SIMON JEFFES: MUSIC FROM THE PENGUIN CAFE
Obscure No. 7 (£1.99)
Distributed by Island Records

ROGER DEAN'S LYSIS: LYSIS LIVE
Mosaic GCM 762 (£2.80)
Obtainable from Lysis Records, 78 Kenton Road, Harrow, Middlesex, HA3 8AE — £3.00 UK, £3.50 abroad

DAVID ROSENBOOM & J. B. FLOYD: SUITABLE FOR FRAMING
A.R.C. Records ST 1000
THE SOUNDS OF SOUND SCULPTURE
A.R.C. Records ST 1001
DAVID ROSENBOOM: BRAINWAVE MUSIC
A.R.C. Records ST 1002
Obtainable from The Aesthetic Research Centre of Canada, P.O. Box 541, Maple, Ontario, Canada, LOJ 1EO

DAVID ROBERTS

Aesthetic plurality has its problems. While everyone was still playing the game of the European masterwork tradition you knew where the goal was and you knew that the general notion was to kick the ball in that direction. There were inevitable squabbles among the onlookers as to whether the ball had gone into the net or not, but no-one was in any serious doubt that was where the players were aiming. But the field of play has changed a good deal: the old goalposts stand isolated and unregarded; the players are running every which way, simultaneously engaged in all kinds of new games. For the man on the sideline, it's not just the multiplicity of new sets of rules that is confusing, but the fact that nobody is letting on what those rules are.[1]

If you agree with R. G. Collingwood's argument[2] that it is impossible to understand the meaning of a statement unless one knows what question that statement was attempting to answer (and his argument presumably holds good for artistic statements as well as logical propositions), then you will appreciate that the lack of communication about the purpose and aims of present-day music must have drastic effects upon its comprehension. Each of the records under review is ambiguous as to intention at a very basic level and suffers for it to a greater or lesser degree.

Take, for instance, *Music from the Penguin Café.* The music sounds — at the aural equivalent of a first glance — like what one might call palm court rock — somewhere at the other end of the spectrum from punk rock. It's pleasant, undemanding stuff: chugging strings, tinkling electric pianos, restrained electric guitars and subdued vocals, with no uncouth percussion; all neatly performed and well-produced. I should be inclined to dismiss the record as excessively cosmeticised and effete if it were not that it appears on the Obscure label, if there were not something about the record-sleeve that suggested the record might not be all it seemed, and if, most importantly, I had not been informed that Simon Jeffes, the composer of the material, took a fairly serious view of what he was doing.[3] Everything appears to hinge upon the word *Zopf,* the name of one of the ensembles playing on the record. (The other is the Penguin Café Quartet, a subset of the former.) *Zopf,* literally 'a pigtail' (one of the tracks is called *Pigtail*), gives rise to *Zopfstil,* the German for late Rococo style. What I understand Jeffes to be attempting (and I understand it only very dimly) is the creation of a highly refined and deliberately mannered modern equivalent. Whatever is being attempted, the point at issue is that there is virtually nothing in the way the record is presented to indicate the ideology that stands behind it. Enigmas have their place, but are easily put together and lead to self-indulgence.

Lysis, 'an ensemble specialising in the performance of contemporary music, improvised music, and jazz', is a flexible combination of musicians formed around the nucleus of Roger Dean (piano) and Ashley Brown (percussion). On *Lysis Live* they are joined by Chris Lawrence (bass) and on one track by John Wallace (trumpet). Since we have already started delving into dictionaries I might as well point out that 'lysis' is the 'breaking down as of a cell (*biol.*)' — quite a neat name considering the group's aims. Though their repertoire extends to Bartók, Webern and Stockhausen, Lysis incline more towards jazz on this record. At least, I suppose that that's what they are doing — the group's wide span clouds the issue. The better tracks — *Wheeling, Electric Suite* and *Threely* — are certainly jazz, but I'm not sure into what category the 'improvisations' fall. These sound to me like lumpish and distorted Schoenberg with jazz gestures thrown in for good measure. One particular problem of improvisation in an atonal idom is that the rhythm section can find nothing useful to do. However, the record is well worth hearing for the sake of the three tracks mentioned above.

