

UNISON OF THE MANIFOLD

The Saxophone Quartet "Fo[u]r Alto" on microtonal paths.

Since the 70's saxophone ensembles have repeatedly come into being. In 1973, the legendary trio SOS with Alan Skidmore, John Surman and Mike Osborne was one of the first saxophone groups to play without the obligatory rhythm section. Shortly thereafter, in 1976, the "World Saxophone Quartet" was formed (originally with David Murray, Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill, and Hamiet Bluiett), probably the most famous saxophone ensemble. This was to be the starting gun for a host of other ensembles, the most famous of which being the "Rova Saxophone Quartet" and in Germany the "Kölner Saxophon Mafia".

Common to all of these groups is a form of dialogue-based playing in which the soloists alternatively form phrases, usually powered by the grooving ostinatos of the baritone saxophone, which in turn provides the harmonic structure for the improvisations. How different then is the concept of the quartet "Fo[u]r Alto", formed in 2008, where the principle of dialogue no longer dominates. Instead their goal is to blend the sounds, thereby creating from four voices one singular, richer and multiplex voice.

A major difference to the previously named ensembles can already be found in the instrumentation. Most saxophone ensembles make use of the full range of saxophones - from soprano, alto, and tenor, all the way to baritone and even bass saxophones (as used by Anthony Braxton). "Fo[u]r Alto" however uses four alto saxophones. Whoever believes that this renders the sound of the quartet monochromatic is seriously mistaken. For the ascetic reduction of the instrumentation corresponds to an enormous increase of the harmonic spectrum - this through the use of microtonal concepts.

Since Andreas Werckmeister began to develop an equal temperament in the late 17th century, the tone system based on this temperament has dominated Western Music to such an extent that few are aware of the fact that well into the 18th century, twelve competing church modes were still in use, all equipped with specific tone colours and used for particular compositional purposes. The scales based on equal temperament may have been increasingly useful through their ability to be transposed successfully, but they were equally limiting due to their lack of individual sound characteristics. By all merits there is a somewhat indiscriminate aspect to the equal division of the octave into twelve half tone steps.

These limitations are well known in the New Music world. Already in the beginning of the 20th century, composers such as Alois Hába or Ivan Wyschnegradsky attempted to bring new colours into play by utilising quarter- and sixth-tones. In the 1930's, the American Harry Partch was active with a 43- tone microtonal scale based on a system which he calculated mathematically. Shortly after, his compatriot James Tenney developed scales cut especially for particular compositions. Today the French "Ecole Spectrale"

or the Austrian Georg Friedrich Haas operate with the entire spectrum of the overtones. What has now penetrated into the Western Music is long since a given in the Arabian world: the use of intervals smaller than a half step - known and practiced in the Orient as Maqam[?]t, melody models that contain quarter tones.

This integration of micro intervals is what the improvising musicians of the group hiding behind the ambiguous band name "Fo[u]r Alto" have developed further: the four Berlin-based alto saxophonists - Frank Gratkowski, Christian Weidner, Benjamin Weidekamp, and Florian Bergmann - play pieces "for alto", so to speak, for a single alto saxophone - and that although they experiment with quarter tones. The quartet began its journey by improvising freely with micro intervals. As he was not fully satisfied with the results of these improvisations, Frank Gratkowski decided after their first Berlin concert in 2009 to write microtonal compositions for the group intersected with improvisation. The results of his sound researches, often based on spectral analysis and calculations, certainly do not jar the ear.

In "Sound 1", the final piece of the CD, the quartet manages the amalgamation of sounds in its highest concentrated shape by forming a unique, shimmering sound crystal with partial vibrations: 24 multiphonics are intoned in 24 differing durations by each player in such a way that it seems only one player is creating all these sounds with seemingly endless organic breathings. During performances of this piece the players position themselves around the audience, lending "Sound 1" a similar plasticity found in John Cage's "Fifty Eight".

The most surprising element of the four pieces on this CD is its diversity. The overtone oscillations of the multiphonics in "Sound 1" in the end appears as only one possible method in reaching the goal of blending four alto saxophones into one sound. The other three pieces are organised very differently. By using gradually more complex phrases in "Molto fluttuante", the musicians lead to harmonic stop points until by the end the synchronicity begins to be broken and leads into an improvisation with breath sounds. Seamlessly leading into "Likewise", the rhythms of the four voices are set in strict regularity, however the harmonies are fanned out so that some of the micro intervals often stick out almost painfully. Gratkowski calls this a "uni-rhythmic canon" which is only broken at the very end of the work in a kind of antiphonally devised passage with punctually articulated tones.

The composition "TamTam 4a" can be understood as a combination of all of these techniques in which seven smaller pieces are connected by the use of structured improvisations. Especially significant is one of these improvisations with short tones, giving the impression that someone is holding the play button whilst rewinding a tape. And the composition "Lines-Gong-M" is convincing in that it uses a sophisticated juggling of triplets, quintuplets, sextuplets, and septuplets that appears to be almost bursting apart despite its strictly organised structure. Here the apparently weightlessness of Asian music blends in most beautifully with the rational compositional technique of the West,

without its rigidness being noticed by the listener - so as to entice him into equally foreign and fascinating worlds of sound.

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