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November 3rd, 1999

CD Review:
Giustino Di Gregorio
<u>Sprut</u>

According to its categorical placement within Tower Records on Broadway and 4th Street in New York City, <u>Sprut</u> by Italian composer Giustino Di Gregorio falls into the "classical" genre. Upon viewing the enclosed CD booklet, however, a long list of musicians from many genres (alternative rock, 50's/60's blues, jazz, techno, country, country blues, classic rock, etc.) confronts the listener-to-be. Names of artists such as Nirvana, John Denver, Robert Johnson, Charles Mingus, Nine Inch Nails, Mozart, and Wynton Marsalis (over 120 unique listings) are grouped underneath the titles of this CD's three pieces: "Progetto Numero 1", "Progetto Numero 2", and "Progetto Numero 3". Although I did not know what to expect from this musical purchase when I procured it, drawn mostly to the slick cover art and outer advertisement of "new sounds", I began to realize after opening the jewel case that with this release, Di Gregorio was experimenting with avant-garde musique concrete. Moreover, when I read in the liner notes that these compositions were "initiated by the enormous possibilities of modern technology", I was quite sure that Di Gregorio was employing computer music techniques, specifically at least non-linear digital editing. While many computer music techniques may be difficult to detect in a sublty crafted composition, such dependance on samples pointed a sure finger toward hard-disk based editing.

At first listen, my suspicions of an avant-garde musique concrete style were confirmed. Sampling and digital editing is the modus operandi of <u>Sprut</u>, however not the only means by which Di Gregorio affects his sounds through computer based techniques. Resonant filters, digital delays, pitch-shifting, equalization, and other technologically based devices are peppered throughout the entire compact disc, although not as prominently as many other computer based compositions. Such signal processing only

augments Di Gregorio's main skill and compositional tool of digitally splicing samples into a structured piece. But while previous musique concrete artists have taken their samples from mundane and natural sources, such as car horns, door squeaks, water running, or pots clanking, Di Gregorio takes his samples from common musical sources. In a sense, sources like a snippet from Sonic Youth's <u>Dirty</u> CD or a bar of Bo Diddley's famous riff are almost as common and familiar to many listeners as the sounds of nature itself. A parallel may exist, therefore, where Di Gregorio could be viewed as a contemporary musique concrete aritist exploring the mundane sounds of contemporary times.

From the large amounts of samples employed on this recording, one may expect the layering to be rather dense. I was originally intrigued as to how such a diverse accumulation of tonal sound sources could be combined into a cohesive whole. The basic nature of his samples to have different harmonic centers yet strong diatonic groundings assuredly proposed a challenge to Di Gregorio. Such editing of samples always allows for the possibility, such as is found in modern popular "DJ" music, of creating new tonal compositions in which the old tonalities of the samples are reinterpreted around a single tonal center. Di Gregorio eschews such popularistic methods, however, and chooses a very sparse texture in which to showcase his sampling and editing skills. Although he is quoted as having "a frantic and voracious need to throw everything together", rarely does everything actually sound together. Most often through this compact disc, only two samples will play together, one reinterpreting the other. Certainly instances of three of four samples sounding at the same time appear in these pieces, but so do instances in which only one sample is playing. Di Gregorio's juxtapositions, therefore, occur more on a formal level than on a contrapuntal level. In other words, a main technique of his for combining samples from varied sources is that of playing one after another instead of one at the same time as another. Through this method, he does not obscure the samples through polyphony. At almost any moment during this recording, each sample can be

clearly distinguished and possibly identified if the sample is familiar to the listener. Because of this light texture, the listener immediately realizes at least the basic genre from which a sample is derived. I noticed myself having a very direct response to and feeling about the pieces since many of the sounds were from familiar musical sources, unhidden by surrounding samples or signal processing. In this sense, it was hard for me to divorce the associations attached to the original musical sources from Di Gregorio's music.

