

**Excerpts from the chapter “*Beyond The Valley Of The Falsch: Mego (And Friends) Reinvalidate ‘Computer Music’*”, taken from *Micro Bionic: Radical Electronic Music and Sound Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

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## **Rise of the Twisted Hard Disk**

One of the more impressive and consistent organizations behind the of has been Austria’s Mego label (now re-branded as Editions Mego, with much of the former label’s catalog available to be purchased online.) Other splinter groups doubtless arose around the same time (thanks to the technological advancements listed above), and therefore giving Mego pride of place here may raise the hackles of some- but if they did not merely kickstart this scene, their collective aesthetic sensibility, more than the sum of its parts, has been instrumental in drawing attention towards the peculiar methods and maneuvers of a larger constellation of electronic artists.

The Mego label was originally an offshoot of the Austrian techno label Mainframe, the brainchild of Ramon Bauer and Andreas Peiper. The Mainframe label, while not reaching the same dizzy heights of un-compromise that defined Mego, did deviate from the standard techno / rave template in some colorful ways. The label’s flagship act Ilsa Gold, for one, was known for fish-out-of-water experiments like combining distortion-fueled ‘hardcore’ techno elements with the sampled (and decidedly unfashionable) sounds of German-language folk relics like Karel Gott, or perhaps with the plaintive wailing of some ‘alternative’ coffeehouse rock leftover from the early 1990s. The pounding aggressiveness of Ilsa Gold’s more anthemic numbers, combined with a sampling method that placed exuberant irreverence at center stage, would also be a harbinger of things to come.

The nucleus of the Mego label, as it is known today, would eventually be formed when Peter ‘Pita’ Rehberg joined forces with Bauer and Peiper upon the dissolution of Mainframe. Rehberg, the most visibly active of the original trio today, keeps the archive of older Mego releases in print under the newer Editions Mego label (which, in spite of the name change, does not differ significantly in content or approach from its predecessor.) Rehberg transferred from London to Vienna in the late ‘80s, a musical omnivore previously busying himself with numerous rock-oriented groups, DJing, and fanzine writing- also taking time out from the scene for an extended visit to Minneapolis at the dawn of the 1990s (he

now operates most frequently in Vienna, London and Paris.) Having previously subsisted on an eclectic musical diet of post-punk, industrial noise and the dub offerings from the On-U Sound label, Rehberg was somewhat skeptical of the new 'electronic dance music revolution' spreading through warehouse raves and a deluge of white-label vinyl releases- to him this was just another development in electronic music, rather than the clean wiping of the slate that, in their usual hysteric tones, culture observers were making it out to be.

Still, the 'electronic dance music revolution' provided some of the necessary cover for Mego to engage in its more intense and unmoored sonic experiments: with a thriving local techno scene to draw upon (proximity to hubs like Munich also helped in this respect), and the credibility that came from playing an intimate role in that scene's growth, some deviation from the norm was permitted them. Simultaneously, the nascent Mego label had support from the more hazily defined post-Industrial and noise subculture in Vienna; local alliances with organizations like the Syntactic label (known for hopelessly limited 7" single releases of the genre's leaders) gave the Mego team a rare opportunity to 'play both sides of the field', as it were- local connections even helped to secure gigs at unlikely venues like the hip youth hangout Chelsea (whose website boasts of it being "simply the best of indie, pop, and beats") , where Rehberg recalls blowing out the house speakers in a live collaboration with noise stalwart Zbigniew Karkowski. The up-front, blasting energy of such performances was, to say the least, unexpected in environments where electronic music had previously taken on a "support role," a function much like that of mood lighting. Electronic dance music, in all its endless variations, had previously added color and exotic flourishes to the ongoing Continental European social drama, plugging the awkward silences that occurred in between flirting with strangers or scoring drugs. Now, here was an electronic music which manifested itself in unbelievably loud sheets of sound as techno did, yet forced passive bystanders *not* to divert their attention elsewhere (unless they just chose to flee from the performance venue altogether.) Reviewer Mark Harwood, reviewing Rehberg & Bauer's performances at the "What Is Music?" festival in Australia, accurately describes both poles of audience reaction when suddenly being sucked into this whirling vortex of disorientation:

