

Trained in technology, Anthony De Ritis fools the ear by mixing DJ Spooky with orchestra

Calling Anthony De Ritis's *Devolution* a "Concerto for DJ and Symphony Orchestra" raised not quite the right expectations. A concerto pits hero against crowd in dramatic conflict. But what if the soloist—in this case DJ Spooky, also known as Paul D. Miller, newly shorn of his trademark dreadlocks—isn't so much in front of the orchestra as

skulking within it, mimicking it, sowing doubt about what's real and what's not? What if the soloist isn't a hero, but a spy in camouflage?

Many years ago, when we were both thinner, composer Anthony De Ritis was a student of mine. Since then he's achieved far more success than I can assume any credit for, not only as a professor but as an entrepreneur in the music technology program at Northeastern University. He trained in technology via both uptown and downtown routes, studying with French spectralist Tristan Murail at Fontainebleau and David Wessel at Berkeley's more experimental CNMAT. This put him in an excellent position to write what seems to be the first DJ concerto (though Google reveals a 1999 work called *RPM* by Montreal's Nicole Lizée for turntables and 19 instruments), a work that was premiered last March by the Oakland East Bay Symphony and given its East Coast premiere September 23 in New Haven, with the tightly disciplined New Haven Symphony conducted by Jung-Ho Pak.

Even knowing De Ritis, I feared DJ-plus-orchestra was a recipe for gimmickry, but *Devolution* was smart. Much of the orchestral texture consisted of drones and various backbeats from an expanded percussion section, which gave DJ Spooky room to operate. Ostinatos were limned by an electric guitar

HALL OF MIRRORS

BY KYLE GANN



Photograph by Harold Shapiro/New Haven Symphony Orchestra

Widening the palette

in the orchestra, a hip nose-thumb to Woolsey Hall's scroll-decorated arches. Still, for much of the first few minutes I could barely tell what Spooky was contributing to the texture, until I thought: "If he's playing CDs of orchestras, how would I know the difference?" From that point I watched like a hawk to see whether, when I was hearing

flutes, the flutists onstage were playing, and often they weren't.

Closer to the surface, De Ritis filled the orchestral score of *Devolution* with quotations from Ravel's *Bolero* (an orchestral loop of the same melody over and over, sort of like

a skipping record, get it?) and the slow movement of Beethoven's Seventh. Phrases from the two pieces collided entertainingly, and Ravel and Beethoven found themselves accompanied by Latin rhythms they had never anticipated. But when Spooky started playing quotations from the same two pieces, and you heard violins playing the same thing they'd been playing a minute ago, only now you see their violins mute in their laps—this was screwing with your mind indeed.

A concerto must have cadenzas, and *Devolution* had two. In the first, the orchestra played a low drone, over which the track-skipping voice of an Arabic muezzin suddenly rang out, soon accompanied by a hint of exotically Eastern dance music and then a hard-rock beat. The second cadenza, with Spooky entirely solo, featured what would have been heard, if you weren't watching, as a wild jazz drum solo, and in a strange, quasi-jazz moment, the audience applauded it as the orchestra re-entered.

Hearing violins, seeing them mute—this was screwing with your mind indeed.

Is this the music of the future? Oddly enough it seemed a return to an interesting recent past, a technological update on the quotation tradition of Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* and Ives's Fourth Symphony. But beyond bowing to the pressure to hip up the orchestra, De Ritis and Spooky widened the palette of that tradition, as well as imbuing it with a new kind of hall-of-mirrors logic that could pave the way to a submersion of the orchestra in a world of technology.

Those of you who have high-speed connections will want to know that I've started my own Internet radio show, Postclassic Radio, to play all this music I write about, at live365.com/stations/kylegann.

rip themselves apart in front of the mirror even worse. But that wouldn't be nice, and it wouldn't be true, either. *God Bless the Go-Go's* puts the hard lessons of the past aside without dismissing them. "Talking Myself Down" rescues an infatuated girl from the old "Head Over Heels" syndrome that became a metaphor for everything that wrecked them: sudden wealth, nasty breakups, substance abuse, and flaky management. The punny "Kissing Asphalt" promises that these Go-Go's won't be had so quickly, and their solid performance helped explain why: Drummer Gina Schock shouted out the beat to Kathy Valentine's twangy bass while guitarist Charlotte Caffey plugged along happily, looking as if she'd never missed a day's work. "I don't think that this band's longevity is going to be decided by how many records we sell," said Jane in 1984. "It's going to be decided by how well people get along with each other, and how much people are willing to adjust to changing times and moods." Though still struggling with their fans' expectations, the Go-Go's convinced me they'll be around awhile. —Georgia Christgau

Kind of Blue

I'll describe first, and decipher later. Tears for Fears' "Pharaohs" instrumental fades as dark blue lights bathe the Irving Plaza stage. After some random postmillennial beats, the Eurhythmics-like synth groove of "You Don't Wanna" (a track from the brand-new *Blowback*) takes over. Her dreadlocks braided in two large cornrows, singer Ambersunshower serenades the audience while Tricky smokes a cigarette stage left, his mohawked head eerily shrouded in smoke. Keyboardist Gareth Bowen brings in the Mafia-movie hook to B.I.G.'s "What's Beef?" that anchors "Burly the Evidence." Hawkman—Tricky's latest Jamaican sideman foil—toasts wicked in patois. Things get very loud.

The Tricky experience at its best alternates punk-driven, death-metal dirges with hip-hop vivacity and majestic moments of lump-in-your-throat poignancy. "Pumpkin," which was up next on June 18, is one of those moments. "I can't see, and I can't breathe," Tricky rasps over the Middle Eastern-flavored ballad, testifying to the melancholy suffocation of despondent love. Ambersunshower mines this mood of Billie-level despair on "Makes Me Wanna Die." A back-to-the-audience bandleader à la Miles



JANE AND BELINDA SAY KISS MY ASPHALT.

Davis, Tricky stands off to the side for a good portion of the set, maniacally wagging his head with the music. His most piquant sentiments are made plain by their incessant repetition: stuff like "hate to feel, scared to feel" (from the night's closer, *Pre-Millennium Tension's* "Vent").

Ambersunshower's come-ons in "Overcome"—like "When we fuck we'll hear beats on the corner"—come off, and the band on the whole achieves Nirvana-worthy sonic distortion on "Give It to 'Em." The houselights flood Irving to the prerecorded track of "Tricky Kid,"

Branca Goes for the 100-Guitar Mark

DUELING WITH SYMPHONIES

BY KYLE GANN

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 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;

On, and shouting out every last person in the house. Thus spake Chuck—part Stanley Kubrick, part Hoochie Coochie Man, part Mister Señor Love Daddy: "Happy birthday to sweet Tawana over here," "We got Allen and Suzaaaaay—newlyweds celebrating their honeymoon." And by the way, it's drummer Mr. Smith's wedding anniversary, an occasion that will be duly celebrated like all the rest.

As the band segues out of "Mister Magic" into percussionist Foxy Rob's easy dook-dooka-dook groove, the crowd chants, "Oh my goodness!" Then the inevitable "Wind me up Chuck!" "Oh, talk to me baby!" the funky grandpa laughs. "I don't forget. I remember everything!" —Jeff Chang

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. ▀