

Spanner. Experimental Improvisational Duo. (Rob Power, percussion; Paul Bendzsa, woodwinds, ARP 2600 electronic synthesizer, effects, vocals, prepared piano). (71:08). All 16 tracks composed by Paul Bendzsa, woodwinds, prepared piano and electronics, and Rob Power, percussion. *Carnivore* (4:20); *Shmeagul* (2:48); *Mr. Mumbles* (5:53); *After the Rain* (4:26); *Rat Race*(3:09); *Nervous Breakdown* (5:24); *Ascension* (7:36); *Carousel* (1:44); *Tango* (2:13); *Jive* (3:50); *Belly Dancer* (4:13); *Alone Together* (7:56); *Going Somewhere* (3:51); *Oasis* (3:21); *Insomnia* (4:36); *Wave* (5:48). (SOCAN)

Spanner is a duo consisting of Paul Bendzsa and Rob Power, two longtime members of the St. John's musical community. Each performer brings to this recording a broad sonic palette, as they both draw from accumulated experiences in a very wide variety of idioms and ensembles. Within the improvisational pieces on the CD, listeners may note some of the many musical styles that influence the decisions the players make throughout their sonic journeys. Each performer is an accomplished musician in his own right, and together the variety of sounds that they are able to achieve in this recording is a testament to the depth of their combined experience and the quality of the production. Both players are professors at the School of Music at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

This CD release from Spanner--the duo's first--is an eclectic sonic journey into the worlds created by Bendzsa and Power in every piece. The pieces offer a variety of interactions, or musical dialogues, that vary from cooperative like-minded interaction and co-existence, to purposefully dissonant, argumentative, contrary, and divergent musical gestures. Each performer displays a deep understanding of the other's intentions, and a great degree of sensitivity is demonstrated as the musicians interact throughout the recording.

A helpful introduction is printed in the CD leaflet: "Spanner is an improvisational duo whose original compositions are shaped and refined from their experiments, explorations and performances. There are no stylistic boundaries: creative energy develops from within the players, as their hands, breath and ears guide them through endless musical choices and instrumental timbres." This explanation is a useful and welcome preparation for the journey the listener is about to take.

Being a musician who has some experience performing in improvisational settings that are idiomatic (based on structures or norms in styles such as Jazz, Popular Music, and certain ethnic improvisatory styles) as well as non-idiomatic (free form improvisatory settings), I might have a different point of view than a listener who has not been--or chooses not to be--exposed to the types of musical situations presented on this recording.

To further elaborate, it should be noted that this recording may not be received as "easy-listening" by those uninitiated in the culture of improvisatory music. I believe the players successfully present a valuable record of their interactions as a sum of their collective musical experiences. Though a number of the pieces have obvious influences from popular or recognizable styles, during other pieces it may be possible at times for listeners who are not used to

improvisational media to become frustrated or confused while trying to find a simple repeating rhythmic, harmonic, or melodic motive to grasp. However, for those in tune with the world of improvisatory explorations, such as the type that are presented in this recording, the result of Spanner's effort will be appreciated as a smorgasbord of aural experimentation that is a worthy addition to the collection of Canadian recordings.

The CD cover art and layout are well presented and appealing. Included in the cover and jacket are interesting photos of the duo, a piano with a statue or stuffed Cobra snake sitting on top, and an artful presentation of Rob Power's elaborate microphone: a quarter-toned instrument created by the performer from what seems to be tuned pieces of a mirror.

Produced by Bill Brennan and brilliantly recorded, mixed and mastered by John D.S. Adams, everyone involved in this venture helped to create a stirring and striking end product. The recording engineer, who had his work cut out for him, did an amazing job of capturing the many different sound colors and textures created by the performers on their various instruments. I was informed by Rob Power that Brennan and Adams were both of great assistance, "providing advice and reassurance during the production since they both perform the same style of music. Bill and John...[provided] objective ears and the technical knowledge that let us experiment freely in a recording situation."

Whether or not the titles and musical ideas were conceived before they were performed on the recording, or simply

labeled afterward, there are delightful and obvious examples of word painting heard in pieces such as *Mr. Mumbles*, *After the Rain*, *Jive*, *Belly Dancer*, *Oasis*, and *Wave*. In each of these pieces, it is made clear how the title relates to the musical exploration: there are mumbled vocal effects and intermittent incomprehensible radio interjections during *Mr. Mumbles*, post rain-shower sonic images in *After the Rain*, ever-present stylistic quotation of subtle jazz/swing rhythms in the percussion part for *Jive*, Eastern/Persian/Arabic stylistic traits in *Belly Dancer* and *Oasis*, and a gradual rise, crest, and fall in the final piece, *Wave*. Descriptive musical gestures that relate to their titles exist and are used in a number of other pieces, as well. At times, the title associations can be somewhat elusive to the listener in a few of the other pieces, but surely they carry significance for the performers and others that are aware of the aural image that is associated to each piece. There also seems to be a great flow from one piece to the next, following an alternating sequence between high energy or fast paced pieces and slower meditations.

Power and Bendsza performed together as a duo for 4 years prior to this release, and one can't help but appreciate the level of communication and listening between the two players throughout the recording. I was able to contact Rob Power, and he told me that "some pieces have a game plan, while others are completely improvised. We play together weekly to develop a musical trust, and we rely on this intuition in performance. For the CD, much of what we created was dictated by whatever instruments we chose to bring to the

studio. For example, the ARP 2600 (Paul's analog synthesizer) has a prominent voice on the CD, yet we had never used it together before that recording session. Some pieces also involved overdubbing, and thus became compositions in the studio that had more forethought. Those tunes include *Shmeagul*, *Rat Race*, *Belly Dancer*, and *Insomnia*.”

Approaching this recording with open ears, listeners may be transported by the constantly evolving sounds to unexpected and exciting places. Listening audiences will appreciate how the sonorities and explorations evolve and occur sometimes as anticipated or choreographed denouement of a phrase, and frequently as adventures into uncharted sonic landscapes created by Spanner. The end product keeps listeners on their toes, making it a pleasantly challenging and often enriching experience to allow oneself to objectively enjoy the creative energy and sounds presented in this recording.

Devon Fornelli
Brock University