

Brainwashed - Attilio Novellino, "Strängar"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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This Italian composer's latest full-length is quite a significant departure from the aesthetic of 2018's inventively shape-shifting *A Conscious Effort*, as Novellino decided to head in an entirely non-conceptual direction (he correctly believes that abstract music too frequently has hidden meaning and significance projected onto it in order to lure in both listeners and acclaim). In keeping with that theme, the album's prosaic title translates simply as "strings." That title is certainly apt, as sounds conjured from strings are indeed the heart of the album's aesthetic, but it is also a bit of an amusingly misleading understatement:

Strängar

is not an orchestral album, but is instead largely a celebration of the many vivid and visceral sounds that one can produce from an inventively misused piano. It is also much more than that though, as Novellino's cavalcade of scrapes, dissonantly jangling metal strings, and assorted percussive sounds intriguingly bleeds in and out of a very different vision of spacey, hallucinatory synth motifs. Admittedly, that sounds like a potentially unwieldy marriage on paper, but Novellino executes it beautifully to achieve a compelling and unique blurring of the boundaries between disparate worlds.

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The four numbered pieces that comprise *Strängar* can all be reasonably described as variations on a single theme, as all are built from a core foundation of strummed, scraped, or hammered piano strings that ultimately dissolves into a second act of simmering synth-driven psychedelia. Novellino proves himself to be quite ingenious in varying the tone and texture of his ephemeral passages, however, and the transitions between them tend to feel both organic and fluid. As a result, each of the four pieces has its own distinct character and that character steadily deepens as each unfolds. In the opening "Strängar I," a slow-moving progression of minor piano chords hangs in the air as a small-scale textural apocalypse of metallic scrapes, buzzing strings, and snarls of noise unfolds below. Unexpectedly, however, it all dissipates to reveal a sadly blooming synth melody that quickly expands into a densely layered and harmonically rich juggernaut of glimmering, undulating electronics and crunching, clattering machine noise. Since *A Conscious Effort*, Novellino has gotten considerably more adept at metabolizing his influences into something that feels distinctive and fresh, as the most simplistic description I can muster for "Strängar I" is that it sounds like a John Cage performance and an aggressive Tim Hecker remix of Steve Roach's

Structures from Silence

are blurring together in a cathedral full of industrial machinery. There are still recognizable nods to Novellino's inspirations, but their context and trajectory is never the expected one. That is an admirable bit of transformative alchemy and it is one that Novellino is able to successfully repeat again and again. It almost feels like each piece is some kind of timeless occult ritual that propels me through a portal into a futuristic landscape of neon and gleaming chrome.

In "Strängar II," Novellino opens with a darkly dissonant and rippling arpeggio pattern that sounds like an autoharp, but presumably originates from piano innards. Gradually, some more gnarled and distorted tones creep into the reverie and coalesce into a dense and erratically throbbing undercurrent. From that point on, the piece steadily evolves in a non-linear fashion, at times approximating a haunted music box or a deconstructed, time-stretched requiem mass, yet ultimately blossoming into a pointillist crescendo of shivering and streaking synth tones. That wonderful finale does not last long, but it is absolutely gorgeous while it lasts, calling to mind a slow-motion fireworks display or a melting night sky full of stars. The following "Strängar III," on the other hand, initially sounds like a jagged, heaving swirl of chiming and scraping metal strings before eventually resolving into a final act of smoldering drones and pulsing loops that slowly burns out and fades away. Both sections are likable and beautifully realized, but my favorite part of the piece lies in the transition between them, as there is a brief interlude of long, slow scrapes and metallic harmonics that threatens to steal the show long before Novellino gets to the intended pay-off. Elsewhere, Novellino saves his most memorable transformation for the album's closing statement. At first, "Strängar IV" resembles a skeleton plucking away at a rusty, cobwebbed, and strangely tuned harp as eerie metallic sounds heave and churn in the background, yet a more coherent form slowly emerges as subterranean pulses, shortwave radio noise, and tender swells of warmth snowball into a quavering and hissing dreamscape of intertwined drones. In a final twist, Novellino then slowly dissolves his elegant structure to make way for a glimmering, receding coda of hazy synth swells and reverberant scrapes and crackles.

While *Strängar* is an impressively absorbing and oft-haunting suite of songs in general, it is an especially wonderful headphone album, as Novellino's textures are all sharply realized and full depth of his craftsmanship does not reveal itself without focused listening. Obviously, there are plenty of other artists in the abstract/experimental milieu who take sound design very seriously, but it is quite rare to encounter one who also pours the same amount of thought and effort into their overall vision or their compositional decisions. In that regard, Novellino is a welcome surprise. Admittedly, it took me a few listens to fully appreciate what he achieved with *Strängar*

, as it is not the sort of album that instantly grabs me by the throat, but rather a quietly mesmerizing slow burn that grows deeper and more vivid with each fresh immersion. I especially love the way the pieces seamlessly transform from rippling, creaking, and scraping metal textures into sublime and harmonically rich soundscapes, as it calls to mind time lapse video of a blooming flower, but with the eerie, dreamlike sensibility of a Quay Brothers film. As a result, I am tempted to come up with some colorful term like "ghost ambient" to describe the darkly beautiful final destination that each of these four pieces reveals, but terms like "drone" or

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"ambient" would be misleadingly insufficient: Novellino is never content to allow his work to linger in a state of suspended animation, as subtly moving parts are always sneakily assembling the framework for the next transformation. While it is hard to say whether or not this is Novellino's best album to date, there is no question in my mind that

Strängar

marks an impressive leap forward in shaping his evolving aesthetic into a focused and fascinating vision that is his alone.

Samples can be found [here](#) .