

Ellen Fullman / Konrad Sprenger – Ort

I was walkin' down the street
with my suitcase in my hand
when the buildings leaned in
all the buildings leaned in.
And glittering glass
lies like jewels
strewn on the street
as accidental melodies ring out
under our feet
Ellen Fullman, "Glittering Glass" from Ort (2004)

The heat and glint of Brooklyn streets radiate from words intoned over a muscular riff. Rippling with New York self-assurance, it faithfully tracks the spirit of The Velvet Underground. Yet the instruments on "Glittering Glass" are played by Jörg Hiller, aka Konrad Sprenger, Berlin based composer, producer, DJ, instrument builder, arranger and recording engineer. And the voice, twanging with the residue of America's Deep South, belongs to Ellen Fullman, a composer and performer who was raised in Memphis and kissed on the hand by Elvis Presley when she was one.

Fullman is best known for her invention in 1980 of the Long String Instrument (LSI), a set of vibrating strings ranging in length from 13 to 30 metres, tuned in Just Intonation, attached to wooden resonators and played with rosined fingers or specially made bowing devices. She has for years devoted her creative energies to refining the design and tuning of this instrument, painstakingly installing it in a variety of venues to bring them alive as sounding spaces, charging the air with scintillating, shapeshifting clouds of overtones.

Now with the remarkable album Ort, released by Hiller's Choose Records and credited to Fullman and Konrad Sprenger, Fullman has broken into song. "Glittering Glass" is followed immediately by a haunting rendition of Woody Guthrie's migrant worker ballad "I Ain't Got No Home". A galloping version of AP Carter's hanging song "John Hardy" also sits comfortably alongside seven inspired and singular originals.

"In 2000, I received a grant to live and work in Berlin for one year," she explains. "Composer Arnold Dreyblatt introduced me to Jörg Hiller. Arnold had always wanted to record "I Ain't Got No Home" and suggested we all do this as a project together. I began practising the song and invited Jörg to the studio to work with me. I'd recorded the chord progression with an Afro-Cuban syncopation. Jörg said, 'No, no, it should be more flat, just back and forth, like this.' I knew it was going to be a special collaboration when he started playing my Long String Instrument and it sounded just right. Not only was his instinct correct in how the rhythm should go, but he sounded good on my instrument. From the very first moment, I've experienced continuous and remarkable depth of trust and shared aesthetic with Jörg. Arnold's direct participation never actually worked out, but his spirit was felt." Formerly a student of Pauline Oliveros, La Monte Young and Alvin Lucier, Dreyblatt had a formative role in Fullman's musical development. "When I first moved to New York in 1981," she remembers, "he invited me to his studio and demonstrated all of his instruments, the midget upright pianoforte, the portable pipe organ. His work was so appealing to me – really good sounding instruments, quirky tuning and original musical structure. His studio was like a laboratory, with instrument parts spread around. This visit made it clear to me what I wanted to do. My long string thing at the time was screechy and untuned. Through Arnold, I learned all about the New York music scene."

But it's Fullman's songwriting abilities that figure in Dreyblatt's own recollection of their initial encounters, "We spent a lot of time talking about tuning systems and instrument building," he affirms. "But I've never forgotten her early songs, which were put aside as she gradually devoted herself obsessively to her unusual instrument." 20 years later, in Berlin, Dreyblatt instigated Ort (German for Place). "Having collaborated in various projects with Jörg over a number of years, I had the feeling they would make an interesting combination," he says. "Jörg not only was familiar with early minimalism, but was getting into raw American Country through the Harry Smith documentary recordings. When he suggested a recording project with Ellen's instrument, I figured the time was right to bring back that haunting Memphis voice and those unforgettable lyrics in collaboration with her instrument, backed up by Hiller's recording genius and instrumentation. Ellen asked me to play on the record. I didn't have time to make the sessions, but I suggested that she record "I Ain't Got No Home" along with some of her own pieces. I had an idea in the early 80s for a recording project with that wonderful tune which was never realised. It was perfect for this situation."

Hiller visited Fullman's studio and they recorded the Woody Guthrie song in a single afternoon. "I was able to play the LSI for the first time and was amazed by the variety of sounds I was able to achieve by just moving my fingers," says Hiller. "When Ellen had to go back to Seattle we decided that she would send me recordings and she said I could record whatever I wanted over her material. I made several attempts but it felt too impersonal. It was important for me to see her reaction while I played."

One CD that reached Fullman contained the instrumental basis for "John Hardy", Hiller's personal choice of material. "I retuned the instrumentals by changing the speed in ProTools to get a key that worked for me," Fullman explains. "I talk-sang at the bottom of my range, really an open-mouthed whisper. I invited my friend Jessika Kenny over to sing it with me. She has a beautiful voice, she has studied and performed a lot in Indonesia – and had performed "John Hardy" busking on the street." Last year Fullman managed to return to Berlin to complete the project, weaving the "private thread" of her songwriting into a beautifully crafted fabric.

