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THE MUSIC IMPROVISATION COMPANY 1968-1971 (Derek Bailey, Hugh Davies, Jamie Muir, Evan Parker) Incus 17 (£3.50)

TONY OXLEY: FEBRUARY PAPERS (David Bourne, lan Brighton, Barry Guy, Tony Oxley, Philipp Wachsmann) Incus 18 (£3.50)

EVAN PARKER: SAXOPHONE SOLOS Incus 19 (£3.50)

DUO: DEREK BAILEY, TRISTAN HONSINGER Incus 20 (£3.50)

BARRY GUY: STATEMENTS V-XI FOR DOUBLE BASS AND VIOLONE Incus 22 (£3.50)

COMPANY 3 (Derek Bailey, Han Bennink) Incus 25 (£3.50)

COMPANY 4 (Derek Bailey, Steve Lacy) Incus 26 (£3.50)

COMPANY 5 (Derek Bailey, Anthony Braxton, Tristan Honsinger, Steve Lacy, Evan Parker, Maarten van Regteren Altena, Leo Smith)
Incus 28 (£3.50)

Available from Incus Records, 87 Third Cross Road, Twickenham, Middlesex. Prices include postage and packing to UK.

KEITH POTTER

After a period during which it seemed to me that other musical matters were providing the 'right ways' forward, I've myself become re-involved with improvisation over the past two or three years. But I'm quite certain that it's not only this that is leading me to the conclusion — and taking full account of all the talk of the composed, fully-notated 'no messing, no illusions, no tricks' music of the 1970s having entirely supplanted the anarchic, improvisatory work of the 60s — that free improvisation still has an important part to play in the New Music

What Malcolm Barry has referred to as the 'flurry of activity at the improvising (only possible?) end of what used to be called (when we had one), the avantgarde', 'seems to continue apace with the work of, among others, the London Musicians' Collective (see further on in this issue for a report on current activities from their secretary). Ducking, for the moment, the ongoing debate about the currency (in, as ever, at least two senses) of the word avantgarde, I will at least stake my personal belief in the increasing force and relevance of free (as well as not quite so free) improvisation on firmer ground than I would have thought possible even two years ago.

The upsurge of activity and the 'higher profile' of improvised music point to more than just its indisputable value as a form of music-making in its own right. (And anyway, there's not enough space here to state a case which improvisers themselves have long since ceased to feel needs to be stated every time improvisation is mentioned.) This, in the immediate context of the present review, is the most important thing. So I'm not in any way denigrating improvisation as an independent and valid activity if I also draw attention to its potential for being a catalyst in the evergrowing and overlapping areas of what we used to call 'fusion music'. (This is perhaps an unfortunate term to use these days, since it has acquired connotations which are both pejorative and wrong. But to me the potential for the bringing together, the confrontation and sometimes the merging, of different styles and areas of music-making that improvisation offers is one of its 'assets' for the future, despite the failed 'fusion' attempts of the past, such as 'Third Stream'.) Not merely, then, an end in itself, but also a means to many other ends.

A few of the composers who flirted with what they thought was 'improvisation' or 'intuitive music' in the 60s have perhaps given any type of 'performer freedom' a bad name in some quarters. But this doesn't seem to me to deny the vast potential of what is anyway and already something of a melting pot: a fruitful ground (to mix my metaphors) where musicians and also non-musicians from many different backgrounds (musical, theatrical, performance art,

etc.) may work for a long time to come.

I'm aware that reviews like this, while setting an important context for discussion, might also detract from the consideration of the music itself. Or rather, in this case, from consideration of the musical artefacts, the products which these discs and sleeves sitting beside me on my table as I write, have inevitably become. (And since the problems of recording improvised music have also been discussed in these pages before, ² I'll not start on that one again.)

