

Syndicate for the New Arts at Historic St. John's (Mar. 16)

by David Kulma



This past Friday evening, the Parish Hall at Ohio City's Historic St. John's Episcopal Church buzzed with egalitarian noise brimming with vigorous life during the three-set free-improvisation concert presented by the Syndicate for the New Arts and New Ghosts.

The first half hour was filled with the sweeping sounds of electronic musician Judy Jackson. Depending on the knob she spun, a single note would slowly slide down to the depths like a syrupy contrabassoon, or

another would dance across an overtone series like a futuristic harp. If only the highs hadn't been at ear-splitting levels — luckily, there were ear plugs.

Frank Meadows split his own half hour into three improvisations on his amplified double bass with loop pedal board. In the opening, he quickly swapped between resonant bowed and plucked notes. But the main feature of this first twelve minutes found him bowing the tailpiece. As he looped it to expand into other ideas, this gorgeous snarling was delectable.

Meadows prepared his bass with chopsticks and a large packing bubble to prepare for the next ten minutes. As he placed and moved them, they turned his bass into a percussive sound chamber. In the final six minutes, he showcased beautiful melodic connections with overtones by sweeping his left hand up and down the strings. Meadows has a canny ability to shape time, and he stops exactly when his music should end.

The main event of the night was the 40-minute set by electric guitarist Tashi Dorji, drummer Tyler Damon, and alto saxophonist Liberty (Mette Rasmussen). This was free improvisation at the highest level. Each is a virtuoso with great musical ideas, and they combined to envelop this religious space in a trancelike ecstasy.

Dorji focused on creating mesmerizing textures. He often jammed on a single motive, creating a canvas for his collaborators and himself. (His loop pedals came in handy.) His hard-driving tunes along the way burst out of the sonic wash. Particularly memorable was a seven-beat syncopated groove he spun using chopsticks.

While Dorji created pads and grooves, Damon concentrated on timbre and spinning rhythmic ideas. He struck his drum set with sticks, soft mallets, maracas, a bell, and, most amazingly, a hand-held cymbal that he gloriously rubbed on the snare. He has such a large storehouse of fertile material that he played in long-breathed paragraphs rather than licks.

Rasmussen's saxophone wailed above the din with ideas galore. One stand-out section included her reattacking a single note while spilling fast filigree all over her range. Another had her playing plaintively into a tambourine over the bell. And in a third, she ululated altissimo lip glissandos.

Throughout the trio's two sections, they swooped up over and over to create sensory overload amazing in its addictive intensity. They were on the same wavelength, but whenever they came down from their emotional climaxes, the music slipped into withdrawal. Gradations between the highs and lows would have allowed them to better curate the moment.

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