"Pita thrilled the Melbourne crowd (one male witness reported to have shed tears, while other folk moved about in what can loosely be described as 'dancing') and diced the Sydney audience, shredding one of his tracks by cutting out every few seconds. At a safe distance, you could see numerous people exit, fingers firmly in ears."<sup>1</sup>

Andrew McKenzie of The Hafler Trio -who is not directly allied with Mego, but whose work maps a similar psychic terrain- also summarizes the performer-audience disconnect that could come about when listeners are forced to decode an incoming rush of mutated sound signals, often in the form of genuinely painful frequencies or tonalities, without any form of 'visual aid' to assist them:

“Focusing on output requires attention, practice, and a degree of consciousness. None of these come for free, and none of these can be assumed to be existing qualities of an audience. The best that can be done is to attempt to attract those qualities by means of developing them in oneself. What follows from that is feedback on the state of things as they are, not as we might like them to be.”<sup>2</sup>

If the effect of this sound was jarring within a venue that normally played music, then hearing it broadcast from more unorthodox locations took things to a whole other level of bewilderment. One such unorthodox location was the *Riesenrad* [Ferris wheel] at the Prater amusement park in Vienna, which movie buffs will recognize as the site of a famous Orson Welles monologue in *The Third Man*. Originally built to commemorate the golden jubilee of Franz Josef I in 1897, it was one of the first Ferris wheels ever built, and became a universally recognized landmark of Vienna. So, what better place to stage the defiantly outré sound of the local Mego-affiliated computer music group Farmers Manual than in one of the city's most beloved tourist attractions! In the summer of 1997, Farmers Manual prepared a novel live set that would last the duration of one ferris wheel ride (about 15 minutes), conflating sentimentality and nationalistic pride with 'the shock of the new' and with the decidedly more alien- such high-concept performances (albeit 'high-concept' infused with playful mischievousness) may not have approached the spectacular overkill of Karlheinz Stockhausen's composition for a quartet of helicopters, but they did exhibit the elasticity of this new music: its lack of lyrical dictation, its tendency to not be pinned into place by an incessant backbeat, and its use of portable electronic devices for both recording and playback meant that it could be performed in all variety of public places while generating the same polarized reactions of curiosity and hostility. In a nod to the clandestine punk rock concerts staged on riverboats during the period when certain Central European countries were Soviet satellites, Farmers Manual and several others have taken this approach to the waters on the 'Mego Love Boat.' The tongue-in-cheek whimsy of such actions extended even to the formation of a Mego go-kart racing team; with Mego catalog number 052 being assigned to a 2-stroke racing vehicle.

Farmers' Manual in particular have been fanatical about documenting the live aspect of this music- one web archive features gigabytes worth of live material from them and allied Mego acts, while their *RLA* DVD catalogs every surviving

live recording made of the group from 1995-2002. It is a brutally effective comment on just how much the music subculture has changed since the days of, say, The Grateful Dead: where once fans devoted years of their lives to tracking down and swapping bootlegged, “no-two-are-alike” cassettes of live performances by their psychedelic torch-bearers, now fans of such a ‘computer music jam band’ could have their every single performance delivered for a comparatively meager investment: only the cost of a commercial DVD, or the time it would require to download all the shows from the Net (at <http://rla.web.fm>, for the curious.)

All innovations in live performance aside, Mego is a label mostly judged on the merit of its recorded output. Mego’s initial foray into the world of conceptual music, and away from techno as we now know it, was the *Fridge Trax* collaborative effort between Peter Rehberg and General Magic, an alias for the Bauer / Peiper creative duo. The latter duo is also responsible for the mind-bending 1997 computerized song cycle *Rechenkönig*, a surprisingly cohesive collection of shimmering audio debris. This particular album epitomizes the ‘Mego style’s’ emphasis on the primacy of the abstract sound assemblage rather than linear narrative, yet with the same good-natured irreverence that informed the earlier Mainframe releases (note the familiar patter of Barney the purple dinosaur on the album’s opening track.) In a description that reminds us Farmers Manual’s mischievous appropriation of the *Riesenrad*, reviewer Alois Bitterdorf states that

