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Free Improvisation: a review

MARSH GAS (Ian Brighton, Jim Livesey, Radu Malfatti, Marcio Mattos, Roger Smith, Philipp Wachsmann, Sound in Brass handbells — leader Andrew Hudson)
Bead 3 (£3.75)

FIRE WITHOUT BRICKS (Roy Ashbury, Larry Stabbins)
Bead 4 (£3.75)

AFTER BEING IN HOLLAND FOR TWO YEARS (Peter Cusack)
Bead 5 (£3.75)

CHOLAGOGUES (Paul Burwell, Nestor Figueras, David Toop)
Bead 6 (£3.75)

SPARKS OF THE DESIRE MAGNETO (Richard Beswick, Philipp Wachsmann, Tony Wren)
Bead 7 (£3.75)

DOWNHILL (Clive Bell, Bernard Watson, Colin Wood)
Bead 8 (£3.75)

ALTERATIONS (Steve Beresford, Peter Cusack, Terry Day, David Toop)
Bead 9 (£3.75)

LEVERS ALONE (Chas Manning, Hugh Metcalfe, Parney Wallace)
Bead 10 (£3.75)

HARRY DE WIT — APRIL '79 (Jan Kamphuis, Joep Maessen, Wolter Wierbos, Harry de Wit)
Bead 11 (£3.75)

FOR HARM (Jan Kamphuis, Philipp Wachsmann, Harry de Wit, Kees van Zelst)
Bead 12 (£3.75)

OPERA (Richard Beswick, Will Evans, Matthew Hutchinson)
Bead 13 (£3.75)

GROUPS IN FRONT OF PEOPLE 1 (Gunter Christmann, Peter Cusack, Guus Janssen, Paul Lovens, Maarten van Regteren Altena)
Bead 14 (£3.75)

GROUPS IN FRONT OF PEOPLE 2 (Peter Cusack, Terry Day, Guus Janssen, Paul Lytton, Evan Parker, Maarten van Regteren Altena, Paul Termos)
Bead 15 (£3.75)

LONDON BASS TRIO LIVE (Marcio Mattos, Marc Meggido, Tony Wren)
Bead Cassette 1 (£3.00)

Available from Bead Records, 1 Chesholm Road, Stoke Newington, London N16 (tel. 01-249 7543). Prices include postage and packing to UK at press date.

Two years ago I wrote a fairly extended review of the most recent records on the Incus label, founded by Derek Bailey and Evan Parker in 1970 and still going strong. This time — in an even longer review, for it deals with no less than thirteen discs and one cassette — it's the turn of Bead, a younger label that began operations in 1974 when the guitarist Peter Cusack and the clarinetist Simon Mayo got together to produce an album called *Milk Teeth* (an appropriate name, it appears, when you read their somewhat instructive account of the problems which face anyone starting a record label from scratch — to mix my metaphors) with, according to the sleeve, the dancer Shelley Lee.

In among our past record reviews you'll find a discussion of Bead's first two discs: for anyone who wants to follow up the leads from the present article, I've listed below all the reviews of improvised music which *Contact* has published.¹ Here I want to discuss the Bead output since then and up to the time of writing. If you want a fuller account of such things as the genesis of Bead, or further critical comment on the label's output — and in particular further information about the individual improvisers, the groups in which they play and the contexts in which they work — the rest of the footnotes to this review should give you some starting points. The now sadly defunct *Musics* magazine² will give you an even better idea of what has been going on, particularly during the mid and late 70s. A visit to the London Musicians Collective, or better still regular visits, will give you the best idea of all:³ though you should also keep an eye (I nearly said 'a beady ear') open for the deliberate 'infiltration of the more visible venues', i.e. the more 'classically' orientated halls such as the Purcell Room and St. John's Smith Square, if you want to catch all

the players and observe a very interesting, useful and indeed necessary phenomenon in contemporary free improvisation/free jazz, call it what you will — the refusal of at least some musicians (some of them very much involved with the Bead label) to confine their activities to the ghettos where they imagine most people think they belong (then most people *do*...). The quotation in that last sentence is from the bass player Tony Wren, involved with Bead from quite near its conception and currently its main administrator.⁴

There is, I think, a pretty generalised but still rather important distinction to be made between the kind of musicians to be found on the Bead and, most obviously and for comparative purposes most conveniently, the Incus label. I've already said that Incus was founded by Bailey and Parker: players of a certain age (around the 40 mark now, give or take a few years) who have certainly 'come of age' in terms of their improvising activities in what, for want of a better term, we tend to call 'free jazz'. This considerable experience stretches back roughly 15 years: to the mid 60s, anyway, if we're not to put too firm a date on it. From the present vantage point, their work, and that of musicians closely associated with them (Barry Guy, Paul Lytton, Tony Oxley, Howard Riley,⁵ Paul Rutherford, to confine the list to British players for present purposes) clearly takes on a pioneering quality. Free improvisation is scarcely generally accepted in this country nowadays, heaven knows, but 15 or even ten years ago Britain was a cultural desert as far as anything approaching a 'free music scene' was concerned: a few individuals, most, nearly all, of them based in London — and ultimately forming themselves into the London Musicians Co-operative (which the present Collective succeeded) — working in what must have seemed a

vacuum compared with the 'scene' in Holland, West Germany, Rome or in parts of the States. As far as Britain goes, and even in many respects as far as the world in general was going — for free improvisation out of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor (or to whoever you want to trace it . . .) was really pretty new anyway — these musicians represent a First Generation of improvising musicians of the free kind.

