

David Beardsley Paints Moods Without Moving

UNIDENTIFIED FRETTED OBJECT

BY KYLE GANN



BEARDSLEY SCULPTS TONES INTO OVERPOWERING MOODS.

The September 21 concert of David Beardsley was the most peculiar I've heard in a few years. In the first place it was held at Chama, a tiny storefront East Village bookstore devoted to UFOs and extraterrestrial phenomena. Secondly, 25 percent of the audience members were new-music critics from *The Village Voice*; which is to say, only three other people were there besides me, and that includes the guy who runs the place. This was officially the smallest concert I've attended in 21 years of reviewing, and the competition's been stiff. Then there was the playing itself. Beardsley ran his guitar through a phalanx of effects pedals. All he had to do was pluck a note occasionally, and the music wheezed, reared up, and roared in furious beats. It seemed to take on a life of its own as we all sat there motionless, including the soloist. Surrounded by posters of crop circles, reports of near-death experiences, and books offering incontrovertible evidence of life on Mars, this music seemed at home.

A big name in microtonal circles, Beardsley used to run a microtonalists' Web page called Juxtaposition Ezine, currently down for refurbishing—a visually undeveloped but important resource for information on people using odd tunings. He's made a lot of music on computer, but he's back to the guitar now, and playing a magnificent instrument—if magnificence can be attributed to the eccentricity of one's fretboard—designed by Jon Catler (guitarist for La Monte Young's Blues Band and an interesting composer). The frets, closely spaced and providing 63 pitches per octave, do not go straight across, but make the jagged patterns required to get the pure intervals of just intonation, harmonies more resonant and powerful than the ones available on a modern piano. I spent intermission admiring that fretboard, and enjoyed the look of it almost as much as the music.

Which was not what I expected, given the fretboard. The ostensive purpose of a just-intonation guitar is to play more purely in tune, but Beardsley—as he had to later explain to me, since I couldn't figure out how he was doing it—used not the simple consonances but the tiny intervals available from

overtones spaced closely together, like the 48th and 49th harmonics, less than a quarter-tone apart. The set opened with rich drones, and eventually he began to lean heavily on an interval just higher than the octave, which had a menacing quality. Gradually amid the roar this gave way to a pitch slightly below the octave, a note that, in a major seventh chord on D, seemed to hover or glide between C-sharp and D. This description makes the music sound static, but more often than not new tones would precipitate a crescendo of ominous beats vigorous enough to shake the store's ceiling fan.

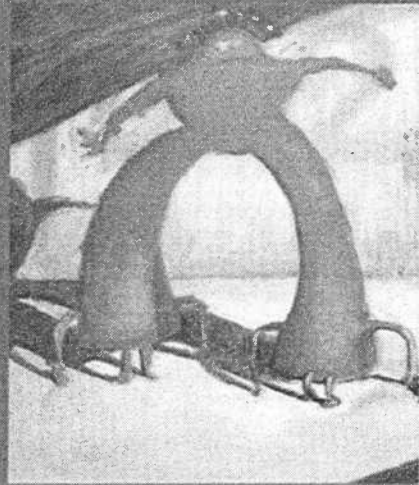
In other words, Beardsley creates with guitar some of the same beating effects that Alvin Lucier does with acoustic instruments and sine tones. But rather than simply demonstrate acoustic illusions, he sculpts them into overpowering moods. In the 17th century it was widely believed that certain musical intervals had built-in emotional connotations: the minor sixth sorrowful, the major seventh yearning. Atonal modernists tried to pretend that that was all superstition, but music like Beardsley's brings the whole issue up again in powerful terms. Why was that squeezed minor ninth so sinister, and why was its resolution down to the major seventh such a cathartic release—as much of a release as the newly cleansed final theme of any Beethoven symphony? Except for the absence of a rock beat—which would interfere with the continual acceleration and deceleration of his pulsations—Beardsley has made himself a one-man Glenn Branca band.

The music decrescendoeed again to its opening drones, and then built back up into an out-of-tune augmented triad, based, as I later realized, on the 13th harmonic (in the key of C, a quarter-tone between A-flat and A). Such austere music isn't for everyone—clearly—but in its glacial tension and release it offered the essential outlines of symphonic form, stripped of surface detail. And in such pure tunings, the dissonant elements that, in Mozart, merely resolve politely, here actually shake the walls and demand resolution. Beardsley is planning further gigs at Chama in October, so call for details. Even in that tiny space, there's plenty of room. **U**

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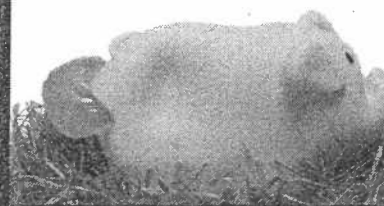
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