

## Stelarc & Bolt Ensemble

Jolted, Melbourne, Australia

In the centre of the room is Stelarc, standing silently on a dais. His famous third arm is rigged, its mechanical hand and five finger-pincers cabled into a python of leads reaching to an overhead bar supporting its massive bulk. Additional cables sprout from his 'real' hand, attaching MIDI-controller rings for generating theremin-like tones, plus a tiny cam which projects a virtual sight line of his body to a large screen to his left.

With such a cumbersome rig for his and Bolt Ensemble's presentation of *Stellar Metal Arc*, Stelarc can't make a grand stage entrance. He waits in polite quietude, mentally prepping for the concert, where he will operate his third arm/hand, and solo on his interactive rings, all while being backed by the ensemble on their raised proscenium stage. This performance is a rarity. Stelarc has mostly collaborated with ensembles generating live electronic music, melding

with his squarewaves put through trancey digital delays. Bolt Ensemble are James Hullick's contemporary music group of shifting members. Tonight sees Hullick on synths, electric guitar and prepared piano, with Miranda Hill (double bass), Peter Neville (drum kit), Zac Johnston (violin) and Gideon Brazil (flute/sax).

Hullick has produced a graphic score which extends Stelarc's sweeping dovetails of delirious portamento pitching. The score is broken into around ten sections, concatenated as if it's a song set: half atonal shimmers of sliding pitch confluence, half sudden eruptions of jazz rock with surprising echoes of Sony Sharrock. As these five performers vibrate and vamp, Stelarc's five fingers open and shut with a series of amplified clicks. The contrast between these two networked energies becomes clear: Stelarc is essentially trapped and suspended in his rig, becoming performatively disabled rather than corporeally enhanced, as per the augmentative rhetoric of post-body

theories circa 2000. Comparatively, Bolt Ensemble musically soar and career.

Stelarc as disabled? Let's unpack that. While his experiments in extending muscular and neurological capabilities invite reflection on how artistic practice intersects with scientific investigation, all nascent technological developments can seem impractical and awkward. Stelarc's high-tech spectacles often mute this perspective, aiming for futurologist potentiality. But once you place such a figure in the context of a contemporary music ensemble rooted in modernist sensibilities, the clash generates a fruitful dialogue between the two contrasting notions of radical progressivism.

Stelarc's restricted posture and limited motion mechanics evoke *Suspensions*, where he potently explored how his body could become a sculptural mass defined by weight and gravity. There, and in tonight's performance, his body's 'obsolescence' was closer to noh theatre than Cyberarts. Bolt Ensemble's sonics aurally draw tonal

arcs and plot pitch trajectories around Stelarc's gestures and his MIDI-pitching, enlivening his mechanoid poses within their aural space.

This fusion of capabilities relates to another ensemble of Hullick's, The Amplified Elephants: a group identifying with intellectual disabilities, whose live concerts are impressive and distinctive proposals on how new music can accommodate and expand neural modes of musical performance. Live, they are far from theoretical, producing fascinating and unpredictable results.

Bolt Ensemble's cabaret-style backing of Stelarc continues this investigation into how one can generate and produce new music by bringing multiple viewpoints in direct sonic contact with each other. It's fulsome, multifaceted, and strangely inclusive: at the close, Stelarc is unsheathed from his rig as he generously invites the audience to come up and chat with him about its design.

Philip Brophy

## FUJI|||||||TA + id m theft able

Epsilon Spires, Brattleboro, US

Epsilon Spires, in the small, artsy town of Brattleboro, Vermont, launched in 2019. Most of their activity has been movies and performances in the parking lot of the 150 year old downtown church leased by the organisation. They cautiously moved back into their sanctum this spring with political discussions, screenings and visual arts as well as matinee organ recitals and concerts by the likes of Laraaji and Kali Malone. And, on the summer solstice, Epsilon Spires presented solo sets by the idiosyncratic id m theft able and sound artist and instrument builder FUJI|||||||TA.

Maine man id m theft able opens the evening. He comes off as a nondiscriminating soundmaker, seemingly fascinated by the results of clanging any

two things together. Tall and generously bearded, he's an unusual presenter of ideas; his social media is filled with chaotic collages, yard sale tales and hints to where he's hidden cassettes of his music in the woods.

At Epsilon Spires, his sonic fascinations are played out with controlled feedback and manipulated objects on an amplified surface. At first, he seems to be waiting to see which way his noise will go, but it gets there pretty fast. He's soon consumed by frenetically singing into and brushing his face mask against a megaphone.

