

Fuzzing the Familiar

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2002 AT 4 A.M.



Best known for his music for multiple boom boxes

photo: Tania Savayan

It's remarkable how enjoyable it is to see some familiar object through an obscuring mist. Like, take a simple drawing you've seen a million times and wet it to see the ink run: Suddenly it looks mystical, poignant, a romantic ruin. And given how simple and surefire the technique is, it's curious how few composers have availed themselves of it. After all, there's no easier way to get a complex passage across to an audience than to have some familiar tune sing out from the background.

There's Charles Ives, of course, who made something of a fetish of having "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" peeping through an orchestral chaos. More recently, Gloria Coates's Fourth Symphony washes over an aria from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* with a veil of string glissandos. Berio's *Sinfonia* draws wonderful sonic graffiti over Mahler's Second Symphony, and I once reviewed here Berio's *Rendering*, an orchestral piece on sketches from Schubert's uncompleted Tenth Symphony, with snatches of Austrian melody fading into and out of hazy tone clusters. And the German composer Dieter Schnebel has a lovely *Schubert-Phantasie* based on Schubert's G-major Sonat, in which the cadences of that piece waft ghostlike through the background. All these examples are for acoustic instruments, but now electronic composer Phil Kline is getting in on the act, and no one could be better suited.

Kline's February 17 gig was at Egizio's Project, a little gallery space in Soho where Patrick Grant is curating a concert series called "One-Two-Three-Go!"; hardly worth publicizing them, because the place was already packed up to the heating vents with listeners. Two of Kline's four pieces were based on the quotation technique I'm referring to. *Mirage (I Only Have Eyes for You)* was a video piece with electronics whose halo of glissandoing tones gradually allowed the non

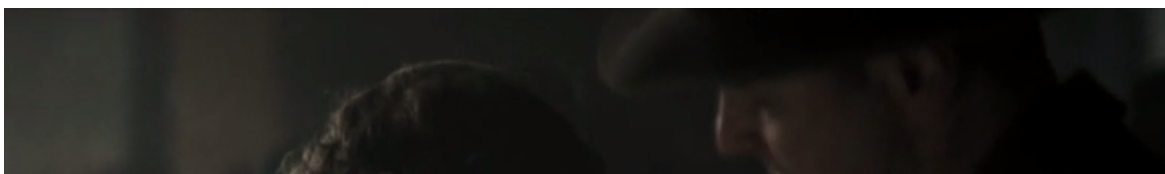
was a video piece with electronics whose halo of glistening tones gradually allowed the pop song referred to in the subtitle to blur through as though from a distant room. And in *A City Called Heaven*, Kline sang an altered version of the old Southern hymn "I Am a Poor Wayfarin' Stranger" as Eve Beglarian crooned ebbing and swelling wordless tones, and Todd Reynolds spun out a delicate background on violin. Meanwhile, a digital delay system sustained their tones into a wash through which the song was just intelligible.

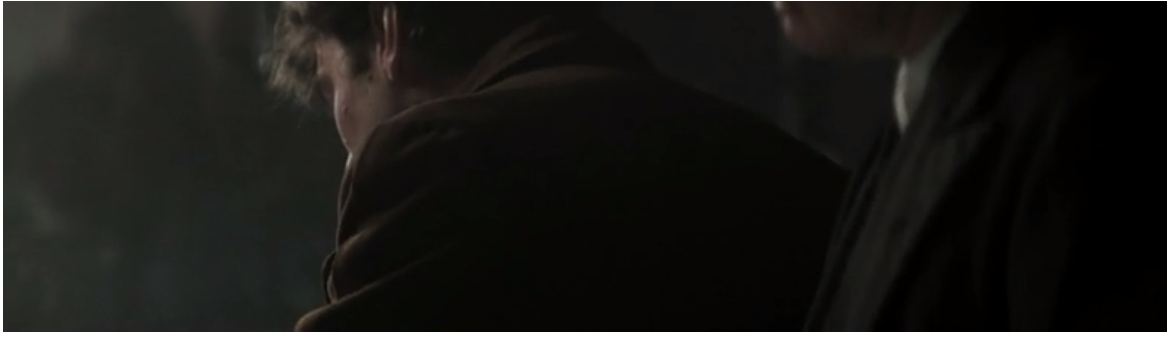
Delayed signals are central to Kline's aesthetic—he's best known for his music for multiple boom boxes, which he sometimes uses to record each other in recursive loops. More often, though, his textures echo back and forth from boom boxes carried on the shoulders of pedestrian volunteers; you'll hear the effect on the new recording of his famous *Unsilent Night*, a peripatetic Downtown Christmas tradition, just released on a Cantaloupe compact disc. But delay isn't his only technique, and I can't figure out how he gets the orchestral textures of bells and strings in pieces like *Mirage*; sometimes no simple repetition seems present, and I can only shut up and listen. Reynolds, though, also played four Kline études for violin entirely based on digital delay, something like Steve Reich's *Violin Phase* only less ambitious and more melodic. Each line of crisp eighth notes Reynolds tossed off became background to new melodies, the results often sailing along in oddly restful tone clusters.

Apparently not content to write music just to sit and listen to, Kline, as his concert career expands, is adding text and video. His use of text I'm not totally convinced by yet; in *Mirage*, it seemed to just drown out beautiful sounds—but his video sense is catching up with his music. The major work, *Meditations in an Emergency*, was a symphonic-sized accompaniment to videos he made himself—for example, panning back and forth from his hand in front of a New York sidewalk up to the tops of buildings over and over again, with shifts in perspective that formed a reasonable analogy to his music. (Despite its title, the piece was made prior to 9-11, though it now inevitably calls that emergency to mind.) The music, more strings and bells with obscured singing voices in the background, swirled from boom boxes hidden around the periphery of the room, like dry-ice smoke slowly enveloping us.

Here, too, was a sense of the identifiable—New York skyscrapers you've seen a million times—brought into contact with the ineffable: the repetition and transformation of abstract outlines. Of course, these smaller works of Kline's don't achieve the grandeur he can get in larger and longer sound assemblages, but everything he does—as Cage said of Feldman's music—is just almost too beautiful.

Sponsor Content





©2016 Village Voice, LLC. All rights reserved.