

Horses For Courses

I've been blessed with a number of record labels over the years who have supported my work, most notably ReR London (formerly Recommended Records). The relationships have tended to be generous and committed. I've never had a major company interested in my work, but that is to be expected, as my music is obscure and little known. In the 1980s, I was looking for a good European label that would promote my output and I thought I had found one, one that shall remain anonymous or better - vanquished. This label was interested in my WDR production *Violin Music for Restaurants*, and yes ...would I come to Switzerland to sign a contract. At the time I was on tour in Austria, close but still some seven hours on the train. Should we meet in Basel where the guy and the label were based? No, he wrote, and suggested some obscure and tiny railway station about two hours from there. We met in the waiting room of said obscure station and signed the contract. Did he know of any place I could stay overnight around here, I asked. No, he said, you'll have to go to Basel, as he got in his car and drove away ...to Basel. Some hours later in the dark I arrived by train in Basel and felt, having lugged all my gear around (violin, backpack, and 19-string cello), quite exhausted. I set out up the street looking for a hotel. After some minutes of walking, I got the strangest feeling I was being followed slowly in a car. I stopped. The vehicle drew parallel with me and the driver's window wound down. It's HIM, the mean fucker! Eh ...I think there are some hotels in the next street, he offered, and drove away at speed. My opinion of this guy's helpful attitude to impoverished musicians on tour was somewhat reduced. Months later in Berlin, I got a call from him ...despite the fact that the CD was already publicly advertised, he had decided against the production, no reason given, but I could buy the digitalised master off him for 1,600 Deutschmarks (in 1989, this was for me a hefty load of money). I still have the contract.

When I started Fringe Benefit Records (FBR) in 1977, it would be fair to say, I really didn't know what I was doing ...other than the idea that if other musicians could do it, then I should be able to. Initially, all of my recordings were made direct to cassette, then transferred to reel-to-reel tape, then to vinyl. Why? Why make a vinyl from a shitty recording? Well, I liked the idea of getting away with it all. The guy at the pressing plant suggested adding some reverb, compression, maybe some track marks. No, I insisted, had to be raw and un-produced. The covers were likewise - silkscreened at home in small batches of twenty. Anyway, the guy at RCA took pity on me and told me that if I stood next to the conveyer belt in the packing yard of the company the following week at an appointed time ...two boxes of my albums would appear marked 'Jon' amongst all the MOD shlock sliding along said belt. And it came to pass ...two free boxes of FBR product. No one noticed, no one cared. I posted these from the Danger Island Post Office to all and sundry around the world - one was returned shaped like a salad bowl, another got me my first major festival in Europe.

Within in a few years, I saw the pointlessness of continuing with vinyl and bought myself some Sony cassette recorders and started to manufacture my own limited editions as they were required. The covers were inscribed with a bold '**FBR**', and I printed some minimal information about the content on an ancient Olivetti

typewriter, enough to warrant the FBR stamp of approval (yes, a real rubber stamper and red ink).

My amateurish attempts at a record company came sharply into focus when I started to have contact with the various improvisers labels in Europe. Somehow, they found the money to craft some excellent productions - studio recordings, impressive covers. But I suspect that they had no more luck convincing the general population as to the value of their music than I did. For instance, in 1983 I received a postcard from German percussionist Paul Lovens saying that the Alexander Schippenbach trio (of Paul, Alex, and Evan Parker) were going to tour Australia courtesy of the Goethe Institute. Enthusiastically I rushed down to the rather grand Goethe building in Sydney to offer my assistance in setting up the tour. There, I met the Dr Herr Professor complete with spotted bowtie. On his table was a sparkling copy of the trio's latest album. The Doctor looked at me with some sadness. 'I put on the record', he said with a heavy German accent, 'and my pot plant keeled over and died! This music kills'.

