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I've long thought of string quartets as an excellent form to showcase compositional approaches. They're small but incredibly flexible ensembles that can take nearly limitless musical journeys in a capable composer's hands. While making satisfying music unto themselves, listeners can often find all of the major elements of a composer's style presented in relatively unobstructed view within quartet writing: dynamics, use of space, articulation, polyphony, etc.

Recently I have received a number of power trio recordings—I'll use the "classic" definition of a power trio consisting of guitar, bass, and drumkit. As I dug into this music, I realized that I've loved dozens of power trios over time, and that the power trio format provides a similarly reliable platform for the presentation of compositional ideas through rock instrumentation. Frequent servings of improvisation are one place where the analogy falls short, as most string quartet music is fully composed. While some power trios focus on composed music, most incorporate improvisation, together or in solos. But the clarity of approach is consistent: think of the power trio efforts of folks like Bill Laswell, Fred Frith, or Vernon Reid, and how their power trio-based projects inform the compositional and improvisational strategies they bring to work in various larger ensembles.

After several weeks of power trio immersion therapy, here are four of my recent favorites:

Hyrrokkin - Astrionics

For having recorded the music for this cassette EP less than three months after forming, Hyrrokkin sounds like they've been playing together for years. And for being only an EP, this music has a long reach. Hyrrokkin leans heavily on intricate composition—other than short intervals within occasional rhythmic/textural cells (most notably in "Sephfus"), I don't hear much improvisation on this album. That puts them in a small class of power trio comp maniacs like the "Void" era configuration of the Flying Luttenbachers, or Colin Marston-related units like Behold the Arctopus or Dysrhythmia. Hyrrokkin bring the same amount of energy to their music as those bands, but they gravitate toward relatively cleaner sounds, and they're not afraid of melody. Timbrally, the guitar sounds remind me of my favorite early post-hardcore sounds, or even earlier crunchy goodness like "Hard Attack" era MX-80.

Edward Ricart and Paul Larkowski alternate guitar and bass duties on different songs, and they have remarkably complimentary sounds on either instrument. Both lay down hypnotic and propulsive bass riffs (Paul on "Super Agoinst" and Ed on "HAARP," for example), and both take their turns at guitar fearlessly,

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alternating between long-tone melodies, inventive diad-based harmonic/rhythmic ideas, and occasional outbursts of atonal/chromatic speedpicking. Drummer Brett Nagafuchi's approach unites jazz and math-rock ideas brilliantly, sometimes taking a stop-time approach on thorny, unison riff sections, alternating with a jazz approach to teasing cymbals through longer grooves. In between those percussive extremes, there are a lot of busy ideas happening in the guitar and bass parts throughout the record which the drum work sensitively delineates into palatable sections while keeping the energy level very high.

A masterful debut, and I'm psyched for more. Fortunately, Hyrrokkin are planning to record a full-length soon and tour throughout 2012. Much love to label New Atlantis for bringing this group to light. This one is a cassette/CDr release, already in a second printing since September, and you can find New Atlantis releases online at <http://sundmagi.com>.

Scorch Trio - Melaza

Scorch Trio is almost the opposite of Hyrrokkin in approach: they too create a forceful sound with the energy of rock, but their collective vocabulary outlines roots mostly in jazz and improvised musical systems. There are occasional repeated figures that serve as collection points along these wild rides, but these songs are very free, with emphasis on texture, soundscape, and in-the-moment conversation between the musicians. Raoul Bjorkenheim gets brutal with his guitar, pulling many unexpected sounds from his strings, bending, tapping, sliding, and finally firing through a ring modulator in the last few minutes of the album. Ingebrigt Haker Flaten digs into his bass just as fiercely at times, loudly and percussively tremolo picking into a frenzy.

That's not to say this is a noise album. While this seems mostly improvised, the trio carefully incorporates contrast into the music. Tracks like "Raitru" are delicate and quiet, and others like the title track are high energy but with a more melodic sensibility—at times the guitar tones almost drift into Bill Frisell territory on that one.

This is the fourth Scorch Trio record, and the first to feature Chicagoan Frank Rosaly on drums. Rosaly keeps the drum approach here eerily similar to that of his predecessor, Paal Nilssen-Love. In comparing this record to "Brolt!" immediately before, the only substantial difference in drum textures that I detect is that Nilssen-Love spends a lot more time with his snare in passages that Rosaly more often fills with tom work.