There are, though, two related problems involved here. The musical object demands attention through the 'usual' channels in the 'usual' ways: reviews, advertising promotion to sell the product. The musicians involved with Incus records, two of them having set up the label and having continued to run it themselves, wouldn't have it any other way (well, they might, but they're stuck with it).3 So:

- (1) All the words in the world won't convey any musical experience really (if they did, then why bother with the musical experience?). And when it's improvised music, with its claim to be even more 'quintessentially' the music of live performance, of the here-and-now, than any other, the objectivisation' of it on record is perhaps going to relegate it even further to a mere documentation (though that's important and recognised as an important and, in one sense, vital part of Incus's function by Bailey and Parker, its instigators) and thus relegate any writing about recorded improvised music to a stage even further removed from the musical experience than other musical criticism. And
- (2) The words seem harder to write about improvised music as such in any case. This is perhaps only to say that reactions to it are very 'personal', as all writing, just as all music, must be. But there's a vocabulary problem even in talking about improvised music (and conversation is improvisation too), let alone in writing about it. Hence the recourse to the Big (Improvised) Debate.

So, belatedly as before, to the records themselves, released over the last two or three years. Incus 17 is indeed of particular and peculiarly documentary value, being made from tapes of the Music Improvisation Company eight and nine years ago before they disbanded after a final concert with Paul Lytton in 1972. While Bailey and Parker, guitarist and saxophonist respectively, have since become and remain best known for their free playing as exemplified here, and Davies's own instruments and his playing of them have also become known both in Britain and abroad,4 the fourth member, Jamie Muir, who formerly played percussion with King Crimson and also with a group called Boris as well as MIC, has apparently since become a Tibetan monk.

The playing on this disc is violent and relaxed by turns. Untitled 3 (track two) has more space in it and allows Davies's electronics to 'speak' more effectively than Pointing (track one): the instrumental combination does not easily favour his more delicate sounds when all are playing.

Bedrest, as its title may imply, is more relaxed in parts, while the first piece on Side Two is even somewhat 'programmatic' (at least in retrospect: apparently it wasn't deliberate), being something to do with a water rat which is 'imitated' in the music. (This, by the way, is more lifelike thn they perhaps realised: my cat — who, I may say, doesn't like improvised music — couldn't take it at all . . .) In the Victim's Absence, the final track, is presumably some kind of requiem for it .

Music Improvisation Company also made a record for ECM, later than the tapes issued here. The value of issuing such old material may be doubted, despite the record's obvious documentary significance, but there are plans for a second MIC Incus record of material dating from the same

time as that on their ECM disc.

'All compositions by Tony Oxley published by Compatible Recording and Publishing Ltd © & @ 1977.' The name of the company is an alias for Incus, but the use of the word 'composition' indicates Oxley's somewhat different attitude to improvisation from that exhibited by many of the younger, 'second generation' improvisers or, for that matter, by Music Improvisation Company. Like Barry Guy's Statements on Incus 22, Oxley's Incus 18, entitled February Papers and recorded in February 1977, consists of 'pieces' as much as/more than 'improvisations': at least the individual tracks are built very much around Oxley's playing (on violin, percussion and electronics). Nothing wrong with that, you may say, and not even anything more 'compositional' and less 'improvisatory' about it either: most traditional jazz is built around a solo player or players and much of it is 'composed' to varying degrees. Yet I have heard Oxley described as 'the only fascist improviser': an indication, perhaps, of the difference in attitude to improvisation on the part of many of the younger musicians currently involved with the London Musicians Collective as opposed to those who ran the old London Musicians Cooperative which included Oxley and Guy

Certainly Oxley's Quartet 1, with which Incus 18 begins, sounds in parts like a poor man's Xenakis, with its glissandi on three violins (Oxley, David Bourne and Philipp Wachsmann), bass (Barry Guy) and electronics (the latter also controlled by Oxley and only evident some way into the piece). But then Xenakis often sounds like a rich man's improvisation group ... (Now my cat really does take exception to Xenakis ...)⁵ Sounds of the Soil 2, which follows (there is no Sounds of the Soil 1, on this record at least), has a nervous, almost frantic and incidentally more electronic energy that I find quite appealing; Oxley is now on percussion while Wachsmann's violin is joined by lan

Brighton's electric guitar.
Three pieces — Brushes, Combination and On the Edge are for Oxley solo on percussion and electronics (the latter, by the way, are a live electronic extension of his percussion kit which is itself quite extensive: Oxley appears to have been the first to surround himself with such a battery of acoustic and amplified gear in this way, though to my mind Paul Lytton makes a much more interesting and more musical use of a similar set-up). Inevitably (?), these pieces present a more unified conception. (Brushes, for example, uses only brushes.) Composition or improvisation? In a way it doesn't really matter here. The composer has the freedom to play what he wants. And the improviser to compose (pre-structure?) as much as he wants Though the variety of different sound sources and methods of playing combined in Combination sound not only as though several tracks have been put together but as though several different players could have been responsible, such is Oxley's dexterity. On the Edge (dedicated 'to E.P.': electronics made to sound like Evan Parker's soprano saxophone?) is another multiple sequence of regular repeated patterns, faded out at the end.

