

Polwechsel: Traces Of Wood (2014) on hatOLOGY 712

By [GLENN ASTARITA](#), Published: January 13, 2014

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Since the late '90s, the European outfit known as Polywhechsel has brandished a strikingly unique sound campaign. Other than the dual-drummer percussionists' attack consisting of polytonal cymbals swashes and soft timbres, the music predominately emanates from the lower-register schematic via double bassist Werner Daffeldecker and cellist Michael Moser's earthen-toned string implementations. Nonetheless, the quartet depicts a rather surreal paragon with subtle surprises, as an element of the unknown remains a constant throughout its repertoire.

It's interesting how the band produces otherworldly treatments without using electronics. With buzzing arco lines, creaky cymbals and ricocheting drum patterns, the musicians intersperse antidotes to all things considered conventional. Some of the passages are framed on unnerving quietude and minimalism. They also execute edgy and raw contrasts with moments of understated beauty, employing resonating percussion and the string performers' faintly altered extended notes. In a sense, they weave nearly inexplicable song forms into a tantalizing soundstage.

On "Grain Bending #1," the quartet alternates understated subplots with creaky and foreboding soundscapes, peppered by the percussionists' sweeping snare drum rolls and unforeseen shifts in strategy. But they also lash back with some venomous, saber-rattling breakdowns amid blustery drums and bombastic cymbals crashes, as if an agitated deity has entered the picture. And during "Nia Rain Circuit," either Beins or Brandlmayr use a mallet instrument to add color, sparking an additional perspective to the asymmetrical flows.

Traces of Wood does not reside within the easy listening category but, on the other hand, the program is not over-cooked or gushing with garrulous statements. The musicians' approach could represent the narrative for a scenario, where a master craftsman is sculpting wood, along with the trial and tribulations of designing a priceless piece of art.

Track Listing: Adapt/Oppose; Grain Bending #1; Nia Rain Circuit; S 64° 14" W 56°37".

Personnel:

Burkhard Beins: drums, percussion; Martin Brandlmayr: drums, percussion;

Werner Daffeldecker: double bass; Michael Moser: cello.

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[Polwechsel – Traces of Wood \(hatOLOGY 712\)](#)

By [Dan Sorrells](#)

To compose, at least by propensity, is to give to do, not to give to hear but to give to write. The modern location for music is not the concert hall, but the stage on which the musicians pass, in what is often a dazzling display, from one source of sound to another.

-Roland Barthes, "Musica Practica"

The liner notes of *Traces of Wood* begin with a Bartsian epigraph. I've chosen a different one, taken from the short essay "*Musica Practica*." In it, Barthes speaks of a divide between an older "practical music" and a new way of "coding" music that he sees pivoting around Beethoven's work. The musical fantasy had shifted, and if you wanted to imagine a place for yourself in music that engaged you, it could no longer be as the source of the song, but only as a conductor, orchestrating something far larger than the individual subject. And so Barthes proposes a new practical music, an effort to sidestep the problematic move from music that had its heart in the individual in-

terpreter to music of the “technician, who relieves the listener of all activity...and abolishes in the sphere of music the very notion of *doing*.”

For Barthes, the composition should not exist as some static product or commodity to be passively consumed. Instead, like the reader of a modern text, the listener is to take an active role, to “cross [the composition] with an new inscription,” to not simply *hear*, but to *do*: to work through a piece to uncover their own application.

Though written about music we now find antiquated, it’s a program that’s well-suited for modern music, particularly of the sort made by groups like Polwechsel. The four compositions on *Traces of Wood* feel like a culmination: a summit where distinctions between composition and improvisation have become moot, and a place where the only logical approach to the music is an active working-through, on the part of both musician and listener. Each member of the quartet (Michael Moser on cello, Werner Dafeldecker on bass, and the dual percussion of Martin Brandlmayr and Burkhard Beins) contributes a composition, though it’s quickly apparent that what they each offer is less a rigid score than an environment in which a “composing” can take place. *Traces of Wood* marks out a realm where composition is unseen, or to evoke Barthes again, *inaudible*. There’s a sense in which Polwechsel represents both the furthest reach of the original abolition of “practical music,” and the best candidate for the mode of listening Barthes suggests to reboot it.

