

A Lengthwise Slash

David Grubbs, 2011

I first met Arnold Dreyblatt in 1996 when he came to Chicago at Jim O'Rourke's urging. At the time Jim and I were the two core members of the group Gastr del Sol, and we also co-directed the Dexter's Cigar reissue label for Drag City. The basic idea of Dexter's Cigar was that there were any number of out-of-print, underappreciated recordings that, if heard, would put contemporary practitioners to shame. Just try to stack your solo free-improv guitar playing versus Derek Bailey's Aida. Think your power electronics group is hot? Care to take a listen to Merzbow's Rainbow Electronics 2? Do you fancy a shotgun marriage of critical theory and ramshackle d.i.y. pop? But you've never heard the Red Krayola and Art and Language's Corrected Slogans?

Gastr del Sol work time was as often as not spent sharing new discoveries and musical passions. Jim and I both flipped to Dreyblatt's 1995 Animal Magnetism (Tzadik; which Jim nicely described "as if the Dirty Dozen Brass Band got a hold of some of Arnold's records and decided to give it a go") as well as his ingenious 1982 album Nodal Excitation (India Navigation), with its menagerie of adapted and homemade instruments (midget upright pianoforte, portable pipe organ, double bass strung with steel wire, and so on). We knew upon a first listen that we were obliged to reissue Nodal Excitation.

The next time that Arnold blew through town, we had him headline a Dexter's Cigar show at the rock club Lounge Ax. In Alec Bemis's recent interview with Arnold... their discussion at one point turns to a comparison of the distinct contexts of contemporary composition and, for lack of a better term, non-academic music. The fact that Arnold effortlessly traversed these worlds immediately made him a sympathetic figure—much like our mutual ally Tony Conrad, who made a similar splash in Chicago by simply taking it to the stage.

For the Lounge Ax show, Arnold restrung a double bass with piano strings, quickly taught guitarist Kevin Drumm and myself a technique for attacking an open string with a lengthwise slash of the pick, and rounded out the ensemble by giving instructions to Maureen Loughnane on violin and Jim O'Rourke on snare drum. (Part of this performance appears as the track "Point Source" in the Table of the Elements label's "Lanthanides" series of one-sided LPs.) I remember the piece as one long ecstatic hurtle forward, a continuous threat to jump the rails. I remember folks hollering upon its sudden, shattering conclusion.

Two points should be made. The first is that if Arnold Dreyblatt's music resonates beyond the sphere of contemporary composition, this has to do in part with his willingness to work in all variety of situations with all variety of ensembles. The difference between the ragtag pickup band that night at Lounge Ax and the Crash Ensemble and their realization of Resonant Relations could hardly be greater, and yet Arnold's unique sound world glimmers with both ensembles.

The second point is that contemporary composition—at least the kind that pricks my ears—finds itself increasingly coterminous with a wide variety of approaches to music-making. Arnold Dreyblatt's music has always invited its listeners to get to know it through multiple, varied pleasures. As disciplinary turf wars matter less and less, the excellence of music such as Arnold's has never seemed more obvious.

