received a cryptic email from Paul Lovens asking me what I was doing in December...2009! Of course, I told him that whatever he wanted me for, I would be there.

It turned out that, at the invitation of the Jazzatelier, he had just begun planning a three day festival that would celebrate his 60th birthday. The fruits of those years of labor were amply harvested in concert, as twenty-one musicians were invited to perform with and for Lovens during the ninth installment of the Phonomanie festival in Ulrichsberg, Austria, a small hillside village in the Alps close to the borders of Germany and the Czech Republic.

Despite scheduling himself to perform three sets a night, as well as taking responsibility for the emcee duties, Lovens was more relaxed than I've ever seen him onstage—laughing, smiling, exhorting his cohorts, and even

happily blundering, like when he struck one of his small tuned cymbals to end an improv, but took three tries to figure out which one it was when he tried to mute it. The sense of relaxed intimacy also emanated from the audience, as fans from as far away as California, Canada and England made the trip to this small Austrian village to celebrate the music of one of the greatest jazz and improv drummers of all time.

A trio of Mats Gustafsson on baritone sax and fluteophone, Günter Christmann on trombone and cello, and Lovens on drums auspiciously opened up the festival. These three appeared to relish catching each other off guard with their rhythmic and sonic choices, like brothers circling each other's backs and trying to land surprise pokes and punches. While playing cello, Christmann slowly rolled two bows over each other and across the strings, from the bridge up to the tuning keys. This gesture perfectly encapsulated what makes his musical decision-making so fascinating,

combining the perplexity of semi-arbitrariness with a precocious instinct for actions that will produce engaging sounds. Due to declining health, Christmann has been traveling and performing less and less frequently over the last several years, so it was especially thrilling to see that the ingenuity displayed from his early solo records all the way through his series of Vario recordings is very much intact.

It started snowing ever-so-lightly during this set, which we all discovered as we walked outside to get air after the intensity of the music was absorbed.

Paul Lovens' longstanding percussion duo with Paul Lytton was next. This performance was much more ambient than their Po Torch recordings, including some brief moments that bordered on techno and drum'n'bass thanks to Lytton's skillful manipulations of amplification. Lovens also made subtle changes to his drums for each set: sometimes a rack of small, tuned cymbals, sometime not; sometimes a bongo,

sometimes not; always a pile of cymbals scattered on the floor around him, and always a cloth to dampen wood or cymbal on drum head. Because this set was more ambient—flowing more like the way water creeps into cracks rather than consuming all the oxygen the way fire burns—I listened to it like a farmer, hearing the craft of citrus bubbling on the trees.

Solo performances by Carlos Zingaro, John Russell and Hans Reichel, respectively, punctuated each evening as the third set. One of the best aspects of this arrangement was seeing Lovens introduce these friends each night, and then watch their set from the side of the stage. Zingaro's violin was so wavy I heard Jimi Hendrix creasing and unfolding his whammy bar as if it was an accordion. (Then when I slept later that night, I dreamt that Hendrix was still alive, had recently put down the guitar, and was now a highly regarded avant-garde painter, even among the art cognoscenti.) Zingaro unleashed a violin that

sounded so oceanic in its swirls, tides, surges and buoys that I must have been swimming. Or at least fished for with bait I found absolutely alluring. And when I closed my eyes I could swear I heard flutishness.

The last set of this first night featured Tobias Delius on tenor saxophone, Rudi Mahall on bass clarinet, Wilbert de Joode on doublebass, Serigne C. M. Gueye on percussion and Lovens on drums. This was a joyful set to watch as Lovens was having so much fun letting Gueye's Senegalese hand percussion take the lead, to which Lovens added jazz shuffle fills and swinging downbeat drops. Gueye successfully focussed the sound around him, so much so that when Mahall's blistering low-register solo kept finding new bottoms and tops, Lovens had only to sparsely hit cymbals to accent the rich tapestry of rhythm and line. I also really liked hearing how Lovens changed the way he played drums to make them sound like hand percussion, as if sticks were just complicated

digits.

The tone of the set was free improv within jazz forms, as sudden seemingly-coordinated (but actually not) three-person changes would juxtapose against unchecked wild fern growth. The band was willing to attempt working with just-discovered, regular beats, which is never easy to transition out of smoothly, but listening and playing at the edge of the abyss was a challenge they more than met.

## Day 2

The second day began with a duo between Lovens and Austrian pianist Wolfgang Mitterer, who also triggered sounds with a digital keyboard. Unfortunately, some of these programmed sounds had durations of three or four seconds apiece, which is just too long when improvising with someone who has the reaction time of Lovens. The timbre of the electronics was also thin, like 1990s digital.

Thankfully, Mitterer had many sounds programmed into his machine, and the samples got better, shorter and more intriguing as the set progressed, culminating in wonderful arcing poings that he tossed in a riveting back-and-forth sequence to Lovens' side of the stage. Widely known for his ability to wield many loose, small cymbals on the heads of his drums, what often gets overlooked is the wide variety of tone colors Lovens coaxes out of all of his cymbals, a practically orchestral palette of wood plus metal which the particular sonic character of this set highlighted.