This term 'First Generation' applies more to the length of time a player has been working in free music as a main, or at any rate major part of his activity than to his actual age, it would seem. Guy, for example — perhaps the prime mover in the formation of the London Musicians Co-op as well as the London Jazz Composers' Orchestra (a somewhat irregular, ad hoc and none too accurately titled band which is still going)⁶ — is a good bit younger than, say, Bailey. (I find it mildly interesting that I know Guy's year of birth without looking it up (1947), whereas I've been unable to find Bailey's: composers seem to bother about such things far more than improvisers, or at least the Cultural System in which we all have to operate does, providing more means for the dissemination of such trivia — books, programme notes, *Contact* . . . — for those who write notes than for those who merely play sounds.) And there's something more difficult to pin down (and therefore more interesting) as well about this business of 'First Generation'. Of course there's a wide range of styles, manners of playing and attitudes to that improvisation, improvisation in general and even music in general among these musicians. But there's also something very hard to define that nevertheless *would* define them, if we could find the words, as a group: they do share, if not styles and manners of playing, then at least a corpus of attitudes to playing, to making music, to doing whatever it is they do. I'd hate to pin this down to just one thing, but a sort of common denominator which I found, and which might put some one who's not heard much, or any, of the music concerned on the right track towards a real understanding of what I'm getting at, is: virtuosity. Not the conventional, 'classical', scales-and-arpeggios type of virtuosity, necessarily; at least probably not. And not even a 'conventional' virtuosity of any kind (loud and fast as opposed to soft and slow, or at least soft and fast as opposed to soft and slow); at least not necessarily. It might be more a virtuosity of the mind than of the fingers (and I haven't got time to clamber out of Pseud's Corner to explain *that* properly, I'm afraid). But it's still virtuosity. Curt Sachs provides probably the main reason why most people think that some kind of virtuosity is necessary in instrumental music for it to be any good and in the process provides a better definition of it than I have.⁷

In the course of a very substantial introduction to the first seven Bead records, Kenneth Ansell provides not only the link between this and the matter of the playing on these discs (which it is my firm purpose to examine in just a minute), but a stab at defining the difference between the music of the First Generation players who largely dominate Incus and that of the Second Generation players who are to be found on Bead. 'Bead Records,' he writes, 'has become the focal point for recordings of the second generation of British free improvisors. By comparison with that of the first generation the music of the musicians we shall look at here operates within a concentrated and compressed dynamic range. Having disregarded the more extrovert and aggressive side of free music has not emotionally disembowled the music though: within the detailed intricacies and subtle interplay captured here is a wealth of emotional responsiveness and expression. Within its natural parameters it is both diverse and articulate. Once the listener assimilates the language adopted here he will find as much variety of expression as in their more volatile counterparts.'⁸

Now an important implication in what Ansell is saying seems to me to be that we should not expect the music on these Bead records to be all soft and slow, any more than we should expect that on most of the Incus records to be all loud and fast. Its 'natural parameters' cannot be defined quite so simply or simplistically and the 'detailed intricacies and subtle interplay' go much further than merely the tying of filigree knots or fancy pattern work done sotto voce rather than at the top of one's voice (and often at the extremes of one's range). But if you want a reasonably clear, probably the clearest, example of the qualities to be found in Second Generation improvisation, try either Bead 6 or 8 first.

A similar situation arises with Bead 6 as with Bead 1: a

third performer is credited on the sleeve whose contribution, because of its more visual nature, is somewhat difficult to detect on the record itself. While it doesn't appear that the dancer Shelley Lee had anything to do with Bead 1, the performance artist Nestor Figueras *can* be heard on Bead 6: at least there are quite a lot of sounds on the record which he *could* have made, even if they were actually made by David Toop's mainly flute-type instruments or Paul Burwell's mainly percussive ones. Figueras' contribution (described as 'movement/respiratory and vocal sounds/body percussion') and the confusion of roles, which results not only from the kind of work which the 'musicians' on the record do but also from the fact that the recording is taken from a live performance, illustrate well some of the qualities to be found in Second Generation improvisation. The visual element is sometimes very important: I wasn't at the concert at Action Space in London on April 1, 1977 from which this recording was taken, and I'm sure I'd hear it a different way if I had been. And there's also a quality in this performance which is more important than the merely visual impact of essentially aural events, but which is harder to define: perhaps one might call it a kind of 'ritual theatre'.

