

CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE *Schlingen Blängen*

New World Records 80578

The organ has been called "the monster which never breathes," but perhaps its breaths are simply very long and deep. In Charlemagne Palestine's perambulations through the organ's sonic landscape, this is certainly the case—the breath is some 70 minutes long.

Schlingen-Blängen was first realized in Holland in 1979, although it had several precursors. Composer-performer Palestine had become well known in avant-garde circles in New York and Europe and was often seen and heard at major festivals. Usually, the instrument of his long, environmental, quasi-sacred musical inventions was the Imperiale Grand Bösendorfer piano. The alchemical magic of dancing harmonics which he managed to coax out of this magnificent instrument through sheer physical will (indeed the physicality of a Palestine performance was memorable—a battle of wills with the piano itself) transformed both physical space and imaginary space inside the listeners' heads. Those who have experienced a Charlemagne Palestine Bösendorfer performance such as *Strumming Music*, or *Lower Depths* or *Timbral Assault* (see discography) usually have found the relentless coaxing of sound from the piano to be a physical ballet as well as a spiritual-musico exercise.

So the idea of creating a new sound world through the resources of an old tracker Baroque organ seemed quite a different tack to take. The physicality of the performance would be less present, more implied in the overwhelming acoustics of the space than in the movements of the keyboard performer. In *Schlingen-Blängen* the arms and torso of Palestine take a break and we experience sounds set into motion by the initial choosing of a chord and its timbres (the setting of the registers or stops); the melodic changes that occur are subtle and few. The resultant torrent of sound, which begins as a trickle, might delude the listener into a visual hallucination of the ever-active composer somehow hammering away at keys and pedals, but such is not the case. This very unpalpable acoustic experience seems unusual for this composer.

Yet Palestine had worked with disembodied organ sonority before, in fact well before he "discovered" the Bösendorfer.

In the late sixties through the early seventies, his main experiments in sound were carried out in the electronic music studio—in New York at the old Bleecker Street NYU School of the Arts cooperative studio, and later at the newly founded California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles where Palestine studied and taught for a couple of years. Access to pure sine wave oscillators and voltage-controlled formant filters (remember, this was the era of analogue synthesizers and classical tape studios) allowed him to set up minutely tuned drones in a space where people could come and go as they wished—a kind of perpetual performance. The space had a holy, worshipful aura, and this was always important to Palestine whose seeking of the magic of tonal alchemy was tied to his search for the "sacred." Naturally, over a period of time, the tuning of the oscillators would drift ever so slightly, creating new beating tones and strange difference tones, and he would occasionally shift the frequency of the filters to emphasize or de-emphasize certain areas of the harmonic spectrum. If one lingered in these harmonic spaces for a while, the initially imperceptible changes became not only noticeable, but very grand. It was like putting pure sound under a microscope.

But there was an organ analogue to all this electronic experimentation. In 1970 and '71 Palestine was allowed to utilize the sanctuary of a very liberal downtown Los Angeles Unitarian Church with a nice old French organ three nights a week, and he began a series of events called "Meditative Sound Environments" (this might sound today like a rather banal "New Age" vademecum, but in 1970 it was a fresh idea) which consisted of his putting into motion a chord by inserting cardboard wedges between the organ keys; he would then simply let the sounds find their own relationships—both consonant and dissonant—in the night air of the sanctuary, occasionally adjusting the stops to make subtle timbral adjustments.

To my ears—and I was present at a number of these—the musical environment in the organ events was enriching to a degree not possible in the sine wave drone environments.¹ The rough edges of the impure sound waves emanating from the metal organ pipes added richness that made the experience somehow more "musical" than the rarefied atmosphere of the filtered electronic environments.

In fact, Palestine had made similar experiments with organ sonority a few years earlier in New York, at a Unitarian-Universalist Church on the Upper West Side. This was during the same period when he was the carillonneur at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, and regaled New York every evening at five o'clock with massive assaults on the giant bells (of course, his astonishing improvisations on the carillon were always preceded by a sedate hymn or two.)

But upon his return to New York in 1972, oscillators, organs, and even bells, took a back seat to his growing repertory on the Bösendorfer. A series of long evening-length concerts in his own loft and eventually at festivals and alternative performance venues associated him in his public's ear exclusively with that remarkable piano. He also began to develop extraordinary "performance art" works, which involved a lot of vocal virtuosity as well as a choreography never seen before. His forays into the visual arts, with his installations and sculptures created around hundreds of stuffed animals, began to claim more of his attention in the eighties, and his musical events became a part of memory.

