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Bob Ostertag

Book Of Hours

bobostertag.com DL

It's my fault for thinking Bob Ostertag was some sequestered academic pumping out tepid New Music of the 1980s variety. He did, after all, make a version of "Water Music" with kayak paddles in the San Francisco bay, where Ostertag is videoed paddling with a skull-stretching grin while a stern Jon Rose looks on. However, this current work with Roscoe Mitchell, Shelley Hirsch, Theo Bleckmann and Phil Minton is the sophisticated and earnest best of what experimental music always offers but rarely delivers.

Book Of Hours is 50 minutes of thought, weirdness and formal precision with a healthy relationship to technology. Ostertag, badass that he is, sort of exquisite-corpsed this shit by recording the four musicians separately and independently without knowledge of what the others were doing, and then stacked, sampled and chopped them into a gorgeous, time-suspending composition of intimate moments and glossolalics. The composition is layered but often offers only a single voice.

This work is a challenge to the composition school that says 'It can't be improvised' and to the improviser school

that says 'It can't be notated'. Ostertag has no allegiance to what took place in real time, nor does he adhere to any score. Instead, he extends the possibilities of the composer by focusing on the personality of each musician and their individual voice, and avoids the processing which typically dates the voice. In his sleeve notes, Ostertag writes of his own awareness of the "instantly identifiable thumbprint of the synthetic", and his drive to not reduce the voice through electronics, and thereby preserve the individual expression of both the players and the composer.

Given that this is a commission from WDR Radio Köln, and that it's a Bob Ostertag composition, it's unusual in that there's so much focus on the players. But it's hard to articulate who exactly is doing what in the composer versus performer sense – doubly so as the mix is so precise and the voices so constantly morphing. Trying to parse the decisions of both composer and performer is an exciting proposition, and this is a fresh take filled with technical accuracy and personal gesture.

Ben Hall