It's this ritualistic, I'm even tempted to say religious, approach to performance which makes the work of all these three so individual and frequently so compelling. And it's not entirely typical of all Second Generation improvisation: how could it be? Indeed on listening to the record I was struck first by how different it was from the others I had been listening to, in numerical order, up to that point: I jotted down such things as 'less musical or at least less to do with music', 'less to do with any known kind of musical continuity', 'yet it is still "extraordinarily musical"'. Not much help, perhaps. Especially when the imagination is prone to playing tricks on the listener because it's forced into such a prominent position when listening to Bead 6: not only because you have to try and think yourself into the situation of the concert (what was going on visually? what was the atmosphere like? — though some of the latter does come across), but also because the sense of musical time demands some getting used to, and when you've succeeded to some extent, the music's spaces allow lots of room for the imagination to manoeuvre. But it's the best I can do for now.

One of the difficulties with this kind of music arises naturally, I'm afraid, from its apparently almost 'esoteric' qualities. It *is* new, it *is* different and it's undoubtedly not for everyone. Because of all this, it's even more prone than most free music (most contemporary music generally?) to charges of spuriousness and pseuderie, and this becomes a particular problem when anyone comes to write about it. I'm not just using this as an excuse for incoherent or purple prose. I find it difficult enough to write about this music as it is, but I have to admit that, with a few exceptions, I find the writing of others about it, particularly some of those involved in this kind of 'religious' approach, quite baffling. I give details of two examples below: one⁹ which I quite fail to understand; the other¹⁰ which, though it contains passages of incoherence, should be read as a whole as an interesting attempt to relate some of the concepts inherent in 'slow music' of this kind to a thesis concerning the derivations of Western composed and notated music in vocal rather than instrumental music in ways which are interestingly different from, as well as related to, some other approaches to this complex subject.¹¹ This latter article, by Peter Riley, includes a review of Bead 6 as well as other records, including more composed music by, for example, John Cage and Alvin Curran: composers who, unusually, seem to mean a good deal to at least some of these Second Generation improvisers.

Like Bead 6, Bead 8 consists of two side-long takes from a live concert given by a trio of Second Generation musicians. As with Toop and Burwell, I have heard two of these players — Clive Bell and Colin Wood — live and know them to some extent as well as their music (I believe they play quite often together, but I've never heard them together before). Like Toop, Bell is a flautist with a deep interest in the music of the East: he has taken the study of it seriously enough to spend some while in Japan recently learning to play the shakuhachi, which he plays on this record in addition to the Western concert flute. One of the most memorable aspects of Bead 8 is some very expressive shakuhachi playing from Bell.

In some ways the music from this trio is more

'traditional': if that word means anything, which I suppose it doesn't unless I define what 'tradition' I'm talking about — that would be hard. So what *do* I mean? Warm, romantic even, a feeling for texture and timbre that is, however, never at odds with a balanced formal design. And perhaps that design is part of the 'traditional' feel of this music: it's almost too balanced and formal, 'calculated', dealing in graceful emotional curves that at times don't sound so much improvised as composed (something which can only rarely be said of Second Generation improvisers, more often of First). When I got on to the second side I suddenly realised what this seductive mixture of West and East, the oriental tracery of the shakuhachi, the warm, resonant and also at times eerie cello and Bernard Watson's evocative use of the inside of the piano as well as the keyboard, what this freedom within apparently well-defined limits reminded me of in terms of Western composed music: George Crumb.

It must already be evident from what I've said about these two discs that it's neither possible nor probably desirable to pin down these Second Generation improvisers into a narrow conformist format: in some ways what started as 'rule' has already proved to be 'exception'. No matter: I didn't intend the definitions to be either rigid or even very lasting — but they might prove useful as scaffolding for discussion. Let me now take up another line about these musicians which will probably waver just as easily: the 'problem' of 'technique'.

There are clearly considerable differences of opinion among improvisers themselves as well as among those who listen, or don't listen, to them as to what technique is necessary in their particular case, or even as to what technique *is*. Some musicians of both the First and Second generations got together a while ago and recorded a discussion about it and published the result.¹² It certainly shows up differences in the attitudes of the First and Second generation musicians which are in part, of course, bound up with the question of virtuosity which I mentioned earlier. You would expect a Bailey or a Parker to have an attitude to what constitutes technique which is, to put it no more precisely, nearer to that of an 'avantclassical' player such as Vinko Globokar or Michel Portal: neither of these European musicians has an exactly 'conventional' attitude to such things anyway and both have considerable experience as free improvisers; but both also play fiercely virtuosic composed music and Globokar composes it as well. Toop or Wood — or, to take a somewhat different case which I'll come to in a moment, Steve Beresford — don't feel the same way about these things. And this, among other factors, leaves them wide open to criticism on this level as well as on others: 'Another annoyance of the series was the attitude of Paul Kelly, the recently appointed Jazz Centre Society representative in the Midlands. Even though his office is in the same building, and one concert could have been attended during office hours, he showed no interest either. When asked (not by us) if he was planning to come, after some humming and hawing, he is alleged to have said, "I'm not interested because many of the second generation haven't proved their technical ability to the critics". This is certainly the oddest reason for not going to a concert that I've ever heard, if not the stupidest. I hope that such a comment only represents his attitude to this particular group, not to improvised music in general.'¹³

