

Brazil's Neighbor Blurs Boundaries

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
Monday, 13 October 2008

When American cellist-composer Joan Jeanrenaud left the Kronos String Quartet in 1999 after two decades to pursue composition, improvisation, and multidisciplinary performance, it was, beyond question, boldly assertive. Jeanrenaud strove to rediscover the cello for modern ears.

Her probings, though notably idiosyncratic (as her compositions themselves continually demonstrate), are rich with musical insight. Transparently honest, her writing avoids empty affectations, yet indulges a genuine sense of play, as characterized by the truly individual blend of intensity and intelligence that can be heard on her new CD, *Strange Toys*.

Jeanrenaud uses distortion, effects, and electronic looping as discreet and beautifully voiced backdrops for the melodies of her improvisations and compositions. She fuses contemporary cello techniques and electronic effects with programmed beats, spoken text, and traditional instrumentation, employing sounds often associated with rock, jazz, and hip-hop and its siblings, but in (or along with) contexts unerringly closer to contemporary classical than anything else. This is music incorporating both free and more structured material and ranging from contemplative, impressionistic sound-collages to hectic, swirling vignettes.

The different tracks on *Strange Toys* cover a considerable emotional range, although they are stylistically homogeneous. Considering that the disc is primarily multi-tracked Jeanrenaud, the spark and presence which comes across is no mean feat. She has created a series of highly varied and often emotionally charged environments as frameworks for some truly impressive compositions, most of which are terse, direct, and uncompromising in their fervent messages. The musical thinking is clearly a formalized version of her improvising. "I always start with some idea in mind," says Jeanrenaud, "a person or a dog, an idea or a sound I want to create, then I improvise on that idea."

A striking example is neatly encapsulated on the first track. An abstract prelude that sets the tone for the recording, "Sling Shot" was originally written as a single movement for a larger work - a suite of six two-minute dances - for choreographer Cid Pearlman. Storytelling over roughened terrain, the somewhat wayward invention brings together four spatially notated electronic loops: a long harmonic crescendo, a low pizzicato with a wide vibrato, a snap pizzicato followed by two more pizzicato notes in diminuendo, and a tremolo. Here Jeanrenaud's contemporary argot of jagged phrasing illuminates, but never overwhelms.

Carrying you along cocooned in rich sound, "Axis," written for Jeanrenaud's first cello teacher, makes use of loops and a delay effect (Lexicon MPX G2) in combination with written out material in 9/8 and encompasses an astonishing range of effects. After the first loop is created, a low sustained pattern is added, then a looped melodic phrase in the mid register.

Jeanrenaud playing live, stops the loops, dispenses a series of chords, loops four long tones in succession, and repeating one note, fades out, the final chord sounding on defiantly - a thrilling denouement and sumptuous tribute to a teacher who was at the center of her professional trajectory.

On "Kaleidoscope," the interestingly textured background strata, set to contrast with the foreground rather than to interact with it, is bolstered by beats from producer PC Muñoz and provides a kind of schizophrenic symmetry. Starting with a loop in 6/8 then another in 3/4, creating syncopation with the first, Jeanrenaud enters with a series of expressive melodies that contain tremolo and a fast glissando vibrato.

Moving her bow from near the cello's bridge (ponticello), producing a nasal, brittle tone, to its fingerboard (sul tasto), eliciting soft harmonics, back to the bridge, then behind it to sound like a medieval viol, Jeanrenaud is constantly shifting hues, turning ideas inside out and upside down. Beneath it all there's a very sure compositional technique.

Jeanrenaud's delicious blend of ancient and modern modes is pointedly exemplified in "Transition," where the music of Telemann, Glass, Marais, Vivaldi, Mackey, and Lupo are integrated with newer works by Jeanrenaud and Alex Kelly. Written for two cellos and two viola da gambas, the transparent textures of the first movement reveal the harmonic and textural richness of the post-Lullian style. By contrast, the second movement introduces a tautness, an inner tension, and improvisations by solo cellist Alex Kelly.

