

Ensemble for the new millennium

Liner notes by Primož Trdan for the CD Štiri Dela, 2021. Translation by Predrag Petrović.

The institution of the contemporary music ensemble contains a certain contradiction of western artificial music in its last phase of the new, contemporary composed music. The idea of how new music needs a special performing unit and how living composers create for a handful of specialized virtuoso performers who can appropriately play their most complex compositions shows how much new music has narrowly surpassed the technique and aesthetics of the past composing practice, and at the same time, it only tightens the broader ideology of the 19th century. This was, among other things, a century of turning to the specialization of music tasks. Once, it was customary for the music author for a larger ensemble to actively participate in the performance, lead it, play a demanding part as a soloist, and partially improvise it, however, the 19th century slowly introduced composition as a more isolated work. The composer's product becomes a written, designed work; it is not so much a musical performance anymore. As a result, the notation is becoming more precise, the composer is becoming increasingly distant from the audience, and it did not take long for the musical taste to become more and more focused on older works.

The new music is about a hundred years old. In 1918, Arnold Schönberg founded the Society for Private Musical Performances, which organized properly prepared performances of newer works in a closed circle. What followed next were specialized festivals, societies, workshops, and since the 1970s, contemporary music ensembles with special programs, exclusive orders for composers, and concert cycles of contemporary music. In recent decades, ensembles have been gradually realizing the need to unravel this framework. Many approaches are emerging and changing the way we collaborate with the composer. They are increasingly testing the work material together with the musicians, establishing improvisational protocols in compositions, and pushing the boundaries of their authorship towards the performer. Strict aesthetic refinement is complemented with some most welcome breadth, the artistic management of ensembles are looking for shifts to other genres – New York ensemble Bang On A Can interprets Sonic Youth's music, their fellow citizens Alarm Will Sound arrange Aphex Twin's tracks.

Šalter Ensemble comes from a slightly different context. It comes from a desire to bring musicians and scenes together, to work collectively, which is, in this sense, a part of the trend of large improvisational ensembles, which has been, in recent decades, spreading between ensembles such as the London Improvisers Orchestra and the Berlin Splitter Orchestra and new interpreters of the big band jazz tradition. Since 2017, the ensemble is comprised of twelve musicians from Switzerland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. The initiator and artistic director, the Swiss accordionist Jonas Kocher together with Davorka Begovic, Bojan Djordjevic and Tomaz Grom, have gathered an ensemble of different musical backgrounds, generations, in which the experience of free improvised music, jazz and rock scenes, folk music practitioners, and performers of classical tradition meet. Musicians have the skill of improvisation in common, which is not a crucial way of making music. The ensemble plays the compositions of four of its members, Bertrand Denzler, Robert Roza, Roko Crnic and Tomaz Grom – they prepare the work concept which they, in cooperation with their colleagues, test it, develop it, adapt it through experience, and improve it. The improvisational experience is essential here and it allows a special way of listening and responding, playing and communicating. Even listening to various concerts and recordings of Šalter Ensemble clearly confirms that this is not a total improvisational openness, but carefully developed compositional ideas take place in front of us, frequency movements in time and space that bear a clear author's signature. But at the same time, the performance of songs is driven by a different spontaneity and dynamics among musicians, which is usually absent in classical contemporary music ensembles.

In many ways, Šalter also responds to the dilemmas of contemporary music ensembles, but not from the position of curating from the top of the hierarchy. The reflection about the nature of creating the new music, the way the author and the performer cooperate, the reflection of the new musical aesthetics is already embedded with the wide-ranging selection of participating musicians, and at the same time great sound seekers and sensible people. This kind of reflection is built "from the bottom up". This is where Šalter is an active human community in miniature and an ensemble for the new millennium.