

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits -Lou Reed: Metal Machine Music

Friday, February 5, 2010 at 8:00PM

Morton Feldman called one of his pieces *Between Categories*, and that is very much where we are—perhaps always, under any circumstances, but certainly tonight. It is not just that classically trained performers are playing the work of a rock musician. It is not just that something is being released from the zero space of a recording into a hall where people are gathered together, instrumentalists and audience. It is not just that this same chunk of sound, created once and for all, is being repeated (and changed), a magnificent relic brought into hazardous life. It is not just that chance effects of feedback are being taken as crucial instructions, accident interpreted as design. It is not just that a private event is being re-enacted in public. It is not just that a provocation is becoming....

Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* always was special: four 16-minute sides, in the original album of 1975, created largely of electric-guitar feedback. "I had a loft in the garment district and would record at 5a.m.," Reed has recalled. "I would set the guitars up to feedback, and then the two waves of sound would hit each other causing a new sound and then another and then another...an array of overtones as pure as the strings that were vibrating. Across these I played various melodies and manipulated the speed they were recorded at. I thought of it as Energy Music and a continuation of my work with the Velvet Underground."

At the time, it dismayed fans for whom Reed was the glam rock star of *Transformer* (1972) and *Sally Can't Dance* (1974). It also sent shivers up the corporate spines of RCA Records, who required Reed to get back on track with *Coney Island Baby*. Yet it was listened to with close attention by musicians developing the new genres of punk and industrial, and in 2000 was re-released as a classic. Ulrich Krieger's live version had its first performance—without the fourth part, but with Reed participating at the end of the third—in Berlin in March 2002, and CD and DVD recordings of that occasion have been released on the Asphodel label.

Introduction © Paul Griffiths (www.disgwylfa.com)

The idea of transcribing *Metal Machine Music* came out of my hearing an "orchestralness" in the original, along with the rock-music side of it. Both versions have both aspects to them, the orchestral and the rock, but it's in the nature of the beast that the emphasis is different in each case—otherwise an ensemble arrangement wouldn't have made any sense, if it had been exactly like the original.

To me the idea of a transcription seemed very natural. Beside rock music, the other side of my musical upbringing was what gets called "new" or "contemporary" music; from very early on, I was listening to composers like Schoenberg, Xenakis, Nono, and Stockhausen (but not pre-20th-century classical music). The same thing interests me in rock, industrial, no wave, and noise music as in new music: sound, soundscapes, and structure, which is rhythm on the large scale. For me, these are the essentials of music—not harmony, and not melody.

Music is coming full circle today: archaic ritual music consists mostly of these two parameters, sound and rhythm, often extending over long durations, and so does a lot of contemporary music of any style, even dance music like techno. I found all of this in *Metal Machine Music*: intricate, beautiful, complex, and daring sound-colors, as in new music, the rough, sheer force of real rock music, and a ritual, archaic, long-duration intensity.

Lou Reed brought this together from the rock-guitar side of things; I wanted to emphasize the orchestral side of it, and the human touch of classical instruments and a 10-piece ensemble. Also, I wanted to show how *Metal Machine Music* is a "missing link" between contemporary classical music and advanced rock music. Another motivation was to make it into a live event to be experienced by an audience collectively, instead of a studio production to be heard alone at home under headphones—to bring out the social, ritual aspect of it.

The problem with most arrangements of rock music for orchestra or string quartet is that the arrangers don't have a knowledge of rock music, nor do they actually love it. They transcribe the pitches and the rhythms, and miss the whole point: they don't transcribe the sound of rock, which for me is the ultimate essential, nor the music's intensity, nor its social component. If you turn on the radio in your car, how do you know you're listening, let's say, to the Rolling Stones, even when Jagger's not singing? It's not the harmonies, it's not the melodies, and it's not the rhythms, because these are all used by countless other bands; they are kind of blueprints. What defines the Stones's music is the sound and the way they play it, and play with it. So if you don't transcribe that, you fail.

