

EMAIL INTERVIEW with Pachi Tapiz, Spanish Music Critic December 2009 to February 2010.

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Q1: Why did Rova decide to join its creative forces with Nels Cline Singers?

Ochs: Rova has employed all these guys over the past 12 years or so in different bands. Scott Amendola and I work together in Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core as well as in a new band called Kihnoua featuring the great vocals of Korean-born Dohee Lee. (That band plays in Europe very soon, but unfortunately nothing in Spain. I thought "maybe" some place there would hire this band after all the news / nonsense in December, but no one called me except journalists. No, I was not surprised that no one called. But I do feel strongly that Kihnoua is a great band, but I would agree with those on the other side; it is not a jazz band. Jazz influenced? Definitely; jazz band? No. I will send you the just released CD in early May when I return from the tour.) Sorry for the digression: So Scott performed first with Rova in a big piece of mine in 1998 called "Pleistocene: The Ice Age." (as well as Adams' and Raskin pieces that same evening.) And he worked in Vancouver with us on Electric Ascension in 2005 along with Devin Hoff and Nels, of course. Nels recorded Electric Ascension with us live in 2003, played on every performance of that "event" until 2009, and he is "the man" in free jazz when it comes to playing updated versions of late-period Coltrane on guitar. He loves his gig in the pop band, Wilco, but he is one of the edgiest guitarists on the planet, and your readers should definitely check out The Nels Cline Singers' CDs. Devin has worked less with all of us.

The Singers play in the Bay Area all the time. We all just knew we had to work together some day, and that day came in 2008. One of the pieces on the new CD is from the first concert by the septet, so you can see that we were "right on it" from the very beginning.

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Q2: Why did you name this new group - CD "The Celestial Septet"?

Ochs: I am not sure this is so interesting, but we originally proposed this band to perform in Linz as part of their year-long festival of the arts, the year – 2009? or 2008? – when Linz was official "culture capitol" of Europe. We wanted to include works dedicated to or composed by Albert Ayler and John Coltrane, and we thought that "The Celestial Septet" had a nice ring to it. That it somehow tied into to late period Coltrane titles, which Nels Cline has been playing and recording for a long time anyway. We did not get invited to play there; they took solo Cecil Taylor instead. But the name; names are hard to agree on, so we just kept this one.

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Q1.1: Your concert in Sigüenza is definitively "The Concert of the year 2009". It's been told and written so much about it. Can you tell us about that Sigüenza incident? Were you aware of what was happening while you where playing? Are you gonna give somebody a complete discography of Rova (for example)?...

Ochs:

That's funny... Let's see: maybe .... Oh well, first of all the complete discography would include LPs that have been out of print now for a long time, or anyway have never made it to CD or digital download. So this could be a problem right there! I guess I'd give the complete disco to the producer who puts out all the early music; how's that?

Actually I look forward to some day returning to Siguenza, maybe with Kihnoua. It's very calming music, though intense, and I think that I could send the complainant the CD in advance, and then he'd be less surprised by what we do and more willing to go with the flow. As "everyone" knows, the complainant has a problem with his nerves; he just needs more time to get with the program, and not allow himself to panic! My music may not be "jazz" but it's absolutely coherent. And many of the pieces are "stories in sound." So you just have to listen calmly and get into the language. It's really not hard to do. We live at a time when the ability to adapt is very important. Not to "give in" or "surrender," but to "be part of", to "find the good in" other realities than ones own.

Before that concert in Siguenza, maybe on the way to Siguenza looking at the beautiful red landscapes, I pretty much decided to "take it easy" on the audience. I thought we should start as conventionally as possible. Play the closest piece we had to jazz, for example. But when I read in the festival program about the line-up for the entire festival, I dismissed this idea and so, in the concert we did what I had done in every concert since Vienna. We first played one of the most abstract pieces in the repertoire called "Stone Shift.". The thing about "Stone Shift" is: number one, we kill the piece. Everyone understands the piece so well now that we absolutely convince everyone in the audience to ride with us down the road we're on, and not to worry. Relax and enjoy the ride. Secondly, I did take the time to explain that the piece was imagined as a sonic landscape, as the music to which Akira Kurosawa might imagine creating a 20-minute film to accompany the music. The piece is dedicated to Kurosawa. (I also have a piece dedicated to Cronenberg, and would like to do another dedicated to legendary American film maker Stan Brakhage. This would not be the same piece as "The Mirror World;" that was composed for and recorded by Rova with many guests in 2005, but another piece entirely.) Finally I say something like: "people should feel free to close their eyes and make their own movie as we go along through the music."

