

TAKTLOS

BY JOHN SHARPE

TAKTLOS FESTIVAL 2020 © BY MORITZ BECHLER



Mark Feldman & Sylvie Courvoisier

She's been such a fixture on the downtown scene that it's easy to forget Brooklyn-based pianist Sylvie Courvoisier's Swiss origins. But it meant she was perfectly placed to curate an exciting mix of American and homegrown acts for the 34th edition of the Taktlos Festival (Mar. 12th-14th) in Zürich, held in the roomy surroundings of the Kunstraum Walcheturm, within the city's old arsenal complex.

That the event was such a success—and indeed happened at all—owed much to the improvisatory skill of the organizers in adapting to the changes wrought by the rapidly developing coronavirus pandemic on both availability of musicians and social climate. Courvoisier both opened and closed the festival, affirming her status as one of the most complete creative musicians.

For the first set she paired with longtime collaborator violinist Mark Feldman in an unscripted, restless, uncompromising but nonetheless spellbinding duet. From the outset, the level of interaction was preternatural as if they were conversing in a deeply personal secret language. Feldman's querulous wisps floated into the air, before Courvoisier answered by running her thumbnail along the edge of the keys. Feldman moved between whistling glissandos, vinegary sawing and plucked notes rounded off with the bow while Courvoisier reveled in the sonic possibilities, whether generating cascades of clusters by applying the backs of her hands and forearms, or effortlessly integrating preparations to sound both primitive and modern. At one point she alternated between modifications at opposite extremes of the keyboard, contrasting a curiously dampened, almost metallic treble against a twanging bottom end and a full-voiced middle. Feldman's responses were never predictable, except that he hardly ever echoed, resulting in a music strange and ambiguous, but still full of drama.

Courvoisier returned for the final set of the Festival with her trio. It was to be the first date of a much longer tour but with coronavirus restrictions and cancellations multiplying by the day, it didn't make sense for drummer Kenny Wollesen to fly in from New York for a single gig. Instead she and bassist Drew Gress were augmented by the already present Tom Rainey on drums. One of her most potent settings, the trio allows full rein to her rhythmic drive without sacrificing the complexity and risktaking that makes her work so enthralling. They began with the rolling vamp, suspenseful pauses, intricate interlocking parts and abrupt hairpins of "Double Imprint", with space for Gress to step forward woven into the fabric and Rainey picking up accents, swinging forcefully but still sensitive and alert to sudden switches of mood.

Whether on the brooding timbral adventure of "Nightmare", the explosive "Just Twisted" or the bright bounce of "Éclats For Ornette", astonishing three-way interplay within the contours of Courvoisier's slyly crafted charts formed the touchstone of a wonderful closing set.

Courvoisier's bookending appearances weren't the only highlights. With prospective partner Japanese pianist Aki Takase grounded on doctor's orders, saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock reconvened Sleepthief, her improvising outfit with Rainey and British pianist Liam Noble that has released a pair of albums on local imprint Intakt. While Rainey and Laubrock enjoy a near-telepathic communication, Noble plays with them much less frequently, but his richly voiced percussive presence, repeating motifs and blocky counterpoint fulfilled a key role in this unit, helping set off Laubrock's shifts between reflective multiphonics, choppy skronk and breathy impressionism while Rainey engineered contrasts and juxtapositions as the three elements meshed in unexpected ways.

As well as being a groundbreaking electric guitarist, improviser and composer, Fred Frith also teaches at the Basel Academy of Music, an hour's drive to the west. He conducted the 19-strong student ensemble entitled Sonic Space through his Samuel Beckett-inspired composition "Failing Better". Among the staggered rhythmic layers of a largely notated piece, two accomplished vocalists, Lara Miriam Süß and Marie-Louise Schneider, declaimed the text in a manner recalling Kurt Weill or even Henry Cow while controlled eruptions of improvisation within the overall architecture showcased scratchy rasping cello, bowed percussion and a thorny oud/cello duet, among others. The prevailing vibe was disciplined and elegant, the outcome superb.

Pianist Cory Smythe gave a captivating and slightly unsettling solo performance, which resided at the interface between contemporary new music and free improvisation. What was remarkable was how Smythe subtly used an array of electronics and implements to alter or supplement the sound, without in any way suggesting that what we were hearing was anything other than piano. One of two Midi keyboards situated within the body of the grand enabled microtonal flourishes, making it seem that Smythe was flexing the tonality of the instrument. Towards the end, in apparently surreal anticipation of the looming pandemic, Smythe donned a gas mask with a tube linked into the electronics, which made it possible to give sustained tones a vocalized shape. Add to that passages of spectral resonance and crashing thunder and the whole recital took on a dream-like, otherworldly dimension.

Feldman's Maniac was comprised of Courvoisier and Swiss guitarist Dave Gisler instead of the absent Uri Caine, alongside the leader, Gress and Rainey. With Maniac, the classical feel that permeates other parts of Feldman's work was tempered by the metrical cut and thrust of the writing. They opened at a jazzy lilt, before toggling between bristling extemporizations from the pairing of the leader and Gisler, and the piano, bass and drums threesome, until uniting in a quickstepping refrain. Feldman was as virtuosic as ever, moving from unnerving squeals to mournful airs and everything in between. In a continuous set Feldman guided his comrades through capricious twists and turns, which encompassed swinging sections, emphatic cadences, romantic coloration and a perky hoedown, while also unfurling opportunities for spiky abstract improv.

Gress also took to the stage alone for a rare unaccompanied bass outing, spotlighting the interwoven strands of melodic and propulsive invention that have made him such a sought-after accomplice. Across four extemporizations he maintained a rich stream of ideas, sometimes establishing a conversation between opposing voices, rejoicing in singing bow work, exploring staccato

outbursts and even seeming to paraphrase "Lush Life" at one juncture.

Among the Swiss acts, from behind a custom-assembled kit, drummer Julian Sartorius joined in percussive tandem with the synthesizers of Hans-Peter Pfammatter in a darkened auditorium, invoking variously a gamelan orchestra and industrial noise. Spidery patterns rubbed shoulders with trancy beats, percolating electric piano sonorities and dial-twiddling swooshes in a set that touched on both minimalism and metal.

Two groups of young Zürich-based musicians blended electronic and acoustic sources in co-operative communion. No Flores comprised Gisler, alto saxophonist Tobias Meier and drummer Jonas Ruther, with guest Ramon Landolt on keyboards; without solos they gradually built to a thumping crescendo, from which they slowly withdrew. Similarly selfless, Special Circumstance also included Landolt in their number along with his brother guitarist Dominik, saxophonist Tapiwa Svosve, accordion player Tizia Zimmermann and drummer David Meier to display impressive shared restraint across similar but more open terrain. Initially delicate with sporadic flare-ups, none of the instruments appeared constrained to their customary roles, an approach that continued even when they took an aggressive turn into a synchronous beat with a middle eastern modality.

Two days after the festival finished, the Swiss authorities prohibited all public gatherings, restrictions that have now covered most of the continent. It now seems to belong to another time. But when normality is restored, Taktlos should figure highly in anyone's concert calendar. ❖

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