

Blast From the Past

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2000 AT 4 A.M.

My first trip to New York City was in 1981, so I missed the '60s and '70s altogether. I never heard the *Theatre of Eternal Music* live, never saw Philip Glass and Steve Reich still on speaking terms, and, most regrettably, never heard the legendary performances of Charlemagne Palestine. For many tantalizing years I never even knew what his music sounded like, until recordings started appearing in the late 1990s (including a new organ disc just out on New World), and even then old-timers assured me that CDs couldn't capture the experience. So it was like being allowed to step into a time tunnel that Palestine's September 12 and 13 performances at Sonnabend Gallery, his first New York appearance in 20 years, exactly fit every description I had ever heard.

"I was born in this town; I'm glad to be back in this town; I'm happy to see my old friends in this town; and tomorrow I will be happy to *leave* this town."

Right down to the obligatory harangue. Palestine walked out in a multicolored jacket and brimmed hat, with a yellow silk scarf around his neck and a snifter of cognac in his hand, just as though he had stepped out of my imagination intact, and began his left-handed paean to New York City: "I was born in this town; I'm glad to be back in this town; I'm happy to see my old friends in this town; and tomorrow I will be happy to *leave* this town." From here he went on and on about his former landlords, New York rents, Disneyfication, commercialism, and how New York was no longer a place where people "like me" could live and do their work, the "like me" seeming to include everyone who might ever have any interest in Palestine's motionlessly volcanic music. As though there were anyone *else* like him.

At last he removed the hat and jacket, placed the snifter on the floor (almost empty by now), and faced his immense Bösendorfer piano, whose bulk dominated the room. Just as in every Palestine story I had ever heard, stuffed animals lay before the piano in a heap, mostly monkeys but also a Hindu-looking stone elephant and a small bear with an extendable penis (which he proudly showed around following the performance). And with those stubby fingers he began to beat the keyboard.

At first he hammered away on open fifths (like C and G), a sparkingly pure sonority. Gradually he added half-step dissonances to the fifths until he was hitting clusters, which moved, over a long period of time, up into the treble register. Even more gradually he slid down into the bass and created an unbelievable roar, from which he finally emerged, moving upward in clusters again. And after a while, the dissonances dropped out again, and we were left with those now quiet fifths in quickly alternating hands. Finally, he stopped playing and held up his hands in front of him to silence the audience as the Bösendorfer tones slowly, slowly died out.

That was it. It took 26 minutes. I'd waited for that 26 minutes for 20 years. It was just what I imagined it would be, and worth the wait. I couldn't have duplicated the achievement, even if I had found the right notes—couldn't have pounded away at that keyboard, *fortississimo*, for 26 minutes nonstop, with that much energy. I guess 26 minutes is about as long as he can still do it, because in the old days he used to keep that up for two or three hours; but I was satisfied nonetheless. As he did it, Palestine often stared directly into the audience, either measuring his effect on us or possibly just lost in a trancelike state. And after the applause, he came out and sang a weird little chant in three-note phrases.

I haven't described the music in such a way that you could distinguish it from a child banging on the piano, and I'm not sure I can; except that Palestine has a way of choosing notes so as to tremendously affect the thickness of the sound and create panoramic variety (and even microtonal anomalies) among the overtone masses he is creating, sort of a one-man acoustic Glenn Branca symphony. There were none of the cross-rhythms you hear in his music from the early '70s recorded on Barooni, but the music was similar to his *Strumming Music* recorded in the late '80s. But let me assure you that CDs can't capture the experience, and if you weren't one of the wide-eared sardines squeezed into little Sonnabend Gallery those two nights, you may have to wait *another* 20 years.

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