Getting the sound of rock music is what we've tried to do with our ensemble *zeitkratzer* (which means "timescraper"). It has a lot to do with the redefinition of instrumental, acoustic playing through the (re-)influence of electronic music. Arrangements of electronic and rock music—Merzbow, Zbigniew Karkowski, alva noto, Terre Thaemlitz, Lee Ranaldo, Deicide, Throbbing Gristle—were always part of the *zeitkratzer* repertoire, along with modern composition, silent music, and many other contemporary musical styles along the same path.

I have never accepted these arbitrary style definitions. They are used not so much to identify a style, in

order to be able to talk about it, as to divide music into easily consumable portions and pretend one style of contemporary artistic musical expression is better than another. This is for companies to sell products. But our world is very complex, and we should embrace the diversity and the fantastic juxtapositions possible. The three styles I am most interested in are advanced rock, electronica, and contemporary composition that use the best of all worlds.

For the task of transcribing *Metal Machine Music*, I began by listening to the recording and trying to identify which sounds could be taken over by which of the instruments of our group. That generated a general draft, or idea, or map of the instrumentation: who—which player, which instrument—could do what, and how. Then Luca Venitucci, who was the accordion player of the group, and I each did a rough transcription of the piece separately: two pair of ears hear more than one. We compared what we heard and put it together. We did several rounds of listening on different speaker systems (because on any particular system you hear different aspects, for better or worse), always getting more and more into the details. After that, I wrote out the score in proportional time notation with Luca's assistance. My experience as a composer helped, of course. I know instrumentation and I know how to get strange, unusual sounds out of classical instruments, and how to notate that. Amplification plays an important role as well. Most of my own (chamber) music is amplified, so I know how to use amplification as a further help in getting weird sounds out of classical instruments.

Of course, we discovered a lot about *Metal Machine Music*—like that it is not atonal but modal, being based on an open fifth to which the guitars were tuned, and the overtones thereof. Having found that out, transcribing became easier, because we knew what we were supposed to listen to and could easily identify pitches that didn't match the main mode.

Feedback generally consists of a fundamental pitch and its overtones. If you hear feedback and it jumps into higher tones, you can be pretty sure you're hearing overtones of the main pitch. So feedback can be played by acoustic instruments, if you give them the specific pitches and any deviants. Wind instruments are especially good at mimicking feedback sounds, if they play very purely: without noise components in the tone and without vibrato, very steadily, nearly emotionless.

We used playing techniques that are standard in new music, as well as techniques developed by the musicians of zeitkratzer and others of my own. Also important was the way we work with microphones. For instance, the strings are amplified with pickups and microphones. They play a lot *sul ponticello* (at the bridge), in order to bring out more of the overtones, which are strongly emphasized by the pickups. So we get a very rich string sound with many overtones clashing, much like the effects Lou Reed got from guitars leaning against amplifiers. But the strings use a very refined *sul ponticello*, always changing the distance to the bridge, pressure of the bow, speed of bowing, etc., so that the overtone clouds move and change and live. To take another example, the wind instruments often play rather softly, but very close to the mike or even with the mike in the bell, so that we get a very sine-tone-like quality, which sounds a lot like feedback. There is no electronic treatment or processing. The only compromise, if you want to call it that, was that originally we used guitar distortion on the strings—but that was mainly because we had only four string players and needed to fill up the sound. For the Great Learning Orchestra performance in Stockholm I had almost four times as many strings and we could do without the distortion pedals.

When we first started rehearsing, the musicians needed to get acquainted with the material and find their positions in the overall structure. In regular classical music, or even new music, the players know from long experience whether they have to be forward, accompanying, or whatever. With *Metal Machine Music* it was very different. Though all of that is still relevant, the performers have to define their roles anew—especially because this is non-ego music. You might not be heard as an individual player with a part, but you still bring an important aspect to the piece, adding to the overall sound and experience. If you don't play, that will be heard. If you do, the audience might not recognize your playing. This is a very new and different experience for a musician.

There is no conductor. The score is written in proportional time notation, so there is no time signature. One page equals a minute, subdivided in seconds. There are several big clocks onstage that the musicians have to watch and follow; this is a technique that was already used in the early sixties by John Cage. Everybody reads from the score, because you have to follow what the others are doing as well as watch the clock.

Lou was blown away when he heard it. After what he went through with the original album, which could have killed his career, here was this bunch of young musicians taking this music and him seriously—and even going a step further with the music, giving it another kind of life.