Chant — Quartet 2 is more continuous than Quartet 1; a regular and incessant scrubbing, which later returns, begins the piece before it becomes more 'electronic'. Trio 2 (no Trio 1 here) has qualities of energy deriving from the instrumentation (same as Sounds of the Soil 2 but with Oxley also on violin). The music on this disc is nicely paced and varied from track to track, though violins and/or

percussion are omnipresent.

Since Bailey and Parker founded and continue to run Incus, it's perhaps not surprising or unreasonable that more than two-thirds of the label's releases so far contain an appearance from one or other of them, quite often both. Incus 16 is a duo record, nos. 2 and 12 are Bailey solo and the present disc, Incus 19, is Parker solo. It's interesting that while Bailey has avowedly moved away from solo playing in the last few years, Parker has apparently moved more towards it, though at least one important reason for this has been the effective break-up of the duo he had for several years with Paul Lytton when the latter moved to

Belgium.

I have in fact usually heard Parker in duo work in the past, either with Lytton or with Bailey. He normally stands in a corner, perched on one leg; his manner would lead one to suppose that he is entirely oblivious of everything going on around him, did his playing not frequently prove the opposite to be the case. His solo improvisations on this disc are just as rivetting and full of character, or rather characters: all his own, I should hasten to add.

The four improvisations recorded in 1975 on Parker's usual soprano saxophone are entitled *Aerobatics 1-4*; nos. 1 and 4 (the latter recorded some months after the first three) are on Side One, 2 and 3 on Side Two. The first one consists of violently expressive outbursts of apparently random events, splurging all over the instrument almost, or indeed actually, simultaneously (contrapuntally even), or concentrating mercilessly on some poor unfortunate area of the instrument's range and squeezing all the juice out of it. No. 4, following this, is particularly vital: a short, screwed-up piece of overflowing energy, unchannelled in any 'conventional' terms but forced into 3' 48" as though into a tube far too small for the force it is made to contain. Time in inverse proportion to space? Or the other way round? A (paradoxically?) long 3' 48"...

Aerobatics 2, commencing Side Two, includes some excruciatingly long, high held notes and high-flown melodies tossed into the air to be spun around; just a few notes for what seems like an eternity. But I can hear why Parker should want to end the record with No. 3, which in terms of sheer virtuosity and stamina outdoes even the others, with its rhythmic elements that occasionally proclaim a jazz background in an otherwise almost

unclassifiable idiom.

In Parker's playing sounds seem to 'suck' as well as 'blow': a result of his circular breathing, of course, but while I'm quite sure he is capable of making all the notes sound the same if he wants to, he draws on the opportunities inherent in this particular technique to extend the range of his playing. Sound is no mere object(,)(ive) result of Parker's playing, but merged with his personality to become a subject(ive) force. But when the wind blows through the not-quite-sealed-up cracks in my front room window frames, as it did on the Sunday afternoon I played this record, it makes a sound which nicely complements Parker's sax.

Incus 20 consists of duo improvisations by Derek Bailey and Tristan Honsinger recorded on two consecutive days in February 1976. Bailey, whose playing is pretty familiar here now, uses a 'Waiswich Crackle box' (I think the inventor's name should read 'Waiswicz') as well as his guitars. The Dutchman Honsinger, whose playing I think I heard for the first time at last year's Company Week, ⁶ is a cellist whose frequently totally frenetic style of playing has qualities quite unlike those of any other improvising cellist — and I'm tempted to say of any other improviser on any instrument —

whom I have heard.

