

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

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Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present “musicians in their own words”.



Christian Fennesz

**Austrian guitarist and computer/electronics player
(December 25, 1962–)**

Fennesz on Early Influences

Pitchfork: Some people, including me, hear something in your work distantly related to My Bloody Valentine...

Fennesz: I've always loved their records. Same with Sonic Youth. I was really a big fan of *Loveless*. At [the time it came out], I made music that was not too far away from [what they were doing], but we were stuck in Austria. There was no way to get attention from the outside world. Maybe it's a generational thing. My Bloody Valentine was also using guitars and samplers, and they were fascinated by the power of a good pop song. Sonic Youth and MBV were definitely big influences for me.

Fennesz Interview by Mark Richardson, March, 2002 for Pitchfork.

Fennesz on Melody

Pitchfork: The overall tone on your albums is quite variable. For example, *Plus Forty Seven Degrees 56' 37" Minus Sixteen Degrees 51' 08"* is more harsh and abrasive than *Endless Summer*. How did your goals differ with each record? Assuming the shift to a more melodic sound was intentional, what precipitated this change in your music?

Fennesz: I hate the idea of repeating myself. I need new perspectives and challenges for each project, and I'm very happy that many people are able to follow me without any problem. That's really great. When I started to work on *Endless Summer*, being "melodic" seemed to be the bigger challenge. In the end, it was more interesting for me.

Fennesz on Mixing Noise and Melody

Pitchfork: I enjoy this collision of noise and melody in your music. Some of the tracks on *Endless Summer* push the melody quite far into the foreground (I'm thinking specifically of the title track and "Caecilia"), but even these retain an undercurrent of distortion. I know you've expressed admiration for the songs and arrangements of Brian Wilson, whose music seems much more "pure" in the sense of being traditionally beautiful. Could you see yourself ever making music as "clean" and directly melodic as something like the Beach Boys? What is it about the noise mixed with melody that intrigues you?

Fennesz: I don't know if I could do this... technically, maybe, but would it have the same power and magic? No, I don't think it would. But I wouldn't want to do it anyway. Why should I? Brian Wilson and many others did it already. I come from a different generation. For me, noise is not something I use to shock, or because it's funny, or weird, or whatever. I use it because I find it beautiful. For me, there is a strong hypnotic power in noise music, and that's something I don't want to leave out of my music anymore.

Fennesz on Boring Laptop Live Performances

Pitchfork: I've always had mixed feelings about performances with laptops. On the one hand, it's often an opportunity to hear some interesting music very loudly in a public space. On the other, sometimes it can feel awkward staring at a guy onstage as he operates a computer.

Fennesz: It's true that laptop performances can be boring for the audience. The problem is, the organizers of events are still putting us on the classic "rock stage," instead of trying to find new ways to present the music. It's not our job to do this, I don't think.

Fennesz Interview by Mark Richardson, March, 2002 for Pitchfork.

Fennesz on Laptop Improvisation

Pitchfork: How much improvisation is possible with laptop performance? Are new sounds created on the fly, or is it just processing of existing sound files? Do you play guitar in performance?

Fennesz: In my case, I am improvising with existing sound files. I use an MSP patch that a friend of mine made, and you have to improvise when you use this patch. I don't use a guitar in performance anymore, but I'm thinking about doing it again.

Fennesz on Real and Modeled Instruments

Fischer: The album [Black Sea] includes Guitars and Synthesizers. What were the criteria for deciding which instrument to use for a particular part? Or was this much more of an intuitive process?

Fennesz: It's always an intuitive process. Once I have the basic recordings in the computer, I start playing around with them and then anything can happen. I've been using physical modeling synthesis a lot on this album. I tried to blend the "modeled" instruments with the real acoustic instruments. I was trying to do the same with the room ambience.

Fennesz on Having Something to Say

Davenport: Can you describe the creative process on this album [Black Sea]? Was it difficult as opposed to Venice or the collaborations you've done in the years between?

Fennesz: Um, yes it was kind of difficult. For me it's like that. I really have to have something that I can stand for. If I feel I have nothing to say, then I don't want to release anything. I've been writing music for the four or five years since the last solo album, but nothing seemed to be strong enough. Expectations are getting higher and higher, of course, and especially because there's such a gap in between the records. So it's not easy. At a certain point, you just can't think about that anymore though. Then I just went for it. The last three months of recording, I had the impression this could work as some kind of statement at least. The process is like that. I work on and off for years, and I throw away things that I'm not happy with; I start again, and then in the last two or three months I actually do it.

Fennesz on Equipment

Davenport: You mentioned working with patches. What other kinds of equipment are you using now, and are you using guitar pedals in conjunction with the patches?

