

The Deontic Miracle, "Selections from 100 Models of Hegikan Roku"

August 4, 2019

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This second installment of Blank Forms' ongoing Christer Hennix archival series is quite a radical departure from the wonderful *Selected Early Keyboard Works*, which is a hell of a surprise as both albums originate from roughly the same period (Stockholm, 1976). The key difference is that *Keyboard Works* was composed of (mostly) solo rehearsal tapes made during the Dream Music Festival, while *Hegikan Roku* captures the ensemble's actual public performance. In fact, it was to be The Deontic Miracle's only public performance, as Hennix wryly notes that the trio were "the most rejected band ever formed in Sweden." While that is somewhat heartbreaking, it is easy to see why this project was not warmly embraced: challenging art is often described as being "ahead of its time," but The Deontic Miracle must have seemed like they existed outside of time altogether. Even by today's standards, an amplified Renaissance oboe and sarangi trio playing dissonant, Just Intonation drone music would likely clear a room instantly (as would a lot of other albums that I like). As such, this is definitely one of Christer Hennix's most difficult releases, but it features some very bold and uncompromising work indeed. It is wonderful to see it finally surface.

Catherine Christer Hennix was first inspired to form The Deontic Miracle by La Monte Young's Theatre of Eternal Music, which she encountered during her time in NYC. Young would prove to be quite an influential figure in Christer Hennix's life, as would Pandit Pran Nath. She first met both at a festival in 1970 and would later study extensively with each. Roughly a year after that meeting, the first incarnation of The Deontic Miracle was born in Sweden. Unfortunately, the ambitious endeavor was cursed right from the start, as the dozen jazz musicians Christer Hennix enlisted did not adapt to Just Intonation well at all. Exasperated, she completely gutted the ensemble until it was just herself, her brother Peter, and Hans Isgren. I am not at all surprised that the hapless jazzmen had so much trouble wrapping the heads around Christer Hennix's radical vision though, as she is an accomplished mathematician and complex mathematical ideas have always played a central role in her work. Moreover, her musical inspirations at the time were probably so far out as to be nearly incomprehensible to most musicians: the NYC avant garde scene and Hindustani raga influences were probably as close to the mainstream as she ever came, as she was similarly fascinated with Japanese Gagaku music and the thirteenth-century vocal music of Perotinus and Leoninus. In hindsight, it is legitimately remarkable that she was able to find two people who were even aware of all of those disparate threads, much less interested in helping her combine them into radical new forms.

To my ears, the two lengthy pieces that comprise *Selections from 100 Models of Hegikan Roku* most closely resemble the uncomfortably harmonizing drones of Japanese imperial court music—the Gagaku influence is definitely the most powerful guiding force here. After its initial flurry of fluttering and trilling oboe virtuosity, the opening "Music of Auspicious Clouds" coheres into a heavy, slow-moving fog of endlessly shifting, buzzing, and nerve-jangling drones. I suspect the underlying thrum originates from the sine wave generator and the "electronics" credited to the trio, but I am not sure what kinds of sounds Isgren could conjure from an amplified sarangi. The heart of the piece, however, lies in the clouds of ugly harmonies that converge and dissolve in an eternal ebb and flow of simmering tension. The following "Waves of the Blue Sea" is initially a bit less harrowing, as the trio allow a bit more space into their oboe eruptions. It favorably reminds me of Terry Riley's great "Poppy Nogood" at times, though Riley's trilling and overlapping flurries of saxophone sounds considerably more meditative and indebted to Eastern drone than Christer Hennix's similarly trilling flurries of oboe. Before long, however, that reverie curdles into a grinding and uncomfortable miasma of otherworldly harmonies quite similar to that of "Auspicious Clouds." The two pieces on *Hegikan Roku* may start somewhat differently, but the ultimate destination is very much the same every time.

It is amusing that two pieces inspired by such normally pleasant and calming tropes (clouds and the blueness of the ocean) can feel like a sensory assault or plunge into deep existential horror in Christer Hennix's hands, particularly when contrasted with the similarly Zen-inspired but distinctly not-terrifying work that Peter Hennix recorded over the course of his own career. Notably, this album even explicitly borrows its name from a 12th century book of Chinese Buddhist koans ("Blue Cliff Record," in English). Unrelenting tension and intense discomfort are not traditionally sensations that I normally associate with Zen Buddhism, which makes Christer Hennix's interpretation an especially fascinating one. My working theory is that she heard these pieces very differently than I do, finding a reassuring mathematical order at the heart of the cacophonous entropy. I would be curious to learn how much the actual form and structure of these pieces was deliberately engineered though, as it seems like the focus is almost entirely on harmony. That central focus has not changed much in the ensuing four decades, but I do feel like Christer Hennix eventually got a bit more interested in framing her harmonic experiments in a tighter and more satisfying compositional arc. While it is entirely possible that I am imagining/projecting that, her early work definitely feels like it relied very heavily on sheer audacity (I include *The Electric Harpsichord* in that statement, which was also recorded in 1976).

Notably, the album's description mentions John Coltrane as one of the major reference points for this performance, which was a comparison that I initially found perplexing. After listening to it fairly deeply on headphones, however, I began to see that it made perfect sense: Christer Hennix and her brother regularly unleash fiery, Coltrane-esque squalls of notes on their oboes, but the Just Intonation tuning of the instruments makes them sound more like an extradimensional insect swarm than jazz. In fact, just about everything about this performance still sounds jarring and alien to ears conditioned to Western modality, which is quite an impressive feat: though they were not appreciated for it, The Deontic Miracle were absolutely visionary in their complete rejection of conventional form, melody, and harmony. This performance would have blown minds in the right time and place, but Sweden in 1976 was neither of those things, so this one show was like a bright and beautiful star spectacularly burning out forever. Or at least close to it, as it would be another roughly 35 years before any of Christer Hennix's singular compositions saw any public release. Happily, the first work that eventually surfaced was the stunning *The Electric Harpsichord*, which made a hell of an impression and instantly created an audience for other lost works from one of the 20th century's most radical and innovative composers. Among those, *Selections from 100 Models of Hegikan Roku* admittedly stands as the most challenging endurance test, making a truly rough entry point for the curious. For the already converted, however, it is yet another landmark Christer Hennix release that is quite unlike anything else on earth.

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