

Konrad Sprenger Miniaturen

Choose 2006

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Mel Bay and his brethren deal in a curious sort of marginalization. The creators and publishers of student musical books are tasked with drawing up a curriculum that won't violate the diminutive attention spans of butterfingered 8 year-olds learning the piano. At the same time, the curriculum has to be compelling and cohesive, apt to dole out incremental musical payoffs to keep the little buggers at the keyboard. There's a certain finesse required in turning four bars of "Scarborough Fair" into a piano exercise.

It's with this sort of gentle didactic approach that Konrad Sprenger has constructed his first solo album, *Miniaturen*. A thirty-five minute work spanning thirty-two tracks, the work was borne of a number of musical sketches collected and composed by Sprenger over the last ten years.

Unlike other short-work dabblers like John Zorn who prefer autonomous compositions, with Sprenger there's little in defined starts and stops. At many points, his sub-minute tracks bleed into each other rather than fading out. Like the patient instructor, Sprenger uses these transitions to slowly indoctrinate the listener into his little world. A simple, vaguely Renaissance guitar begins the album, stretching lazily over the first few tracks. As the pieces become more complicated and melodies begin to grow in complexity, Sprenger gently begins to manipulate feedback and play with whatever he's got laying around the studio. Sometimes, he brings out strange instruments like the bird organ and a violin-and-piano contraption from the 1800s called a *Phonoliszt*, and sometimes he underscores his themes with ominous levels of audio feedback.

Miniaturen often flows so well that Sprenger's insistence on separating his compositions into tracks (often shorter than 30 seconds) sometimes seems superfluous. It's not hard to imagine many of these works clustered together into longer, obtuse pieces. Indeed, Sprenger seems excited to take the listener in small steps and without repeating himself. But by the first third of the album, it's clear that the CD track separators are more of an artistic stance than anything else, allowing Sprenger to define where the beginnings and ends come in his compositional process.

It's a nice surprise, then, when the work reaches its climax with a seven-minute track, "Generation Opfer." Displaying an economy of brass & piano and paying off the listener with wood-block clicks rather than cymbal crashes, "Opfer" is the final entrance exam into Sprenger's world. Once the listener is in, Sprenger puts the walls back up and rattles off another thirteen exercises in the last five minutes. He finishes by returning to the baroque guitar that open *Miniaturen* and it feels a bit like coming back to review page one in the Mel Bay book.

Boundaries are important to Sprenger. Ultimately, *Miniaturen* turns out to be just as concerned with short-form experimentation as it is with tracks, titles, times, and transitions. Even if the boundaries seem arbitrary to us, they're essential in helping us understand how rewarding those little four-bar exercises can be.

Reviewed by: **Mike Orme**

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