Now when I tell the audience to think of this as music for film, that really I think helps people to relax and get with the music. And then the music starts with the two drummers playing a Cadence straight from a real Kurosawa film. It's such an aid, so easy.

But our friend in the audience didn't hear me, or didn't understand, or just didn't care to make any effort. Whatever. So no, I had no idea that anything at all was going on in the audience until after the concert was over. A little noise out in my audiences is absolutely normal. In Vienna, earlier in the tour, I did have to ask people talking in the audience to leave the theater after playing this piece. But I did not feel any need to do that in Siguenza, so I was totally surprised by the story when told about it after the show. Still: for me it was all simply funny, or fun, until Wynton got involved. Then I felt compelled – unhappily – to take matters more seriously.

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Q3: The concept of the group is very democratic: there are four composers for five compositions. There are also old and new pieces. How did you decide what to play, and who makes and/or decided the arrangements?

Ochs: One of the reasons these two bands work well together is that both bands are very democratic in the way they develop their music. It's true: all the compositions that the Nels Cline Singers play are by Nels Cline. (Maybe one or two by someone else outside the group.) But

the development of the music after the pieces are brought in is done “democratically.” Or shall we amplify on that? What I mean is that Nels gives the other players a lot of freedom to find things that work for them within the given composition. Rova does the same. If I bring in a piece, I expect the other members of Rova to respect the limits that the composition puts on the music, but at the same time I expect them to take those compositional limits and stretch them until they go somewhere I had never imagined they could go. In other words, the composed elements are meant to push the musicians “out.” Not “free” (whatever that means), but still “free to choose” how to make the music sound best.

Well, that is the story in most cases with the music for Celestial Septet.... . Certainly “Headcount” is not like this. Here 5 of us read down some written music, while the drummer and the guitarist have more freedom to “blow.” So that’s an exception. But in the other cases, we all really look for ways to help bring the pieces to life. The composers have the final say, but we all encourage each other to find interesting ideas/sounds/ etc.

On this CD, the pieces by Amendola, Ochs (the piece dedicated to Ayler) and Cline are very carefully worked out by the composers. I think all three of us had a very good idea of what we expected to hear in each section of those pieces, but within those composerly limits, we were also all excited with what the individuals gave to the music. Adams’ piece was also carefully composed, but there was actually more room there for individualism in each section; that is: it was more a jazz piece where heads were played and then solos, however brief, were injected onto the landscape, while the others were maybe a little more like a series of “sculptured sound events.

As far as deciding what to play goes: we needed 2 sets of music, so we basically played everything that was contributed by members of the band for the concerts. Jon Raskin had another piece or two that we played, but they were not ready to be recorded, so there was not any decision to make as far as the CD goes. Also as far as the CD goes, I felt that the 5 pieces included worked so well with each other in concert that even the order was known before we recorded. In other words, the first three pieces were always the first set of concerts, with the other two pieces being included in the second set plus a piece by John Coltrane called “Living Space” and one of Raskin’s pieces. (We felt the original work was too strong to exclude it for the Coltrane piece instead of the originals. Plus of course Cline and Rova already have “Electric Ascension” out there as an homage to Coltrane anyway.)

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Q1.3 Can you tell us a little bit more about your new project "Kihnoua"?

Ochs: “Kihnoua” focuses on a couple of things for me. First of all, since starting to work with the quintet version of the Sax and Drumming Core in 2007 (which is the band that played at Siguenza), I have been getting into composing using a system known as “formings;” it was first devised by Lisle Ellis, a great bass player who I play with in “What We Live.” We first used this system in the band “What We Live,” but only on our very last tour, which included the singer Saadet Turkoz. Up to that time, “What We Live” might have rehearsed pieces, but in concert we did free improvisation only. (“Free improvisation” is a term we could have another interview about; that term tells you almost nothing about the sound of “What We Live.” But that’s another story, or interview.) But when we performed with Saadet, the free improv thing just wasn’t working well. Or there wasn’t enough variation from song to song. So Lisle and I decided

to compose for the band, and I decided to use his system so that there would only be one system to teach Saadet and drummer Don Robinson.