Now on one level this is merely all good partisan stuff: and the protagonists can speak up for themselves if they wish to. (*Musics* points out, by the way, that Kelly is involved in setting up a Southern Improvisation Circuit to enable groups to tour Southern England on a fairly sound organisational and financial basis, so the above should be read in the light of this.) At the same time I think there are several points which are relevant here:

- (1) Even allowing for the partisan nature of much comment, especially in letter or off-the-cuff form, concerning music of all kinds, there is a considerable discrepancy between what some musicians are doing, or at least what they *think* they're doing, and what even some seasoned, even 'professional' listeners think they're doing.
- (2) This manifests itself more in the case of Second Generation improvisers than First, which must be partly due, at least, to the differences I've tried to illustrate above.
- (3) The question of 'technique' is a stumbling block here because different people mean different things by it, and different people place different values on even the specific techniques over which they can agree identification.

Since there's no agreed yardstick by which we can measure 'technique' in free music any more than there's one for 'inspiration' in any kind of music, the argument is likely to be extremely inconclusive. However, let me put an end to this one by discussing the technique of two of the musicians I've already mentioned. Wood has an enviable 'classical' technique by, I should have thought, anyone's standards (I've heard him play quite a bit of notated, composed music — Purcell, salon and 'revue' type music — on several occasions). Toop is a very fine flautist by my standards: he has agility and good intonation if he wishes to use them; he must have perfect pitch because he picks up pitches consistently and quickly in ensemble music, again if he wishes to. I've heard that he can't read music: it surprised me, but I've deliberately refrained from tackling him on the subject because I think the answer would be irrelevant to my understanding of the term 'technique' in terms of the kind of music he plays — if he wanted to learn musical notation, I'm sure it would be a simple matter for him.

Beresford can certainly read music (and I can prove it), but if anything his relationship to such 'conventional' concepts as technique is much more oblique than Toop's. In some respects he's quite clear and leaves himself wide open to the criticism quoted above (he was a member of the group to which Kelly was referring): 'Well I'm a failed classical pianist and I'm a failed jazz pianist, basically . . . I'm not good enough. I just don't have the technique to be a good classical pianist. I don't have the commitment to jazz to go out and learn the 400 standards that you need, and also think it's primarily an American music. I mean, I failed consciously in a way, but not in another way. But at the same time I practise at the piano. Ideally I'd like my performance to stretch from completely uncontrolled to completely controlled as well.'¹⁴

This is where it starts to get complicated. Beresford is interested in lack of control and he concedes that this makes him very different from the First Generation musicians who 'would not be into lack of control at all. Because they just see improvisation as being orientated around the instrument, about learning to play the instrument and extending instrumental technique.' At the same time he's also interested in complete control and thinks that 'once you get to a certain stage, you can definitely learn more by just refining your technique rather than by tying yourself up in knots and trying to play'. This is nevertheless practically what he does on occasions, and it's not hard, having seen him play, to understand how several First Generation musicians who were in Bailey's chameleon-like Company with Beresford a couple of years back¹⁵ flatly refused to play with him: a flat contradiction of the aims of Company in some ways, giving a good indication of the extent of the rift that has subsequently developed in some ways between the Generations.

Four members of the group in the above discussion, including Beresford, appear on Bead 9. (We've printed a portion of the sleeve of this disc to give not only the performance details but also an idea of the mechanics and costs of producing a record privately these days.) Beresford's contribution marks something of a departure from most of the other music issued on Bead so far. But aside from the theatricality which is an important part of his performance, as it is also particularly of Terry Day's percussion work, Beresford's 'departure' takes a form which is not necessarily predictable from the quotations above. He uses tonal chords, or even whole phrases or whole sections in a fairly clear tonality. But tonality with a wooden leg: a bit lopsided, in part 'artificial', an 'injured' tonality. Peter Cusack's guitar takes this up briefly early on, but otherwise the sounds of whistles and assorted percussion, which soon seem more 'normal' after you've been listening to six other Bead records, soon take over.

