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INSTITUT FUER FEINMOTORIK
PENETRANS (2002)

Staubgold 25 CD / LP

it's no surprise that a group exists that is dedicated solely to the idea of the "empty turntable" - that is, creating music using only turntables, no records, "prepared" in the manner of John Cage with an array of household objects: rubber bands and who knows what else. After all, we already have our no-input mixer artists, our shortwave splicers, our field recorders of powerline interference. The medium is the message, the tool is the message -- hell, these days, we've so ingested our tools, our media, that it almost seems like the message simply is, buzzing all around us like highwire hum. If Institut Fuer Feinmotorik didn't exist, you can be that someone would have invented them.

No, what's surprising about the Southern German quartet is that, far from being a one-skip wonder, or an arts grant gimmick, they've pursued their minimalist (mediatist?) practice over the course of seven releases now. And Penetrans, their latest recording, proves the project worthy of continuation. Not that it necessarily shows development, progress, or any ol' such modernist shibboleth -- who needs it?

After all, good, stripped down rock doesn't evolve, it just rocks. Likewise, Penetrans, restricting itself to eight turntables, four mixers, two compressors, one "gaengiger mehrspurmischer," zero records, and various unnamed treatments, is simply rockin', rollickin' grooviness. Rich in syncopated funk and a dozen shades of grey, it amounts to a kind of roots techno -- the 21st century equivalent of the jug band.

The metaphor's not so far off -- after all, on "Wird es sehr weh tun?" ("Will it hurt much?") the buzz of the rubber band resembles the huffing and puffing into the ol' cider jug, while on "Rufen Sie die Polizei." ("Call the police.") the promiscuous rattle approximates a washboard jig, or perhaps a cadenza for spoons. And if you told me that two note oom-pah was a broomstick stand-up bass, I wouldn't know the difference. Of course, the group's choice of titles carries them a ways from your usual back porch blues, but then again, a healthy, down-home sense of irony and pragmatism keeps it grounded. Thus "Behalte du deinen Traum, ich behalte das Geld!" -- "You keep your dream, I'll keep the money!" -- or, better still, "...ja, das ist Kunst!" Ja, ja it is.

Philip Sherburne