But my critical perplexity reaches new peaks with *Suitable for Framing* which I find so unmitigatedly awful that I feel sure I must be missing the point. Three works are represented: *19IV75* by David Rosenboom and J.B. Floyd, and *Patterns for London* and *Is Art Is* both by Rosenboom. All three are for two pianos, with the addition in the last-mentioned work of the mrdangam, an Indian drum. For 99% of the time the music is loud, fast, thick-textured and pounding. The result is gross and boring and reminds me of how much I dislike the sound of the piano. But — you never know — could this not be intentional? Especially so when its impact is such a definite one. Since the record is issued by the Acoustic Research Centre of Canada one wonders if one isn't being used as a guinea-pig in some experiment. Again, the enigmatic sleeve does nothing to disclose the intention behind the music.

The other two records put out by A.R.C. are far more interesting, though they too raise aesthetic and evaluative problems. The Centre has performed pioneering work in applying bio-feedback to musical — or at least sonic — ends.[4] In David Rosenboom's *Portable Gold and Philosophers' Stones,* which takes up a side of *Brainwave Music,* the brain waves of four appropriately-trained performers are picked up through electrodes and applied to the voltage-control inputs of a bank of resonant band-pass filters. Two of the performers are monitered for body temperature and two for galvanic skin response; these signals are used to generate a chord of pulse waves which are fed through the filters. By suitably regulating their brain waves the performers 'play' on the harmonics of the chord. This is to simplify the set-up considerably — in fact one of the points that worries me is that such a mass of electronic equipment is interposed between the performers and the output that it is difficult to know how much real influence they have over the result that emerges. If the performers were replaced by further electronic equipment which functioned similarly, would there be any effective difference, other the loss of a certain frisson from contemplating the thought that 'all this is produced by the direct activity of the human brain!'? This is a live issue for so much experimental music where the means are more interesting than the aural result. For all that, this is a moderately successful piece considered purely as sound, lying somewhere in the same stretch of territory as *Stimmung.* Less successful is the same composer's *Chilean Drought* where alpha, beta and theta brain waves are each used to filter three separate readings of a news description of a

drought that occurred in Chile in 1968. Rosenboom's *Piano Etude 1* consists of a very fast, repetitive piano solo that is modified by two band-rejection filters; these are controlled by the amplitude of the pianist's alpha wave. As the alpha signal slowly changes throughout the piece, the average centre frequency of the filters moves gradually upwards, thus altering the sounds of the piano. The record is certainly very interesting, but is it intended to be anything more than a demonstration of possibilities? (The question is not rhetorical; I really would like to know.)

Sound sculpture too is not without its difficculties: in what proportions should a sulpture be regarded as an object to be looked at, to be listened to or to be played upon? On the whole the examples of *The Sounds of Sound Sculpture* work well as regards their aural qualities, and, to judge by the photographs in the booklet that comes with the record, they look good too. They fall into two broad divisions. First come items that require the agency of players to produce the sounds. Into this category falls the work of François and Bernard Baschet which is already well-known and is given rather perfunctory treatment on the record. Less familiar is that of Harry Bertoia: it consists of variations on the theme of clusters of metal rods that form elegant sky-scraper-like blocks; when excited by the hand these produce sustained hissing, ringing, booming and clashing noises. The productions of Reinhold Pieper Marxhausen appear to revolve around the idée-fixe of doorknobs, the sonorous properties of which are well demonstrated. The second category is that of sculptures that play themselves. The automata of Stephan von Huene are exceedingly ingenious and produce surprisingly complex results. He is well-represented on the record by his *Totem Tones* Nos. 2-5 (a bewildering variety of toots and hoots: like a demented recorder class superimposed upon fog-horns) *Washboard Band* (crazed mouth-organ, washboard, etc.) and *Rosebud Annuciator* (frenzied xylophone and drum); these are all possessed of great charm. David Jacobs is also allocated a large slice of the playing time: his *Wah Wahs* and *Hanging Pieces* are to vacuum cleaners as a dinosaur is to a lizard. They should be truly spectacular seen in action, thrashing their pneumatic appendages in various states of tumescence and accompanied by assorted whooshings, whines and hums. Here of course still photographs are inadequate; is it conceivable that some enterprising institution should exhibit some of this fascinating work in this country?[5]

NOTES:

[1]This metaphor is respectfully dedicated to Hans Keller.

[2]R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), Chapter 5, pp. 29-43.

[3]I am grateful to Richard Witts for this information.

[4]See David Rosenboom, *Biofeedback and the Arts: Results of Early Experiments* (Vancouver: A. R. C. Publications, 1975). For a review of this see *Contact 14* (Autumn 1976), pp. 34-35.

[5]For more information on the artists mentioned, see John Grayson (ed.), *Sound Sculpture* (Vancouver: A. R. C. Publications, 1975). This also was covered in the review cited above.