

ANNETTE KREBS INTERVIEW BY CLIVE BELL



With the release earlier this year of her first solo album, Berlin-based Annette Krebs has propelled herself into the front rank of guitar improvisers. If ‘propelled’ is the appropriate term for such minimal music, teetering on the brink of complete silence. Still, underlying Krebs’s apparent self-effacement is a steely grip, a radical exploration of the language of musical timbre, rather than a flurry of notes. This fascination with timbre is already there in the work of predecessors like Derek Bailey and Keith Rowe. Krebs is ascetic, but comfortably at home with her own language – the album is a kind of wildly confident use of understatement.

Originally from Saarland on the border with France, Krebs studied in Frankfurt. A guitarist from childhood, she was at this time more involved in visual art, painting and selling abstract pictures. Five years ago she stopped painting to concentrate on music, but was coaxed out of retirement to paint the water-colour image on the cover of *Guitar Solo*. On the phone to Berlin, I asked whether, like her duo partner Taku Sugimoto, she had ever been a loud rock guitarist. “Not really. When I was 17 we had a few sessions in my village – electric guitars and boys. I was never really involved in that, it was not the world I felt inside.”

In Frankfurt, Krebs started single-handedly inventing improvised music from the ground up. “I thought I was the only person in the world doing this! I started playing abstract paintings on the guitar, playing it with a violin bow – these were my ideas, and I didn’t know there was a whole scene like this. I was so happy to discover in Berlin there were lots of people doing this abstract music. I went to concerts, and I began to deconstruct the guitar. I had a head full of scales, and an acoustic guitar with six strings, so I stripped off all the strings except one. I really wanted to make music which I had not learned before, the music that you have just inside your fingers.”

Krebs was working things out by herself, uninfluenced by the prepared guitars of Keith Rowe or Fred Frith. “This deconstruction was a personal thing, a way to discover new sounds. When you work like this there are two ways: one, you look at what other people are doing, and then you try to make something interesting. The other

way is to be completely alone, to close the door. You try to step away from any influences, and go deeply into the instrument, asking yourself what sound have I never heard? What is my job here? My job is not to copy people. Inevitably I am influenced, everyone is, but I think my job is to discover music on the guitar, and this I have to do alone.”

When I refer to Krebs’s way with timbre and sound colour as radical, she laughs. “You think so? No, it’s natural. It’s a kind of exploring, like physical work. This is a new musical language of noise and noisetones, noises which also have pitch. And there is a world of things between noise and pitch. What I and many others are doing is discovering the new rules which apply to this material. If you are a physicist and you have a new material, then you place it in different environments and see how it reacts.” Do you have any scientific training? Another chortle – “No, but I think it’s a good metaphor. This is really what I’m doing.”

Another quality of Guitar Solo is mystery. There is barely a plucked guitar string to be heard, and it’s hard to know how these sounds are produced. “I’m not doing much, actually, it’s a very reduced set-up. I have the electro-acoustic guitar on my knees, with two foot pedals controlling two microphones: one under the strings and one contact mike. I play the strings with ear-cleaning cotton buds, steel wool or plastic wool. I also use wood, or a viola bow, and I can bow the contact mike itself or the body of the guitar. Then there is the natural sound of the amplifier and equaliser. Hiss and hum – this is also musical material.”

The Berlin scene is impressive: apparently easygoing contact between composers and improvisers, a wealth of sound-art and installations, and plenty of performances. However, to achieve the concentrated focus of Guitar Solo, Krebs closed the door on all that. “I put myself in a special environment in order to discover something. It was really closed, because I didn’t go out for a month. To have silence and to be clear. It’s as if I wanted to paint on very white paper. When you go out each night – alcohol, drugs, smoke – then the music you make is different. It’s difficult to get this silence. I did everything to avoid other stuff; no other music, no newspapers, no bars, I didn’t meet many people. I was just sleeping, eating and making music. It was great.”

What about the return to normal life? “Well, that was a terrible shock at first. The first thing I wanted to do was see a movie. At the cinema there was a documentary about whales, and I was very interested. But the film music was so loud, and worse than decoration, it was really shit. Beethoven when the big whale came, and Mozart when the small whale came. Unbearable!”

Apart from her duo with guitarist Taku Sugimoto (two CDs so far, on Slub and Rosbin), Krebs has equally valued partnerships with Andrea Neumann, who plays the insides of pianos, and saxophonist Alessandro Bosetti. These two are also members of the eight piece Berlin group Phosphor, which includes the trumpet of Axel Dörner and the percussion of Burkhard Beins. In the autumn she tours the US for five weeks with the like-minded duo of Ernesto Diaz-Infante and Chris Forsyth (tour dates at www.paxrecordings.com). As for

recording: straight after Guitar Solo, Krebs recorded its opposite, a three inch CD for the label A Bruit Secret. "It had to be very different. It's not silent at all, absolutely not nice, in fact it's a provocation. For the first record I wanted to make something good, pleasant to hear, something 'wow'. So I wanted for the second release to compose something darker, stranger, perhaps even irritatingly disturbing, inspired by paintings from Goya a.o.

Remark

Originally, Clive Bell had added a final sentence to the interview that I would never have said *. He was talking about the events of September 11th in New York. It just so happened that my second solo was finished at the same time. But of course the one has nothing to do with the other! Later he said that he thought it was kind of poetic to mention September 11th in that context, but deleted the passage immediately after I complained because I definitely find every war equally cruel, and since there are always many unjust wars in which innocent people die, you couldn't make beautiful music anymore - and that's not true! So I corrected the last sentence here afterwards so that it expresses what I wanted to explain.

** "But the second one was after September 11th and all this political shit, and I thought it's no good any more making something nice."*