



# Polwechsel Traces Of Wood

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean.

Roland Barthes, *S/Z*

**For** about twenty years Polwechsel have been operating at the interface between improvised music and contemporary composition. Recognised as one of the seminal groups in this area, they started out when a paradigm shift in music was taking place. Driven by a small circle of musicians, notably in Vienna, Berlin and Tokyo, this shift introduced profound changes in the development of improvised and experimental music, as the relations between avant-garde, high art, pop and various subcultures of the nineties were re-evaluated. The musicians involved in this transition occasionally drew on modes of playing employed by improvisational collectives of the sixties but also referred to influences from the highly concentrated sound and noise works of new music composers while keeping a critical distance to the energy and expressiveness of free improvisation, as well as embracing genres such as rock music, noise, and electronic club culture. In many cases they called into question the polemically defended former opinion of a dichotomy between composition and improvisation. This has resulted in musical concepts and performance practices that these traditional terms alone can no longer adequately describe.

**Polwechsel** were among the first groups of this multifaceted music scene to establish aesthetic strategies and performance practices that were soon recognised as a radical form of ›reductionism‹: a paring down of the habitual musical linguistically in favour of a microscopic

exploration of singular musical events; a deceleration and de-automation of musical processes in favour of immersive listening; an eschewing of the dramaturgy of musical forms in favour of focussing attention on the fleeting presence and physical materiality of sound; an awareness of the flip-side of sound, of background noises, silence, disruptions in sound production and musical articulation. The music seemed to rebel against the information we are being flooded with through the current modes of social communication just as it invited the listener to discover a whole world in the neglected, imperfect, confusing detail – an ordinary world perhaps or even a counterworld, but certainly not a refuge. Perhaps the minimal, measured gesture that produced this music also took a sceptical look at the creative enthusiasm and innovative drive which had come to dominate the post-Fordist working practices.

**The** reductionism of the time was a school of perception that linked the protagonists of Vienna's experimental music scene to Berlin *Echtzeitmusik*, Japanese *Onkyo* and *New London Silence*. It still serves as a common horizon of that generation of musicians, but belongs to the past. As Michael Moser said about the work at that time, »To reduce further would mean to stop playing«, that is, to become silent. The situation thus called for pushing the music into another direction. Polwechsel's changes of direction and perspective have also been reflected in the different instrumentations and collaborations, for instance with the laptop musician Christian Fennesz on *Wrapped Islands* (2002). The current line-up – since *Archives of the North* (2006) – includes the two percussionists Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr, who bring a wide range of musical experiences between experimental rock and electro-acoustic improvisation to the group. Meanwhile, the ensemble has begun to introduce musical aspects that either were not included initially or only included to a small extent, such as tonal relationships, harmony, rhythm, but also questions of form, musical space and, consequently, expressivity. Thus in the light of the experiences gained through ›reduction‹ a reconsideration of the whole array of the musical means of expression has begun. But what is most noticeable is the difference in the individual approaches, something already laid out in the group's beginnings that is now increasingly splitting up into a broad spectrum of musical concepts.

**Never** before have heterogeneity and cohesion been such crucial elements of a Polwechsel release, as two seemingly contradictory decisions set the tone for *Traces of Wood*: to leave as much room as possible for the aesthetic positions of the individual band members on the one hand and to intensify forms of collective creation on the other. Whereas up to now the tracks were penned mainly by Moser and Dafeldecker or assembled from collective improvisations, as is the case of *Wrapped Islands*, for instance, this time each member contributed one composition, the specific form of which was worked out in long rehearsal phases. For the most part they came up with ideas concerning the structure of musical sequences without any specifications as to material, sometimes with specific ideas of sound or fragments of compositions which were then fixed and reworked collectively. This is a strategy characteristic for a composer/performer ensemble where the individual attitudes and musical languages become an integral part of the composing process. It resulted in extremely different works formulated in the common idiom of the group that sometimes builds up to a full orchestral sound.

**Form** not only is an important aspect in the latest music of Polwechsel, it is also essential to the work of Burkhard Beins. However, rather than being interested in organising the overall structure of a piece of music, he studies the decisions and actions that give rise to form. Since 2007 Beins has been developing »Adapt/Oppose«, a series of scores that define only the spaces for group interaction and have meanwhile been performed by various ensembles. Durations and timing of musical events are left open, as is the actual musical material, which has to be worked out collectively. The parameters specified in the score are: combination, direction and the order in which the musicians react and interact; the position in the structure where new material is introduced; the fundamental expressive principles of similarity and contrast. Beins' scores are neither indeterminate pieces nor systems of rules for improvisation but tools for collective compositions. Last but not least they reflect fundamental aspects of Polwechsel's work, for »Adapt/Oppose« directs the musicians' attention to combining two extremely different dimensions: on the one hand the full concentration on the detailed shaping of the singular musical moment, on the other, the participation of every player in determining the beginning, duration and end of individual sections and thus the proportions of the resultant form. As Beins emphasises, the mere constellation of musicians is a compositional element, since both the musical materials and personal styles of the players enter a process of mutual transformation.

