fused way that effectively bridges the conceptual gap between electronic and acoustic.

The next work on this disc, “Netivot,” is written for string quartet, electronics, and an optional film part. It was composed for and is performed by the formidable Arditti String Quartet. The title is a Hebrew word for “paths.” According to the liner notes they are to be understood “in a pragmatic sense as the things that we walk on in order to get somewhere, but also in a spiritual sense as a way of being on the route to peace and self-fulfillment.” The first two movements: “Devekut” and “Hitbodedut” are named after forms of prayer as described in the Jewish Kabbalistic practices of Spanish mystic Abraham Abulafia. They can be considered as states on the path towards divine revelation.” The third movement, “Pillars of Clouds and Fire,” refers to the guideposts that the Israelites followed while traveling in the desert.

Interestingly, this work’s harmonic language comes from analyzed vowel formants produced by the voice. “Devekut” can be described as a sustained, microtonal, textural portrait. The various dissonances Felder uses produce different beating combinations that create viscerally shimmering effects. About three fourths of the way through this first movement the texture breaks violently as if the music had suddenly snapped to attention—revealing electronic resonant trails that were formerly almost unnoticed. The movement ends shortly thereafter.

“Hitbodedut” opens with falling and wailing gestures. The electronics part is more obvious in this movement. For example, near the 1 minute mark we hear some noise and granular sounds that may have been processed samples of pizzicati heard immediately prior in the string quartet. This is followed with a poignant section featuring harmonic sweeps, and octaves, set into extreme ranges. As this section continues, more noises are added that might make one think of close-up sounds of the bow or rosin. Whatever the case, they carry a certain visceral weight that leads one to consider that what is being heard is the inside of a giant string instrument composed of the four members of the string quartet, plus electronic modifications. Even though these materials capture one’s attention, they are also fragmented and distilled by the composer to achieve a level of unpredictability. The fast pacing of events suggests that objects are passing by the listeners while perhaps on a journey of their own. Elsewhere in the piece, material fragments are presented and passed around the quartet that are also diffused by the electronics part, creating a dynamic kaleidoscope effect. The movement seems to end on a pessimistic note. Perhaps the prayer remains unanswered?

For “Pillars of Clouds and Fire,” the third and final movement, the electronics once again are used to granularize the texture but in even more obvious ways than the other movements. Still, the electronics part is for the most part less present than the string sounds, which creates a well-blended mixture of acoustic and electronic worlds. This conjures the idea of a heightened sense of reality, as if one were looking to clouds or fire for direction. The music for this movement ends after a fadeout of a chord of open fifths, which is followed, oddly, by about 30 seconds of silence, perhaps a connection with the optional film part.

The pieces on this disc represent the mature work of a composer, and his ability to deftly blend acoustic and electronic materials into convincing compositions is worth exploring.

Jeff Morris: Hearing Voices

Reviewed by Ross Feller
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On this compact disc composer Jeff Morris uses live sampling techniques to record and transform sounds that are happening in the moment of performance. Morris programs his live interactive “rigs” using Max software. A variety of voices are used as fodder for the composer’s processing techniques. The pitch and time shifting techniques he uses offers us a snapshot of current technologies and their common usage. Morris’s digital audio system involves a push and pull between autonomy and control. In the liner notes he describes this process: “I give my instruments the ability to make some creative decisions on their own, and they give me different...
ways to influence the performance as it goes without totally controlling it.” Ultimately, giving voice “to ideas and relationships we didn’t know were there” fuels this effort.

The first piece, “In the Middle of the Room,” is a recording of a live sampled improvisation with a vocalist. It begins with crackly static, an intentional homage to lo-fi technologies. The female voice begins to sing and is harmonized and processed in real time. The voice is split into separate, chaotic lines distributed into different registers. Some of these lines serve as accompaniments to the main, unprocessed voice via beating effects or difference tones. The vocalist sounds like she was improvising the text, or reading from a common, “everyday” source. After about 3.5 minutes I found myself wanting something new to occur, perhaps an unexpected change of texture, not obviously linked to the vocal material. Shortly after the 5-minute mark the piece seems to end, just to be sparked back to life with similar materials as before, only in a sparser texture.

The voice and computer-processing techniques produce a result that is reminiscent of certain alternative pop genres, as well as the work of improvising vocalists that utilize live electronics, such as New York City-based virtuoso Shelley Hirsch. Apparently, Morris worked on this piece while studying with Karl Berger and Ingrid Sertso at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. The importance of improvisation makes sense here, as Berger and Sertso founded the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York, from which many important improvisers have emerged.

“Definition of A,” a vocal duet with electronics, presents a sound world “where the words only seem to raise more questions” according to the composer. Also recorded at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, this work features two female vocalists and processed percussive sounds. The use of processing seems to be more pronounced in this piece, compared with the first work. The voices, at times (because of how the composer highlights formants or resonance), resemble instrumental timbres, such as a trumpet. There is also a sense of antiphonal call and response, as the voices sound like they are interacting with one another. Another antiphonal relationship can be discerned between the pair of voices and Morris’s processing techniques, which add a third “voice” that also clearly impacts the structure of this piece. This third voice produces a range of effects from lightly humorous to darkly frightening states.

