

CD Feature/ Elsa Justel: "Mâts"

[Tobias](#)

Human voice as a template: Music driven by curiosity.

Many composers and listeners fear a growing degree of abstraction in music, the consensus among them being that it leads to less „human“ and „emotional“ compositions. Elsa Justel disagrees. Her pieces certainly rely on a considerable amount of processing and timbral transformation. But behind the border of immediate recognition lies a colourful new world, which she playfully populates with her sounds.

„Mats“ is a collection of several loose tracks compiled over the last 10 years, with the most recent piece already dating as far back as 2004 – which implies that Justel is one the composers who either needs temporal distance to be able to gauge the true value of her work or an artist who simply cares more for quality than for being up to date. If this album, her first regular CD despite several impressive distinctions at international concours' and competitions, is anything to go by, the latter seems to apply here.

The approach has paid off. To me, anyway, an album of serious academic electronics that is both sonically explorative and thoroughly enjoyable is a feat to be celebrated. Maybe her position as a professor of Avantgarde Music has indirectly been responsible for this bipolarity. In her function of teacher, Justel confronts her students both with the most adorable facets of the music she loves, as well as with the stereotypes and cliches of the genre (which she semi-jokingly mocks on „Puntos, comas y refritos“). Like a knowledgeable DJ, she seems to approach her job as a composer both from an angle of education and entertainment.

Another stand-out feat is the vigorous thematic reduction she applies to her work. „Midi de Sable“ researches the sonics of the contrabass recorder and of the basset „to create a deep space“, „Albu Sud“ deals with the fusion of concrete and synthetic source material and „Au loin... bleu“ with the integration of speech into music. Her music is not so much conceptual, it is driven by curiosity – quite a difference in a community which often replaces healthy naivete with cool theory.

Shades of the sources often remain audible, but blended in with the electronically manipulated elements, they, too, turn into events changed by the senses. And yet, every single sample Justel uses seems to be filled with a life of its own, talking, singing, babbling, bouncing, laughing, grating, gritting, crunching or humming. Just like an instrumentalist in search of perfection, she uses the human voice as a template, imitating, mimicking or exceding its capacities with her computer.

This original factor turns her emissions, as void of melody or harmony as they may be, into a veritable dialogue with the listener and into an invitation to participate. It is music which creates an open, not a hermetically sealed, ambiance and which, despite its high degree of abstraction, is closer to nature than many more „traditional“ forms. I, for one, listened to this while taking a walk on a sunny morning along the canal.

By Tobias Fischer

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