The signature harmonic richness and glorious overtone shimmer of Fullman's Long String Instrument can be experienced on Body Music (XI 1993) and Change Of Direction (New Albion 1998). The LSI heard on Ort is a mini-version, encompassing just the upper cello range. "This was the size of my studio in Berlin," she says.

“Something about the song format gave me permission to do some things I might feel silly about in a performance – like using this gigantic installation to imitate the sound of a harmonica. I loved Delta blues music as a teenager in Memphis and was able to see some of the originals perform. I saw Furry Lewis a lot at a bar called Peanuts. My favourite experience was seeing Little Laura Dukes. She was tiny, had a little girl voice sometimes and sometimes a big rough voice. I was really attracted to her quirky text and unusual emphasis in delivery, like ‘Sittin’ on THE curbstone, wor-R-RIED AND BROKE HEA-arTED so, I WOULD raTHUR be A rabBIT, hi-DIN’ IN a GRO-ound HO-og’s HO-ole’. I love working with the shapes of words in my mouth.”

More recently Fullman has been listening enthusiastically to the alternative Country songs of Lucinda Williams. “I would say that hearing her music gave me permission to use my accent, musically,” she says. “While singing, it is impossible for me to cover up my southern accent so I’ve cultivated the persona of my voice.” During the mid-1990s, while she was living in Austin, Texas, Fullman studied vocal technique with North Indian classical singer Anita Slawek. “I learned that singing just one note could be engaging and musical,” she observes. “The shape; how it starts and ends. And when Anita sang in class, sometimes I was moved to tears by the sheer beauty of one very specifically tuned and shaped note followed by another. Anita said, ‘When you are really in tune, the music plays itself’.”

Such insights have added crucial impetus to Fullman’s development of the LSI. Her formal training, at Kansas City Art Institute during the late 1970s, was in sculpture and ceramics. “My background has given me a tactile approach to music,” she says. “For me, it’s more about the sound of it, the resonance, than about ideas.”

Another vital mentor is composer and Deep Listening pioneer Pauline Oliveros, who met Fullman at a time when her sculptural investigations were gravitating towards sound art, “I met Ellen in 1980 at the New Music America festival in Minneapolis,” Oliveros remembers. “She was wearing a pleated metal skirt with wires that were attached to her ankles so that when she walked along, the strings were plucked and sounding. She called the piece Street Walker. I have been watching and listening to the development of her Long String Instrument for 24 years. With very strong determination she has created the instrument, learned to tune it, play it, compose music for it and teach others how to play it. It’s a remarkable accomplishment. Others who are engaging in long string type instruments have benefited from her model immensely.”

“I had no formal education in music,” continues Fullman. “Pauline has always been very generous to me with her time and attention.” In 1994 Fullman and her LSI collaborators Elise Gould and Nigel Jacobs performed and recorded with Oliveros and Deep Listening Band (with Stuart Dempster and David Gamper). Fullman’s piece TexasTravelTexture and Oliveros’s Epigraphs In The Time Of AIDS were issued on Suspended Music (Periplum). “I had been exploring ways to expand the vocabulary of sound production on my instrument,” Fullman recalls. “I codified these into a system, with names and notation symbols. My intention was to use all of these textural variations in one piece. I composed TexasTravelTexture as an underlying fabric for a structured improvisation by Deep Listening Band. I tuned the LSI to Pauline’s accordion, a scale that uses pure sevenths, which sound flatter than in equal temperament. This was my first experience integrating traditional instruments with the LSI, and in Pauline’s composition my first time to improvise – both important new directions for me.”

After studying Indian music with Anita Slawek, Fullman decided that the warmer tone of bronze strings would best suit the LSI, and she was aware that her tuning had improved. Working with Oliveros was a comparably educative experience, affecting Fullman’s current understanding of tuning. “I imagine regulated air flowing across brass accordion reeds to help myself make the adjustments to get the sound I am looking for,” she explains. “Small adjustments allow the strings to speak more clearly.” Performers on the LSI walk between groups of long strings. “The walking and playing is like surfing through the overtones, working with the forces of nature to bring out what is already there,” she continues. “In composing, I am searching for pitch combinations and sequences that do interesting things in the interactions of their overtones. The more precisely tuned my instrument is, the more one can hear clarity in the overtone combinations.”

The unquestionable originality of Fullman’s work has, paradoxically, been shaped and sustained by her interest in creative precursors and her openness to instructive encounters. Harry Partch’s hugely imaginative instrument building and microtonal adventures have proved a valuable touchstone. “Without Harry Partch I would have never taken the direction I have taken,” she says. “It all goes back to him. I was not attracted to the sound of his music, however, until more recently. I was able to see replicas of the instruments for the first time in a performance at Mills College by guitarist John Schneider. He is a real scholar and exquisite performer. And here again, the perfectly tuned and complex intervals brought tears to my eyes.”