In an interesting note which forms part of the front cover for this record, someone (I'm not sure who) describes this first side as 'a sort of piano concerto in the Eric Morecambe tradition'. Beresford is obviously aware of the problems of piano improvisation in free music: the instrument seems to carry all its history on its back in a way which no other instrument does. If you're going to use the keyboard, you've got to take account of this, as well as its sheer weight of tone. To dive inside the instrument seems too often like a cheap way out. Beresford's apparent acceptance of the old and often somewhat decrepit pianos he's faced with on gigs — including, as on Side One of this record, an upright not a

This is a record of improvised music by a group called Alterations. The musicians and their instruments are as follows - Peter Cusack: nylon stringed guitar sometimes through small battery operated amplifier/Steve Beresford: piano - upright side 1, v. decrepit grand side 2 - euphonium, violin, trumpet small instruments, plastic guitar amplified through 5 watt battery amp, snapits, toy piano/Terry Day: percussion, 'cello alto saxophone, mandoline, homemade reeds, small instruments/David Toop: flutes, fire bucket, water, thrown/dropped/shaken percussives, Fender Esquire electric guitar, some plucked and bowed strings, some trumpetings and other noise.

The production of the record was as follows - a number of concerts were recorded on a Uher Stereo Report with 2 AKG D224 microphones. The final selection was from The Premises in Norwich, May 13, 1978. This is side 1. The second side was recorded at the London Musicians Collective, 42, Gloucester Avenue, NW1, by Max Eastley on June 22, 1978. The selection process was assisted by the transference of edits from the master onto cassette tape. The final master was prepared by Peter Cusack at Steim in Amsterdam. This tape was then taken to Nimbus, Wyastone Leys, Monmouth, Wales where it was cut, processed and pressed. The cost for this section of the production for an edition of 500 was £346. The labels were designed by Steve Beresford and Peter Cusack and printed at Smith Press, 36, West Barnes Lane, Surrey. The cost for 500 labels was £39. After discussion by the group the cover was designed by David Toop and Steve Beresford and printed at Senol Printing, 4, Hardwicks Way, London, SW18 at an approximate cost of £120. The record is the 9th release on the BEAD label - a musician owned and run label based at 1, Chesholm Road, London, N16, England.

grand - clearly focuses attention on this problem even more. But even when what start as 'intrusions' from the piano get taken up in interesting ways by, for example, Toop's flute, I can still understand why a very fine pianist like the composer John White, who's done a lot of improvisation in his time, avoids the piano entirely, as far as I know.

So far I've discussed two trios and a quartet. Bead 3 forms solos and combinations of two, three and four players from a pool of six, plus a contribution from a team of handbell ringers on one track. But the focus is mainly on the electric guitar playing of Ian Brighton. Free improvisers tend to come from one of three backgrounds: a jazz and/or commercial music one (Bailey, Larry Stabbins), a 'classical' and composed music one (Guy, Philipp Wachsmann) or a 'non-musical', often art school one (Toop, Burwell); occasionally a more ambiguous mixture but usually with a 'classical' training (Howard Riley, Beresford). This applies to both First and Second generations, with the possible exception of the art school one: each pair of names above consists of one First and one Second generation improviser except for Toop and Burwell who are both Second - I couldn't think of an art school First musician.

Brighton is, like Bailey, from the first category, and his electric guitar playing relates quite a lot to Bailey's, I feel. It would perhaps be hard for it not to: on this instrument and in this country Bailey is the rather of free improvisation. But Brighton's playing is often cleaner, less cluttered, a trifle less frenetic than Bailey's. And less vital too: none of the tracks on this disc really held my attention. The track with the bells, the middle one on Side Two, also has a lot of alto saxophone from Jim Livesey: slightly more 'jazzy' than anything else on this disc, it also turns out somewhat more individual and interesting.

One of the many problems with making records of improvised music is that the musicians have often tended to 'move on' from the position which a particular recorded performance documents by the time it is actually released. This is a hazard of some contemporary non-improvised music too, of course, in which the turnover and subsequent rejection of ideas can sometimes still be pretty fast, even in the late 70s. Any record takes a certain amount of time to produce from the tape: actually making the tape itself is the easy part as far as the Bead improvisers are concerned. But unless you have an efficient commercial machine behind you, it takes time and a lot of effort to get the money together and get the disc actually circulating, as it were. Two years between original recording and release is not unusual, though in the case of Bead 4 it was actually a bit quicker. But then the time taken for a reviewer to get his review together and actually publish it has to be taken account of too. He has some of the same problems . . .

Bead 4 was recorded over four years ago, and Stabbins, the soprano and tenor saxophonist on this duo disc, has apparently changed more than most since then. (He can currently be heard playing with Elton Dean's Ninesense, for example, and there's a new quintet of free improvisers which also includes Burwell and Wren.) But I rather enjoyed Bead 4. There's an 'immediate' quality and, dare I say, a sense of purpose about it which is entirely lacking on Bead 3. Is it something to do with the fact that Roy Ashbury's percussion has a lot of regular repeated rhythms? It's incisive music (not so typically Second Generation?) and it could, I suppose, become a little wearing eventually. The title track has a sax solo at first balanced precariously above the mutterings of the percussion: an integrated, if intermittent song of a quiet, calm beauty transcending the fact that some of it is actually quite loud and even occasionally makes a pretence at aggression. Later things 'hot up' (this is meant almost traditionally). I think the music on this record is enhanced by the feeling it gives of an added dimension - even if only of an illusory kind: a sense - always tenuous, sometimes tantalising, often perhaps even irrelevant to the music's central core - of building on something (their own previous experience of playing together?). At the same time the considerable amount of pretty sparse playing is quite 'Second Generation' and makes a contribution to Peter Riley's 'theory'.

