

*Urgent* (trente oiseaux) with Zeitkratzer's Reinhold Friedl agitating the interior of a piano and Bernhard Günter bowing a plugged-in cello-guitar hybrid called a celloitar. The result was nervy and expressionistic, a series of sharply defined yet vaguely harrowing soundscapes. There Vorfeld was credited with homemade stringed instruments as well as percussion. On *Snake's Eye* both men apparently play just percussion, but the outcome is comparably strung-out, taut and twitchy. Regular rhythmic figures have largely – not entirely – been displaced by pulsation at the molecular level, generated by various kinds of rubbing and bowing or by constructive interference between the improvisors. Cymbals shimmer, screech and radiate. Drums, removed from idiomatic use as time-keepers, revert to their bottom nature as resonant bodies with broad expressive potential. Not the brawny tussle the cover suggests but a frictional, hands-on music that resonates with imagination.

Julian Cowley

## Walter & Sabrina

### *Jung Ahh Fleisch*

Danny Dark CD

## Walter & Sabrina/Dietrich Eichmann Ensemble

### *Demons!*

Danny Dark CD

A picture of a beautiful, semi-clad woman on the cover of an album of 'experimental' music always implies a critique. The strictures of the underground would forbid a straightforward celebration of unselfconscious heterosexuality and *Jung Ahh Fleisch*, the latest album from the UK art/pop duo of Walter & Sabrina, is yet another self-flagellating conceptual sphinx that would pretend to trade a scalpel to the male psyche and its controlling gaze for permission to masturbate.

Walter & Sabrina, the duo of Walter Cardew – son of composer/improviser Cornelius Cardew – and artist Stephen Moore, parade a series of prole hijackings of operatic settings that combine the barbarous high art strategies of the Art Bears and associated Rock In Opposition cells with an improvised music aesthetic and various tried and tested avant garde approaches. The lyrics combine

embarrassingly arch pornographic scenarios with fantasies of sexual violence and clumsy exegetical art techniques inherited from the most tongue tied 20th century manifestoes. As they boast themselves, it's all about opening up "ways into our art" – thanks guys!

"*Will ejaculate?/I'm scared of dying*" they stammer, with all of the sophistication of *Viz* does Beckett. Throughout the liners (the sloppy, confused nature of the project means that it inevitably requires explanatory text) they insist that the whole experience is supposed to be vulnerable and challenging but instead it comes across as predictable and dull, a tedious lecture in an empty art gallery. And it's all rendered with a smug sense of irony, specifically installed as a get-out clause for any 'meaning' you might proscribe to them. "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" is surely their favourite modern art moment.

The female characters in the lyrics move from displays of male-sanctioned sexuality through to murderous scenarios as quickly as a marijuana user progresses to smack in the columns of a tabloid newspaper, a liberal/intellectual twist on the 'she was asking for it' crap, this time legitimized by tortuously convoluted lyrics and a leery on again/off again self-loathing stance.

On *Demons*, a second disc that amplifies the input of the otherwise dazzling pianist Dietrich Eichmann and his ensemble, they sound even more like Whitehouse, one of their most obvious conceptual models, with barked Cockney vocals over a serrated electroacoustic carve-up that furthers the simplistic moral tautology of the first disc while missing the point of Whitehouse's sophisticated tactics of implication and seduction completely. A testament to the separation – or the alienation, as I'm sure they'd prefer – of the white male's dick from the white male's brain, both releases function as a particularly aggravated form of art music made specifically to be applauded by people who make art music. But the kind of subject matter that the duo deal in has to go wild in order to fulfill its basic remit and with this kind of dense, awkwardly selfconscious style of presentation no one outside of a closed circle of experimental music fetishists – all of whom are more than au-fait with the

tedious ideas advanced – could possibly be attracted to it. It's the sound of one hand clapping – or should that be wanking?

David Keenan

## Iannis Xenakis

### *Kraanerg*

Mode CD+DVD

*Kraanerg* stands as the longest stretch of non-stop music Xenakis ever composed, and has historically been his most problematic piece. The backstory is that Xenakis was approached to create a ballet score for the inauguration of Ottawa's National Arts Centre in 1969. Despite a new university post and work on another commission, Xenakis accepted the challenge to produce a 75 minute score in six months. The director of the first production infuriated him by slamming an interval in the middle of his fastidious architecture; most contemporary critics agreed that the music was superb, but regretted the stilted staging.

All these decades later a paradox hangs awkwardly: despite Xenakis designing *Kraanerg* specifically as a dramatic stage work, the music never quite touches on the levels of innate drama he achieved in 'pure' orchestral and instrumental works like *Pithoprakta* and *Eonta*. Those pieces pursue a particular technical consideration to its logical end game, but without its stage action *Kraanerg*'s episodic structure and frank re-application of techniques from earlier works feels unwieldy.

But the fantastical sound world *Kraanerg* evokes is irresistible. The ballet has been recorded previously, but this 2006 version performed by the Callithumpian Consort conducted by Stephen Drury is definitive. The National Arts Centre were keen to show off their sophisticated sound system, and Xenakis extrapolated a tape part from treatments of the ballet's instrumental parts for the original performance. The overlap between instruments and electronics is one of *Kraanerg*'s more intriguing aspects, as electronics push towards a refined, alienated mode of expression. Remastered tapes reveal hitherto shrouded high-register brightnesses and sonorous low-end depths; an audio DVD version realised at the same time has surround sound as Xenakis intended it.

Philip Clark