Whether deep chant, falsetto yelps, sputtering or complementing and mimicking the objects he manipulates, his voice is always at the core, rarely staying with one idea for more than a minute. Eventually, he moves away from the table to wave or hit two differently sized yard

signs, then he turns his attention to a collection of baking tins on the floor, kicking them about in a display as visual as it is sonic. It's hard to imagine he wouldn't be doing the same thing at home tonight.

FUJI|||||||TA's set is a display of pipes. Standing behind his handmade organ and in front of the expansive set of pipes stretching upward at the rear of the altar, he blows beautiful long tones on a Japanese shō that fill the old, wooden chapel. At length, he loops the shō and gently alters the sound at a mixing desk, clarifying the vibrations, then begins pumping the wooden air compressor that feeds his own small instrument. The quiet, rhythmic clacking of the handle against the case is a part of the presentation.

When the loop eventually cuts out, the ear attenuates to the soft but profound

bass in his organ. His low chants and abrupt shouts at first detract from the multiplicity of drones but, captured and repeated, they soon become part of the proceedings. The sound is constantly in motion. The performance ends with the release of the compressor handle, which comes to a rest with a soft clunk against the wooden casing, the unintentional sound serving as a final full stop.

Both performers are dutiful on stage, not so much artists as taskmasters. The first set is cluttered, the second uneasy, but they share focus. Commitment to the work of making a sound is what makes each exciting in their own way. On the way out, FUJI|||||||TA's tech rider T-shirt and id m theft able's stickers of his high school ID make for the coolest merch table this side of the Green Mountains.

Kurt Gottschalk

## Cosmic Gathering

Alte Spinnerei, Chemnitz, Germany

A cloud of golden dust hangs over the post-industrial complex of Alte Spinnerei, a performance and arts venue situated in the heartlands of the former East German city renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt during the Communist era. The hot weather has left the ground parched. But the crowd is undeterred, taking advantage of the outdoor swimming pool cum steamy sauna in the centre of the site.

Initially christened Camp Cosmic, the festival was founded by DJ Albion, with its first instalments taking place in a forested location in Sweden. Since moving to Germany, its expanded leadership has transformed it into a more intimate event. "We invite people to play music that they wouldn't necessarily get to play anywhere else," co-organiser Alexander Arpeggio tells me. "It's about friends coming together to share really special tracks."

There's a dream-like atmosphere to Cosmic Gathering. The decor is carnivalesque, with more disco balls than I've ever seen in one place, a giant glowing lava lamp on the main stage and searchlight lasers beaming over the horizon. At one point, Sneaker DJ passes by in a bear costume, a box of rainbow vinyl in his paws. Released on Arpeggio's *Eine Welt* label, the EP features a dedicated cosmic anthem. Naming core crew members and resident DJs, a synth melody is accompanied by German lyrics translating as: "*Dust swirls up from the dirt road/In rich yellow and sky blue/If you gaze long into the cosmos, the cosmos gazes into you*".

Despite the silliness – or perhaps in perfect equilibrium with it – there's a serious note. The roster leans strongly towards DJ sets, with a repertoire of choice vinyl collectors, edit-heavy mixes and psychedelic selections.

André Pahl's slot on Saturday evening opens with layering vocal tracks that create multilingual glossolalia. It's a blend of traditional Eastern European folk singing, a Polish choir and Galician composer Mercedes Peón, Pahl informs me later. I get the impression that mixing in this context isn't only about playing good songs – although that's definitely a prominent component – but also meticulously preplanned arrangements: coveted Discogs gems, specially recorded cassette tapes and, in Pahl's case, Ableton-manipulated voice fragments.

It's a stroke of genius to programme live acts at sunrise. French producer Epsilove draws me bleary-eyed towards the Kuckuck tent, wondering who is playing jungle at the crack of dawn. When I reach the stage, she's bent over a huge hardware set-up, riding her analogue equipment through downtempo techno to textured industrial and muted hardcore,

navigating each twist and turn with distorted, sung-spoken lyrics. It's the perfect daybreak ritual, an incantation that leaves me dancing in a trance until mid-morning.

Another highlight is Alicia Carrera's 6:30am Sunday morning set at the woodland Birkenhain stage. With a feather-light touch she drops in a dub track, its percussive drop reverberating reverently through the trees.

On Sunday night, watching the sun sink from the lofty perch of a treehouse at Livegarten, God Is God vocalist Galina Ozeran and Etkin Çekin on synth and guitar gently caress a swathe of seated listeners. The audience looks utterly blissed out, enraptured by the steady heartbeat of the music. It's here, in the pitched down, hypnotic momentum, that Cosmic Gathering really lives up to its name as it orbits the stars.

Hannah Pezzack