The reasons for Honsinger's individuality lie at least partly, I think, in the apparently contradictory elements in his playing. His total and almost manic involvement in the wild outbursts which, often carrying on for much longer than one might suppose possible, are a particular characteristic of his performances, tend to make him croon somewhat raucously to himself while playing. In turn this tendency seems to have led naturally to the use of his voice barking, shouting, screaming — as an occasional but usually integral part of his performance. This might not seem specially unusual in a 'free improviser' who quite naturally makes use of whatever resources his instrument(s) and his body allow. But at the same time he exhibits a formidable virtuoso technique of cello playing that has its roots placed firmly in his classical background in that he confines himself to a considerable extent to discreet, even often equally tempered, pitches, the virtuosity of his playing arising in an almost 'traditional' way from his use of a high degree of articulation in scale and arpeggio type patterns, rather than from the perhaps more familiar kind of 'instrumental extension' in improvised music which opens up all the sound possibilities of an instrument and puts 'conventional' and 'unconventional' modes of playing on a more equal basis.

This is not necessarily to say that more 'unconventional' modes of playing are less virtuosic: for a start, it depends on what 'convention' you're talking about. Derek Bailey's guitar playing - both electric and acoustic, on this record and on many others on the Incus label - could hardly be described as 'conventional' in any sense other than that his style of playing has now become so familiar (and sometimes, I can't help feeling, so predictable) that it has itself become a 'convention', almost an institution ('conventional'?). And yet his playing is frequently virtuosic in character and aim, it seems, as well as in sheerly technical ('means' rather than 'ends') terms. (At the same time, some of what have become known as the 'second generation' improvisers in this country have eschewed all kinds of 'virtuosity' as being irrelevant to their aims.) But Honsinger's approach to improvised virtuosity gives his playing a unique quality and a very specific kind of result in terms of the relationship between the performer and his instrument, pointed out by Peter Riley in his perceptive review of this disc in Musics:7 'Even the 'correct' tuning is insisted on, and that too becomes no more than a refusal to be sidetracked into easily available contemporary effects. The stance is basic: the musician goes into action between the instrument and the sound, creating there an arena of privileged liability as the emotive and mental objectification - the opposite of the interpreter, who stands behind the sound-box feeding codes into it. This is more important than "instrumental exploration". Incidentally, Riley's concept of 'total improvisation' as put forward again in this review and actually occasioned by hearing Incus 17, and his mention of 'objectification' come up against fundamental issues concerning improvised music, and I'm not at present entirely sure whether my earlier remarks about 'subjectivity' in Evan Parker's playing complement, qualify or reject what Riley has to say on these. Further discussion of this area would, I think, be fruitful.

This concentration on Honsinger at the possible expense of Bailey in this review is, I think, justified, since not only is the latter's playing better known here and it appears on many other Incus records, but Honsinger appears for much of the time on Incus 20 to be the dominant force, with Bailey sometimes acting more as an 'accompanist', if such a concept is relevant to this sort of improvisation, which I'm not sure it is. Some of Honsinger's more subtle 'vocal extensions' actually turn out to be snatches of conversation during what seems to have been an especially casual concert from which most of this disc derives. Listen to the second track on Side One, Duo (Part 1), for example, which begins with him talking, and Performance at the beginning of Side Two, which is refreshing (after listening to a whole side of manic activity, from the cellist in particular) in its solo guitar opening followed by Honsinger's voice before the fuller texture sets in again. Or, for more fully fledged 'vocal extensions', listen to the first track on Side One, The Visit, with its more 'overt' vocalisations. And while a 'tune' emerges and subsides just as quickly in, for example, Duo (Part 1), only in the frenzied The Shadow on Side Two does Honsinger use the body of the cello as a direct sound-

source, and then only briefly.

Barry Guy is, like Honsinger, a pla

Barry Guy is, like Honsinger, a player with a classical background, though in his case he has kept up his classical bass playing (from continuo for the Monteverdi Orchestra to avant-classical concerts with, for example, the soprano Jane Manning, with whom he has an established duo) to add to his myriad other activities as free jazz musician (he has played regularly for some years with, for example, Howard Riley and Tony Oxley, and formed Iskra 1903 with Derek Bailey and Paul Rutherford) and composer (jazz: as on Incus 6/7 with his Ode for Jazz Orchestra; and avantgarde: as with his several commissioned works from the BBC and

Donaueschingen).

