

Re:Sound 2019 presents ~Nois

by Mike Telin



What do ‘Rollicking Monkeys Landing on Mars’ sound like? The answer to this and other curious musical prompts proposed by Pauline Oliveros can be heard on Thursday, June 6 when the Chicago-based saxophone quartet [~Nois](#) performs her *Thirteen Changes* at 7:30 pm at [Negative Space Gallery](#).

The concert kicks off the 2019 edition of the Re:Sound

Festival of New and Experimental Music. The evening’s lineup also includes Cleveland’s Miralia/Stranahan Duo, and Detroit’s art-rock quartet [saajtak](#). Click [here](#) to purchase tickets.

Thirteen Changes is one of Oliveros’ text scores, which asks players to musically respond to a prompt, and to each other. “The piece is entirely improvisatory,” Brandon Quarles said during a telephone conversation. He explained that he and his ~Nois colleagues — Hunter Bockes, János Csontos, and Jordan Lulloff — use the composer’s thirteen lines of poetic prose, evocative images, and mysterious statements as a jumping-off point and as inspiration for sounds.

“For example, one prompt is ‘Standing Naked in the Moonlight’ — and without hesitation you turn that into sound,” he said. “You have to trust your instincts as to where it will lead you, but it is a musical conversation between us that is always different.”

Quarles said that prior to a performance, the group often discusses who will take the lead on each of the statements. “Basically we give ourselves structural points — who

will be creating the sounds — although more and more we are leaving that to chance.” He added that each player can decide not to play.

“One of my favorite moments was at the M-Prize competition. Our tenor sax player was given the line ‘A Single Egg Motionless in the Desert,’ and he made the choice to not play. It was amazing — we just let the sound of silence sit there for a while and then moved on. Sometimes that is the right choice.”

The evening will also include *Dwalm*, a work with video, composed for the quartet by Gemma Peacocke. “This was written in 2018. It’s one of our favorite pieces and we really look forward to playing it in Cleveland.”

The program will be rounded out with Dave Reminick’s *Consort* (2012) for four de-tuned soprano saxophones. “Dave is a Chicago-based composer and saxophonist so he knows how to write for the instrument.”

Quarles explained that the first saxophone part is written at A=440, and through a calculated pulling out of the mouthpieces the other three horns are progressively de-tuned by quarter-steps.

“This creates some amazing harmonies of microtonal inflections, although in some places we are asked to play in unison, which requires us to have some specialized fingerings. What’s interesting is that the instrument de-tunes unevenly, but no matter how far you pull the mouthpiece out, the lowest note remains the same. The last note of the piece is a pendulum swing on the lowest note, and as the lines move from one instrument to another, it creates a feedback akin to an electric guitar. Dave calls that the melting saxophone section.”

~Nois formed in 2016 while the members were graduate students at Northwestern. Quarles said that from their first meeting they knew they didn’t want to be a “normal” sax quartet. “We were all interested in contemporary composition, commissioning, and collaborating very closely with composers. We also wanted to enter a couple of competitions to get our name out there, and to make us better, because that’s what competitions are ultimately about. So we formed in late September, just three weeks before the Chicago Wind Ensemble competition — we entered, and won.”

In addition to that win, ~Nois has been awarded the Second Prize in the Open Division of the 2018 M-Prize International Chamber Arts Competition, Silver Medal at the 2017 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, and Second Prize at the 2018 North American Saxophone Alliance Quartet Competition.

The quartet was also invited to be an Ensemble Fellow at the 2018 [Blackbird Creative Lab](#), where they worked closely with the Chicago-based ensemble Eighth Blackbird — an opportunity that Quarles said came at an important time in the group’s development.

“We had experienced success at these competitions, and had already completed a five-week tour across the southeastern U.S. We knew we could play together, and had often talked about how we could make the quartet our main mission in life as professional musicians. And the Blackbird Creative Lab allowed us to have discussions around what we wanted to be — what our vision and goals were and how we were going to get there. We got tons of great musical advice and had fun collaborating with the other fellows.”

When it came to selecting a name for the ensemble, Quarles said it was something they did agonize over for a while. They wanted it to be simple and say who they are and what they do.

“Being a Chicago-based ensemble is very important to us,” the saxophonist said, “so we wanted a name that would reflect that too. I had a teacher who lived on a street named Noyes, and the other direction was a street called Illinois something. It’s funny because people often pronounce it ‘Illi - noise.’ So we took off the ‘Illi’ part and kept ‘nois,’ which references where we are from. And we added the tilde in the front — which in math means ‘approximately’ — because all music is ‘approximately noise.’ ~Nois says that we are a Chicago-based group that plays everything under the sun.”

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