

ORGAN FAILURE

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Muzak on the water

I play side A of *Orgelshtick*.

A few bars of tame muzak glide sweetly through my speakers; the generic mellow mix of canned bass and drums that always makes me think of Chris de Burgh's 'Lady in Red', that sugary 80s ballad that I used to love when I was little (and which, embarrassingly perhaps, I still love without a trace of irony).

This enveloping nanosecond of nostalgia, however, is abruptly interrupted by a strident chord from an off-key organ. The chord – followed by a similarly dissonant arpeggio, then another – sounds so unapologetically arbitrary that I suddenly envision a cat plonked on top of a keyboard, its pink cushioned paws galumphing around the keys, startled by the noise but compelled to continue the racket.

As the composition progresses, the chords grow longer and I am able to make out the outlines of a disgruntled melody, which makes me imagine a (human) player of a slightly lunatic gaze pressing his fingertips on the keys and shaking his arms while he plays, as if to give even more strength and purpose to his discordant performance. All this while, the nice muzak keeps playing lightly in the back, like a small pond of blue water that contains and gently rocks the noisy instrument and its zany player.

Stuck in the (experimental) shtick

The result is both disturbing and comedic, like an aural sketch that mocks the pompousness of both the traditional religious Orgelstück and its avant-garde counterpoint. It is, somehow, a piece of cultural slapstick, challenging the pride and dignity of a solemn genre, which betrays a certain disappointment with experimental music as a mere label, rather than a vehicle for doing things. A shtick, a sales pitch, then, rather than a creative method.

Might the predictability of the 'experimental' outcome, the disregard for the actual process of thinking and making, be what Lundkvist is questioning with *Orgelshtick*, precisely?

'The humouristically-scepticist admittance of doubt and failure reoccurs throughout history, from Diogenes through Cervantes to Alfred Jarry' said the art critic Jörg Heiser in 2008, a propos his re-

search on the use of slapstick humour as a critical strategy in contemporary art.¹ And if the use of the word 'slapstick' seems pertinent here it's because of Lundkvist's deft treatment of both humour and sound as signposts that simultaneously generate and annihilate linguistic structures. The humour that recurs in Lundkvist's art practice is one where silliness is a self-reflexive, distancing device that allows him to tease out and repurpose language's potentialities and shortcomings. His deadpan humour is a proxy for scepticism, a tool to destabilise fixed meanings and erect new ones from their semiotic rubble.

Slap sticks and other utterances

So, coming back to this onomatopoeic word (slaaaap ssssttick!), I presume most of

The Comedy of Errors to *commedia dell'arte*. It is this dual function that I most associate with *Orgelshtick*. Although Lundkvist has employed sound in many of his previous works (in the series *Collection of Sound Effects (Winds and Drums)*, *heart of darkness no. 2* and *a work for two speakers for audiences*, to mention a few), *Orgelshtick* is his most musical piece to date, as well as a move towards the pre-linguistic realm, positing the organ as a mechanical mouth whose utterances are still inchoate, as compulsive as unsystematised.

As it happens, I hadn't properly considered the concept of pre-linguism until a few days ago, when its revelation was forced upon me while sitting on a train. On the seat in front of me there was a child of around two years old, who uttered a wide variety of noises at a high volume,

the word. Finally, there were times when I heard the toddler delivering a 'speech' with startling poise, rhythm and skill, like a seasoned MC. One could infer that he had paid great attention to the verbal emanations of the adults around him and that he just couldn't wait to participate and contribute. And he had everything going for him – the voice, the phonetics, even the delivery – everything except the language. So he made a makeshift one, to use for the time being.

From shticks to tics

I play side B of *Orgelshtick* – which I find more in tune with the realm of drone compositions (albeit an interrupted one) than side A – while I reminisce about that kid on the train, and I start to wonder whether Lundkvist's organ,² that 'mechanical mouth' engaged in a soliloquy that no one can understand, might be forever trapped in a pre-linguistic phase, on the cusp of coherence, or rather, embodying a pattern of altered speech production, akin to those who suffer of Tourette syndrome.

After all, Tourette syndrome and pre-linguism share some similar traits to the untrained ear. For example: 'Some children with Tourette syndrome may repeat words. If the child repeats somebody else's words, it is called echolalia, but if she repeats her own words, it is considered palilalia. [...] In cases of palilalia, the repetition may be a word or phrase and the child may whisper the repetition. When speaking, those with Tourette syndrome may use different voice intonations. Whether a patient has simple or complex vocal tics, they break semantic rules, because of their insertion into larger units of conversation where they have no apparent contextual meaning.'³

I guess, when I listen to *Orgelshtick*, I hear as much an exercise of self-expression as a rebuttal of meaning. I hear a raspberry blown towards all those wordy, self-serious pamphlets, compositions and artworks around us, but one that is self-aware and willing to inscribe itself in the very same circles. It is Lundkvist's compliance with the rules of the artist as musician (releasing a 12", presenting it in a gallery) and subsequent reluctance to take the piece at face value within any of those specific categories (art, avant-garde music, commodity), which sets the rules of the game we are playing here.

Now, who's playing? ●

HENNING LUNDKVIST

ORGEL-SHTICK

12' / 18'
33 1/3 R.P.M.

DRUCKSACHE

us are familiar with the type of comedy that it describes: that which exaggerates a failed, noisy or brutal physical activity, such as people falling down the stairs or chasing or beating each other up, which also favours repetition as a comic device (think Benny Hill, or the Looney Tunes cartoons, for instance).

But its etymology is maybe more obscure, its genesis in the 'slapstick': a club-like instrument, composed of two wooden slats that make a banging noise, which has had stellar appearances in the history of theatre both as percussive instrument and as a smacking weapon – from Shakespeare's

unforgivingly and throughout the duration of the trip. Although this is surely a rather irritating traveller's hazard, this time I chose to embrace the sonic warfare rather than pretend it wasn't happening. Surprisingly, the experiment yielded bountiful results. I found, for example, that sometimes the tangle took the form of long, epic sentences delivered with adult intonations, while on other occasions the child would fixate on a specific sound, usually cacophonous, and repeat it like a scattergun until the phoneme took on a new dimension, as if one could almost see a floating speech bubble containing

1. 'All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art: An Interview with Jörg Heiser', *Art & Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/heiser.html, accessed September 9, 2014.

2. Which is really a mimicry of an organ, from a ready-made 'stock music' track.

3. Elizabeth Stannard Gromisch, 'Talking with Tourette Syndrome: Understanding Speech and Language Characteristics', www.brighthubeducation.com/special-ed-neurological-disorders/123952-overview-of-speech-and-language-characteristics-in-tourette-syndrome-children, accessed September 9, 2014.