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Brooklyn Hears Factory Sounds From Germany

Von Jon Pareles

Pohl Musik brought a remarkable instrument to the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Friday night. The Klangmaschine, invented for the group by Christof Schlager, looks like two ventilator tubes and a large electric fan hooked up to a podium-like control panel; its metallic innards produce enough buzzes, rasps, huffs, clanks, scrapes and siren noises to stand in for a factory.

It does just that in the repertory of Pohl Musik, which hails from the Ruhr Valley, West Germany's center for steel, coal and heavy industry. The group's performance was part of Ruhrworks, a New York showcase for the area's cultural groups presented by Goethe House and by the Ruhr Cultural Foundation, which was founded by the area's corporate giants.

Pohl Musik's compositions are both steeped in industrial sounds and distrustful of them. Many of the pieces, which carry titles like "Compression" and "Death at the Harbor," suggest individuality, in the form of jazz-flavored saxophone melodies played by Karl-Heinz Blomann, ground down by the noises of the Klangmaschine (also played by Mr. Blomann) and by pummeling, high-speed funk riffs from Thomas Kammann on electric bass and Norbert Sollbach on guitar. Some pieces also used digitally synthesized sounds as a different kind of mechanized onslaught.

In a few pieces, like "Broadcasting Signals" and "Rotation," the combination of melody, funk and noise jelled. More often, however, the music was less than the sum of its parts. Mr. Blomann veers between the frantic sputters of free-jazz saxophone styles and the choppy, jazz-rock melodies of Weather Report and Passport; the funk riffs were crisp but generic. And too many pieces used the predictable contrast of a pretty section followed by a noisy one. Six decades after George Antheil's "Ballet Mechanique," and in the wake of industrial-rock groups like Einsturzende Neubaten or Skinny Puppy, Pohl Musik seems provincial.

Still, the Klangmaschine is a mechanical marvel. Pohl Musik may well be sending a different message from the one it intends. For the moment, its bleak industrial sounds are more intriguing than its melodies.

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