After writing one or two pieces that way for that band, I adapted the concepts in the system to fit what I wanted to do and began using that for the Drumming Core in 2007. Now I feel like many pieces I want to arrange for many ensembles are best adapted to this system. What it's really, really strong at doing is making transitions from one section of a piece to another clear to all the players. It also allows me to tell stories and change colors, to dictate who plays in one section and who is silent.

So "Kihnoua" continues this process with a different set of voices. Well Ochs is still there, but in a lot of ways I play a different set of ideas. Also, Scott Amendola is in both bands, but here I have him playing more color and less rhythm, and we add the electronics to his "kit." Then we have a voice (Dohee Lee) and a string player. And we have used many string players and different combinations of them on a lot of the pieces, and of course that changes the music quite a bit. So that's really interesting. On this tour we will work with two bass players, whereas earlier in the band's existence we worked with cellists like Okkyung Lee and Joan Jeanrenaud (who is on the new CD just out from the Krakow label called "not two."), and with Fred Frith on gtr, Zeena Parkins, harp, Carla Kihlstedt, violin.

But the other impetus for this band was that, ever since the 1980's when Henry Kaiser turned me on to the Korean music form called p'ansori, and then to the Korean improvisation form called "sinawi music", I dreamed of one day travelling to Korea and maybe finding people who would play with me (or me with them.) Then in 2007 I heard Dohee Lee do a performance in San Francisco, where I live and where she had just moved after graduating from college in Seoul. I approached her to see if she could improvise and discovered that she did indeed improvise and in college had studied p'ansori singing. So a little later we started playing together. And we continue to this day. The tour takes us to Padova, Ljubljana, Prague, Berlin, Moscow and an Austrian Festival: Ulrichsberger Kaleidophon.\_

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Q1.4 I think it's real great that music can cause a reaction as it did in Sigüenza to that one listener. It means that this music is live, that it has something inside. I really liked it. I really like those "Imaginary film landscapes" (you also played another one dedicated to David Cronenberg). Do you have some plans of playing that music with some real images/scenes of those film makers?

Ochs: No. I do however plan to record the Cronenberg music this summer, and I hope to find his mailing address. Then I will invite him to create a film for the music. Otherwise, in concert, I prefer the active imaginations of the listeners to take part; they can close their eyes and create their own "imaginary films." I think it's better that way than filling their eyes with images.

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Q1.5 How did you feel about all this when Wynton Marsalis get involved in that incident? What do you think about him, his music and his thoughts about music? (In Spain we have just translated his last book and it's terrible (not terrific!) what he says / writes about John Coltrane and Miles Davis).

Ochs: I stopped listening or thinking about Wynton Marsalis a long time ago. I thought that this "incident" was more humorous than anything else until the self-proclaimed king got involved. But in the end the joke was on him as the reaction to his publicity move was so negative that his handlers felt forced to say that he never meant for his search to go public. ... In 1983 Rova played a festival in Nancy, France; we played some time before Max Roach and m'Boom played. At the end of our set I looked to my left and saw Max Roach standing in the side-stage shadows applauding. That was at a time that he was working with The World Saxophone Quartet; there was no reason for him to feel obligated to hear Rova. So his checking us out was purely for musical curiosity and information. Ever since then he's been my role model. Right around the same time, Rova did a double bill with The Jazz Messengers and Art Blakey. All the kids in that band sat backstage and made jokes about Rova during the set and then smirked when we came offstage. They are my anti-model. I kind of make it my business to try to be open to everyone and to find the positive in what they do. So I'm disinclined to get into Marsalis' head space. I don't think it's a healthy place to inhabit.

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Q3 Do you have some plans of writing some specific piece for this project? It must be really exciting to write music for all those great musicians. It's really fine the way you re-create that "old" material and bring to this group.

Ochs: I am not sure what you mean. The piece called "Whose to Know" is 100% new. It evokes Aylor but there are not even any Aylor quotes in there. I was planning to quote David Murray's "Flowers for Albert" at the very end of the piece, but that idea didn't make it into the final cut. In general it will be awhile before more gets written for this band. These pieces (on the CD) are rocking – great – and we have only performed them a few times, so it seems likely that we'd play these at future concerts. (No concerts planned right now until – I hope – February 2011 in USA.)

