Essays on the Peripheries

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Erzuli Maketh Scent
Thoughts on Cecil Taylor’s Music

... the unknown can only be approached from the known.
— Evan Parker

Listening to Cecil Taylor’s solo performance, called *Erzuli Maketh Scent* (74:43) that was recorded in Berlin in 1988, I was devastated by the glorious power of this music, the total experience of sound it affords an attentive listener, the absolute sense of a music in perpetual flux equal to life. I’ll admit that I never really listened to Taylor’s music carefully. The demands he makes on the listener are enormous, and when first encountering his music I was unable to come to terms with it. There is the problem of length; performances easily stretch in excess of an hour, an hour of sustained intensity. Gary Giddens observes that one needs to decide for oneself how one is going to approach this obstacle until it is no longer an obstacle. So much is happening in Taylor’s music that one can’t possibly be aware of it all at the first hearing. The “influences,” all the different kinds of music that go into a typical performance can only be noted with difficulty. This music makes such an approach impossible, except for fleeting moments when one is aware of something that sounds curiously melodic, whether it’s European classical or blues based.
What Taylor demands is that a listener abandon expectation along with a preconceived idea about the music. So total is this music. By “total,” I mean so much itself, so totally unbound by the mere tradition. To this extent it is a very personal music but in no way hermetic.

Cecil Taylor’s music is an unexpected music, constantly changing our ideas of what jazz is or European, Classical music for that matter, or even the nature of music itself. It is a “free” music but not naively so – he learned to play with the net up then got rid of it. He has written, “emotions must be controlled to achieve purity.” So, while it’s “free” music, one doesn’t think of his music as wholly improvised. While not composed in any ordinary sense of the word, there is an overriding structure that governs the movement of the solos. Reflex action as encapsulated structure. Each idea a form in perpetual evolution. Its mutability governs a barely noticeable logic. It is essentially based on the reconciliation and variation of opposites. An essential theme in Erzulie is the emergence of light from dark, the white and black keys creating a third invisible gray key, a fusion of both. In various passages one can hear Taylor’s accumulation of dark, heavy, bass sounds that thunder and from which emerge spikes of sound that suggest a radiating outward light. Indeed, the dark roar from the piano is oceanic, the light incipient, the whole a process of fusing opposite emotional states. One must note here also the play of sound and silence. One thinks of Monk and then doesn’t.

Of course, Taylor’s music is not music to snap your fingers along to, and it’s certainly not background music either; but this is not to say that the music doesn’t “swing.” Even “swing” is just part of the larger vocabulary of this music and there is the violence that eventually gives over to a meditative space. He has said, in an interview published in Hambone, no. 12:

Well I don’t know what jazz is. And what most people think of as jazz I don’t think that’s what it is at all. As a matter of
fact I don’t think the word has any meaning at all, but that’s another conversation.

The blues are present if for only a split-second development that is dispensed with for something else, a new sound shape, which is evolved almost simultaneously before taking over the previous sound in volume. This dialogue is continual and confounds our expectations. Just as we think we’ve hitched a ride on some melodic statement we watch it develop and rise only to give way and ground us; but soon there is the uplift again. Steady now. We’re never fully grounded or in the air but somehow in a glorious transit somewhere in the middle. Such a dynamic range requires complete attention from a listener. We must be prepared to give ourselves completely over to the music or it will lose its powerful effect. This is part of Taylor’s aesthetic. His promise, also, that the music rewards careful listening.

In terms of length, how do we solve the problem? For me there is no way to listen to Taylor’s music in excerpts. No way of listening to Erzulie Maketh Scent in sections. Each finished piece is part of the Total Work and cannot be understood partially. Just like Classical music but unlike rock and roll. There is so much happening one is bound to pick something up at the expense of something else, so no single listen will amount to a complete understanding. The entire picture will remain unclear, with the sense that you’ve missed something. An appreciation of Taylor’s music (I am thinking of the solos in particular and the music on the FMP Berlin 1988 box set in general, where Taylor was joined with many of the foremost improvisors in Europe, in duets and larger groups, including a whole orchestras) requires a familiarity with modernist, European music as well as Free Jazz in America and Europe. Ironically, Taylor’s music mostly upsets those with a seemingly wide knowledge of jazz and is appreciated by diverse others whose main listening is to rock and indie music. But that’s the way it is for better or for worse. Taylor’s music is not ornamental or artificial. It’s like real life. Not elevator music or easy swing the Ellington way. It is what the Total Music sounds like.
Recordings