In 1979 one of his supporters in Holland, the festival producer Leendert van Lagestein, heard Palestine casually mention something about these early organ pieces, and suggested that he might like to replicate one of them at a church in Friesland. Van Lagestein ran a festival in Groningen; the best church organ he could find was in a small village called Farmsum Delftzijl, some distance away from Groningen, hard by the North Sea. The audience had to be bused in as the chances of finding an audience in such a remote area was slim.

The results were magical, pure vintage Charlemagne Palestine; and it is amazing that it took so long

¹ I wrote a review of these events for the *L. A. Free Press*. Here is a particularly gushing description:

"Once a beautiful sonority, a wellspring of music, is achieved, it is left alone to its own devices, allowed to spread, to grow, to lavish its fecundity on the ears of the listener who begins now to FEEL the music, and realizes the act of hearing is basically feeling. We feel sound, not hear it. We know this when a sound might hurt our ears, but it is also apparent when sounds feel good, when they caress."

for the piece to be recorded. This happened almost ten years later, in 1988, when Palestine and van Lagestein returned to Farmsum with digital recording equipment and made several takes. The story of the fate of the recording after that is oddly similar to that of other recordings that have been made of Palestine's music, but, along with those, the music has finally been released—literally—after many years of bondage. There is now a small discography of his music from the period of the seventies and early eighties.

Oddly enough, little of substance has been written about Palestine's music, although quite a number of articles about his performance and video art as well as his sculptural creations—often based on arrays of stuffed animals, which he considers to be spiritual, have appeared in visual art-centered publications. This is not surprising, as his audience were mainly denizens of the art world, and his early supporters were more likely to be patrons of art than music—for example, his first recording was a private issue put out by the Sonnabend Gallery in New York.

A work like *Schlingen-Blängen* is hard to describe because so little happens in it, yet at the same time an immensity of activity is going on and there is so much of it that it boggles the mind; better not to try. But on the subject of the static in music, let me say that Palestine's work has best exemplified in the past twenty-five years the idea that standing still often achieves great movement. Once, many years ago, he and I were listening to a beautiful, sensuous orchestral work of Debussy, and after a particularly ravishing passage he said to me, "If only it would stand still and stay that way for a long time." In a way, that is what he has been trying to do, turn music into a physical entity that can be experienced like a painting, as something to be contemplated at one's pleasure and will. Thus, even though there are dynamics and curves and formal shapes to his music, the overall impression is one of static movement; the paradox is no more explicable than the dichotomies of yin and yang, of sacred and profane. Several art writers have mentioned the word *shaman* in talking of Palestine as a person—and the person and artist are very much the same—and, even though it's perhaps an overworked idea these days, there is something of the magician in him, and when his music works, it is magic indeed. When it doesn't work, there is the trickster, the imposter, the impish devil at play—we feel taken in. But that side of him only verifies the other side, for there is a genuine disarming sincerity to the wholeness of his integrated artistic vision and, if in seeking to uncover the sacred, he sometimes misses the mark, it is all the more precious when he hits it.

Charlemagne Palestine in the Netherworld (i.e., below Houston Street)

Charlemagne Palestine's careening career through the avant garde music/ art world of the sixties and seventies in New York and the West Coast (not to mention Europe and Canada) could be said to typify the wide ranging, inclusive crossover, anti-establishment characteristics of that very world; yet, at the same time, in a broader sense, there is nothing typical about Palestine. He seems to fit in no known vessel.

Although he is best known as a composer and performer of his own music, most of which is improvised, at least in the sense of being performed from memory as opposed to being written out, he has also ventured into parallel worlds of performance art, painting-sculpture and experimental video.

Although he began to develop his unique vocal styles and massed-cluster-of-sound music in New

York in the late sixties, he did not really associate with the main characters of the then emerging "minimalist" style as exemplified by La Monte Young, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich. He did study briefly with the Indian singer, Pandit Pran Nath who eventually became Young's guru (and Terry Riley's as well). It was at CalArts in the first two years of its existence, 1970-71, that Palestine connected with Simone Forti, the dancer who had been associated with not only the Fluxus scene in New York, but the San Francisco Tape Music Center through her work with Anna Halprin. Palestine and Forti collaborated both as teachers and performers in California and later in New York where they both resettled—the California thing for both of them was always a temporary home. It was at CalArts however that he discovered his piano, the Bösendorfer, and when he moved to New York he was able to secure loans and grants from friends to purchase one (later the Bösendorfer company supplied him with pianos for concerts in Europe). For a few years there were almost weekly performances in his loft on North Moore Street in Tribeca, and before that on Reade Street where he shared a studio with Philip Glass.