Which brings me to Death Metal, which I'm reliably informed has now migrated to the moniker of Doom Metal - a generational shift, apparently - but sounding much the same, very loud, very slow, maybe even marginally slower than the original ponderous Death. I wonder what is next after Death and Doom? But ours is not to wonder why, ours is just to do and ...how on earth did I end up on the stage of a Death Metal festival in the middle of Brazil playing solo violin? It seems that the son of the mayor of Belo Horizonte was able to persuade his father (or some suitably corrupt sycophants) to provide the cash for a Festival of Death. Luckily, I wasn't playing just acoustic violin but my latest incarnation of an interactive bow powering electronics and amplified violin. Boosted to Death volume, I probably played a 1,000 times more notes in the space of 30 minutes than all the band members from all three nights put together. The crowd of several thousand had become slightly bored by all the death stuff as they were/are Brazilian and would have preferred some music to dance to, I suspect. Despite Brazilian's obsession with Death (The Day of the Dead is cause for much celebration), I seemed to have brought them to a state of silent, open-mouthed horror. To say I was nervous would have been an understatement, as earlier in the day after the sound check I had casually asked the security guy if there was any way of getting back to the hotel, as the place was already packed with punters. With the click of his fingers, two underlings grabbed me, and feet not quite touching the ground, I was whisked through the crowd at aggressive speed and forcibly placed on the other side of the security fence. I spent the afternoon at the hotel pondering my survival options post-performance. After the concert, Chris Cutler helped me get my gear offstage; 'horses for courses', he said.

One kind of horse I've learnt to ride on occasion is to keep my mouth shut and stand with my back to the wall. This was the case in the Bonn Psychiatric Krankenhaus. I'd taken on a temporary work scheme between leaving school and taking up university (at which I didn't last a year, don't ask what I studied, you'll never ever guess). The treatment of mental illness must have moved on a lot since 1970, but back then it was fairly draconian and included some painful injection treatments. Our cohort of willing helpers was led by a socialist couple who sat us

down on the first day to explain that mental illness was causal and a characteristic of capitalism, and in any case, such illness did not exist. Next I was to play a game of Draughts with an inmate - easy - he beat me hands down. On moving on to the next assignment I was told I had been playing with a murderer who had strangled his two wives. 'And don't mention you are from England; one of our patients thinks he is the son of Hitler'. Over the next weeks, our socialist education continued. 'How do you detect someone with a mental illness?' asked the strident group leader Frederike. 'They have green eyes', replied the guitar strumming hippie who indeed had green eyes. He left the next day. Music, however, seemed to be abundant in the Krankenhaus; many patients sang or hummed to themselves obsessively. One of the nurses (not a patient) would suddenly burst out with half-remembered bits from *The Magic Flute* at the top of his voice - which I found quite alarming - and Mozart operas do this to me to this day. Towards the end of my internship, I was told to referee the weekly football match and handed a bunch of keys to aid with the proceedings. The game went like this. About ten patients leaned against the side walls, their heads hanging down, immobile, showing no sparks of interest. Then one of them (always the same one) would run across the yard and kick the ball as hard as he could over the exercise wall, over the toilet block, over the adjacent security wall, and into the car park. Managing my selection of bewildering keys, it took me about seven minutes to go and retrieve the ball, and on returning, place the ball in the centre of the yard again ...upon which the 'champ' inmate would come running up and kick the ball over the wall again. He showed little excitement and his colleagues offered neither encouragement nor dissuasion vis-a-vis his performance. This Sisyfusian operation lasted for an hour. Einstein had it down: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'. This may have confirmed my suspicions that playing the same classical music over and over was not for me, I determined to work in freer forms.

Improvisation. Plain to see. We are doing it all the time in conversation, while driving a car in unfamiliar territory, while cooking a variation on a recipe, while wandering around a new city—a veritable *flâneur*, and other peripatetic activities. We are perceiving new patterns, but our skill base senses how to deal (or not deal) with each new phrase, turn, ingredient, or street. This is quite achievable alone or in small groups but gets more problematic in larger constellations. This popped up in my mind one day in 1996 as I was standing in the middle of Beijing observing in admiration how the whole place functions. For example: when seven lanes of innumerable cyclists converge on a roundabout (a roundabout without a central island, I should add), the resulting discombobulation resembles a weather map, each cyclist making their way steadfastly through the turbulence, each pursuing an individual track, crossing other tracks in contrary motion - almost a dream state of trust and acceptance. But then oops ...an accident; someone has messed up negotiating their way through the convolution - a head-on collision. No problem, an eddy suddenly emerges. With a minimum of fuss, the cyclists of Beijing create another weather pattern, leaving a small low pressure zone (the said accident) around which the endless flow pedals on. Try this in a Western country, I'm thinking, and witness the aggression and pandemonium.