

**Syndicate for the New Arts:  
An evening of improvisation (Apr. 21)**

by Mike Telin



It's one thing for a group of musicians to meet for the first time during the rehearsal of a work that is known to them all. It's another thing for musicians to come together for the first time during a public improvised performance and create a cohesive musical trajectory on the spot. On Saturday, April 21 at Historic St. John's Episcopal Church in Ohio City, Syndicate for the New Arts, in cooperation with New

Ghosts, presented two groups who did just that. The results were thrilling.

The evening began with two ten-minute improvisations by the newly-formed trio of saxophonist Bob Bucko Jr., violinist Alex Cunningham, and drummer Alexander Adams. Their stop in Cleveland was the third of the group's seventeen-concert tour. The well-shaped first improvisation found Bucko and Cunningham responding to Adams' inventive and colorful sounds and rhythms. Bucko used electronics that altered his sound and reverberation to great effect. The trio produced harmonies that grew from light and open to thick and Mahleresque.

The second began with Cunningham playing mandolin-like tremolos and Adams providing a rhythmic line over which Bucko took the solo. The moment where the dynamics began as a whisper and gradually grew in volume was memorable as was Bucko's concluding solo. Like the first improvisation, this was well-shaped and held your attention from start to finish.

Next up, bassoonist Dana Jessen, bassist Jaribu Shahid, and pianist Josh Harlow — who were meeting for the first time that evening — demonstrated what three performers who are masters of the art form of free improvisation can produce. From the first soft notes in the bass and piano, the trio locked into each other's musical

aesthetics, as they developed the storyline. Jessen's rich sound sang beautifully in the room — at first haunting, then crying, then full of anguish. Shahid added more texture with vibrating water bowls, while Harlow added discrete color commentary from both a prepared and regular piano, and synthesizer.

The second improvisation found Jessen producing demonic sounds over those of her colleagues by simply blowing air at different speeds through the instrument. Moving seamlessly into a second section, Shahid produced a golden tone during an extended pizzicato solo. Harlow followed with his own jazzed-up lines and when Jessen entered the sonic canvas, the trio was off to the races until the players brought everything to conclusion with sounds like mice scattering across a wooden floor. Harlow set the grove to begin the final improvisation. Here the trio dug even deeper into their bag of tricks, producing sounds that mimicked the human voice — although no words were uttered, they were speaking to each other.

During their set, Jessen, Shahid, and Harlow had offered up three sonic, modern-day tone-poems, and the large audience responded with a long, enthusiastic ovation. Finally all six players took the stage for one last on-the-spot musical creation.

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