One of the best examples of the merging of backgrounds, styles and disciplines active in the world of free improvisation, Guy at the same time seems to have an attitude towards free music today similar to that of Tony Oxley (with whom, indeed, he plays on Incus 18), and also that of Howard Riley, though the most memorable adjective I've heard applied to his playing is not 'fascist' but 'Fauviste' (and this time I'll reveal my source). For despite his attempts to avoid 'a pre-arranged plan' in his recording session of several hours from which these pieces (his word) were chosen, Statements V-XI for double bass and violone sound as though they could have been composed. They might well have been carefully considered in advance from among Guy's range of wizardry with the foot pedal as well

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as with the bow and structured from these 'effects' to produce 'effective' pieces, rather as an after-dinner speaker might carefully prepare the content and timing of his 'offthe-cuff' (i.e. partially notated?) statements to gain the

greatest effect.

From at least one point of view there's nothing wrong with this: if the results are musical, interesting and perhaps even new, what does it matter how the music was put together? On the other hand, it seems to me that the results that Guy has achieved on this occasion have lost out both on the care and 'quality' (of 'kind', not of 'superiority') that should go with composition and on the spontaneity of improvisation. At the same time it should be said that Guy's interaction with his instrument, and the range of his 'effects' is still widening and deepening after several years of playing in this way. Particularly fruitful are the ways in which he interacts between the 'surface' sounds necessary to put the instrument in vibration and the deep resonances of the bass which are thereby set in motion: both areas of operation are linked at both the fundamental and obvious level of the means necessary to produce the acoustic vibrations to play the thing and also at the more subtle and potentially still extendable level afforded by the equalisation of those sound sources in terms of dynamics potentially through the use of amplification. But in one very important sense, this all remains mere 'instrumental extension', mere 'effects', when compared with Honsinger's approach to his instrument

This is to some extent a retrospective review, since some of these discs have been available for some time. Even so, the numbers on the records don't correspond exactly with the order in which they were issued, and Guy's Incus 22, for example, came out only at the beginning of this year, whereas the first two Company recordings, Incus 21 and 23, were available over a year ago. Partly because we've already reviewed these latter, I propose to make a somewhat briefer mention of the other Company records so far available, though of course the character of each is very different and determined entirely by the personalities involved: Company, another of Derek Bailey's conceptions, is described by him as 'a pool of improvisors from which different groupings are drawn for different occasions and settings'

Incus 25 and 26 are both duo records with Bailey as one half of each duo, and were recorded before the first Company Week which took place in May/June 1977.10 Incus 28 was recorded during that week and consists of duo, trio and ensemble improvisations from a total of seven out of the ten players who took part in the Week at the ICA and the Round House. Two further records of music from the Week are promised for the future, while it appears that no recordings were made during this year's Company Week (also May/June at the ICA) which had a largely different

line-up.

The other main reason for spending less time on these three discs is that, by and large, I find the playing on them far less impressive than on most of the others under review, in particular Incus 19 and 20. Since Company 3 and 4 are in one respect an extension of Bailey's duo activities represented so excitingly on Incus 20, this might appear strange, especially so, perhaps, with Incus 25 which features Bailey with the Dutch percussionist Han Bennink.

If Honsinger is manic in one way ('classically' manic?), Bennink is twice as manic in (quite?) another: even the backgrounds from which he works pretty well defy description, as is to some extent revealed by the instruments which he plays on this record — 'drums, violin, banjo, clarinet, voice and home-made junk'. It's been said that only his compatriot the pianist Misha Mengelberg can begin to curb ('control' would probably be too strong and wrong a word) Bennink's playing, and I think it would be reasonable to say that Bailey doesn't even begin to try. Despite (or maybe more likely because of) this, he is to some extent a more equal partner to this particular difficult Dutchman than to Honsinger; certainly I managed to focus to a greater extent on Bailey's own contribution to his (newfound?) interest in duo work than with Incus 20.

Some of the track titles on Incus 23 seem to point to a 'greater significance' in terms of background, and foreground, references, but actually untangling them foreground, references, but actually untangling them seems at the moment somewhat hard. References there certainly are, however: to many different kinds of music, to semiology, to Woody Allen (the latter two pieces of information derived from the sleeve-note, I must confess, rather than from the music). In the Dead of Night I gotta go

