

TENDER MUSIC: liner notes

"The record is going to be interpreted, rather than identified. That's the problem with critics and everybody. They think they have to interpret what's going on- all they have to do is see it. But they have to put a lot of baggage aside to see."

-Ed Moses, from *The Cool School* (Arthouse Films: 2008), directed by Morgan Neville

Ed Moses was a visual artist who belonged to the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles during the late 1950s, and was part of a group of artists known as the "Cool School," which included Edward Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, John Alton, and Wallace Berman, among others. This group helped transform art in the second half of the 20th century. Ed Moses passed away at the age of 91 on January 17th, 2018 as I was writing these liner notes and already using the quote above to introduce them; an odd and sad coincidence. For me, his statement sums up the problematic importance of the art and/or music critic- they're the ones who tend to leave the record, but they often interpret the "facts" of an artist or musician's activity (any creative activity) instead of identifying them.

When I was asked by Konstantin Drobil to write liner notes for *Tender Music*, the first duo album by Elisabeth Harnik and Joëlle Léandre, who have been playing together in this format since 2016 (the recording comes from their third performance together), I wanted to figure out how to submit something that wasn't based too strongly on my working relationship and friendship with Elisabeth. Also, I felt that celebrating the duo's music in a promotional way was merely obvious and would do nothing to convince a person unfamiliar with either Elisabeth or Joëlle's years of work to buy the recording- if you're reading these words you already own a copy of *Tender Music*. And I'm left, once again, to consider Ed Moses' point- to identify as opposed to interpret.

Why is this duo's music important in the face of so much other music being released and made available, through so many different formats at this point in time? The six pieces included on this album range, for the most part, between 5 and 10 minutes in length, entitled "Ear Area" I to VI, and completely improvised. The instrumentation is restricted to piano/prepared piano (Elisabeth), and acoustic bass and voice (Joëlle), but this does not mean that the music is in any way limited. As Elisabeth said when she wrote to me about the project:

"Piano and bass do have a strong 'history' together (in classical music, in contemporary music, in improvised music...) on which we can rely musically. At the same time we take new risks and surprise each other in order to formulate new relations between our instruments. It's this interplay between 'listening' and 'demanding' that fascinates me in a duo setting. Having a strong counterpart has such an inspiring and encouraging effect on the music and I am very thankful for these moments!"

The musicians break open limitations and preconceptions by moving effortlessly through the various musical histories Elisabeth describes above, overlapping them, combining them, colliding them; and then doing the same with their own unique personal creative histories- applying techniques and melodic/textural territories that are distinctly their own, developed in other ensembles and fields of endeavor, and brought together through the parallel lines of expression in this duo. The longest and final piece feels like an epitaph to those histories, piano chords and voice disappearing into the air.

The importance of the music of Elisabeth Harnik and Joëlle Léandre, both in tandem and in other circumstances, also has further resonance and significance in a broader social context. Consider the amount of time they have worked relentlessly in the often male dominated fields of jazz and new, experimental, and improvised music. As we close in on the second decade of the 21st century, it is still clear that we are living in a far from equitable world. To face that discrepancy as an artist for decade after decade, often under the gaze of outright hostility, is something that needs to be identified. Elisabeth expresses this fact much better than I ever could:

"I have known and respected Joëlle's work since I was in my middle 20s. I was very lucky to have met musicians of her generation, and one generation before, personally in the 1990s. I can say that I found my intrinsic approach to the instrument with free improvisation through her in that time period! Performing with Joëlle in a duo format, creating music with her and having the possibility to get access to her musical knowledge- also this energy, this power, this rage, this directness, this passion... that was involved in creative music from the start! -and her experience as a musician on the road for more than 40 years, is a great honor and challenge and bliss for me."

I can't ask more of a musician, a visual artist, a writer, a filmmaker, a choreographer, a dramaturge, a photographer, an architect, a designer, of an artist, than to contribute creatively and with generous passion despite ongoing adversity. Without question, with this album and with their careers, Elisabeth Harnik and Joëlle Léandre have done so. One of the definitions of the word "tender" is "humane." Is there a better way to identify and celebrate their work, the gift of it to all of us, than to call it humane music?

-Ken Vandermark, Chicago, January 21, 2018