Cusack's guitar improvisations and tapes on Bead 5 'celebrate' two years of work in Holland, where there is a particularly flourishing free music scene.¹⁶ Perhaps slightly surprisingly, considering the environment in which his recent ideas have been formed, there is some very 'unjazz-

like' playing on this record: not only no jazz 'dirt', but less of the 'aura' of anything even vaguely to do with jazz that one finds unmistakably in the playing of, say, Bailey or Guy, or Brighton, Ashbury and Stabbins. Some of this is obviously due to Cusack's guitar, which is acoustic, not electric, to the deliberately wide stereo separation and to the even more 'compositional' use of tape, albeit environmental. And there is some tonal material that at least evokes some other styles of guitar playing even if they're not exactly jazz ones. But this record is definitely very Second Generation.

Bead 7, like Bead Cassette 1, involves Wren himself playing with musicians who, like him, have a 'classical' and even 'compositional' background. Bead 7's Duchampian title refers to the players' attempt to work the fact that 'improvised music is particularly sensitive to situation, acoustic properties of a room, and audience' into their performances, recorded live in a variety of venues in London and Holland. Though it's nowhere referred to on the sleeve or the disc label, the three musicians together constitute the group Chamberpot, now without Mayo, which David Roberts has twice reviewed in these pages. Their playing is characterised by a high level of activity, sometimes producing a great deal of noise. Wren's bass playing is admittedly less frenetic, less 'fauviste', than Guy's, but Wachsmann's electronically modulated violin is among the most violent things I've ever heard and Richard Beswick, the 'Beresford' of the group, plays oboe, guitar and other things in a decidedly nerve-jittering manner.

Bead 10 is by a group called Levers, ex-students of a new music course at Ravensbourne College of Art run by Oxley, Howard Riley and others. Wren described Levers to me as 'Third Generation' though, to the outside ear, this record doesn't demonstrate a markedly different attitude to their work from that evidenced by the Second Generation improvisers on Bead. There are some perhaps more excitable — but hardly truly gripping — vocal outbursts from one or more of the three musicians, who otherwise play percussion, guitar and alto sax doubling clarinet doubling 'Parneyphone' doubling 'Eric Phone' (I'm not sure what these latter two are!). But the mixture of sparseness, frenzy and occasional tunefulness which most of the six tracks demonstrate left me without any strong impressions of musical conviction.

Beads 11 and 12 continue the label's Dutch involvement; the central focus is Harry de Wit, who is not only the 'other' Dutch bass clarinetist called Harry (the 'alternative' to the celebrated 'avantclassical' player Harry Sparnaay) but also plays piano and percussion (he actually does relatively little clarinet playing on these two discs). Side One of Bead 11 has de Wit on bass clarinet and brushes and three other Dutch musicians on bass, trombone and trombone and voice respectively; de Wit transfers to piano and prepared piano for the three tracks of Side Two.

The single track on Side One starts and finishes in a laid-back manner very different from that of most of the Dutch improvisation which has circulated in Britain so far (most of it tends to be pretty punchy). But it has a big climax around two thirds of the way through (note the classical 'European' format!) which may remind the listener that that manic manic percussionist Han Bennink also hails from Holland. But there's a great deal of control here: the music takes such a long time to 'get going' that you start to wonder whether it's *about* 'getting going' at all (it turns out, I think, that it is), but the musical line is kept taut and the interest impressively retained.

The first track on Side Two has magical, throbbing prepared piano from which eventually emerges a brief passage of jazz-like walking pizzicato bass and then a number of fragments in quick succession; but it ends too quickly and too suddenly, I feel. (This is a fairly frequent 'fault' of improvised music on record. Often it's because the tracks are compiled from much longer takes and the impression is given that the choice isn't dictated by considerations of the 'wholeness' of a 'piece' — a consideration inappropriate to improvisation? Nevertheless, I think that most listeners, including improvisers, listen in 'wholes', and the resulting dichotomy is frequently unresolved.)

The second track on Side Two is much more obviously 'traditional'; sometimes it's almost (vaguely jazzily) 'neo-classical': the nearest thing this disc comes to the 'populist' Dutch free jazz 'school' of musicians like Willem Breuker and Leo Cuypers. It ends with an amazing section for two trombones and voice over an ostinato piano figure. The

final track includes some highly fragmented, even pointillist playing and builds to a vigorous climax, but it's not as tightly controlled as Side One.