Traces of Wood is Polwechsel’s first album since their 2009 collaboration with John Tilbury, and the first since the departure of John Butcher later in that year. It opens with Beins’ “Adapt/Oppose,” which engages in the intense dialectic its title suggests. The musicians move in and out of alignment with each other, and the music is jostled between long, collaborative drones and sections bristling with short blats of strings and light percussion. It establishes *Traces of Wood* as a music of friction. As the album progresses, we feel the resistance in a number of planes of movement, not just those of bow on string or stick against membrane.

“Grain Bending #1” is a fascinating piece in which each musician’s instrument is outfitted with a transducer that relays sine waves and other samples into its sounding box, allowing them to “act both as loudspeakers...for external sounds and as independent sound producers,” as Matthias Haensch describes in the liner notes. It moves from periods of violent activity to eerie calm, as the musicians tease out a complex harmony from the bed of sinusoid tones. Perhaps most remarkable is the *melody* that eventually emerges: minimal and unobtrusive, yet surprising in the context of Polwechsel’s output. Moser’s piece maneuvers covertly into a position where this melodic turn can be accepted and integrated into the larger, abstract thrust of the entire work.

“Nia Rain Circuit” also uses technology in a subtle way. As the group performs, snippets of their playing are recorded and then re-injected into the performance on a predetermined schedule. The result makes for engaging and disorienting listening: I often believed I was hearing the musicians playing in real time, only to have the sound source abruptly cut short, revealing that it was a recording and the musicians were in fact focused on another element of the music. Here we feel the friction between technology and performance, between what we anticipate and what we actually get.

The final piece, “S 64° 14" W 65° 37”,” juxtaposes sharp interjections from the musicians against field recordings of a storm Dafeldecker made during a trip to Antarctica. Often, the music serves to interrupt the continuity of the raging blizzard, but at times, the group seeks to supplant the very storm itself. It’s the most aggressive of the four tracks, and perhaps appropriately so, standing in as it could for nothing short of the primitive showdown between man and nature.

In the end, it is far easier to engage this difficult, slippery music in listening than in writing. Even in detailing how it was produced or the history that shored up its making, *Traces of Wood* eludes easy description. The words are always inexact, loosely-fitting. This could be the last type of friction that’s touched upon: that between language and music. Again Barthes, this time from “The Grain of the Voice:” “if one looks at the normal practice of music criticism, it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, this execution is *that*.”

And so I’m left to sit back, hit play once more, to wrestle between *this* and *that*, and try to start again from the beginning.

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POLWECHSEL : Traces of Wood

Hatology 712 / harmonia mundi

Burkhard Beins, Martin Brandlmayr (dr. perc), Werner Dafeldecker (b), Michael Moser (c)

