

Brainwashed - Luc Ferrari, "Music Promenade/Unheimlich Schön"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 21 April 2019 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 23 April 2019 06:18



One of the many, many things that I feel vaguely and irrationally guilty about on a daily basis is my failure to take a deep plunge into the Editions Mego-curated Recollection GRM series, as there was a period in my life where I was extremely interested in classic musique concrète and was maddeningly unable to find much of it. Consequently, this series would have been an absolute revelation for me back then. Unfortunately, my passion for early electronic music is considerably diminished these days, as my historical curiosity has long since been sated and a lot of very important pieces have not aged particularly well. That said, there are some pieces that have aged quite well indeed and there are always some long-forgotten gems that have eluded me. This, the third Luc Ferrari release in the series, is one of those very pleasant surprises, resurrecting two lengthy tape pieces that range from playfully anarchic to enigmatically seductive.

[Recollection GRM](#)

The two pieces combined for this release make a curious and unexpectedly complementary pair, as they were never intended to share an album and explore very different sides of Ferrari's iconoclastic vision. Of the two, "Music Promenade" enjoys a far greater stature in Ferrari's oeuvre, standing as one of his most revolutionary and landmark works. It was first premiered in 1970 and was the culmination of five long years of recording and editing. Primarily intended as an installation, the piece was "played" by four separate tape machines and was intended to evoke "a (walking) man...struck by the violence of his surroundings. Nature has disappeared in a whirlwind of warfare and industry in the midst of which he encounters a dying folklore and a lost young girl." I cannot necessarily say that all (or any) of that quite comes across to me, but the piece is unquestionably a cacophonous and surreal mindfuck, as it sounds like an avant-garde theater performance colliding with multiple marching bands.

There are also some alternately space-y and cartoonish touches thrown in to further ensure that I am wrong-footed at all times. To top it all off, each of the four tapes is a slightly different length, so the bizarre juxtapositions between the disparate elements were intended to change their relation to one another with each repetition (the loops are each roughly twenty minutes). Sadly, putting the piece on an actual album necessarily fixes one of the near-infinite variations as the definitive version of the piece, but at least that version is one hell of a wonderfully deranged and vivid sensory assault. Also, it feels refreshingly different from today's insular experimental music scene in that it attempts (to some degree) to capture the life and sounds of the streets and the spirit of an era. Whether or not the average person had any interest in

Brainwashed - Luc Ferrari, "Music Promenade/Unheimlich Schön"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 21 April 2019 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 23 April 2019 06:18

hearing it is certainly up for debate, but if one had happened to blunder into the installation, I suspect it would have made an impact on them.

The album's second half is devoted to the comparatively simple and subdued "Unheimlich Schön," which can be roughly translated as "weirdly (or eerily) beautiful." That is an apt title for a couple of reasons. For one, the heart of the piece is essentially just a loop of actress Ilse Mengel seductively whispering that phrase again and again. Secondly, the piece is indeed a weirdly beautiful one, as Mengel's sibilant speech is deconstructed, overlapped, and combined with the sounds of gasps and deep breathes until it becomes a dreamlike, textural abstraction. Its inclusion as an accompaniment to "Music Promenade" was an especially inspired choice, as "Unheimlich Schön" is a comparatively underheard and uncelebrated piece within Ferrari's influential body of work. As someone hearing it for the first time now, however, I am struck by how incredibly contemporary it sounds, presciently anticipating the "ASMR" aesthetic by nearly five decades and not disrupting that illusion with anything that might sound dated. Aside from the language difference, "Unheimlich Schön" sounds far more like it was plucked from a current Félicia Atkinson album than it does like a minor tape experiment from the distant past.

Of course, there are some caveats. Obviously, it would be unforgivably arrogant describe groundbreaking and visionary art from a half century ago as "flawed," but any honest discussion of this release should at least note that "Music Promenade" did not emerge completely unscathed from its technological limitations and the prevailing trends of the era. Like many other serious composers from the mid-20th century, Ferrari gleefully rejected conventional notions of harmony or melody, but the chromatic blurts and jarring jump cuts that he replaced them with have not aged particularly well. Nor have the more electronic sounds that he sporadically uses. The actual field recordings, however, sound as vibrant and physical as ever. With the benefit of hindsight, I can say that "natural" sounds have a timelessness to them and pointedly unnatural sounds tend to have a very short window before they are eclipsed by whatever the next new thing is. That said, while the more modest "Unheimlich Schön" miraculously managed to nimbly avoid all the perils of embracing an ephemeral future, I am still more struck by the maniacal chaos of "Music Promenade." Ferrari was definitely swinging for the fences with that piece and I always appreciate messy, crazy gambles more than safer work executed masterfully. Much the like other two Ferrari reissues in this series, this one vividly shows exactly why Ferrari and the Groupe de Recherches Musicales have had such a large and lasting impact on the experimental music world. Nevertheless, I was delighted to find that *Music Promenade/Unheimlich Schön* also transcends its deserved status as A Very Important Historical Document and remains quite a unique and absorbing listening experience to this day.

Samples:

- [Music Promenade](#)
- [Unheimlich Schön](#)

Brainwashed - Luc Ferrari, "Music Promenade/Unheimlich Schön"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

Sunday, 21 April 2019 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 23 April 2019 06:18