The gambas play repeated figures underneath in different overlapping meters - one in 3/8, the other in 4/8; Jeanrenaud furnishes long sustained tones attacked ponticello, prior circular bowing between bridge and fingerboard. Cross-rhythms, syncopations, and sequences accommodate the juxtaposition of gentle beauty and agitation.

"Tug of War" loops a seven note phrase several times, each with a slightly different time variation and placement. Pushing and pulling against each other, the notes create a game-like ambiance. Jeanrenaud furnishes a solo line, close in range, but more chromatic, before the loops are removed.

One by one the textural stratum is detached until just the first phrase remains. Beautifully shaded cadences confirm Jeanrenaud's ease with the electronic idiom, new sounds, and combinations of effects - not precisely notated in the music and probably unimagined, but within the scope of an idiom that demands a very high technical standard; yet whose proper expression requires the utmost restraint.

Written for solo cello and percussion, "Dervish" has a shape and duration influenced by visual artist Tom Bonauro's video and set design for the acclaimed multimedia piece *In Between*, created in collaboration with Jeanrenaud. The composition opens restlessly with Jeanrenaud playing a B-flat baião-like pizzicato pattern (two dotted quarter notes followed by a quarter note) while William Winant delivers an airy eighth note figure on marimba. Winant takes over the B-flat pattern, and the mood gradually becomes more animated as Jeanrenaud makes a darting excursion into a more abstract language of gruff expostulation atop Winant's pattern before we're ferried back whence we came.

"Ink Blot" was written for the San Francisco Modern Museum of Art's podcast focused on Bay Area Beat era artist Bruce Conner. The piece starts with one loop, and keeps adding more. With each layer, each loop, the number of notes increases, spiraling into an evocative moodscape before swirling back to the initial two notes.

Says, Jeanrenaud, "When I was asked to write a piece inspired by Conner's Ink Blot, I thought about how a note could

be folded over on the cello, like on a piece of paper, and wrote from that perspective, creating larger and wider inkblot layers." Like an inkblot's singular and esoteric concept, the piece gives a rare insight into Conner's work.

The spatially generous composition, "Blue Kite" is an unusually expressive two minutes that creates an atmosphere of flying, floating, drifting in the air. Basically in 4/4, its style ranges from the primeval drone-like loop of a sustained minor 7th that opens the piece to the long tones and ear-appealing (spiccato) bow strokes bouncing off the string that are at once, ebullient and austere. With this piece Jeanrenaud makes her mark as a gifted miniaturist.

On the memorably beautiful "Livre," William Winant appears on vibraphone playing a repeated loop in 6/4 with a four bar transition at its center over which Jeanrenaud tenders a texturally lucid line of intuitive poetry that finds her in most responsive form. The cello's arching phrases and vibrant tone, as well as its translucent colors, create a profound effect, as does the work's serenity. The result is a stark grandeur that is not prepared to surrender to the excesses of romanticism.

A work full of emotional candor - regrets, nostalgia, longing, and hope, "Waiting" is one of Jeanrenaud's earliest pieces utilizing electronically looped repetition and is infused with real artistry, sensitive musicianship, and saudade. A two bar pattern in 4/4, using 8th note triplets becomes the foundation, to which loops are added, first two whole notes, then longer notes, giving the piece a lilting feeling, like a lullaby. In all, there are 8 loops over which Jeanrenaud supplies a somewhat improvised line, phrasing with controlled freedom, before returning to the melodic pattern of the first four bars.

For "Rainkids," Jeanrenaud composed two loops built on the natural harmonics found high up on the cello's G and D strings. The first looped pattern is in 23/8. The second loop incorporates 8th and 16th notes in diverse combinations. Above these loops Jeanrenaud improvises freely on the natural harmonics of the same two strings, their flute-like timbres creating a perfectly in tune, unprecedented sound quality. The patter of prerecorded falling rain and children cheering bookend the piece.

