

The Wire
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Eliane Radigue/Charles Curtis
Paris Galerie Xippas (March 26, 2006)
France
by Dan Warburton

Those familiar with Eliane Radigue's exquisitely woven tapestries of ARP synthesis might wonder what a full-length piece for solo cello by the composer might sound like, but those present -- specially invited by Shiiin Records' Stéphane Roux -- in the austere surroundings of the Galerie Xippas, in the Parisian Marais district (barely a stone's throw away from the Musée Picasso) will confirm that the European premiere of Naldjorlak was nothing short of a triumph. The work was specially conceived -- not written, because there is no notated score as such -- for cellist Charles Curtis. He is in every sense the perfect dedicatee: not only because of his experience in performing long duration drone works by the likes of Terry Jennings and La Monte Young (he's just finished recording Young's seminal 1958 Trio for Strings), but because he's a performer of quite extraordinary sensitivity as well as technical ability. The "composition" of Naldjorlak consisted of numerous lengthy meetings between Curtis and Radigue, who handpicked a number of the cellist's personal techniques and invited him to develop them into an hour-long work.

In keeping with the composer's concern for the nuances of a sustained individual pitch -- when it comes to Radigue's music, "drone" is far too simple a word for it -- Curtis decided to tune not only the strings of his cello, but also the tailpiece, spike and tailpiece wire to the essential frequency of the cello's resonating cavity, the so-called "wolf tone". The wolf tone itself is, as Curtis notes, "to some degree tuneable, it slides up and down a bit in response to greater and lesser overall string tension". Naldjorlak, at least as Curtis has conceived it, resembles Radigue's two most recently composed pieces, L'Ile Re-Sonante and Elemental II, in that it falls into sections of roughly ten minutes duration, moving from the strings themselves to the tailpiece, the spike and ultimately the tailpiece wire. This final section, a sudden migration to two extremely high pitches barely a quartertone apart (Sachiko M would be proud), was a total epiphany; the ear, after nearly an hour of overtone-rich, low register velvet drone, is suddenly blown wide open. Birds singing outside the window and the roar of a passing aeroplane became almost holy experiences.

The venue, a long gallery space some 20 metres long and barely five metres wide was perfect for the work, and Curtis took full advantage of it, gently shaking the instrument to play the wolf tone against the natural resonant frequencies of the room. The result: pure Radigue, a deceptively simple but extraordinarily beautiful exploration of the natural behaviour of sound.