

How to Hear a Face

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Clarence Barlow, one of the few original minds in post-Darmstadt European music

That music is a language of logic is a fact too much emphasized by academics and too little recognized by the average music lover. No one but a pedant really cares whether a symphony drops to the subdominant key in the coda, but it does exert an influence, however subliminal, on the piece's overall effect. Rely too exclusively on logic to make your points, as Milton Babbitt does, and the audience is likely to zone out. But Clarence Barlow's musical logic is like Lewis Carroll's, luring you down a rabbit hole into a wonderland whose charm is that things only seem to make sense; or else, conversely, his nonsense only makes sense in retrospect.

The charm of this interplay of sense and nonsense makes Barlow one of the few original minds in post-Darmstadt-era European music, yet in America he remains a mystery and an underground legend. His life and behavior gild the aura: Born in Calcutta in 1945, he teaches in Cologne, and I've seen his name appear in several different spellings. As with almost all Europeans one can describe his music as forbiddingly complex, yet certain elements are whimsical in their simplicity, and he is something of a musical humorist. The most amazing thing I've seen him do was a performance on Disklavier (computerized piano) in which he played his own theme and variations on the arietta from Beethoven's Op. 111 Sonata—an act of formidable chutzpah, since he was competing with Beethoven's own variations. As Barlow played away, the piano began adding notes of its own in mid performance, until finally he stood up and walked away as it continued without him.

His recent Roulette gig, though, was part of a tour and more modest in its resources: eight prerecorded video-music works plus a few live piano pieces played by Deborah Richards. The video pieces offered isomorphisms between what we heard and what we saw on the screen, but the one-to-one correspondence was too complex to seem Mickey Mouse. For instance, a piece called *1981* followed a spiral twirling among three names—Clementi, Ravel, and Schumann—while superimposing piano trios by those three composers. Violin, cello, and piano phrases from three centuries jostled each other, all mixed up at first, then more identifiably quoting one or the other as the spiral drew nearer to individual names. The shards of melody preserved the emotive content of the originals, but now refashioned into a more challenging idiom of Joycean nonlinearity.

Other pieces, less traditional in their sound sources, were similarly traced by points moving on a geometric grid. In *Sechsendreissig Skandierte Gesichtspunkte*, piano notes sounded in synch with dots sweeping across the screen. The music's logic was meaningless at first, but as the dots progressively outlined a photograph of a woman, you slowly became aware that you were hearing a human face translated into sound. Further works applied similar processes to extremely complex visual abstractions, such as *Les Ciseaux de Tom Johnson*, a birthday homage to my *Voice* predecessor. Here electronic tones beeped whenever moving lines intersected overlapping circles, while in *Estudio Siete*, curves and squares danced to a layered and harmonized collage version of Conlon Nancarrow's happy, Spanish-tinged Study No. 6 for Player Piano.

It was the live piano works, though, that finally pulled us through the looking glass, a fact apparent the instant Richards began playing *Des Nus Descendants Une Echelle*: It opened with a quotation from Erik Satie's *Trois Morceaux en Forme de Poire*, one irreverent trickster quoting another. Descending scales and static octaves finally led to the tango from Bizet's *Carmen*. Likewise, *Clair de l'Une Fois* reconstructed Debussy with dissonances and bitonality. *Pandora* was the one monumental work, pounding away with Rzewski-ish chords in Barlow's own inimitable brand of nonlinear tonality. And the closing *Bachanal* was a last joke, less than a minute's worth of accelerating four-note groups banging in a final cluster. Coming from a continent young composer who seems intent on rivaling Schoenberg in awesome profundity, Barlow is an engaging, latter-day, high-tech Satie. This outlay of his lighter works merely whetted my appetite for more.

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