

The Magic, Cloudy Sounds of Julius

One rarely uncovers something really new. I'm not referring to the technical realm, where new products are being revealed at least monthly, or the area of technique, where instrumentalists and vocalists are constantly discovering new sounds or new ways to produce old ones. I am speaking of the conceptual sense – looking at music with new eyes. And in at least one case, the idea of “looking at music” has a very real basis. I recently experienced the current work of Julius, a German artist living and working in Berlin. Several years ago I had seen a series of his photographs, but was at a loss to explain why I found them so fascinating. Over the past few years he has turned his attention to sound art, with striking clarity and simplicity of result. One senses that he has approached music with a love of the unknown, not wishing to tarnish the feeling by learning too much. It is an attitude I have encountered (and not entirely understood) in other visual artists – their feeling of moving into another world, trespassing on hallowed ground, tasting forbidden fruit. Vito Acconci, for example, once described an elaborate piece involving enclosed loudspeakers and subliminal level sounds. When asked whether he was satisfied with the sonic results, he replied that he was not but that the concept was more important than the result.

With Julius, however, one feels that the concept, process, and result are equally important. He works with minimal materials: single notes played on an instrument, the sound of stones, of clapping, stomping, bare feet on wood, recorded and then rerecorded on a variety of tape decks and cassette machines so that timbre, pitch, and noise level are all affected and altered. He erases some of the recorded material on each rerecording, following a present pattern. The tapes played back simultaneously then create melodies and rhythms with shifting timbres and colors that are both accidental and planned, the result of a highly specific process.

What is fascinating is that the process applied to the sounds is not a musical but a visual one, and the result is indeed tinged with magic. *Music Line – Concert for a Beach* is a series of small loudspeakers arranged in a long line on a remote beach, broadcasting slowly shifting patterns of single short sounds. The effect was so mysterious and the timbre so unusual that I had to ask what the sounds were in their original form. “Piano,” was the reply, single piano notes, the 'a' above middle 'c', struck at the approximate rhythm of pulse beats. Yet it was not just the timbre, not just the surprise of discovering the original sound source, not just the strangely disjointed rhythm, not just the slightly comic effect of car speakers displaced from autos to the beach, but the overall effect as the sounds drifted to speaker to speaker in a pattern that was distinctly unanalyzable.

There is always something visual in Julius' installations. *Music for Clear Water* was delicate, percussive sounds played through a small wrapped speaker immersed in a clear bowl of water. *Chamber Music for 3 Loudspeakers* was an arrangement of three small speakers, placed like a trio, playing for each other. *Music for a Wall* used small loudspeakers taped to the wall, playing music for the wall.

Julius' verbal explanations expose an attitude toward sound and the making and arranging of sounds that is distinctly different from the musical approach. His feeling that much attention is given to “brilliant, grand sounds” in music has led him to pay more attention to what he calls “indistinct and cloudy sounds”. He speaks of “emancipating the tones” to give them life and let us see what these “other” sounds have to offer.

His immediate plan is to give a series of outdoor programs in various settings around Berlin. *Concerto for the Earth* will involve burying loudspeakers in the earth and playing music for the earth. *Concerto for a Frozen Lake* will be similar, playing music for the frozen water. In the spring, a *Rain Concert* is planned.

Julius' music is at once delicate and powerful, yet one cannot listen as one listens to ordinary music, or look at the objects with eyes accustomed to visual art. It is a marriage of

visual and aural that makes one think and look and listen, and appreciate with a sense of complete freshness.

Joan La Barbara (published on Musical America, February 1982)