Gegründet in den 1990er Jahren, komplettieren seit einigen Jahren neben den beiden Gründungsmitgliedern, dem Cellisten Michael Moser und dem Kontrabassisten Werner Dafeldecker, die beiden Perkussionisten Burkhard Beins aus Berlin und Martin Brandlmayr aus Wien das Quartett. *Traces Of Wood* ist die dritte CD in dieser Besetzung, diesmal allerdings ohne Gäste. Interferenzen, Reibungen. *Adapt* - gestrichene Beckenklänge treten hinzu. Sachte Steigerung, Kontinuität. Abbruch. Pause. *Oppose*. Einzelne Aktionen der Perkussionisten, sacht, pointiert. *Adapt/Oppose* nennt sich das Stück, das Beins für Polwechsel entworfen hat. Es steht in einer Reihe von Konzepten, in denen er Struktur und Organisation von Musikern untereinander untersucht. Klare Spielanweisungen dienen dazu, innerhalb der Gruppe in ausführlichen Proben gemeinsam ein Werk zu erarbeiten. Brandlmayer arbeitet mit minuziösen Unterschieden von Zuspieldung und Live-Gespieltem, mit Interaktion der Musiker untereinander und mit ihren eigenen Aufnahmen. Dafeldecker konfrontiert die strukturierte Übertragung eines Schneesturms mit frei improvisierten Passagen. Moser schafft mittels kontinuierlicher Entwicklung und Veränderung einen dramaturgischen Bogen mit einer für Polwechsel überraschenden Klimax. Kontinuitäten und Kontraste, Fragen nach Interaktion und Konfrontation, so ließe sich die CD ebenfalls betiteln. Jeder der vier Polwechselmitglieder hat ein Stück hierzu beigetragen. Eigenkompositionen oder Konzepte zu erarbeiten ist Usus bei dieser Formation. Es sind konzise Spielkonzepte, die Notationen und Anweisungen verschieden. Immer aber sind es Kompositionen, die klar für diese Formation formuliert werden. Es sind Spielentwürfe, die die jeweiligen Identitäten der Musiker genauso berücksichtigen wie die klangliche und musikalische Identität der Gruppe selbst. Die Musik der Formation Polwechsel ist charakteristisch - über all die Jahre hinweg. Und dies nicht etwa, weil die Musiker sich auf einmal Gefundenem ausruhten. Sie verfolgen konkrete Fragestellungen. Ihre Positionen sind klar und in steter Entwicklung begriffen. Sacht, nicht radikal. Über all die vielen Jahre ihres Bestehens ist Polwechsel der Gestus der Ruhe geblieben, der Fokus auf Präzision, Genauigkeit und Sensibilität im Spiel - eines jeden Einzelnen wie in der Interaktion als Gruppe. Es ist die Subtilität in der Klanggestaltung, in der Entwicklung eines Klanges oder kleinen Motivs, aber auch die sachte Kontinuität darin, wie die Musiker Prozesse gestalten, die ihre Musik erkennbar und zugleich spannungsreich macht; eine Klarheit in der Struktur, in der Proportionierung von Spiel und Pause, im Innehalten und Weiterstreben. All dies sind - unter anderem - Erfahrungen, die sie in ihrer Phase der sogenannten Reduktion gesammelt und erarbeitet haben. Hinzu gekommen bzw. deutlicher hervorgetreten ist im Lauf der Jahre das Spiel mit traditionellen Gestaltungsmitteln, mit Relationen. Das In-Beziehung-Setzen von tonalen oder harmonischen Bezügen, das Spiel mit rhythmischen Einwürfen, mit Kontrasten und nicht zuletzt auch eine gewisse Expressivität, die impulsiv, drängend spürbar wird, ob in ruhigeren oder dichteren Passagen, die jedoch nie plakativ ausgestellt wird. (pol)

Polwechsel
Traces of Wood
hatOLOGY 712

I still have distinct memories of hearing the first release by Polwechsel when it first came out in 1995. I knew Radu Malfatti's playing from his many sessions as part of the London free improv scene. I was also familiar with Michael Moser, Werner Dafeldecker, and Burkhard Stangl from the group Ton-Art as well as Stangl's participation in groups led by Franz Koglmann. But that first Polwechsel release, along with Stangl's *Loose Music* marked a startling sign-post in changes in listening and sonic interaction; eschewing conversational interplay and gestural activity, instead focusing in on the intersection of a Cagean sense of sound and silence with a collective approach to form and structure. Over the course of two decades and seven releases, the collective ensemble has stuck to this strategy, even as the membership of the group evolved. Probably the biggest shift came in 2005, with the addition of percussionists Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr, who

brought an extended timbral palette along with a more propulsive (though certainly open) sense of trajectory. *Traces of Wood* is the group's first release in four years and brings with it two significant changes. First is the membership of the group, now a quartet with Dafeldecker, Moser, Beins, and Brandlmayr. This intrinsically focusses the sonics with bass and cello accentuating the low-end octaves of strings coupled with the dramatic range of percussion. Secondly, each of the members of the ensemble contribute a compositional form, offering a structural multiplicity to the recording.

First up is Beins' "Adapt/Oppose" which defines an open framework for collective interaction, providing parameters for combinations, trajectories, and order for interplay, but leaving the decisions open for the group. Listening to the way that they navigate these signposts, it is evident that the deep-rooted experience the four have playing together is integral to the arc of the music, as rich timbres and textures flow in mutable layers. Moser's "Grain bending #1" utilizes patterns and abstracted melodic contours to shape the piece, further influenced through the dissemination of pure tones and percussion samples to transducers mounted to the instruments, turning them into both sources and transmitters of sound. The sonic breadth of the quartet becomes orchestral as sections are plied against each other, massed into dense walls and then opened up for more transparency. Again, it is the intrinsic empathy of the members of the group that allows them to navigate the twists and junctures. In groups like Trapist and Radian, Brandlmayr incorporates pulse-based material into open-form pieces so it is natural that refracted pulse is used as an element in "Nia Rain Circuit." Here, recordings of live performances are edited into sampled patterns which are introduced. Mirror reflections of real-time improvisation and processed materials are interleaved, creating a shifting focus of foreground and field as taped fragments disintegrate into the presence of the acoustic instruments, making optimal use of the contrast of the ring of metallic percussion and mallet instruments and the hanging dark string resonances.