Another effect of having short samples abutted against each other in time is that of a constantly changing texture. Rarely does one mood or feel have time to assert itself before it is quickly replaced by one dissimilar. Blues licks are followed by bits of random noise which are followed by orchestral excerpts. Such transitions cause a sort of rhythmic discontinuity which can be very jarring. This arhythmic nature seems to be a common characteristic of contermporary music. In this CD, however, the arhythmic sections are foiled by extremely predicatable rhythmic sections, often in the form of a drum loop. These repetitive drum samples seem oddly trite and out of place in such a collage of sounds, acting as intermittent reminders of regularity in otherwise irregular pieces. In a similar way, the tonal samples (which most of Di Gregorio's are) serve to awaken the harmonic parts of the ear while at the same time denying any real harmonic motion or traditional relationships.

The inherent stylistic discontinuity in Sprut results in a demand for the listener's attention. Much in the same way an advertisment on television captures the eye of the viewer, Di Gregorio's music draws one in by having his arrangements stay constant for no more than five or six seconds at a time. In the liner notes of the compact dics, it mentions that Di Gregorio studied and worked with 8mm cinematography before venturing into the realm of music composition. I cannot help but think that the editing skills learned in the former medium helped shaped this "cut and paste" methodology which he applies to his music. Also, the CD booklet mentions that he worked on an "assembly line", a job where big things are compiled from pre-made smaller things. Such life experiences seem to

definitely have translated over to artistic endeavors in this case. Perhaps I could have learned more about the thinkings and/or life experiences behind the work of Di Gregorio, but most of the liner notes (presumably written by the composer himself) are in Italian. I think this compact disc in that sense is also a statement about the pervasiveness of American culture. Over 95% of the artists from which Di Gregorio has sampled are of American descent. Such a composition as Di Gregorio's is thus a testament, much in the way English in an international common ground tongue, to the common language of American popular culture.

The original methods by which Di Gregorio composes dictate the development of an original compositional structure. In this compact disc, he has "developed a very original style" that derives its orgininality not only from his sampling and editing techniques but from the formalistic ways in which he combines these sounds. To focus each movement of his three pieces, Di Gregorio chooses a few specific samples which serve as motives or themes for the movement. The samples appear and reappear throughout the movement in order to act as reference points for the listener. The lenght of the movements is often so short (one minute to two and a half minutes) that Di Gregorio sets up simple forms such as AB or ABAB within each piece. Usually one sample, a guitar line or drum sample, grounds each section. One of his compositional strengths, however, is that even though samples and sections seem to reappear throughout his music, never will it be a literal repetition. As mentioned previously, the texture is constantly changing. If a saxophone solo was used earlier in a movement, it will return with a different accompaniment, such as a bass line or percussive counterpoint. Also, while Di Gregorio sometimes shifts quickly and dramatically from one section to another, most of his musical changes happen quite smoothly. At least one musical sound will carry over from one part of a movement to the next, creating a subtle way of moving between such different sounds. The transitions between sounds in this music are thus as important as the sounds themselves.

The liner notes for the compact disc also mention Di Gregorio's penchant for the idea of "deconstruction-reconstruction-superimposition". Such a heady and wordy art theory can actually be broken down into easily recognizable parts within his music. "Deconstruction" occurs when Di Gregorio takes a small sample from a famous artist. Whereas many sample artists perhaps prefer to take unrecognizable passages from unknown works, the samples used by Di Gregorio were often very familiar. In many instances I could recognize the exact part of the original song from which the sample derived. Because of this familiarity, I viewed this "deconstruction" process as sort of a distillation. The most characteristic passages of a genre were taken to represent and imply exactly the sound sources from which they came. The "reconstruction" and "superimposition" factors of his music were, in my mind, more closely related. "Reconstruction" would certainly occur when Di Gregorio would apply signal processing to his sounds, but since such minimal signal processing is used throughout this recording, some other process must represent "reconstruction". Since the main techniques of composition in these works were the juxtaposition of samples in time (to create form) and the juxtaposition of samples in frequency/harmony (to create counterpoint), I would view the "reconstructive" process to be the former method and the "superimposition" process to be the latter method. In other words, when Di Gregorio creates the form for two and a half minutes of sound through a guitar loop followed by a drum pattern, he is "reconstructing". Whereas, when Di Gregorio creates a new soundscape and texture by overlaying a saxophone solo on top of a rock band, he is "superimposing......

"plagarism" and schizophrenia/"schizophonia"

conclusion