At times the time- and pitch-shifting techniques Morris utilizes are overused. On the other hand, the knowledge of who the sound shaper or composer is, is never in doubt. This can be a problem when recording improvising performers, since question of who gets composer credit might be legitimately argued. Another problem relates to form. In both the first and second works, which use similar procedural techniques and materials, the formal structures are through-composed, which matches that of much free improvisation. In fact, one might say that it is the status quo form for it. One might wish for a more transformative role played by the live sampling technology.

The third piece on this disc, a three-movement work entitled “A Tuesday with Rodney,” is for male vocalist and electronics. It embraces, according to the liner notes, “the humorous artifacts of sampling, . . . and by treating them seriously, greeting the absurdity with its own logic, we end up finding ourselves in even more new creative spaces we didn’t know existed.”

“Classical Form,” the first movement, begins with the sound of a male vocalist stutter-speaking the word “adagio.” This is followed by a fast series of iterations on the word “allegro.” Gradually, the composer adds “incidental” sounds or noises due to extremely short sample frames, extracted from the text itself. Musical terms such as exposition and development, which describe the formal structure of a sonata form are sampled and processed. Their use conjures humor and a kind of meta-compositional play. At times the words are pitch shifted so low that they sound like they were emitted by a giant reptile or mammal. After the word “coda” is heard, the composer brings back previously heard words to create what might be called a word “salad.” Perhaps this is classical form as understood by the 21st century composer? Toward the middle of the piece some of the words come back, pitchshifted into an extremely high register, as they are also sped up. The result sounds as if a flock of birds suddenly flew over one’s head. About two-thirds into the piece the words are stacked, repeated, and granularized at breakneck speeds, producing an effective, erratic, and dense texture. In a sense, the entire form of the piece mimics classical formal standards, in which materials build, climax, and fall off in an arch shape configuration.

The second movement, “Ballad,” begins with the sound of exhaled breathing that transforms into a series of sung pitches on “ah” and “oh.” The result can be described as a dirge-like texture. This is followed by a section in which the processing techniques are combined with gibbonish syllables and an occasional accented inhalation, as well as vocal percussive sounds that may
have been produced with the lips and cheeks. Overall, this movement works through a dialectical relationship between drawn-out, and short, fragmented sounds. The piece ends with the vocalist speaking the words “and then,” implying continuation and a new section.

“Schenkerian Blues,” the third and last movement, begins with the voice vocalizing on scat syllables such as “bah, dah, duh” while the computer part uses a pitch-following technique that produces harmonies with the voice. There seems to be a concerted effort to exaggerate these sounds in a way that draws attention to their humorous potential, perhaps a reference to the movement’s title. This approach also makes clear the boundary between altered and unaltered materials. Both are patently obvious to the ear, largely because of the composer’s cartoon-like use of extreme frequency ranges and speeds. By the time we reach the end of this movement, when the title is revealed, it almost feels like an afterthought, one that was expected all along.

The next work, “Jabberwocky [A Timbre Poem],” was the composer’s very first computer music composition. Morris describes it as a timbre poem that “illustrates Lewis Carroll’s story through the sounds spoken by me and my mentor, Joseph Butch Rovan.” This piece begins with more lo-fi sounds. In this case it is the sound of surface noise from an LP record. In the digital age this sound has become iconic and has been sampled by many musicians to represent a variety of concepts such as nostalgia, grittiness, distance, etc. Morris’s use of it seems to relate to an alien, or surreal, soundscape featuring a Darth Vader-like voice, a series of filter sweeps, and short sample windows. These match well the Lewis Carroll theme. The latter device is also used to create fragmented, rhythmic barrages that resemble video game sound effects. There is also a section in the middle of the piece that is characterized by a repeated ostinato pattern supplying a degree of continuity. It is worth noting that in this early composition Morris is already exploring techniques that are found in his later works.

“Reprise [Hearing Voices],” the last work on this disc, is for electronics controlled by the composer. One gets the impression that many of the techniques used in the previous works are also present here, but they are utilized within structural shapes that involve sonic interaction or cause and effect. According to the liner notes, this piece “revisits themes from the album, through the perspective of a machine-learning algorithm.” On the one hand, this provides a level of logic that is clearly audible at times. On the other hand, strange, unexpected things happen—such as the 27 seconds of silence that occur in the middle of the piece. In a work that only lasts 4:33, this long silence seems to beg the question: Has the piece ended with over 2 minutes of dead air left? This silent tension is finally relieved with a sizzling white-noise sound that serves as a sonic screen under which other filtered sounds are sounded.

The hard boundary between the natural and the artificial became somewhat predictable over the course of this compact disc, as did the sprawling, through-composed forms and comical sounds. Nevertheless, the disc can be viewed as a successful use of the live sampling of voices, embedded within various flavors of noise. Morris’s work includes an unmistakable and definite aesthetic. And for that reason alone this disc will reward careful listening.