“...much of this sounds like the amusement park rides were left to run, and run around, on their own a little too long, and in the meantime some of them have gotten into the medicine cabinet again, oh no, heavens!”<sup>3</sup>

In many ways *Rechenkönig* is a culmination of the work begun earlier on *Fridge Trax*, itself an intriguing study in the sampling and manipulation of household appliances’ hidden sound world. The album ranks with Frieder Butzmann’s *Waschsalon Berlin* (a recording of the unique, churning rhythmic activity of Berlin laundromats) as a slickly listenable attempt at humanizing the inert and voiceless. At once an alluring piece of and a possible joke directed at those who complain of electronic music’s “frigidity”, *Fridge Trax* capably threw down the gauntlet, which would be picked up in turn by the lush, unsettlingly natural computer compositions of guitarist and laptop manipulator Christian Fennesz, and by a whole supporting cast of other wild brains, whose work will be reviewed here soon enough.

Meanwhile, the problem of presenting this music live was partially solved as the 'bar modern' Rhiz opened for business beneath the overhead train tracks of the city's U6 U-Bahn line. Specializing in presentation of 'new media,' and immune to noise complaints by virtue of being situated along a major traffic thoroughfare, Rhiz became the default venue for much of the Mego label's live presentation. The rumble of the overhead trains and chatter of passerby (who are free to peer in at the live proceedings, thanks to floor-to-ceiling glass windows on either side of the venue) occasionally intrude upon the more contemplative moments of live performances, but all in all the venue has done a fine job of allowing this music to be itself. However, support from other quarters –namely, the Austrian arts funding organizations- has been somewhat more tepid, As Peter Rehberg recalls:

“I'm one of the few Austrian / Viennese labels that doesn't get any support or funding from the funding bodies here, whatever they call themselves...which, on one hand, is a bit of a bummer because it's all got to be financed by myself, but on the other hand it gives you the independence to act on your own- you don't have to be obliged to be nice to anyone [laughs]. And I kind of like that kind of independence. It would be nice to get funding, but they obviously don't recognize my label as a worthy cause. It's a bit of a joke because every other scratchy label here gets funded, but I don't care, because I actually sell records- so I can get the money back.”<sup>4</sup>

Acquiescing a little, though, Rehberg also admits that he is

“...not anti-funding, as places like the Rhiz couldn't exist with out. Although I do get annoyed with labels getting money for a release, and the they package it in the cheapest way possible..... ah, don't get me started..”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Endless Summer, Get Out: A Tale of Two Sound Cards***

It is tempting, in retrospect, to see Mego's progress as eventually coalescing around the prolific efforts of Peter Rehberg and Christian Fennesz. Consequently, it is also tempting for some to pit these two against each other in an adversarial struggle between aesthetic polarities: one reviewer, in a scathing review of Pita's 2004 release *Get Off*, even likens the two to being the “Lennon and McCartney of electronica”, implying a stylistic divergence between Rehberg's caustic, unfeeling experimentalism and Fennesz' pretensions to melodic pop and pastoral simplicity. This “rivalry” exists more in the minds of such reviewers than

it does in reality, though, as can be surmised by the number of live collaborations between the two, and by other shared traits: neither claim exclusive allegiance to the Mego label, and both are capable, when necessary, of making occasional breaks from their 'signature' style.

Although Christian Fennesz' contributions to this music are well deserving of their landmark status (his *Endless Summer* tops both the sales charts and critics' lists for the Mego label), it is Peter Rehberg's work which has most caught this author's attention. Fennesz' most noted works, with their blissful and asynchronous clouds of sound, are rife with references to idealistic worlds come and gone (see the sunny, utopian Beach Boys quotations of the aforementioned album), and as such it is difficult to divorce them from being either a critique of, or tribute to, past music. Stripped of the nostalgic aspect, or really of any human quality whatsoever, Rehberg's solo work as Pita has no easily identifiable cultural precedent with which to connect it, and thus makes sentimentality nearly impossible- yet, in spite of this, some Pita works are striking in the emotional depths that they can plumb while being completely inhuman (Pita compositions in particular are mostly based on patches and virtual instrumentation within the computer, with a minimum of sampled sounds.) The 1999 release *Get Out* is one of the first and best examples of this approach: an unforgivingly stark and jolting montage of sonic atmospheres which, crossing the threshold into near-total unfamiliarity, serves as a perfect fugue for the death of the previous millennium. Without even track titles to base it in the world of consensus reality, it is a demanding listening experience for all but those who would intentionally seek it out, and one so highly subjective that even this author's assessment of it should not be understood as definitive.