Where You Are, the first track, just has to have something to do with Spike Jones and his City Slickers but I'd be hard put to it to describe what it is. The second track, The Song is Ended (medley) uses the two players' more popular backgrounds to more bizarrely obvious effect with Bennink, the dominant partner here, on clarinet (he appears to play anything that's pushed into his hands and a few things that

are pushed elsewhere ...)
Several tracks on this disc are indeed particularly good illustrations of just one aspect of my earlier point about the working out from many different musical vantage points that free improvisation allows: towards new ends if not in fact to new starting points. This is not consistently achieved on Incus 23; while a track called (to me quite inexplicably) Stanley has a nervously dense (or is it densely nervous? quality to it which is more turgid than manic, the final track Tether End 2 (there is a Tether End 1) even has a few sounds on it which I am unable to identify easily as belonging to any of the listed instruments (even Bennink's usual 'homemade junk' category appears transcended. . .).
'Instrumental extension' of the more interesting kind . . . (and you can tell when this review was written).

Company 4, Bailey's duo record with the American saxophonist Steve Lacy, raises similar issues in interesting conjunction with another discreet-pitch approach to an instrument which even traditional jazz musicians have tended to 'bend' more than most others. Much of the playing on Incus 26 is much sparser than on Bailey's previous duo records; Lacy is the careful cultivater of what at first seems a narrower field to Parker's wild sower of the seeds of a much wider and wilder style on good and stony ground alike. First impressions are to some extent belied by later experiences on this disc and information about Lacy's activities in general tend to detract from this view as much as re-inforce it.11 Yet, contradictory though this may be, it is Parker's playing which, while having in some respects the greater range, also has the greater 'coherence' in the end, for Lacy's playing doesn't focus on the instrument itself or its player in the same way. And while Lacy's approach to his instrument can in some ways be compared with Honsinger's to his (though Lacy's individual approach to what he has termed 'toonsville' is fairly specifically post-avantgarde, 'post-free'), he's like a slow bowler to Honsinger's fast one (if I may be permitted yet another metaphor).

Side One of Incus 28 consists of a single seven-man ensemble improvisation from the 1977 Company Week line-up omitting what some would no doubt regard as the more 'freakish' participants (i.e. Han Bennink, Steve more 'freakish' participants (i.e. Han Bennink, Steve Beresford and Lol Coxhill) who I hope will feature substantially on the other 1977 discs yet to be released. Though there are one or two exhilarating ensemble moments, the 'norm' state of this 25 minutes or so is too dense and too un(der)characterised, too uncontrolled in parts, to produce consistently interesting musical results.

The duo playing of the two more 'traditionally'-minded saxophonists Lacy and Anthony Braxton on the first two tracks of Side Two presents resourceful and very musical explorations of the possibilities of this unusual duo combination, but the invention never really takes off as far as I'm concerned. Braxton also appears on tracks three and four in a trio combination with Parker and Honsinger which is predictably much more fraught. The second, much shorter, one of these might present an interesting test to try out on someone who doesn't know: composition or improvisation? I know precisely why / could be fooled in the early stages but not by just past the middle; the nature of the detailed explanation of why and the detailed discussion which might follow would, I think, help to expand our understanding of the differences and similarities between composition and improvisation on a deeper level than anything possible here, and maybe even our perception of the many different natures of musical organisation. Try it for yourselves.

NOTES:

¹In his review of Incus 21 and 23, Contact 18 (Winter 1977-78), p. 36.

² E.g. by Malcolm Barry, op. cit., pp. 36-39 and by David Roberts in the same issue, pp. 39-40.

3 For further on this with specific reference to records, see Dick Witts, Tony Friel, Trevor Wishart and Richard Boon, 'Music and Society — 3: The State of the Nation — a functional primer', Contact 18 (Winter 1977-78), pp. 10-15.

- ⁴ For further on Hugh Davies see David Roberts, 'Hugh Davies: Instrument Maker', *Contact 17* (Summer 1977), pp. 8-13.
- ⁵ For further on cats and music and with reference to Incus 26 see the interview with Steve Lacy entitled 'I'm not much of a hoofer myself', *Musics 12* (May 1977), pp. 4–9.
- ⁶ See the New Music Diary, *Contact 18* (Winter 1977–78), p. 50.
- ⁷ Musics 12 (May 1977), p. 23.
- ⁸ Leroy Cowie's review of a Bertram Turetzky concert in London, October 14, 1973 in *Contact 7* (Winter 1973–74), p. 45.
- ⁹ See footnote 2.
- ¹⁰ See footnote 6.
- ¹¹ See footnote 5.

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