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Q4 I really like "Headcount". It is a favourite of mine on your CD "Figure 8 - Pipe Dreams". It sounds really "Aylorian" ... Will you include some more of that kind of compositions, opposed to those "sculptured sound events."

Ochs: No idea. See Q3.

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Question 1.5 Another new band for you is "Jones Jones." What is the story behind this band?

Ochs: How this band eventually got together is a good example of how things go in the world of improvised music. (I could tell this same story about some other bands I work with too.) I first played with Tarasov in Vilnius, Lithuania, as part of a Rova Sax Quartet 1983 tour to the country formerly known as the USSR. We liked the jam a lot and released it as part of a two disc LP that was released by Hut Hut called "Saxophone Diplomacy." (The jam was not included on the CD that came out later.) A few years later, Rova:Arts produced a show by the original "Ganelin Trio" here in San Francisco which was part of their tour to the USA, so Tarasov came to our home for the first time then. Then in 1990 (I believe) Wayne Horvitz and I organized something called *The International Creative Orchestra*, or something like that. This was a special project paid for by a one-off festival in Seattle, Washington, USA. It occurred around the same time as the annual Vancouver Jazz Festival (Canada); we played both fests with that large ensemble. Around that

same time Tarasov was performing duo concerts with drummer Andrew Cyrille, so we invited both of them to join this orchestra which allowed them to do their duo in Vancouver. That was a lot of fun.

On that tour, my wife and I drove Tarasov from Vancouver to San Francisco, stopping in Seattle, and we again talked about doing “something someday.” But the opportunity didn’t materialize in the nineties.

I had been aware of Mark Dresser ever since his time playing in the Braxton Quartet with Crispell and Hemingway. Then some years ago Dresser relocated from New York to San Diego. San Diego is 7 hours by car from San Francisco even though both cities are in California. But Dresser started making more trips to San Francisco, and eventually he did some collaborations with Rova. Just another musician I really admired who was on the list “to do something with someday.” Joan Jeanrenaud was on my list from 1984 when Rova and Kronos performed as a sax-string octet, but it took until 2000 to work together. Fred Frith was on the list no later than 1987 and probably a lot earlier than that but it wasn’t until 1998 that we formed *Maybe Monday* with Miya Masaoka. I guess that you have to have the right moment in order for things to come together, which involves imagining the personnel playing together and then combining that with an opportunity, a time, and a place.

As it happened though, Dresser and Tarasov had met and played together in the 1980’s, so when Dresser moved to California, and then Tarasov started coming to Sacramento / San Francisco annually to visit, then the actual first meeting of the trio *Jones Jones* became inevitable.

But unlike Kihnoua, Jones Jones began less formally. It was three equals getting together to improvise one set at a concert in California. The set was influenced by the space – very intimate; every small sound was very audible. And we all instinctively went to what I would call a “Morton Feldman zone”: we worked on one cell or small idea at a time, then moved on intuitively but not “logically.” It was very exciting. There was not a wrong note all night, but at the same time, there were constant surprises. A very special set; so special in fact that it has become legendary, first because it was not recorded, and second because we never really played another set like that one.

So the band started as a free improvised music trio; not a sax power trio. In other words, we all “just get up and blow,” but we are all equals; I am not the leader... And we spend some time between concerts talking about the music and refining it conceptually.

That first show did spur us all on to try to book other concerts and, sure enough, within a year we were playing again in San Francisco, followed a few months later by concerts in Europe. (This is often the routing for those of us in California, skipping the rest of the United States until after Europe. Very sad but very true: it is often easier to book concerts in Vienna or Geneva than in St. Louis or Los Angeles, even though St. Louis is much cheaper and easier to fly to from San Francisco.)

The band’s concerts were recorded in Amsterdam, where we received a fantastic reception from an audience typical of the venue called Bim Huis: experienced ears, many of them attached to musicians’ heads. Then we were recorded in St. Petersburg where the audience was exactly the

opposite: excited but for the most part unexposed to improvised music. The first CD by Jones Jones (*We All Feel the Same Way*) consists of music taken from the two concerts mentioned above. The next CD, which will come out in 2011, will be taken completely from a September 2010 concert during the Moscow Biennale, which also featured a retrospective exhibit of Tarasov's impressive installation art pieces. We continue to try to play whenever possible; we will continue to talk about music possibilities and define them, and then go out onstage and try to make those and other "new" musical areas happen.

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