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Symphony in Beef Major

Hermann Nitsch
Island
organ of corti

BY KYLE GANN

Here are the pictures: The gory carcass of a cow sags from two iron hooks. A blindfolded man strapped to a cross is being nestled into the carcass's chest cavity, his white robe soaked with bovine blood. Other men lie across him, held in place by ropes, as butchers huddle around the defunct cow. Meanwhile, musicians in hats blare mournful drones on trumpets and trombones, blating out fearful noises more raucous than a Midtown traffic jam. If Hieronymus Bosch had been raised on Tibetan ritual, he couldn't have come up with a more disturbing soundtrack for hell.

works, is part of a six-day-long play called the *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk* reminiscent of the grand *Mysterium* in the Himalayas that Scriabin never lived to complete. The entire work employs 180 musicians and 100 actors following a 1600-page score. Ten thousand meters of canvas are employed for action painting, 5000 torches light the nighttime parades. Three bulls are slaughtered during the proceedings, along with various sheep and pigs, but—lest animal-rights advocates have a cow—only animals that were slated to be killed for food anyway, and all by certified butchers. (You can find these statistics and more at Nitsch's Web page for the production, www.Nitsch.org.) The slaughter is intended to expose the butchery that our society hypocritically keeps hidden.

Naturally, the discs give only one dimension of this overwhelming melee, but they do offer several hours of the most intense cacophony I've ever heard on disc—and I'm in the cacophony business. Often, as at the beginning and end, massive dissonance grows out of and finally returns to the simplest of consonances, swelling to produce throbbing beats, David First-style. Band three on disc one features a detuned piano (or perhaps it's only out of tune relative to the brass behind it) that continues to play its fractured yet purposeful-sounding gestures through the slowly writhing drone textures that surround it. String instruments scribble furiously, and improvisation seems to figure largely; no way could all these dense tone-thickets be notated in detail.

Periodically the webs of sound are interrupted by the frightening blare of Waldhorns, flugelhorns, and trombones, strikingly reminiscent of the long *dungchen* horns and thighbone trumpets of Tibetan ritual, and sounding—one can't help but notice—like the moaning of dying cattle. Human voices enter only on the last disc, merging into the chaos with bloodcurdling



Hermann Nitsch: slaughtered animals and a soundtrack for hell

These are the unsettling images and sounds that come with *Island: A Symphony in Ten Movements* by the long-bearded, Brahms-resembling Hermann Nitsch. I guess I've been remiss in keeping current with Viennese performance art, but apparently Nitsch has been one of the hottest shows in Europe for some decades now. As early as 1966 he was dubbed "the Bruckner of the Happening" for his massive, slow-moving theatrical scenarios—sort of a German Robert Wilson, but far darker and more complex, as well as more music-driven. Nitsch is just now making it to the record stores stateside, though, via a four-disc recording of *Island* from organ of corti, the fearless new California label that has been dredging the undergroundest of underground music and coming up with gems.

If you don't know organ of corti, run out and buy all their CDs instantly (or look them up at www.cortical.org). Their foremost project has been mining the unknown early recordings of Terry Riley, including his first (and thus the first) repetitive minimalist works. They also have upcoming releases of Pandit Pran Nath and Derek Bailey, and some intriguing co-releases such as a new Nepless recording of the phoneme-based voice works of French sound-poetry pioneer Henri Chopin. Every organ of corti disc looks likely to be a collector's item someday, and Nitsch's *Island* carries a banner in that procession.

Island, apparently like almost all of Nitsch's

screams. Yet the music is not always as sinister as its affinity for steak tartare suggests. Often the noise subsides to reveal quiet textures of bells and mallet percussion all the more beautiful in contrast to the awesome ugliness. Two movements are entirely based on a cheery, sort-of-Chinese-sounding melody that gets recurrently fuzzed and obliterated by dissonance but never loses its childlike joie de vivre.

You wish the liner notes provided a hundred times as much information as they do, but perhaps any attempt to get *Island* across in words was doomed to futility. Though the piece is described as being in 10 "Sazten," there are 14 access bands; some movements are quickly faded out at the end, others cut off abruptly, and though there are no ambient noises to suggest a live theatrical setting, you do get the feeling that these are audio photos of the total action rather than a self-contained work. Nevertheless, rarely has such a large-scale recording felt so much like an ethnomusicological report from another planet. *Island* bulges with La Monte Young drones, Alvin Lucier beat patterns, Kagel-esque cacophony, Ivesian cloud textures, Branca-esque tremolos, Scriabin-esque ritual atmosphere, and Tibetan spirit-evocation, all culminating in the great 20th-century symphony that we feared had failed to arrive on schedule, but that suddenly appears here in all its chaotically mystical and apocalyptic glory.