This is a solid and exciting record, but I must admit that I hear a degree of hesitation at the extreme noise pole of their concept. In comparison to Kawabata Makoto of Acid Mothers Temple, for example, Scorch Trio heads bravely into sheets of pure sound, but they arrive with trained musical sensibilities that seem to include an attendant sense of reservation which peeks through in moments of potential psychedelic reckless abandon. But maybe I'm being unfair to compare the playing of Bjorkenheim to Kawabata, a man whom I once saw play guitar with his ass. Ahem. CD and LP available from [Rune Grammofon](#).

Many Arms - Missing Time

I wasn't familiar with Many Arms until I picked up their 1st self-released disc "Palabras Malas" at the merch table of a Zevious show (bassist John DeBlase capably serves in both bands). Zevious, by the way, is another excellent power trio with two good albums and a truly great live show. But I think I like Many Arms even more: for me, this band reaches to the top tier of thoughtful and visceral power trio music, and deserves to be celebrated with classic trios like Blind Idiot God and Massacre.

Many Arms splits the difference between Hyrrokkin and Scorch Trio on the composition-to-improvisation continuum. Songs are mostly composed, but many feature intensely high energy solos. And they really excel at both. Compositionally, this music nods to

math, prog, drone, psych, jazz, thrash, and more contemporary NYC scenes without bursting at its seams. In terms of playing and soloing quality, the whole band can exhibit an almost punishing display of technique, but they pull it off without turning into “shred” music. Nick Millevoi’s guitar playing in particular floors me. He can spin endless jazz lines or angular stabs of sound with a particularly assertive picking technique. He’s not much of a legato player, but I’ve never heard picking articulation that so effectively demands attention. This is a guitarist to watch carefully. He also recently released a powerful 12-string electric solo record on New Atlantis that I’ll be covering in the near future.

Though John DeBlase is the least flashy performer in Many Arms, maintaining structure when the guitars and drums go wild, he writes a lot of the band’s music, and he gets an especially satisfying fuzz bass workout on the epic “Enfolded Within a Great Flow.” And drummer Ricardo Lagomasino sounds comfortable in every stylistic context he tries, from jazz to blast beats. He’s especially inventive when shifting accents and densities over ostinato bass figures, a technique that makes “Extraction” rock both weirdly and hard. That approach is also responsible for my favorite section on their “Palabras Malas” album, the outro of “The Year 500 Billion.”

“Missing Time” is available from Engine Studios, but also be sure to check the [Many Arms BandCamp page](#), where you can find all of their music. And stay tuned in March—Tzadik Records is set to release the third Many Arms full-length, followed by some April tour dates with Hyrrokkin.

Hedvig Mollestad Trio - Shoot!

Another recent power trio offering from Rune Grammofon, the Hedvig Mollestad Trio debuts with a good, though uneven, record. It’s a refreshing blend of jazz and rock influences, including some Touch & Go vibes and even sludge/doom/drone riffs in songs like “For the Air” that would be at home on a Melvins or Earth record if one added a little more distortion. In fact, they even cover the Melvins’ “Blood Witch,” which features the only vocals on the album, yelled/sung by the band in the background and seemingly picked up by room mics.

But that’s a weakness of the album: there is a lot of space in the music where vocals could comfortably sit. Maybe too much room. Answering the “how to fill space” question is surely one of the most difficult aspects of playing in a power trio configuration: you can fall into a trap where everything sounds too similar timbrally, but it’s also easy to go too far in the opposite direction and sound gimmicky. And each instrument is so critical to the sound—there is no place to hide. If both melodic/harmonic instruments are locked into playing riffs together for minutes at a time, even transitioning between verse and chorus forms, I start to crave melodies above the riffs. Sometimes guitarist Hedvig Mollestad Thomassen takes some thoughtful and interesting solos while the bassist Ellen Brekken holds down the riffs alone, but I wish there were more of those moments, and more interlocking riffs/counter melodies in the compositions, like one finds in “No Encore,” or the bass melodies in “Doom’s Lair” while the guitar maintains the song structure chordally.

That said, everyone plays beautifully, it’s beautifully recorded, and I suspect that the Hedvig Mollestad Trio will evolve into an even more exciting group with time. And the gentle closing song, “The Valley,” is a nice wind-down after several weeks of listening to many, many power trios.

—Scott Scholz

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