



String Theory *Reach of Resonance* and the outer limits of musical creativity

sound
by Joe Milutis

When you learn a new skill, the mind undergoes certain revolutions. That phenomenon was made apparent during my first ukulele lesson. Soon after, I caught Steve Elkins's *Reach of Resonance*—an essay film on much more outré string practices. Having never touched a string instrument in my life, I had been ignorant of the labor and physicality behind the merest strum, and I was, in the course of an hour, made keenly aware of what I had desensitized myself to over the years. Listening to classic rock on my car radio on the way

to the screening became an exercise in defamiliarization, as overplayed songs about “The Day the Music Died” seemed no longer dead. Everything suddenly was a folk song, even the skyscrapers, as if handmade. In short, I entered the screening room in the grip of a vast hallucination of the labor of strings—yes, I now completely understood why Dylan going electric was such a dick move.

And just as quickly, hundreds of years of music history were elided with the first image of Elkins's film: a violin being crushed in a slamming door. Gestures such as breaking an instrument and calling it music have been clearly necessary, as the avant-garde responds to the smug complacency of traditional music, but they can just as well harbor a complacency of their own. Too accustomed to *both* the avant-garde gesture and the traditionalist dispensation, we can only hear anew outside of their comfy con-

texts, by making creative connections that may be more existentially than musically dissonant. Elkins deftly operates across such dissonances, documenting what is squarely within the avant-garde yet also what embodies a strange new folkiness. The experiments he collects are attuned to the particularities of our affinities (or discords) with the world around us: violin machines, barbed-wire music, solos elicited from the leaves of plants, string quartets of riots, chainsaw orchestras, gumleaf country singers, dot-matrix-printer symphonies, cockroach lap-dances, operatics from a dingo, extreme aeolianism . . . all are used to translate or transcribe the non-musical textures of history, politics, geography, and ecology into new music.

Fence-line virtuoso Jon Rose resolutely affirms that he is interested in “unpopular music,” and one can safely say that Miya Masaoka, Bob Ostertag, and John Luther Adams—all of whose work forms the core of Elkins's

documentary—hew to a similar uncompromising standard. Yet this avoidance of “consensus music” allows for deeper forms of affinity, the vibrational utopia announced by this film's title. After all, the problem with folk has always been the folk. Adding more difficult post-human or anti-human elements into the mix, these artists plumb a *sensus communis* not deranged by narcissism, nationalism, or profit motive. Playing to an audience of no one, or at least no human—as we see Rose doing on a fence in the middle of the Australian outback—returns music to its origins as a mode of understanding the natural and cosmic.

Elkins shows with a subtle, essayistic style how these artists engage political, historical, and natural realities without making their art “instrumental” (no pun intended). Ostertag, speaking of the importance of struggle in his work—he has composed concert music based on the civil war in El Salvador and the AIDS crisis in San Francisco—still believes in a distinction between art and politics, and thinks of “politics as an attempt to reconfigure the web [of relations]” while using “art to transcend the web, for a moment.” It is important that these artists do *both*, although their practices may never harmonize the two activities, except in the chord of some impossibly stringed instrument. Elkins brings together a group whose work reconfigures to transcend, and transcends to reconfigure, admitting to the work of art in the work of art. □



>> **IN FOCUS:** For screening info, go to reachofresonance.com.