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IST: Ghost Notes (Bruce's Fingers: BF28)

Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello), Simon H Fell (bass)

The Improvising String Trio's third album has at least one thing in its favour before the wrapper's even off: the CD format. Their music is extremely detailed, and previous releases on LP and cassette have captured only a percentage of what they do. Here, at last, is a full-blooded recording of their very full-blooded music.

This set combines the for which the trio are known with performances of specially-written compositions. These latter have been in their live repertoire for some time now, and it's good to hear them committed to disk at last. They are all "compositions for improvisers", and sceptics about that genre are invited to start here; while IST never sound like anything but IST, these compositions provide just enough material to give each piece a certain identity.

Regular visitors to Musings will be aware of Simon H Fell's apparent inability to produce anything less than top-quality music these days, and his two contributions here are thoughtful, well-played vehicles for improvisation which are no longer even in the same hemisphere as the themes-and-solos model. Meanwhile, Phil Durrant continues his rather ascetic exploration of sine tones, noise and glitches with a new version of Sowari. This writer played in an ensemble version of this piece during a workshop run by Durrant once, and while his explanation of the concept sounded slim the results were rather pleasant. In the hands of IST, "Sowari" sounds like a weird fusion of free improv and electronica. Fascinating stuff.

Elsewhere, Wastell contributes a piece focussing solely on percussive sounds, which again works in spite of how you imagine it's going to sound. Stace Constantinou's "Empedocles" unites the two extremes of post-serial modernism -- stochasticism and aleatorics -- to create something which this listener has already fallen in love with, while Guto Puw's "X-Ist" is a mainly graphic score which inspires some beautiful playing from all three performers. Listening to this piece, one is particularly aware that, despite the strong avant garde heritage in this group, they rarely play extremely abrasive music for long. While many free improv groups saw away at their instruments striving to be "difficult", IST seem to be genuinely trying to make their extremely intricate music communicate as clearly as possible. The last composition is Bergstom-Nielsen's "Fire Music", a score which fits on the back of a matchbox but yields two and a half minutes of arresting music and could have provided quite a bit more.

The completely "free" improvisations are all spontaneous, sparky affairs full of fluid movements and plenty of crosstalk between these regular collaborators. Fell has been an important figure in British free jazz/experimental music for a while now, and Davies and Wastell look to be inexorably rising to meet him. The trio they form is unique and uncompromising; this is both their most accomplished and their most accessible recording to date.

Richard Cochrane