Underlying Fullman’s engagement with Indian singing was her deep appreciation of Terry Riley’s music. 20 years ago they performed separately at New Music America. “He referred to me as ‘The long string lady’,” she smiles. “I really liked that.” When a piece with The Kronos Quartet was commissioned from Fullman for the Other Minds Festival in San Francisco in 2002 she followed Kronos violinist David Harrington’s suggestion to draw creatively upon Geeshie Wiley’s Delta blues song “Last Kind Words”. And the music Riley had written for the quartet proved an important and helpful model.

The original impulse for her to explore long strings came from exposure to Alvin Lucier’s monochordal classic Music On A Long Thin Wire (1979). Another important influence was the undiluted minimalism of Phill Niblock. In 1983, in New York, Fullman met Dutch artist and musician Paul Panhuysen who was performing at Niblock’s Experimental Intermedia Foundation and visited her Longitudinal Vibration Installation at the Terminal NY Show in Brooklyn. The previous year Panhuysen had initiated his own series of long string experiments with Johan Goedhart, so there was a ready affinity. “Paul gave me my first European gig,” Fullman recalls. “He invited me to be in Echo, his sound art festival in Eindhoven, produced my first LP, The Long String Instrument [Apollo 1985] and organised other gigs for me in Europe.”

Less predictable was Fullman’s association with the rock group Poi Dog Pondering. She makes a guest appearance on their 1992 album Volo Volo (Columbia). “I met multi-instrumentalist Frank Orrall and the other members of

Poi Dog when we all were living in Austin,” she says. “Frank is wildly enthusiastic, creative and playful. The most fun was on stage with them in Chicago. I installed my instrument up on a two-metre high riser extending along the back wall of the stage. The show opened with a scrim covering the stage. A guy with a follow spot walked along behind me from down on the floor, projecting a huge shadow of me, walking back and forth, onto the scrim. It was fun playing power chords with a rock band and the audience screamed.”

While living in Seattle, around 2000, Fullman found a context for the LSI among improvising musicians. At one especially successful session, these included visiting saxophonist John Butcher and percussionist Gino Robair. “A leap in my musical practice came during this time,” she affirms. “I really needed to become skilled with control over dynamic shapes in order to play with other musicians, otherwise the LSI would just steamroll over everything. I asked myself, what might happen if I really practised for several hours every day? Could the quality of sound go places I couldn’t imagine? After all, this is a new instrument with no method or tradition. I would play the same chord for a couple of hours, like grinding away at something. And it changed, I discovered a rounder timbre.”

The evolution of the LSI continues. Characteristically Fullman recognises the creative success of Ort as a transitional moment, one more node on the long string of her development as an artist. “The LSI was the original tonal/textural impulse for almost all the songs on Ort,” she declares. “Although the song format may make my tuning ideas seem more accessible, several of these songs are studies for new directions.” One example is “Bottle Glass”, a song based on the Indian raga Vibhas and featuring Fullman’s voice in combination with the LSI and a sine tone. “The disturbing quality is achieved through never playing the root of the chord that my singing is based on,” she observes. “If a drone is played over this track, it sounds like I am going swimming. Without it, it sounds like my intention is to commit suicide by drowning. I’m interested in exploring controlled dissonance.”

Fullman has now relocated to California where she draws support from the San Francisco Bay Area’s thriving scenes – “The tuning theory scene, the Improv scene, the artist-made instrument scene, the West Coast American tonal composers scene,” she identifies. “There seems to be a productive relationship between art and technology here that I hope to take advantage of. I’ve been invited by the Exploratorium – San Francisco’s museum of science, art and human perception – to develop an exhibit based on the Long String Instrument. I’m always stimulated when keeping company with creative engineers. I hope to develop my instrument further and gain technical insights into the properties of the longitudinal mode of vibration.”

Fullman is currently preparing a multimedia performance/installation collaboration called Isolated Reflections, which premieres in Seattle on 29-31 July at Consolidated Works. “The piece will be constructed using multiple installations of the LSI placed in a large-scale environment,” she explains. “Each will be tuned in a system that is in a pure but complex harmonic relationship to one another. I want the audience to experience sounds in the distance that seem to accidentally coincide with sounds nearby.”

Meanwhile, Seattle’s Anomalous Records have just released Staggered Stasis, a CD of previously unreleased material from the mid-1980s that offers further opportunity to experience unalloyed the seductive fullness of Fullman’s Long String Instrument. “Each piece is a study on a very fundamental harmonic structure, an observation of the events that occur as played out by this instrument,” remarks Fullman. “I enjoy the austerity of these recordings, hearing the complexity of overtone production, especially the repetition of the glissando sweep when approaching and departing from the bridge of the soundboard.” [Ort is out now on Choose

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