

Glenn Branca and Friends Shake the Brooklyn Bridge

RATTLING THE STONES

BY KYLE GANN



BRANCA BLASTS OFF: THE EVENING'S VOLUME MATCHED ITS ORIGINALITY.

If the Brooklyn Bridge seemed unusually wobbly as you drove over it July 20, especially at one end, I think I can explain. In the previous few days, the Lincoln Center Festival had completed a quirkily heterogeneous survey of digital and analog electronics in its "Electronic Evolution" series. But on the night in question, Lincoln Center's earnest efforts were blown out of the water by the most explosive—well, certainly the loudest—concert of electronic music in recent memory. The Brooklyn Anchorage, that vast, intricately subdivided cavern beneath the bridge's east end, was filled with loudspeakers of daunting size and weight, and through them were pumped bass tones at a volume that vibrated the very stones beneath our feet and made me glance up anxiously at the huge bricks above our heads.

Had decibels been the only attraction for this enthusiastic crowd of masochists, I wouldn't have much to report, but the evening's originality, mirabile dictu, matched its volume. Annie Gosfield, Phil Kline, and Glenn Branca all unearthed new works, in between which Mark Stewart filled the ambient silences with drones from whirling didgeridoos—a slightly New Agey effect, but preferable to the prerecorded slop that clubs now routinely insert between live performances. Loosely organized by Creative Time and with no place to sit, this was one of those events whose youth-oriented hipness threatened to drown out aesthetic considerations. But it was also one of those nights in which you realized that Downtown American music—neglected and despised yet bursting with idealism, inventiveness, and a willingness to try *anything*—is truly one of the world's great musical traditions.

Take Gosfield. Her music is usually rather intricate in its contrast of disparate factory-sound samples, but since these acoustics would have killed any such detail work, she played a quite different kind of music that she had developed in similar circumstances in Germany. With Roger Kleier on guitar and James Pugliese on percussion, the trio opened with long, loud, breathy wails that filled the entire space, moving to low booming pulsations and rapid clicks of percussion. Some of the latter I could attribute to Pugliese, but in general you couldn't

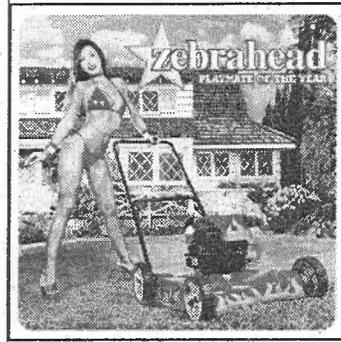
locate a source; the sounds seemed to emanate from thin air.

That was impressive, but it was Kline's *Symphony for Boom Boxes* that raised the hair on my back. A couple dozen of Kline's minions circled through the space with cassette players on their shoulders, emitting buzzy tones whose clashing overtones sizzled like a swarm of gigantic bees. Gradually the tones began to swoop upward, making us imagine that we were swirling down a humongous toilet as the sound above left us behind. Such an effect would have sufficed for most composers, but Kline still had magic to work: The swirl dissolved into gorgeously poignant chords, comforting and disturbing by turns, drawn in wisps of sound that circled over our heads. The boys at IRCAM would be better off junking their fancy computers and hiring Kline to teach them boom box technique.

Kline followed his symphony with a string quartet, played by the Sirius Quartet with delays and other electric effects, so tonal and contrapuntal as to bring to mind Branca's string quartet from a few years ago. The first movement opened with ethereal chords, like Ives's *Unanswered Question*, activity swelling into a final movement of scintillating tremolos, a little reminiscent of Steve Reich's *Different Trains*. While it hardly achieved the grandeur of Kline's sonic poetry in his boom box pieces, it was an enjoyable essay in a difficult, overpopulated genre.

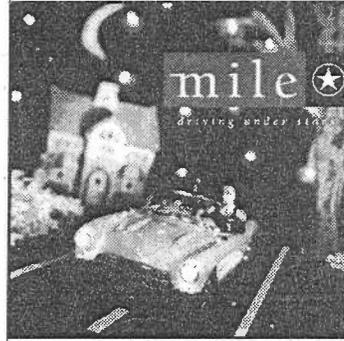
As for the evening's intended climax, Branca's new 12th Symphony, played here for the first time in America and scored for electric guitars despite his oft stated determination to abandon that medium—it was really too loud to be heard. Even with both earplugs and fingers in my ears, it was painful to get within 12 feet of a loudspeaker. From what I could tell, the one-movement work seemed to begin in a state of fairly pure consonance, and slowly escalated into a dense field of dissonant harmonics with a chilling effect similar to, but more subtle than, Kline's symphony. Listening from outside, whence my companions and I finally escaped, you could intuit that a magnificent interplay of overtones accompanied the final catharsis. Someday the recording will come out, and I'll describe the piece to you in more detail. For now, you'll have to content yourself with how unutterably cool I am for simply having been there. **V**

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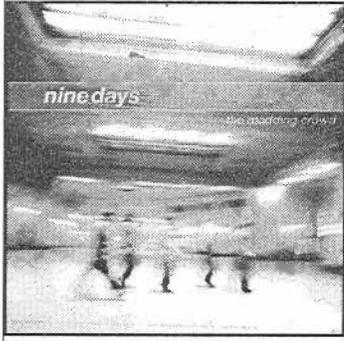
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