

Dueling With Symphonies

BY KYLE GANN

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Glenn Branca's latest piece starts out deafening and gets louder.

photo: Hiroyuki Ito

In the late 1970s, Glenn Branca and Jeffrey Lohn invited Rhys Chatham to play bass with their band, Theoretical Girls, for a couple of gigs. Chatham was then music director of the Kitchen, and the aim was apparently to get the band a Kitchen gig, which it did. Chatham had been writing works for multiple guitars, such as his famous *Guitar Trio* of 1977. By the early 1980s, Chatham and Branca both emerged writing for multiple guitar ensembles with unconventional tunings. But Branca, a rocker, put out records faster than the classically trained Chatham, and the critics gave him credit for all the innovations, referring to Chatham incorrectly as a member of Branca's band. Nasty words flew, and the two haven't spoken in many years.

Around 1981 Branca started writing symphonies for six to 12 guitars. Chatham moved to Paris in 1987, where he wrote a piece for 100 electric guitars, *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See*, which premiered in Lille in 1989. He followed this with two more symphonies for 100 guitars, and none of the three have yet been played in New York. Branca planned out a giant symphony for 2000 guitars, intended to be performed in Paris—where Chatham lives—in 2000. The plans fell through, for reasons easy to imagine; as consolation, he performed his Symphony No. 13, titled *Hallucination City*, in New York, Chatham's hometown, on June 13, with—naturally—100 electric

guitars. Chatham is scheduled to have *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See* performed in New York in 2002.

I'm not saying there's any massive sibling rivalry going on here, or music history's loudest case of one-upmanship. I'm just giving you the facts, and you can draw your own conclusions.

So, for the record, *Hallucination City*—the opening concert of the summer "Evening Stars" series at World Trade Center Plaza—wasn't the first time I've heard 100 electric guitars live. Structurally, it was perhaps Branca's most impressive work ever, filling out 62 minutes with no movement breaks. It started out purely consonant, repeating simple rising motives that changed notes with every eighth beat of Wharton Tiers's energetic but powerfully controlled drumming. Occasional bursts of buzzing tremolos added drama, cued by the subconductors spread throughout the ensemble. (Watching them gave you hints about the structure; for instance, for a while bassist Virgil Moorefield was cueing a new blast every 40 beats.) Starting at a deafening level, the work got louder almost throughout, and—after a stasis of a few minutes that could have signaled an ending—suddenly burst into tensely rising chromatic scales.

Branca's has always played Bruckner to Chatham's Mendelssohn (Bruckner being an acknowledged favorite composer of Branca's). While Chatham uses short movements with complex rhythms and a lot of surface detail, Branca has the patience to let you think for several minutes at a stretch that nothing is happening except the ongoing barrage of sound. Meanwhile, he's screwing up the tension by unnoticeable increments, and when the climax arrives, it raises the hair on your neck. *Hallucination City* did that in several stages, moving from extreme consonance to extreme dissonance, spilling its wad on an anguished minor ninth, resolving to clean chords again, then quieting to a balalaika-like buzz, and accelerating frantically for a final apotheosis. It seemed to me that the harmonies in the second half were of less interest, but that might be only because by that point those little hairs on my inner ear that register pitch were so flattened down that they quit trying to rise to the occasion. Reviewing music this loud is like trying to write art criticism with your nose pressed up against one of Monet's *Water Lilies*.

At its unprecedented one-movement length, Branca's 13th seemed a culmination of his other works, the consonance of the Sixth blended with the atonality of the Eighth, for example. Did the work justify its use of 100 guitars? I've certainly heard him achieve sonic effects as impressive with nine guitars, and there was clearly a lot of simple unison playing. I'm curious about whether the piece's aura was still audible up at Washington Square Park, but didn't want to leave to find out. What was surely unprecedented was that, two-thirds of the way through, Branca became the first composer in history—someone correct me if they can cite an earlier example—to light up a cig while publicly conducting one of his symphonies. Even Chatham's never done *that* before.



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