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Tom Prehn's Quartet

Centrifuga & Sohlverv

Corbett vs Dempsey CD 079

Total Music Association

Walpurgisnacht

NoBusiness NBCD 145

Two premium archeological artifacts dug up from the Northern European underground these sessions from the 1960s and 1970s demonstrate how a particular stratum of Free Jazz was being reshaped at that early juncture. Recorded in 1964/1965 Centrifuga & Sohlverv consists of privately produced tapes by pioneering improvisers in the Danish Tom Prehn Quartet, while Walpurgisnacht is the replication of a 1971 self-released LP by a German Free Jazz collective with one more recent additional track.

Prehn's disc add a session to the miniscule discography of the music teacher, comic book idea man and pianist, who was later involved with more pop-oriented sounds. As on the other discs under his name the quartet is filled out by tenor saxophonist Fritz Krogh, bassist Poul Ehlers and drummer Finn Slumstrup. A representative instance of how the aesthete hippie concept was mixed in with Free Music by the early 1970s, the Total Music Association was a shifting collective of semi-professional improvisers, which in 1971 included trombonist Andreas Boje, clarinetist/saxophonist Wilfried Eichhorn, violist Erich Schröder and pianist Helmut Zimmer plus three players who continued to work in the genre, as the final 1988 improvisation shows: saxophonist Hans-Jörg Hussong, bassist Matthias Boje and drummer Rudi Theilmann.

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While there are echoes of subsequent dark Nordic sensibility in Centrifuga & Sohlverv's piano chording, woody double bass string slices and drum shuffles, Krogh's reed screams and split tone are wedded to the Energy Music of the da. As the four work through on the 44-minute title track, earlier stylistic approaches are audible with swirling piano patterns, a walking bass line and drum shuffles. Following a double bass interlude at the two-thirds mark, the exposition toughens with lower-case chording and rolling percussion timing. Matching the saxophonist's extroverted squalls and tongue flutters, the intense sequence eventually downshifts to unaccented reed squeaks, cymbal pops and internal piano-harp echoes that refer back to the tune's introduction. Recorded the next year the four-part "Sohlverv" marks a shift to harder and heavier interface with skronking sax lines, emphasized bass thumps up and down the scale, drum rattles and staccato piano plinks. As Krogh stretches his timbres to screaming altissimo runs, Prehn's swirling piano variations join in. By the concluding "Solhverv 4", a maelstrom of keyboard cascades, cymbal crashes and drum crunches soar into the unknown, and before being unexpectedly cut off by tape termination, start to pick up narrative affiliation.

Pre-Free intimations had vanished along with neat haircuts by 1971 with the first section of "Walpurgisnacht". It's propelled by piano soundboard vibrations and dynamic patterning, thumping double bass motion, staccato whistles from Eichhorn's high-pitched clarinet and spiccato slices from Schröder's viola that are underscored by low-pitched pumps from Hussong's baritone sax and plunger tones from Boj's trombone. Somehow this darkened free-form is tempered with a riff from "The Creator has a Master Plan" before subsiding into a climax that slides melodic spiritual licks on top of stop-time free form. These connections and fragmentations are further amplified on "us-Succubus-Pestilentia", whose three-barreled title reflects a track that shakes with skewered reed bites and brass snarls at one juncture and calmed down to a bouncy march rhythm at another. This division which at points make the theme appear as if it's being strained

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through unyielding surfaces is finally resolved is what could suggest the music's next evolution. Multiphonic reed peeps, staccato piano clips and Boje's speedy double bass spicccato first expose a collection of downwards slurs with a coda of upwards splatters from the horns. That conception hadn't changed that much 17 years later with the trio of Hussong, M Boje and drummer Willi Schneider. A pumping baritone saxophone line includes a "Boogie Stop Shuffle" quote, followed by an intermittent walking bass line and Theilmann's decorating chiming and ratamacues. More closely sutured in this smaller group, space is left for sul tasto string underpinning and distant percussion patterns to the extent that a story-telling balladic interlude arrives at the three-quarter point. Readjusting themselves with Free Jazz variations in the final section, the trio concludes the piece with drum double smacks and repeated renal reed honks.

While musical history is usually grouped around Great Men and Great Achievements, perhaps Free Jazz's story can be told more truthfully. For as these representative discs confirm, each tonal experiment contributed to create a broader picture of evolutionary improvisation.

—Ken Waxman