Neither is anything on Bead 12, I feel; it generally lacks the earlier disc's individuality too. De Wit is here joined by Wachsmann; the first track and the second, extremely short one are duos. Two Dutch musicians — Kamphuis on bass again and Kees van Zelst on percussion — join them for the final track on Side One; the whole of Side Two is a trio for Wachsmann, de Wit and van Zelst. The very sectionalised formats give, in the opening sections of Side Two for instance, an almost 'classical' feeling of 'first movement', 'slow movement' and 'scherzo' before becoming more 'serious' and more lyrical with occasional outbursts, and then finally turning more and more 'thematic'. Coupled to the fact that Wachsmann is on the whole in much more 'evocative' mood than on Bead 7, this could have led somewhere interesting and different; in the event, though, it seems on this occasion to have had a curiously dissipating effect.

Another record which could almost be classified as 'Third Generation' is Bead 13, which consists of seven tracks by a British trio. Beswick, who as on Bead 7 uses his voice as well as oboe and guitar, produces sounds which give the impression of an effort altogether out of proportion to their purely sonic impact. It's partly due to the fact that he plays oboe, but it's as true of his other activities and it constitutes his own 'style'.

The pianist Matthew Hutchinson is apparently a 'straighter' jazz musician who has played with the John Williams Big Band, though his playing here often has less of the 'resonance' of the jazz virtuoso than de Wit's does. As well as 'ordinary' piano, Hutchinson uses electric piano and synthesizer, and he competes quite adventurously on the latter with Will Evans's percussion on track three of Side One. The overall 'sound' of this group, though, is on the whole not much more original or interesting than that of the players on Bead 10, though their command of musical ebb and flow seems more secure.

Beads 14 and 15 return to the 'Dutch Connection' and are unusual in that they are accompanied by extensive notes (by Peter Cusack) which explain why and how the records came about. Three players — Maarten van Regteren Altena, Cusack himself and Guus Janssen, playing cello/bass, guitar and piano respectively — are common to both discs; one of the ideas of the concerts done in Holland and Belgium by this trio with a variety of other musicians in 1978 and 79, from which these records are taken, was that 'the trio might develop a recognisable music of its own which would be heard as a similarity between the groups'. Even though this didn't really happen, according to Cusack, the resulting combinations, fragmentations, disputes and relationships not only between the players but between the players and their various audiences make up a fascinating picture of how this kind of improvisation actually works in daily practice: and how it is so crucially about the tensions which naturally arise when a group of people try to create music together in front of an audience.

Since to some extent the tracks on these two records feature a mixture of First and Second generation players, Beads 14 and 15 provide a valuable documentation of the kind of things that can happen when the Generations meet: though by no means all the 'tensions' are accounted for by this fact alone and these aren't, anyway, the only records on either the Bead or Incus labels to combine players with very different approaches from different Generations. And anyway, some of the friction happened 'off the record', so to speak: for example, the saxophonist John Tchicai was on tour with some of the other musicians when some of the tapes were made, but at the last concert, from which several tracks were drawn, he left the stage after 20 minutes and he doesn't actually feature on the records at all.

There are, as I said, 'tensions' which are not necessarily accounted for by the Generation gap. One of these concerns the Dutch pianist Guus Janssen, and it's instructive and interesting not only for the ways in which it contributes to the music's moment-to-moment unfolding and to its eventual direction, but because it typifies a perennial problem with free improvisation, and one which has already been touched on in this review. What should the function of functional tonality be in free music? In what circumstances does it have a place? Pedantic questions, perhaps, at least put like that: the musicians themselves

would no doubt phrase it rather differently, at least. But as Cusack points out in his notes, 'the nice tuneful and structured material that Guus is apt to use is a radical contrast to what most of the rest of us do'; a good example is the lumpy jazz-like solo with which Side One of Bead 14 begins. I'm intrigued by how the other musicians deal with Janssen's material, and indeed by how Janssen himself deals with it. Some of the results are less than satisfying, I feel, but the fact that our usual notions of 'compatibility', even of 'fusion', are challenged by some free improvisation would seem, as I have said in my earlier review, to be one of its strengths and one of the most powerful arguments for its future.

In addition to discs, Bead have now started to produce cassettes. Only one is available at the time of writing, and it features a group including Wren which, unlike Chamberpot, I've never heard before. The London Bass Trio, live, partly from the London Musicians Collective's first concert at the Cockpit Theatre, London on November 6, 1976, is just what it says: three monsters all growling, grunting, moaning, shrieking and singing away together in the most incredible combination I've heard for ages. The initial impact is amazing, and though it wears off after a while, the listener's interest should be held by the almost vocal and definitely lyrical as well as the violent and decidedly lumbering qualities of the playing, and by its sheer musicianship. I'd love to hear and see them live.

