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Alexander Held's Modernist Creation for Adventure Project

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Composer Alexander Held

The arts are not insular. Their evolution is more than a foundation of historical works; it's a communal environment in which different mediums provoke each other in the most benevolent manner. Adventure Project is a collaboration between Germany's Ensemble Musikfabrik and Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln (Cologne Conservatory of Music and Dance, founded in 1850 and the third oldest music school in the country) which has existed for three decades. Music and dance are siblings who possess their own personalities while sharing an unbreakable bond. Aptly named, Adventure Project pursues the works of those who push their respective mediums to expand boundaries and ideas. Composer Alexander Held's "Autonomous", which was performed at Adventure Project #8 in June, testifies to the progressive ethos of this group and this event. Alexander and Musikfabrik's Ulrich Löffler (prize winning pianist known for his performances with the Bavarian Radio and SWR Symphony Orchestras) struck up a friendship over their mutual love of analog keyboards and synthesizers, leading to an offer from Ulrich to have Mr. Held compose an original piece for Adventure Project.



The meeting between Alexander and Ulrich, orchestrated (no pun intended) by a mutual friend, resulted in an invitation to explore Löffler's studio and his array of musical gear. One instrument found within was a large three-part modular system with some extra bells and whistles. Alexander was so taken with it that he constructed "Autonomous" around it with the intention of being performed by Ulrich and celebrated violinist Hannah Wehrlich. Sadly, Mr. Löffler became too ill to perform this piece and the music world suffered his tragic loss to cancer in late 2022.



"Autonomous" is a very modern musical composition which celebrates the adventurous nature of the event at which it premiered. In addition to the Modular Synthesizer, this piece is also written for an amplified-live processed electric violin running through a Ring Modulator, pitch shifter, and guitar amplifier. The piece starts out gloomy and mysterious but quickly picks up with fast rhythmic phrases and exciting textures. Alexander divulges, "This was unlike anything that I have ever done before, since the Modular system worked in so many different ways than a traditional keyboard does. The score I wrote had three parts to it; two which were controlled by sequencers that ran by voices and one that the player actually controlled with a keyboard. For the two sequencer voices, I instructed the player to activate and deactivate buttons, flipping switches to advance the piece." He adds, "I wrote something special as well for the violin. The main idea was that the violinist was not so much playing typical violin phrases but mainly operating the effect pedals and Ringmodulator."



The result of "Autonomous" was to challenge both the audience and the musicians performing the piece to be open to new ideas and textures. The nature of the composition required the pianist (Shota Jincharadze) to spend most of the time operating switches and buttons on the peripheral of the instrument to activate the next section. Similarly, the violinist (Hannah Wehrlich) was focused mainly on utilizing the outboard effects laid out in front of her rather than any traditional manner of violin playing. The mood heightened with the escalating tempo and density of sound, boasting flourishing arpeggios and fast beating sequences. A thunderous round of applause accentuated the climax of "Autonomous", reassuring Alexander that the capacity crowd felt the power of his musical voice. He professes, "I still remember the ecstasy of my running on stage, bowing towards the audience and applauding my musicians. It was truly an unforgettable experience. Since the piece was quite out of the norm of what people would expect from a more classical ensemble, I managed to really surprise them with the combination of Electronic and distorted amplified sounds. Making all of this work was truly the most rewarding aspects of this piece. Since I only had limited time to work with the musicians face to face and experiment with the instruments there was a lot of things to go wrong but everything in the end turned out the way that I imagined it. I am very happy to have made the decision to go against the grain by creating something unique and personal to me."

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