

In *Altered Realities*, Erdem Helvacioğlu has found a balance between guitar and real-time processing that results in a cohesive disc with moments of true beauty. The titles of the tracks are visually suggestive and offer vaguely poetic extensions of the disc's title. Names such as "Sliding on a Glacier" and "Shadow of my Dovetail" betray nothing of the musical mood, the programmatic intent or the creative inspiration. They are almost interchangeable on a disc that has no lyrics or program notes, but maybe this betrays Helvacioğlu's aesthetic intent to create a compact disc that plays like an extended composition as each track flows effortlessly into the next. Because the disc works so well as a unified whole that unfolds its macroform over the course of 53 minutes, it makes little sense to isolate the tracks from each other and talk about them as individual compositions. So instead my review will focus on the connective elements that Helvacioğlu uses throughout the disc: his method and materials.

Helvacioğlu's method of music making on this disc begins with his performance on acoustic guitar. The steely timbre of the strings grounds the sonic explorations as he augments the guitar with real-time processing. Helvacioğlu's platform of choice for affecting his guitar sound is AudioMulch, the interactive computer music environment developed by Ross Bencina. The sound is captured and extended by a variety of processing techniques over the course of the disc. In addition, he uses sampling to achieve time-shifted playback within each track and what sounds like the occasional synthesized timbre to accompany the guitar, although these could just as easily be some form of extreme processing.

To control the computer's activity while his hands are busy with the guitar, Helvacioğlu uses a MIDI pedal board with his feet. This equipment setup allows him to perform each track in real-time and simply record to DAT, something he is clear to point out in the liner notes. Limiting himself in this way and not succumbing to the allure of endless studio editing and tweaking gives the tracks a more organic feel. The grounding in human performance makes this a disc that even novice listeners of electronic music will enjoy, and because the method employed to realize each track is the same, it is a big reason for the unified sound of the disc.

Helvacioğlu's materials include a combination of simple motives with tasteful doses of processing, and his careful interactions between human and computer achieve compelling musical results. The melodic material for the guitar is never more than a short fragment lasting up to four measures. The minimal character of these riffs by themselves would likely come off as calm and sterile, not unlike a twenty-first century Satie. They struck me as poignant at times, but lacked the inherent musical tension to sustain focused listening over the duration of the disc.

It is the addition of processing that injects a subtle dose of drama into Helvacioğlu's music. Without it, *Altered Realities* would be just another ambient disc (and I say this as someone who enjoys ambient music!). The processing never remains static for very long as it carries out its duet with the melodic material, where the timing of changes often follow the same formal divisions that govern the guitar playing. These arcs and progressions provide a form of tension and release that intensifies the underlying melodic figures.

The processing rarely seems to overpower the Helvacioğlu's guitar, providing artificial spaces, spectral alterations and granular shuffling. However, there are times when the intensity of the computer's voice surges and the clarity with which it usually augments the guitar is lost. The duration of these moments never feels too long and the guitar is always returned gently to a position in the foreground. Because Helvacioğlu dynamically changes his processing parameters in longer, sweeping motions, he provides a perfect foil to the short, simple guitar motives. Had either one been pushed closer to the other in character, the balance would have likely been upset and jeopardized the success found in their contrasting natures.

The structures of individual tracks exhibit a striking simplicity and allow the changes to unfold gently over time. Most tracks have no more than five alternating motivic ideas in the guitar, with the one exception being a track called "Pearl Border on a Dune" that had ten by my count. Even this variety could be condensed if one accounts for harmonic

and rhythm relationships that exist between the motives, as Helvacioğlu often alters these parameters to provide something new. Each idea is established and repeated before moving on to the next one, but Helvacioğlu seems to have carefully measured the amount of time he can extract from each idea without boring the listener. The guitar's repetition is also tempered with the longer arcs presented by the computer processing as it morphs mostly within and sometimes between the formal boundaries created by the changing guitar motives. It is easy to read each track as a dialogue between these two elements, in which the guitar is pushing the discussion forward with new topics and each conversation ends in a calm, cordial resolution.

If one considers the entire disc as a macroformal structure, there is a clear progression from beginning to end that shows careful planning on the part of Helvacioğlu. The first three tracks setup a light, playful mood as the guitar sounds like it is testing the possibilities of its computer companion. Track three, entitled "Frozen Resophonic", is by far the sweetest sounding track on the album with melodic content that could easily be mistaken for a children's song. "Dreaming on a Blind Saddle" is the track that follows and it is a definite turning point in the mood of the disc. The bleak character, immediately apparent in the opening guitar motif, provides a good setup for the track that is the climax of the disc, track five. Entitled "Shadow of my Dovetail", it combines touches of melancholy with a rhythmic drive that is reminiscent of classic blues, although without the usual progressions. From here the last two tracks give the listener more of the dreamy qualities found in track four, as the processing asserts its transformations evermore on the guitar. The final track ends its unmetered meanderings with a time-stretched and pitch-shifted *arpeggio* that slowly decays away, gently returning the listener to the real world.

Overall, Erdem Helvacioğlu's *Altered Realities* is a compelling sonic ride that functions as a cohesive whole. The unified sound is an obvious result of his decisions to use consistent methods and materials throughout the disc. It is the ebb and flow between computer processing and acoustic guitar that shapes the music in convincing ways. Neither feels out of place as the computer works effortlessly to extend the possibilities

of the guitarist. I felt it was a successful album that captures what it might sound like to hear Helvacioğlu perform a live set at the local venue and should be of interest to those who enjoy an intimate evening of electronic music.