Perhaps the lynchpin moment of *Get Out* (and consequentially, one of the more canonical moments of new computer music) proceeds as follows: a ghostly inaudible murmur of filtered melody on the 2<sup>nd</sup> untitled track, seductive by way of its elusiveness and obscured by steely pinpricks of clipped, high-register sound, becomes resurrected on the 3<sup>rd</sup> track as a backwards orchestral loop of uncertain origin (maybe a Viennese composition?.) The listener is lured into a false sense of calm content, perhaps expecting that this will play out as a balmy piece of oceanic ambience. This is clearly not the case, as the orchestration is abruptly pounced upon by an exceptionally harsh digital decimation. For those who survive this unexpected ambush, the rewards are great, as the distortion causes all kinds of harmonics and auditory hallucinations to emerge from the simple looped phrase- which, at this point, is so laden with overdrive effects that you can no longer tell easily if the original sound source *is* being looped, or if slight modifications are being made to the sound source as it goes along. The track's technique of 'constant crescendo' seems borrowed from earlier forms of techno dance music, but, transposed to different instrumentation, could just as easily be a blast of white light from Swans, one of Rehberg's many influences in the post-

industrial landscape of the '80s. A mish-mash of genre leaders like Merzbow and Terry Riley would be another way to describe this, although this scathing 11-minute opus is clearly more than the sum of its influences.

The remainder of the album plays out as a less epic, but still absorbing, set of viscera-tickling noise episodes and alluring disturbances, the kinds of things that are referred to as a 'mindfuck' in music fanzine parlance: maybe a lowbrow summation of a very complex compositional style, but an apt one nonetheless. After wandering through a sonic terrain so twisting and non-linear that it would put a smile on the face of even a hippie mystic like Friedrich Hundertwasser, we come at last to another lengthy track looping a single gliding bass tone alongside the restless rhythmic sputtering of a Geiger counter (a comparison which has been made perhaps too many times now when attempting to describe Mego-variety music, but, again, an apt one.) The artlessness of this send-off is exquisite, and reminds us of how far society has 'progressed' since Industrial music first began to make its critique of mass media's indoctrination methods. It conjures images of blank sedation under brand-name soporifics, or of row upon row of modern, uniform office cubicles cooled by the pallid glow of computer screens, only the alternation in the rate of the screens' flickering offering any hope of differentiation from one cubicle to the next. The promise heralded by Throbbing Gristle's 1980 track 'IBM' –that of the computer's 'voice' dictating coded orders to spellbound and pliant humans- has been fulfilled here in a most unequivocal way.

And while this new form of computer music could have satisfactorily ended with the disembodied pastiche that was *Get Out*, it was really just getting started, and was growing too much like a rhizome to accurately chart its progress in linear terms of "who did what when": to see Peter Rehberg, Farmers Manual's occasional spokesman Matthias Gmachl, or any other individual affiliate of Mego and its companion labels as an ideological "center" or key "signifier" would be erroneous. An international 'scene' was nevertheless born, which culture scribes -with their penchant for easily-digested, monosyllabic tags like 'punk' and 'grunge' - were quick to pounce on and designate as "glitch". Musical taxonomy still refers to this music as such, perhaps giving too much credit to the generative computer music of Oval as the 'scene leader' within this milieu, and also assuming that accidental composition is the *only* means utilized in making this music. More important than the actual 'glitching' process was the music's philosophical vagueness, and its refusal as a 'movement' to uniformly romanticize or condemn virtual culture, a refreshing departure in an age of insubstantial or dangerous proclamations and territorial claims.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Harwood, review of “What is Music?” festival. *Wire* #194, April 2000, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> interviewed by the author, February 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Alois Bitterdorf quoted at <http://www.mego.at/mego032.html>

<sup>4</sup> interviewed by the author, April 2006

<sup>5</sup> interviewed by the author, July 2008