

# The big playback

By David Stubbs

## Stefan Németh

"I'm interested in this grey zone where pure ambient recordings and music meet," says guitarist Stefan Németh of Vienna's Radian and Lokai, whose first solo album, *Film*, features a mixture of soundtrack work and other pieces derived from those recordings. "This means there is always a lot of 'blank' space in the film scores – something which is going to be filled by the visual input. For the album, I wanted to fill some of these blank spaces. Usually I had to compress the length of time and slightly change the rhythm, which originally is determined by the scenes in the film. On the other hand I added textures, new instruments and thematic elements to bring in more life to the isolated music."

It is curious that Németh, of all people, should be involved in soundtracking, for his work here, like that of Radian, though lush and absorbing on all levels, is not exactly imagistic. In the early days of electronic music, there was a divide between the French and German pioneers, a rather tense and loaded one, given the post-war context and the two nationalities involved. In one corner, Pierre Schaeffer was assembling sound collages entirely from magnetic tape recordings. In the other corner, Herbert Eimert led those who believed in a notion of 'pure' electronic music, unsullied by field materials. With Radian, Németh found himself inclined towards something like the latter school of thought after a dalliance with the former.

"It was not very fruitful in the beginning," he recalls of Radian's development. "There were too many layers of samples at the same time. We had to reduce the electronics to a minimum as well as tonal shifts or harmonic elements. Abstraction was very important for us – and to avoid references as much as we could."

On *Film*, however, the cinematic purpose to which these pieces were originally put inevitably helps create accompanying mental images, even if they are somewhat discreet and blurry. "Via L4-Norte", for instance, is the soundtrack to a film Németh himself is making about the city of Brasília and how



On the couch: Stefan Németh

its utopian ideals have coped with the corrosive effects of reality.

"When we filmed the parliament – an impressive building by Oskar Niemeyer," he recalls, "a guy came to us from the opposite side of the road and told us, 'You know what you are filming? You're filming the cancer of this country.' After talking to a few people, I believe that he's not the only one who thinks like that."

The music itself hints just obliquely at all of this, with its monitoring, percussive accompaniment, metallic guitar and synthesized instrumentation suggesting glimmers, functional right angles and hinting at a sense of depopulation, disillusionment. "Luukkaankangas" and "Soprus" are the names of movies to which these pieces of the same name are the original soundtracks. "Luukkaankangas", a "dramaturgy" based around the Webcam images posted by the Finnish Road Association of all major roads for the benefit of motorists, seems especially apt for Németh's sound treatment, with its lines trailing over the horizon and sense of pure, spatial exploration. Another piece, "Field", with its sense of grand design and aesthetic implications sent out with a reverberant hum into the air, is the accompaniment to an architectural film called *Domino*. Németh is comfortable with parallels between music and architecture.

"I think a music piece also needs a stringent fundamental structure to work well. You can develop pretty complex architecture and music as long as there is a clear structure underneath. This can be very well hidden, but even a random-seeming piece is usually not totally random, because there is somebody who selects a range of events or there is a mathematical process, which pushes it into one or the other direction."

However, if one theme stands alone above all on *Film*, it is that of the dialogue between the mechanical and the acoustic, with Németh toying with our expectations of the supposed humanity and warmth of one and the coolness of the other. When

he plays guitar on "Via L4-Norte", it is with a cold, terse, slightly treated clang. However, the synths, as on "Soprus", are warm, dark, enwombing.

"We have memories about how acoustic instruments sound and they evoke associations," says Németh. "Electronics tend to be more abstract. I love both and I also like to confuse the two by processing acoustic sounds to make them more abstract and vice versa to let acoustic instruments sound like an electronic instrument – often you just need to play them in a different way."

Németh, who grew up just outside Vienna prior to helping form Radian and founding Mosz Records, is just one of a high concentration of artists who have made that city their base – Fennesz, Peter 'Pita' Rehberg, among others. "Austria was never much connected to mainstream music," he says. "I felt that it was a bit isolated for a long time, because as a proper music market, it was maybe simply too small. So I assume a lot of musicians here didn't think too much about record sales or promotional strategies – they haven't been distracted by such things and kept their focus on the music itself without compromises. Let's say it is a playful approach."

Certainly, it has proven a fertile base, even if the Viennese themselves haven't always exactly embraced this nest of artists to their bosom.

"I still remember Pita's and his friends' DJ sets [in the mid-90s] at the bar called the Blue Box," recalls Németh of his formative years as a biology student. "I assume for some of the guests it must have been very controversial, but I was very fascinated by these pieces, which worked in a completely different way from the music I'd heard before. Each new Mego release was an adventure to listen to. It was more about doing it than about how to position yourself in the music world. So it is with Radian. We are willing to turn our own system upside down and our next EP is most likely the beginning of it or a change-over to something different. And it is hard to predict where it ends in the future – I like this uncertainty." □ *Film is released this month on Thrill Jockey*