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**REPORT ON SPECTRO ARTS WORKSHOP MUSIC
(MARCH 1978)**

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At the end of its first full financial year of operation at the new Bells Court premises in Newcastle upon Tyne, this seems a good moment to offer a report on music activities at Spectro Arts Workshop.

Spectro began its life in shop premises at Whitley Bay in the summer of 1969. It operated principally as a small gallery specialising in photography, with darkroom facilities provided for local artists. These activities were expanded to include electronic sound courses and events and performances by visiting musicians, theatre groups and performance artists. I first worked with the organisation in September 1975, running a short course in electronic music using equipment lent under the Northern Arts loan scheme. These courses proved popular and were extended on a termly basis in 1976.

In September 1976 the workshop moved into the new building site, which has now, by sweat and toil, been made into a well-equipped arts resources centre. From the tiny shop in Whitley Bay to the present 11,000 sq. ft. custom-designed building was an enormous change of scale. Many of our problems over the past 18 months have been partly due to the psychological adjustments required in making such a move.

For some months, the music department was housed in a small room on the ground floor where I continued to run courses in electronic music with the help of an assistant. At this time our activities were confined to providing a studio facility of modest proportions which was open daily (including weekends) from 10.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. Users were asked to become Associate Members of the workshop for a small subscription fee, and were entitled to up to six hours free studio time per week, with tuition and guidance if required. We also ran a weekly experimental music workshop. By April 1977 the upstairs music studio was sufficiently complete for us to move into what is now our permanent area. Then began the job of installing our new studio equipment, purchased with the help of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In addition Northern Arts agreed to allow us to use their equipment permanently and this provided us with a good basis on which to establish our studio. In September we were fully operational, though it took some months before our reputation was wide enough to draw a large response. This process is still continuing and every week our membership grows.

Basically the sound studio has four different functions: electronic studio, semi-commercial sound recording service, education and performance presentations. In speaking of the electronic studio, I am reminded of Trevor Wishart's remarks regarding 'communalised electronic studios. . . In the community, instead of the universities'.¹ Spectro's studio is just that: an open-access electronic studio available to the community at large. One hopes that the accessibility of the large studios in this country will increase as a result of the continuing discussion instigated by the meeting of the studio directors at the Arts Council on October 28 last year and the weekend conference at York University at the end of March this year.

Our small performance studio is used principally for commercial recording work. This provides a considerable proportion of our income and supplements our grant aid which would not otherwise be sufficient to finance such an ambitious programme.

The education programme takes the form of evening classes run in conjunction with the adult education department of Newcastle University. We offer courses in such subjects as electronic music (history, theory and practice), studio recording techniques and experimental music. Members of the workshop are given tuition in electronic techniques free of charge. We also provide day-release facilities for students from one or two fine-art departments in the region.

In January we launched a pilot series of twelve events at the gruelling rate of two concerts per week. This has paid dividends — not in financial terms, for the concerts in the main only broke even — but in terms of an enormous upsurge of public interest in the centre as a venue for a wide variety of contemporary music. Our programme goes right across the board and presents all that is new, though not always good: jazz, jazz-rock, punk, improvised music, avantgarde, etc. Much of it is local material, for Tyneside has long been a spawning ground for musical talent, mostly in the popular vein. Among the more outstanding concerts I would mention The Big G, a Newcastle New Wave band, who kicked off the series on January 19, with The Meekons, a Leeds group, as support. Our February 9, 10, 16 and 17 concerts were all jazz-related events, and we collaborated with Jazz North East in presenting Evan Parker, Hugh Davies, Paul Burwell and Peter Cusack on February 16.

In terms of response from the public, the concerts of February 23 and 24 were the most successful of the series, both playing to capacity audiences and creating something of a sensation. *Mogadishu*, an electronic performance in memory of Andreas Baader, provoked a fierce press reaction sparked off by a letter in the *Evening Chronicle* from an 'Art Lover' objecting to what was described as a poison of revolutionary politics spreading upwards through the Northern Arts tree. In spite of a reply from director Mike Tilley, several other local papers carried feature articles couched in a similar vein, and there were veiled threats of a public enquiry and 'questions in the House'. All good stuff of the 'wasting the taxpayers' money' sort, and all before the concert had even taken place. The performance, given by Peter Maben, our technician, and Euan Scott-Batey, a Spectro member and studio user of long standing, hardly seemed to justify the publicity. It was an imaginative and moving performance by two young and inexperienced musicians whose work, though at the moment very derivative, is laden with unrealised potential. The Baader-Meinhof in memoriam section was only one of three 'movements', the others being 'Lebensraum' and 'Full Moon'. It was 'in memory of Andreas Baader' in the same sarcastic sense that Beethoven's 'Eroica' is a memorial to Napoleon, a man who betrayed *his* revolutionary ideals by declaring himself emperor.

The concert by the new Newcastle group Punishment of Luxury on February 24 had my unqualified enthusiasm. These five musicians, led by singer and lyricist Brian Rapkin, a writer of great and bizarre originality with evident organisational ability, offer a brand of music described as 'theatre-rock'. Most of the music is their own material; much is written by lead guitarist Neville Atkinson, whose incredible (and I mean incredible) technical agility matches the ingenious side-stepping harmonic progressions and intricate additive time values of which he is fond. Yet the music has a raw vigour which belies its intellectual framework; one is astonished by the group's command of a wide variety of musical styles. With their weird make-up and extrovert presentation the impression is of a kind of sophisticated punk. The audience was delighted with them.

My own function at the studio as composer-in-residence is to initiate and stimulate activities and at the same time to continue my own work as an audio-visual artist. During my time with Spectro I have been almost exclusively occupied with the project *Tyrannos*, an audio-visual environment based on the myth of Oedipus. *Tyrannos* finally completes its tour of six galleries in this country with a four-week presentation at the Spectro gallery in March and April. The other venues in the tour were: Sunderland Art Centre, D.L.I., Durham, the Air Gallery, London, Aberdeen Art Gallery and Mappin, Sheffield.

In the new financial year we plan to initiate a scheme for visiting composers and artists who will be invited to work at the studio for limited periods. These short-term residencies will be financed by the workshop from its grant aid revenue. Artists and musicians working in such fields as electronic music, mixed media, audio-visuals, sound-sculpture and other media-intensive fields should look out in a few

months time for our advertisement inviting project submissions. Successful applicants will be invited to spend about a month at the workshop. During this time they will also be asked to give public talks and demonstrations of their work and to run workshops for Spectro members and for local schools and colleges.

NOTE

¹'The State of the Nation — a functional primer', *Contact 18* (Winter 1977-78), p. 13.