

The Theatre of Eternal Music **LOST TREASURES**
BY KYLE GANN

In the Theatre of Eternal Music, tones grew from other tones like branches from a tree. A drone would start, and other perfectly tuned drones—guided by the flickering of La Monte Young's reedy soprano saxophone—would appear and sustain on Tony Conrad's violin, John Cale's viola, Marian Zazeela's voice. At first it seemed like uneventful, stoned-out hippie music, but without your noticing, amazing things happened. Consonances would build off of other consonances, and you'd find yourself in a three- or four-dimensional musical space in which two sustained pitches only a fourth of a half step apart could both make perfect sense. The drones created a kind of purely in-tune polytonality that challenged all our assumptions about what harmony is.

I wasn't there; I was in elementary school when Conrad, Cale, Young, & Co. were shaking Young's loft with their heavy amplification back in the '60s. But I've heard some of the tapes, which is more than most minimalism fans have. And I know what the extent of the tragedy is that we don't get to hear this music, tied up as it is up by threats of litigation. Young claims to

be the sole composer and wants recognition as such, Conrad and Cale want equal billing on the basis that the music was improvisatory and collaborative. It's not like the late Beethoven sonatas have been squirreled away from a hungry public, but it is a lost view of music's more esoteric potentials.

So you can imagine how surprised I was to receive in the mail a commercial CD of the Theatre of Eternal Music's work, a 30-minute bootleg disc of a 1965 performance called *Day of Niagara* (Table of the Elements). The performance by Young, Zazeela, Conrad, Cale, and drummer Angus MacLise, released against Young's wishes, is labeled with Cale and Conrad getting top billing within a group called the Dream Syndicate (Conrad's somewhat cynical name for the ToEM). As Young has exhaustively documented in the reactive flurry of e-mails and press releases, the sound quality of the disc is very poor. The miking is badly balanced, the drones sound raspy, the relationships between the consonant tones not at all clear. Listening with this as your only example, you'd have to wonder what all the fuss was about.

There is no need to take sides here. Clearly

it is in everyone's best interest that the ToEM tapes be released. Clearly there are better examples than this one, though it is a little disingenuous of Young to complain that the tape is poor quality when he's sitting on the cache of better ones. People as creative as this crowd ought to be able to apply that creativity to marketing a CD. Clearly the Euro-classical composer-performer paradigm is inadequate to represent how this music is made. Young's contention has always been that he is the composer because he supplied the number relationships governing the drones used in each piece. Doesn't this put him in something of the same position John Coltrane was in, supplying chord changes for Red Garland and Paul Chambers? Couldn't the ToEM tapes be marketed like a jazz album: the Theatre of Eternal Music with Conrad, Cale, Zazeela as soloists, compositions (or numbers) by Young? Can't these highly creative people come up with some compromise in terms of name placement, typeface size, and delineation of each individual's contribution, that would make everyone reasonably happy and bring in a little income to the long-suffering antagonists? Why make mu-

sic so far outside the European paradigm, then not release it because you can't cram it back in?

And on the other side: With all the listener interest evident in this music, why haven't other musicians taken up where the ToEM left off? We know enough about their performance methods, and enough information is obtainable about their number systems to, if not re-create this legendary music, create some comparable analogue to it. British critic Keith Potter has even published an entire ToEM score in his new book, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge). There is no reason for the amazing experiences the Theatre offered to remain shrouded in the

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mists of history, hinted at in books. Either let the musicians figure out some creative compromise, and if they fail, then let some entrepreneurial group of youngsters pick up where they left off. Anything but just sit around and imagine what new worlds that music could have taken us to. ▣



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