Palestine also encouraged other young performance artists, dancers and musicians to use his space, and he often performed at venues such as the Experimental Intermedia Center (Phill Niblock's loft), the Kitchen, and 112 Greene Street. Music critics such as Tom Johnson and John Rockwell of *The New York Times* wrote favorable reviews and profiles of this eccentric artist whose hours long piano events often involved not only singing and chanting, but dizzying perambulations around the space, with *kretek* cigarettes and cognac perfuming the air. The array of stuffed animals on and around the piano grew with each performance, until, in a way, they seemed to take over.

It was the Sonnabend Gallery in Soho which first took him seriously as a visual artist, showing his videotapes and giving him the space to do performance art pieces; for a few years, it was not clear if he was destined to be a composer, a painter, or a performance artist. And he still has persisted in blurring the lines, seeking instead not perfection in a prescribed art form but seeking vessels or *modes d'emploi* for his searching for the sacred. In the late seventies and early eighties when Minimalism became big—that is to say composers such as Reich and Glass became commercially successful and many other composers from the straight concert world began to employ repetition and static forms—Palestine basically said goodbye to all that, left Soho for Brooklyn and Europe, and devoted most of his energies to his make-believe visual arts world of stuffed animals and sculptural creations that used them. Performance art and music performances became rare, and more about memory than manifestations of his current mind.

There was no question that he influenced a host of slightly younger composer-performers (one, Glenn Branca, had started his own record company and paid a sort of homage to Palestine by recording his music). The richness of the scene in lower Manhattan in those days was astonishing; poets, theater people, artists and composers all knew each other, and genre lines were blurred. Minimalist art installations in permanent galleries by people such as Judd or deMaria would attract the same audience as a Laurie Anderson performance, or a Meredith Monk dance-concert event, or a sound installation by Max Neuhaus or MaryAnn Amacher. Simone Forti and Joan Jonas, also a sometime collaborator with Palestine, used video in their dance. Severely minimal composer-performers such as Niblock, Yoshi Wada or Bill Hellermann, performed regularly in their own spaces. It was a time and place where private and public space could become the same, where the work of art became just a part of everyday life, or everyday life became transformed at times into art itself.

The avuncular John Cage seemed to reign over the whole scene, if not stylistically, at least spiritually. Some of the experimental composers of this time who used electric guitars to achieve levels of ear splitting volume in order to reveal hidden overtones and difference tones such as Rhys Chatham and Branca, dismayed Cage in fact, who publicly referred to the latter's music as Fascistic. So even amongst the "downtown" scene there was dissension. Very little of this art worked its way uptown, at least not for a while. For about ten to fifteen years there was a golden age where art, performance, and music co-existed and crossed boundaries without regard to preordained venues or forms. There have not been many eras in art wherein a person could actively pursue creation in two or three "disciplines" because those disciplines were in the process of being redefined—such a time was this and in this soup of influences, allowances, permissions, and encouragements, a unique personage such as Palestine could thrive and find his audience.

—Ingram Marshall

Ingram Marshall is a composer and sometime writer on music. Although currently living in Connecticut, he was for many years active on the West Coast. Recent recordings are on Nonesuch, New Albion, and New World Records.

For those wondering about the meaning of the word *Schlingen-Blängen*, I would simply say that for a number of years Charlemagne has created a kind of shamanistic make-believe language; many of his paintings have strange expressions written on them as text. We would have to accept these as a kind of mock hieratic tongue.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Lower Depths. Charlemagne Palestine, piano. Barooni 019.

Sliding Fifths. Charlemagne Palestine, piano. Barooni 014.

Strumming Music. Charlemagne Palestine, piano. Barooni 019.

Three Fifths. Charlemagne Palestine, electronics. Barooni 014.

Timbral Assault. Charlemagne Palestine, piano. Barooni 019.

Two Fifths. Charlemagne Palestine, electronics. Barooni 014.

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1 *Schlingen-Blängen* (71:38)

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