**Sonorous** energies determine the development of »Grain bending #1« by Michael Moser. The impulse-resonance sequence that

opens the piece changes its form gradually through varying repetition and stretching. In the second part, the initial moving forces are transferred to repetitive patterns, slowly subsiding to an uninterrupted expanse from which delicate melodic contours emerge in the end. Synthesizing the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic aspects of the work, the last section builds up to a surprising and yet consistent finale. This piece goes beyond the characteristic Polwechsel aesthetic, since it is a microscopic study of musical textures transposed into a dramaturgy of form that is finalised and thus completely unusual for the ensemble. Its at times spectral effect is due to resonance and interference phenomena Moser explored in his concert installation *Resonant Cuts* (2008). Tactile sound transducers mounted on string and percussion instruments transmit pure tones and drum samples to the sound boxes where they are modulated by the instruments' acoustic properties. The instruments act both as loudspeakers or filters for external sounds and as independent sound producers. The resultant interferences provide the harmonics and the radiant acoustic form where locatable instrumental sounds blend with the placelessness of diffuse beats to create spatial depth.

**Martin** Brandlmayr's composition »Nia Rain Circuit« is interactive also in the technological sense. According to an exact schedule that specifies points in time and durations, sound sequences are recorded during the performance, edited live and later played back into the musical process. The sampled material is put into a new spatial and temporal perspective: because of the recording procedure the taped sounds often seem closer or more distant than the ones produced in real time, and they are sometimes digitally »frozen« as well, that is to say, they come to a halt. This establishes a double-interaction rela-

tionship in the performance process: interaction between the musicians during the performance, interaction between the performance and its past moments. The interweaving of real and virtual spaces and the changes the sounds undergo within these spaces create a network of connections and memories across form. Brandlmayr's piece seeks to transfer ephemeral improvised moments to compositional structures through editing and repetition. The rhythmic patterns that evolve between the condensation and disintegration of sound fields and textures feel closer to a groove than those of all previous Polwechsel music.

**The** title »S 64°14' W 56°37'« refers to the degrees of longitude and latitude that specify the location in Antarctica where Werner Dafelecker captured the sound of a blizzard when conducting field recording sessions for the radio piece *The Cold Monolith* (2010/11). The snowstorm is one part of an acoustic musical configuration. The other part consists of sonorous activities of the ensemble which sometimes intervenes rather abruptly in the continuum of the taped storm. Whereas start, duration, dynamics and density of the instrumental parts are determined by chance operations, the specific sound material was worked out in rehearsals. Between the pre-structured ensemble parts there is space for improvisation. As is the case with earlier works by Dafelecker, for instance »Field« from 2008, this piece is also based on conflicts: the confrontation of the musicians with structures that were formed without human contribution; the contrast between materials that belong to different spaces and times; the relationship between continuum and singularity. – Is there any such thing as music without repetition? Nothing seems to repeat itself when the blizzard and the sequence of musical events come together, except the sequence itself. Thus each singular event that follows becomes a form of recurrence, that is, not only a difference in repetition but also a repetition of difference.

**Central** problems of a common aesthetic and history of musical materiality are taken as the starting point for the individual concepts in the four new Polwechsel pieces. The works re-interpret this aesthetic from the perspective of the different approaches of the musicians. However, *Traces of Wood* is definitely not only about the traces that shared musical material and different personal styles leave in the respective work. It is above all about reflecting the common history that, clearly audible, has been deposited in the materials, personal styles and compositions, and this history is revisited in every nuance of the music. Sculpting solitary sound and noise, the group has developed an aesthetic economy that it transfers to all formal and spatial aspects of the complex organisation of sound. Even the richest sonority and the intensity of this Polwechsel release is the work of musicians who once exposed their music to the possibilities and risks of falling silent. The members of the group share the knowledge of these possibilities. They share a repertoire of extended instrumental techniques acquired through this knowledge. And they observe traditional compositional, installational, mediated, post-digital means of expression through the lenses of these techniques. What started as a questioning of musical idioms, has developed primarily through the continuous collaboration of the four musicians into a unique language that is characteristic of the group. It is the binding nature of this language that enables them to reflect on and articulate different concepts and aesthetic positions. *Traces of Wood* is a discourse that follows a double movement. It is the sum of a collective effort, and multiplies the results that can be drawn from this sum.

translated by Friederike Kulcsar

Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, NY 1974

# Polwechsel



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Matthias Haensch

## Polwechsel Traces Of Wood

Burkhard Beins *drums, percussion*  
 Martin Brandlmayr *drums, percussion*  
 Werner Dafeldecker *double bass*  
 Michael Moser *cello*

- |                                  |   |       |
|----------------------------------|---|-------|
| 1                                | <b>Adapt/Oppose</b><br><i>by Burkhard Beins</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1301349          | 14:16 |
| 2                                | <b>Grain Bending #1</b><br><i>by Michael Moser</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1301350       | 19:14 |
| 3                                | <b>Nia Rain Circuit</b><br><i>by Martin Brandlmayr</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1301351   | 14:48 |
| 4                                | <b>S 64°14" W 56°37"</b><br><i>by Werner Dafeldecker</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1301352 | 12:39 |
| Total Time DDD <sup>24</sup> Bit |   | 60:57 |

All compositions Tuhtah Publishing.

*Recorded in March 2010 at SWR, Baden Baden by Alfred Habelitz and in January 2011 at Technische Universität Wien, Kuppelsaal by Wolfgang Musil and Laura Endres; Edited and Mixed by Polwechsel; Mastered by Wolfgang Musil; Software programming for Nia Rain Circuit by Klaus Filip and for Grain Bending #1 by Wolfgang Musil; CD-master by Peter Pfister; Liner notes by Matthias Haensch; Cover photo by Michael Moser; Graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Produced by Polwechsel; Executive production by Werner X. Uehlinger.*

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