Fennesz: Actually, I use everything. I don't have just one way for guitar recordings. It's always different. I use Max MSP, Reactor, and also Guitar Rig. I also use classic Fender and Vox amps. I use lots of old pedals. I have many distortion pedals that I love to use, many older Boss pedals and harmonizer things. It's a mixture of analog and digital, which I like. I'm glad to be able to work in a nice recording studio that is owned by a friend of mine. That means I can use all of his great microphones. Basically anything that's available as far as software and classic guitar pedals.

Fennesz Interview by Joe Davenport, 2009, for Tiny Mix Tapes.

Fennesz on the Siemens Telefunken box

Davenport: When we were talking a moment ago about the pedals you use, I wanted to bring up the Siemens Telefunken box that you've been using.

Fennesz: You mean the distortion box? The custom made box? That's a very weird story actually! A couple of years ago... no, it must have been five or six years ago already, a guy from Germany drove down to Austria and came by our studio. I didn't know him and he introduced himself and said he had been building this box for me. I was really surprised, so I checked it out and it just sounded amazing. He called it the Master Distortion. It's really incredible. I think he built three or four of them; one for John McEntire (of Tortoise/Sea and Cake/Gastr Del Sol), one for Kraftwerk, and one for me. So I was really lucky to get that thing. It came completely out of nowhere, and it was completely unexpected. I've been using it ever since, and it's a fantastic box. It is built from old Siemens Telefunken transistors from the '60s and '70s.

Fennesz Interview by Joe Davenport, 2009, for Tiny Mix Tapes.

Fennesz on the Experimental vs Pop Music

Davenport: Would you say that your work comes at experimental music from a pop perspective?

Fennesz: Maybe the other way around, but you might be right. I don't really know. I like to explore new terrain. At the same time, I'm always fascinated by pop music, but not as it stands now. I'm more interested in what's behind it. It's some kind of meta-reality that just gives. There's some magic in good pop music. I try to capture this kind of magic and find it in my own self. What I do is experimental, but there are memories of pop songs in it.

Fennesz Interview by Joe Davenport, 2009, for Tiny Mix Tapes.

Fennesz on Collaborations

English: Collaboration serves more than just a technical interest for Fennesz though. Like many electronic musicians, there's a social aspect that is central to the ways in which collaborations unfold.

Fennesz: “It’s tough, I live in this studio sometimes – I’m in here day after day, week after week, and it’s as though I have no social life anymore. So for me the process of collaboration is really a pleasure – it’s a chance to meet and work with people. I think as well as that I am a player, I love to play music and to do that there’s something about playing with other people that’s really enjoyable. I have to keep this player alive, it’s important for me to communicate by improvising with other people, that just gives me such energy. I think working with people in a completely different field is a great process, it pushes you into areas you otherwise might not explore. You can learn so much and I think it’s always difficult to explain to journalists about this thing of playing with someone like Ryuichi or Keith Rowe, but for us, the musicians, it’s totally natural – it makes sense and we enjoy doing it, even if we play completely different music, we feel connected and we want to work together and learn from each other.”

Fennesz Interview by Lawrence English, 2009.

Fennesz on Acoustics and Electronics

Pitchfork: So much of music that you do, it might exist in a purely electronic realm if it's on a computer and it's being processed and routed through outboard gear. But guitar, it's actually strings vibrating in the air. Is that connection important?

Fennesz: Absolutely, and more and more so. Also to experiment with microphones in the room. Even if I'd record an electronic sound, you know, with a microphone in the room, it really makes a big difference. It's something that starts fascinating me. I try to maybe go on this direction a little bit more.

Fennesz Interview by Mark Richardson, 2009 for Pitchfork.

Fennesz on Live Performances

Savy: Yesterday you played the guitar part of the first song 'Liminal' and, as you say, it is a narrative track but the live version, in a way, felt much more inhabited.

Fennesz: It's a different style what I play live. It's much more expansive. The record version it's almost impossible to play live. I would have to play it as it is, so I might as well play the record. So I try to find ways to recreate my stuff in a live context. But it's a different mix, it sounds different of course. There are some pads I play as well but on the records everything is mixed down so carefully that it's always different live.

Fennesz Interview by Pascal Savy, 2011.

Fennesz on Improvisation and Composition

Savy: The second track 'July' on 'Seven Stars' sounds much more 'composed' compared to the rest of the EP or more generally your music.

Fennesz: Yes it is very composed and sometimes I really like to work like that. It's funny because it sounds very composed but I did it in one day. Actually I played guitar, I recorded that and then I started working on it and re-composing it like an abstract painting, cutting things out and pasting them elsewhere. Sometimes my tracks are really based on improvisations I do in the studio. That means I play in the studio just like the way I play live but I record everything. I find something interesting and then I start composing but the emotional aspect is already in the recording. And when I mix I can really fall into it so, for me, the mix can be a very emotional process as well. It's funny because sometimes I can't even remember how I mixed things. For me the mixing is almost part of the composition.

Fennesz Interview by Pascal Savy, 2011.