

Nic Collins Mellows in a Work of Poignant Humanity

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

BY KYLE GANN

**NIC COLLINS
MAY-TCHI CHEN**

St. Peter's Church November 4

In the 1980s, Nic Collins was a ubiquitous mover and shaker of the Downtown new-music scene. He spent the last seven years in Amsterdam and Berlin, however, and as of this past September he now lives and works in Chicago—which may be, as some East Coast culture mavens have suggested, a different kind of expatriation (though I'll put Chicago up against Amsterdam any day). His music seems to have undergone a concomitant change, evident in his recent concert in the "Interpretations" series. Once gritty and raucous in a Downtown conceptualist noise tradition, Collins's work has become friendlier, more personal, emotive, with bittersweet tonal sonorities, touching texts, and program-note references to his children. Removed from New York, it seems, he mellowed.



NIC COLLINS: BITTERSWEET TONAL SONORITIES

In at least one respect, however, Collins's preoccupations have remained consistent. His magnum opus of the late '80s was an excitingly clever work with a self-referential text—*It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*—in which the vocal part triggered prerecorded samples from a digital reservoir. It was a potent technique, and Collins has continued developing it, most recently in seven new pieces gathered together on a CD, *Sound Without Picture*, on Herb Levy's Periplum label. Each piece has to do with one of the senses, some of them through deprivation: deafness, blindness, the scent of perfume, the "sixth sense." He has also turned the technique into a solo performing venture (*Dark and Stormy* was for ensemble), with an optional second musician for some pieces—in the four pieces he performed here, with Jonathan Impett adding subtle commentary on trumpet.

For instance, the text of *Strange Heaven* is a letter from a blind woman contrasting for her grown son her own experiences of early motherhood and his experiences with his newborn son. "I must have known less about your face," Collins intoned with touching understatement, "than you will know about Quentin's. I mean, I knew its shape. . . ." Collins's voice stirred up lightly ringing minor-key sonorities, his percussive consonants triggered stronger pings, and his whistling elicited high trills. *Sound for Picture*

gender identification, especially as some of the narratives he read connoted a woman's viewpoint. It meant that, beyond its finely honed technical wizardry, *Sound Without Picture* expressed a poignant universal humanity.

To compound the irony, Collins was paired—though the juxtaposition seemed more haphazard than that word suggests—with a more ambitious, hour-long work called *Sonic Mandala* by a young woman, May-Tchi Chen. In chantlike modalities, baritone Thomas Buckner sang mystical verses by the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi, as Wu Man strummed a Chinese pipa, Julie Josephson growled on a trombone, and the Midsummer String Quartet provided the music's core. The work pushed every spiritual button it could reach: There were references to the Italian mystic composer Giacinto Scelsi, a movement based on a hymn by Hildegard of Bingen, and slides projected above of Tibetan temples, mandalas, and placid mountain ranges.

Yet the best moments came when the music stripped down to just Buckner and the pipa. Elsewhere, not only was the spirituality ostentatious, but the music was riddled with academic gestures, reminiscent of Webern only tonal, precluding any throughline that would have held our attention through this vast canvas. Too bad—had intentions been results, we would all have floated home enlightened. ▮

was a first-person account of South African poet David Wright telling how he realized he had become deaf; like the sounds of the poet's world, Collins's voice gradually became subsumed in electronic textures. For *Still Lives*, with a text by Nabokov, Collins made a CD of late-Renaissance music by Giuseppe Guami loop erratically. Reduced to snippets, the music's chords were dwelt upon lovingly, and deconstructed with a nebulous minimalism reminiscent of Ingram Marshall's music. (Beware: *Still Lives* is the first cut on the CD, and immediately sounds like a skipping, defective disc—but it's not.)

We've had numerous women composers—Brenda Hutchinson, Laetitia Sonami, Eve Beglarian, Shelley Hirsch, and others—use such personal memoirs as pretexts for compositions, focusing us on the music while the text, seemingly less important but with its stronger emotional point, sneaks around the back of the listener's psyche. It seemed unusual, in a welcome way, to see Collins shatter that subtle

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