

Matthew Shipp – The Art Of The Improviser (2011)

Written by bluesever

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Disc 1: 1. *The New Fact* 12:27 2. *3 in 1* 9:14 3. *Circular Temple #1* 16:01 4. *Take the A Train* 7:44 5. *Virgin Complex* 6:48 Disc 2: 1. *4D* 5:38 2. *Fly Me to the Moon* 5:11

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3. *Wholetone* 8:03 4. *Module* 7:52 5. *Gamma Ray* 7:23 6. *Patmos* 4:49

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Personnel: Matthew Shipp: piano; Michael Bisio: bass (CD1); Whit Dickey: drums (CD2).

By now, critical listeners have formed an opinion about the music of pianist Matthew Shipp. Like his musical predecessors Cecil Taylor and Thelonious Monk, Shipp is an uncompromising voice that tends to force listeners to queue up in line, either for him or against him. With the release of *The Art Of The Improviser*, he has essentially summed up his first fifty years on two CDs of resolute and committed music.

Like his previous *4D* (*Thirsty Ear*, 2010), Shipp presents a solo recording of original compositions and one standard ("*Fly Me To The Moon*"), but this time adds a second disc with his new trio (since 2009), featuring bassist Michael Bisio and drummer Whit Dickey.

The first disc presents Shipp's trio, recorded live in Troy, NY in April, 2010. The five lengthy tracks act as a summation of his career so far, pulling music from previous releases as far back as *Critical Mass* (213CD, 1995) and *The Multiplication Table* (hatOLOGY, 1997), some of which he reworked on the more recent *Harmony And Abyss* (*Thirsty Ear*, 2004). Shipp often works with big themes; here he commands a steady swinging groove on "*The New Fact*," while trickling his two-handed improvisational explorations. By returning to the theme, he allows the audience to follow his logic. Likewise when he takes on a monument like "*Take The 'A' Train*," his dissection is not unlike a DJ's collage of sounds, where snatches of the familiar melody flash

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by, as if trying to read graffiti on a passing boxcar. The trio also pursues his early classic composition, "Circular Temple," with a reverence for the open chamber free piece, plotting a persistent course of freedom with as much confidence as the younger Shipp demonstrated when he first recorded it.

The solo CD delivers some very inspired music-making, a reminder that the language Shipp he has invented can be subtle and achingly beautiful ("4D") or dense and very dark ("Wholetone"). "Wholetone" progresses as if Shipp is juggling disparate objects: his left hand, pounding dense chords; his right, gamboling. This yin and yang approach makes for a dynamic sound, and showcases Shipp's passion for the music. Tracks such as "Gamma Ray" play with a recurring theme, not unlike a show tune, tethering his explorations of freedom with melody.

Regardless of the approach, Shipp's playing—with or without a net—will be detested by detractors and praised by advocates, making *The Art of the Improviser* one of his best performances on disc. ---Mark Corroto, allaboutjazz.com

Once dismissed as a Cecil Taylor imitator because of his jagged, percussive attack, pianist Matthew Shipp has gone on to distinguish himself as a true original, incorporating not only the history of jazz piano but also the hypnotic repetition of minimalism. He is an "idea man", but not merely a musical intellectual – his music offers challenges aplenty while demonstrating wit and passion.

This double disc of live recordings features a trio date at The Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, NY and a program of solo piano recital at Le Poisson Rouge in New York City. On disc one, Shipp is joined by Whit Dickey on drums and bassist Michael Bisio, who is given generous solo space on several tracks. The *New Fact* begins with a rumbling modal vamp reminiscent of McCoy Tyner, which develops into a nice display of improvisational virtuosity, synthesizing the harmonic language of Tyner and Taylor, as well as Herbie Hancock. The fleet-fingered and pitch-perfect Bisio ends the piece with an absolutely jaw-dropping solo.

Circular Temple, the longest piece in the program, starts with some pensive musing from Shipp and a nice bit of arco bass from Bisio. Eventually, Shipp fastens onto another hypnotic vamp

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and accelerates into an impressive extended solo which demonstrates total mastery of his instrument. This piece slides right into the one standard here, Billy Strayhorn's Take the A Train – in Shipp's hands, a crashing, percussive tour de force. Once again, the pianist does not adopt the standard practice of abandoning the melody after 30 seconds or so – instead, he dissects, examines and reconstructs the melody to excellent effect.

The six solo piano tracks on the second disc also run into each other without pause, forming a single extended improvisation which allows Shipp to carry patterns and dynamics from one piece to the next. An amusing deconstruction and reconstruction of the old lounge-jazz chestnut Fly Me to the Moon is the only non-original, which offers further illustration of Shipp's improvisational magic. Not surprisingly, this is a more demanding program than that of the trio disc, and although Shipp is not adverse to the occasional rhythmic groove, the solo music is often closer to modern classical than to jazz. Not that this is a bad thing, but be warned: you're not going to hear many standard blues changes or easily assimilated Broadway show tunes here. ---Bill Tilland, bbc.co.uk

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