Two general comments with which to end. I've deliberately refrained from mentioning the titles of individual tracks meticulously and even the titles of whole albums in my review. While I don't agree with Peter Riley's criticisms of the programmatic trappings which surround Bead 3 (it's a bit difficult to do so when he doesn't seem to recognise that the titles and the 'fairy-story' enclosed with the record are rip-offs of J. R. R. Tolkien),¹⁷ 'Marsh Gas' and 'Cholagogues' (pre- or post-conceptual?) are perhaps the extreme examples, at least in the present group of records of what started as a private programmatic aspect of the musical activity, perhaps acting as 'inspiration' in some ill-defined way, which became public when they shouldn't, because the listener's way into the music isn't (can't be) the same as the player's. This is a common problem for the creative musician, and while at least some composers have solved it in their own ways, some improvisers perhaps still need to curb their natural and altogether laudable tendencies not to 'hide' anything. If that's what this rash of variously obscure titles means: one could take the less charitable view that it fulfils the role of camouflage. On the whole I've found the 'packaging' fairly unhelpful in coming to terms with the music as perceived, though I find it interesting to muse on its possible relevance to the music as conceived.

My other general comment concerns the qualities of the recordings themselves. I think the basic quality of transfer from tape to disc has improved since Bead began operations, both because they themselves have managed to find their way round the industry better and because the quality of privately produced records has improved generally over the past few years. The original tapes, often from live performances, inevitably vary somewhat, but none are really bad (and I didn't spot all the 'blemishes' — microphones being blundered into, etc. — that are listed on the sleeve of Bead 6). Transfer to cassette is less of a problem, of course, though the sound quality of Bead Cassette 1 is probably not as good as the best of the records. The other aspects of packaging are on the whole adequately done, though there are a few mistakes: e.g. the fourth track on Side One of Bead 9 lasts only 56 seconds and not 10 minutes 56 seconds as it says on the record label!

NOTES:

¹See reviews by David Roberts in *Contact 15* (Winter 1976-77), p.34, which includes a discussion of Beads 1 and 2, *Contact 16* (Spring 1977), pp.23-25, including Lysis and ARC Records and *Contact 18* (Winter 1977-78), pp.39-40, consisting of a discussion of the cassette series Blank Tapes; and by Malcolm Barry, *Contact 18*, pp.36-39 and Keith Potter, *Contact 19* (Summer 1978), pp.32-37, the last two being discussions of Incus Records.

²It may be that some back numbers are still obtainable, since the magazine folded only a year ago. The address is 42 Gloucester Avenue, London NW1, tel. 01-722 0456.

³For an introduction to the work of the LMC see Paul Burwell's article in *Contact 19* (Summer 1978), pp.38-39. The Collective's address and telephone number are the same as those for *Musics* magazine given above.

⁴From a conversation with the author.

⁵For an article on Riley see Malcolm Barry, 'Howard Riley and "Non-Jazz"', *Contact 14* (Autumn 1976), pp.12-16.

⁶It went on an Arts Council Contemporary Music Network tour in March this year. The sizeable line-up included Second Generation players Larry Stabbins and Philipp Wachsmann and First Generation musicians including Guy, Oxley, Parker, Howard Riley, Rutherford, John Stevens and Trevor Watts.

⁷See Curt Sachs, ed. Jaap Kunst, *The Wellsprings of Music* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), especially pp.91-111.

⁸'Bead Records', *Impetus 7* (1978), p.286. This article also contains the account of the problems of setting up a record company to which I referred in my opening paragraph.

⁹Frank Perry, 'A Review: Cholagogues', *Musics 16* (February 1978), pp.10-12.

¹⁰Peter Riley, 'Slow Music: a thesis with instances and some pictures', *Musics 17* (May 1978), pp.12-15.

¹¹See, for example, Trevor Wishart's chapter 'Musical Writing, Musical Speaking' in John Shepherd, Phil Virden, Graham Vulliamy and Trevor Wishart, *Whose Music? A Sociology of Musical Languages* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1977), pp.125-153.

¹²'Technique and Improvisation', *Musics 19* (September 1978), pp.4-12.

¹³Peter Cusack, 'Musician and Context? A Musician's own Gig Review' *Musics 22* (June 1979), p.5. The occasion referred to was a five-day visit to the Birmingham Arts Laboratory in January 1979 by Beresford, Cusack, Terry Day and Toop.

¹⁴This and the following quotations are taken from 'Steve Beresford talks to Steve Lake at Steve Beresford's Flat on April 6th', *Musics 14* (October 1977), p.15.

¹⁵The Incus records from the 1977 Company Week which weren't reviewed by me last time have now all, I think, appeared. I referred obliquely to the 'rift' in my earlier review; three musicians in the 1977 Company Week — Anthony Braxton, Parker and Leo Smith — refused to play with Beresford, whom Bailey subsequently dropped from Company.

¹⁶There's quite a bit of information and comment on the Dutch scene as a result of Cusack's sojourn there; for example, *Musics 7* (April/May 1976) is a special Dutch issue and includes Cusack's 'Thoughts and Observations in Holland', pp.3-5.

¹⁷In 'Records', *Musics 14* (October 1977), p.22.