The set I've spent the most time thinking about and savoring since the festival was the grouping of trombonist Radu Malfatti and sine wavist Klaus Filip with Lovens. I saw Filip play in several sets in Vienna after this festival, and I often noticed improvisors attempting to fundamentally change how they approached improvisation when playing with him, whether due to preconceptions about his music,

expectations of quietness or I-don't-know-what. But what made this trio set so interesting was how Lovens reacted to the kind of super-stripped-down soundworld that Malfatti has been making music in for more than a decade. Instead of altering his style, the sparse, open spaces created by Malfatti and Filip instead allowed Lovens to put his musical philosophy in relief. His cymbal strikes or mallet taps may have been scattered between thirty seconds of silence, but he wasn't afraid to let a strong rhythmic element determine the course of the improvisation. Filip contributed occasional electronic pitches that wobbled in the ear while Malfatti's sparse gestures—like flicking his fingernail against the edge of the trombone's bell—commented on and added another layer to the big, silent downbeats that are a hallmark of Lovens' percussive constructions. This gorgeous, enlightening set ended when Filip's sine waves resonated with Loven's singing-saw bends, and ever-so-gradually dissipated in the



air, like an earring swinging pendulumically from the ear of a woman you've just kissed.

The solo set by the vastly underappreciated English guitarist John Russell was a major highlight of the festival. He improvises by investigating repetitions of small sequences of activity, discovering more and more bizarre and compelling details to add to them. He knows how to incorporate any partial accident into the generation of a new mode of attack. The intensity of his focus combined with his willingness to explore variations created by tiny accidents gave his performance a half desert / half swamp-like character, even though it was now snowing outside with some vigor.

Showcasing his own multi-dimensionality, Lovens' next set was a duet with Eugene Chadbourne. On the surface, it could not have been a more perfect contrast with the night's previous sets: using classic country tunes like Merle Haggard's "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive," Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" and Gram

Parsons' "Hickory Wind" as well as Chadbourne's own extensive and underrated back catalog of songs as a template, this duo crafted long medleys that blended improvisation and song structure into raucous merrymaking. Lovens hooted and hollered and even executed an old-fashioned drum roll (!) across his set as Eugene threw down giant, gritty strums of electric guitar during Chadbourne's own "BYOB Club." The crispness inherent in Lovens' playing style is amplified even more when he's playing an old song like The Byrds' "Everybody's Been Burned." He has always been a master of hitting accents in improv just in the spot where it turns a musician's or audience's sense of direction, but when it's right on the button in a pop song, it opens onto another level of musical depth. Despite the appearance of overt structural differences with the Malfatti / Filip set, Lovens' playing with Chadbourne revealed some of the same basic tenets of how Lovens plays: he

contextualizes the beat and creates rhythm by using negative space.

### Day 3

The trio of John Edwards on doublebass, Paul Hubweber on trombone and Lovens on drums are known as PaPaJo. Lovens rode a warped hi-hat through the beginning of the set, then spun it and rode a different angle, making a dusty Western rhythm jangle with the suspense of a showdown. Edwards matched and augmented not only the direction of the beats—he has such a wide range of philosophical experience that he puts into his music that he captured the shifts in attitude and emotion that each beat Lovens plays exudes. And Lovens loves playing with Edwards so much you could see it onstage: he was downright giddy. This was not just Lovens curating a festival; it genuinely felt like a party for the featured musician, as he invited his best musical friends to come and play with him.

A quartet that hasn't recorded yet, and has only been playing together in this formation recently, followed: Phil Wachsmann on violin and electronics; Michael Moore on clarinet and alto saxophone; Sabina Meyer on vocals and Lovens on drums. Wachsmann coaxes an incredibly rubbery sound out of his violin that makes him adept at sneaking into other musician's ideas and finding within them the ideal compliments to his own. His transitions into using electronics were seamless, whereas with Mitterer the day before there was a clear and distinct difference between realms. Meyer's voice had a lustrous, magnetic resonance that was both pretty and melancholy in a variety of modes: birdlike warble, big, round Alpine hums and Abbey Lincoln-circa-*We Insist!* passion cries. She splintered phonemes and used the distance between her mouth and the microphone as effectively as Barry Guy and Derek Bailey use volume pedals.

One of my favorite moments was when

Lovens hit a cymbal with a big dramatic ring and it skittered atop the snare drum just enough to have its wriggling sides touch an edge and make a screech like a bit reed through a saxophone growl. Moore responded by making his clarinet sound like a trumpet, harshing the pads and tightening his embouchure to blister and break. This very evenly balanced quartet navigated a huge range of territory together—classical composition, rhythmic jams, free improv, festooned weirdness—with superb cohesion and a thrilling equality of voices.

The final solo set of the festival was guitarist and daxophone inventor extraordinaire Hans Reichel, alternating back and forth between the two instruments. Justifiably widely recognized for his daxophone invention, the guitars he has handcrafted for himself are no less unique in shape, design or tone quality. With frets on both sides of the bridge and clamps and masking tape holding down strings, the harmonic

richness of his guitar playing produces otherworldly yet soothing melodies. The daxophone can be percussive, windlike, stringlike and vocalic—all in a matter of microseconds—and Reichel's rendition of "Happy Birthday To You" on the daxophone incorporated all of those elements, and was quite warmly received by Lovens and audience alike.

The final set by the Schlippenbach Trio was the perfect finale. Lovens and Alexander von Schlippenbach (piano) began the set with gentle sparring, coiling around and dodging each other's attacks in equal measure. Evan Parker's tenor sax entered the fray with an unusually melancholic series of slowly twisting lines, openly embracing the bittersweet feelings a birthday celebration can arouse. Once addressed, the trio ignited, using their familiarity with each other to craft a dense, joyous improv. These three masterfully use their musical interconnectedness to create

something both completely new and singularly their own; you can hear the sonic DNA strands winding and unwinding. As Lovens told me later, the key to improvisation —especially among people who have been doing it together for over thirty years—is the ability to surprise yourself.

- Andrew Choate