The recording finishes off with Dafeldecker's "S 64°14" W 56°37'" which refers to the degrees of longitude and latitude that specify the location in Antarctica where he captured the sound of a blizzard when conducting field recording sessions for the radio piece "The Cold Monolith." Start, duration, dynamics, and density of the instrumental components are derived using chance operations while leaving room for improvisational sections. The quartet seamlessly integrates the field recordings, defined structural parameters, and open interaction as the piece unfolds, fusing the components into a dynamically coalesced whole. This recording shows new facets to this constantly evolving ensemble and it will be intriguing to see where they take things next.

-Michael Rosenstein

<http://dustedmagazine.tumblr.com/post/85032708080/polwechsel-traces-of-wood-hatology>

Polwechsel — Traces of Wood (hatOLOGY 712)

Polwechsel has been around since 1993, and their methodological and instrumental explorations still compel. Centered around the partnership between bassist Werner Dafeldecker and cellist Michael Moser, the group has been justly praised for its explorations of those intersections where idioms — new music, "laminal" sound and latter-day free improvisation — intersect in ways tough to untangle. Tellingly, their early records were released by the Hat Now new music imprint, while the most recent documents have appeared on the more improv-centric Hatology. At any rate, this March 2010 date sports a title that could serve as an aesthetic description of sorts, emphasizing the group's focus on the grain and the warp of music rather than any conventional sense of linearity. It also knowingly implies that this is a music that lives in its "traces," effects, and ephemerality. Now stripped down to a pair of duos, Moser and Dafeldecker, alongside percussionists Burkhard Beins and Martin Brandlmayr — the music is rich and sumptuous, even as it maintains an air of mystery. When Beins' "Adapt/Oppose" unfurls with an encompassing drone, I was brought back immediately to the gorgeous, surprising, resonant sound of their debut.

Yet while there's an aesthetic consistency despite changing instrumentation, the group has changed as well. For example, Beins was long noted for his resistance to actually striking the drums, but here — as the drone dies down — there are small thwacks and clatters from both players. It's a bustling sound that recurs throughout *Traces of Wood*, and seems to nod briefly to the sound of more conventional European free improvisation. But the music, both drifting and organically grounded, moves quickly into other areas via clouds of its own conjuring.

One of the group's most admirable features is its ability to sustain atmospheres of particular luminosity but also imbue them with palpable tensions. When you think they're ready to sink into the

pleasant embrace of a mid-register drone, for example, Beins and Brandlmayr might slash against your comfort zone with high-end bowed cymbals. Or, as either Moser or Dafeldecker ululates, the remainder of the group might shriek, slash and scuttle beneath.

Moser's lengthy "Grain Bending #1." This cut crashes out of the gates, spilling quickly into reserve before seeming to tumble again into fragmentation and noise, a dynamic oscillation that preoccupies most of the pieces until it dissipates somehow, its pitch shifting downward as if pulled by some eldritch gravity. Brandlmayr's episodic "Nia Rain Circuit" is a bit more desultory, seeming not to have any definable affect or atmosphere other than to focus on the sudden evaporation of textual clouds at the downstroke of a drumstick or other declamation. But even when things don't succeed altogether, it's impressive to follow Polwechsel's communication via whine, shimmer, rustle, and thwack.

Dafeldecker's composition closes the disc, a hushed whorl of sound flirting with inaudibility until what could almost be a construction noise upends it towards its conclusion. As the disc fizzles out in a series of small punctuations — a squiggling arco slash, a rimshot, a low churn — you come to the conclusion that this is a group gifted with the ability to generate sound seeming to transcend articulation.

And if at times its transitions seem just a touch mannered, *Traces of Wood* on balance leaves a marvelous, mysterious etching.

Jason Bivins