

BIRGIT ULHER

By Julian Cowley

Scattered silences



Cough and sputter: Birgit Ulher

"I am very interested in complex, multiple, so-called 'noisy' sounds, everything beyond the open trumpet tone," says Birgit Ulher, one of the current crop of trumpeters notably redefining the instrument's character and role. "I'm aware that some other trumpet players have a similar vocabulary," she adds. "It seems to be a common phenomenon that new things are invented by various people at the same time. I find it exciting how the vocabulary of trumpet sounds has individualised and extended within recent years, and is still extending." *Scatter*, a new solo CD on the Portuguese Creative Sources label, documents her own individualisations and extensions of the instrument's potential through ten concentrated pieces, shaping carefully chosen 'noisy' sounds into a series of taut forms ventilated with brief bursts of silence.

Two recent releases demonstrate her resourcefulness and agility as a distinctive improvising collaborator. *Sputter* with Gino Robair and *Landscape: Recognizable* with Lou Mallozzi and Michael Zerang (both on Creative Sources) disclose her preference for working with combinations of percussion and electronics that suit well her textural style of flowing pops, rapid burbling and muted growls. "Some of my sounds happen to sound like electronics, unintentionally," she remarks. "It's fascinating how it can work on the same level, though the sounds are produced so differently, especially as the trumpet is so physical."

Ulher is largely self-taught as a musician. Her formal and rather conventional training was in visual arts. "I was very impressed by the immediacy and the physical dynamic of abstract expressionism," she recalls. "The sensual aspect is very important for me. I'm fascinated by certain kinds of materiality – the grain of a colour or sound, the nuances and shadings. My approach is very direct; the material is the starting point from which I experiment and play." Increasingly Ulher views herself primarily as a musician, but she still creates some visual art, in particular modifying Polaroid photographs, making use of their very short developing time to distort and reconfigure the image. Examples of her artwork in

this mode provide covers for *Sputter* and *Landscape: Recognizable*.

Born in Nuremberg, Ulher moved to Hamburg to study at art college in 1982, and soon became involved in free improvisation, helping to set up a lively musicians' collective that attracted many players visiting from abroad. She was especially excited at the time by exposure to British musicians. "The sound possibilities on trumpet are very limited in free jazz," she observes, "because most extended techniques on trumpet are too quiet to play in a free jazz context. The pointillistic and more open approach of British improvisors was an incredible enrichment at that time as well as the idea of silence, which was becoming very important for me. I was beginning to look at the relation of sound and silence as a kind of negative/positive shape. How to place a sound at exactly the right moment is still one of my essential concerns."

Ulher has remained a key figure in Hamburg's local scene, organising the annual Real Time Music Meeting, and she has recently helped establish the Verband Für Aktuelle Musik Hamburg (www.vamh.de), a network designed to forge links among the city's diverse experimentalists and to help promote and stage their musics. She has performed as a member of the European Improvisation Orchestra and in numerous smaller groups. This practical experience of playing with other instrumentalists has helped Ulher evolve techniques to meet the challenges of specific situations and, as she puts it, "to find new possibilities to realise certain sound imaginations". Her approach, musically as in her visual work, is pragmatic rather than conceptual. Meetings with other musicians have been indispensable to the process of finding her own musical voice.

A particularly fruitful collaboration has been with singer Ute Wassermann. There is real compatibility between their abstracted approaches, their rigorous reduction and intensive reconstruction of sound materials, as can be heard from their remarkable duo recording *Kunststoff* (Creative Sources). "I find it difficult to work with singers who use words and

sentences, because it creates another level in music which distracts attention from the sound," Ulher observes. "It restricts the musical space. On the other hand it was very easy to play with Ute Wassermann from the beginning. The trumpet has a strong connection with voice. It's the only instrument as far as I know which only *amplifies* the sound. The sound vibrations themselves are created by the body – lips, diaphragm, and so on. Maybe that's what makes it sound so personal and direct. The particular challenge of working with trumpet and voice is that both are connected to breath. Breathing rhythm can be very determinate if you aren't aware of it." Both women take breath as basic energy and refine it as intricately patterned sound.

Ulher is at present especially excited by the trio Nordzucker, in which she plays with saxophonist Lars Scherzberg and cellist Michael Maierhof. Their 2005 release *500 gr* (Creative Sources) offers plenty of justification for that excitement – grainy layers of instrumental friction and emphatic multiphonics, again aerated with brief silent gaps. In another current working context, Ulher is joined by saxophonist Martin Küchen, percussionist Raymond Strid and laptop musician Lise-Lott Norelius. Ulher remarks that it is often not a memorable experience to watch someone using a laptop on stage, but she appreciates Norelius's personal angle, playing "small metal things" which she works on electronically in live situations.

For Ulher, one of the enduring attractions of free improvising is the intensification of musical personality that it can produce. "Playing a concert is a very complex situation," she concludes. "There are lots of simultaneous things going on. You have to be aware of all those things, deal with them and still concentrate on your own playing. It's a very special kind of concentration. You have to decide about the direction you take your playing at every moment, to be very present. There's no chance to correct something afterwards. It's like mobilising all your resources on stage." □ *Scatter is out now on Creative Sources*