It would be hard to find a more satisfying poetry-based composition than the ethereal "Air & Angels," which was written for this CD and later adopted for Jeanrenaud's installation ARIA. The presence, which undoubtedly gives this work another dimension altogether, is the quadrachord, an instrument created by Paul Drescher whose 17-foot long strings produce unworldly natural harmonics.

After working with Drescher to determine possibilities, Jeanrenaud wrote out and recorded him playing several 8th note pizzicato patterns in 7/8, 2/4, 3/8, 6/8, 5/8, 4/4, and 12/8, which she assembled in the studio, all of them too difficult to perform live.

Over the assembled patterns, Jeanrenaud performs lines in different meters that are both sparkling and darkly intense. When PC Muñoz begins to recite "Air & Angels" by metaphysical poet John Donne, Jeanrenaud mirrors the vivid colors of his text, harmonic color taking its lead from poetic imagery rather than from the sounds of specific words.

Says Muñoz, "What makes working with Joan especially great is that she is extremely open and eager to experiment with subtle, unexpected textures and instrumental pairings." This is a work of daring delicacy and beautifully raw

emotional content. Poetry and virtuosity are held in perfect poise; aspects of angels seem prophetically prevalent in the mixture.

The thirteenth track, "Vermont Rules" is a refreshingly openhearted piece, both somber and celebratory. It begins with a single note intoning thirteen times, unfolds with a kind of "heart to heart" weightiness and never looks back until the final choral-like variation. "Vermont was the name of BJ Miller's service / companion dog," explains Jeanrenaud.

"When BJ was nineteen, he was in a horrible accident and lost an arm and both legs. Vermont was really important in BJ's life, but after 13 years, Vermont died." The piece, a theme and variation, passes through their imaginary journeys together - through the blues, the middle east, the baroque - each, in its own right, an expression of unarguably sincere emotion that keeps sentimentality, though not sentiment, at bay.

Chaotic, ceaselessly active, and shatteringly furious, "Trottola" (spinning top) is a loop of five bars in 6/4 with another loop of the same material starting on the second bar of the first loop. Overlapping, this fugue-like effect is repeated another three times. Next is added to the busy background turmoil a pizzicato line in 6/4, which is also looped prior to Jeanrenaud's supplying a tremolo ascending line, going up chromatically two octaves to the end of her fingerboard. The result is one seeming endless eruption with an acquired will of its own. There is a power and excitement in this music, an emotional urgency barely under control that, stretching the expressive potential, transcends all other issues.

These fourteen pieces show Jeanrenaud has attained a remarkable mastery of her craft. The range of invention is extraordinarily wide, full of melodic invention, harmony that knows when and for how long to remain static or flowing, or ready to spring surprises, at times romantic and at others impulsive.

The variety of forms and fluidity of sounds could have been imagined only by an accomplished virtuoso with an adventurous outlook. Listening to *Strange Toys*, one constantly senses the joy of a woman alone in the studio: awestruck, contented, inspired, prerecorded loops coming from all directions.

Jeanrenaud is an imaginative musician with a highly developed sense of fantasy, to which she gives free rein. A charismatic presence, she has the ability to create exciting as well as beautiful and languid things, embracing each project - performance piece, multimedia installation, or dance score - with the passion of a devoted horticulturist tending her most precious flowers.

In Jeanrenaud's hands digital composition has reached a peak of expressive refinement, begging the question how one woman with an incurable degenerative disease, multiple sclerosis, can command so much ardent emotion, enduring courage, and scintillating style.

Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of *Brazzil* magazine, an online international publication based in Los Angeles, for more than a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the *Georgetown Journal*.

He is the recipient of three government grants that allowed him to research traditional music in China, India, and Brazil. His articles on Brazilian music have been translated and published in Dutch, German, Portuguese, Serbian, and Spanish. You can reach him through his e-mail: cuica@interworld.net.