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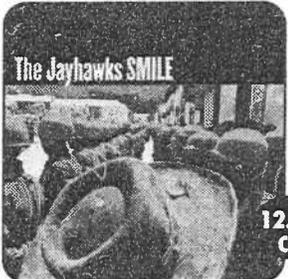
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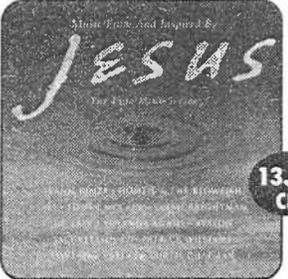


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MUSIC

Bernadette Speech's Music Renounces Technique

THE RIGHT TWO NOTES

BY KYLE GANN



LINDA HARRIS

SPEACH'S RENUNCIATION OF TECHNIQUE IS A NOBLE GESTURE.

BERNADETTE SPEACH

Roulette
April 29

For those who've followed it for years, Bernadette Speech's music sounds like it's in transition. She used to write thickly textured, jazz-tinged, postminimal works in which pitch and texture seemed equally important. Now it's almost as though she's on a bet to see how few notes she can get away with. Several of her pieces at her April 29 Roulette concert stripped down to only one pitch line at a time. It's almost a kind of renunciation—a renunciation of technique, perhaps, something she has plenty of. I remember a piece of hers for piano and orchestra written in such a way that the orchestra seemed to be improvising in sync with Ursula Oppens's improvised cadenza, a trick that Mozart should have been proud to think up. Now she'll play two notes over and over, daring to make them stand or sink by themselves.

It's a noble gesture, renunciation of technique, and a rare one, but not without precedent in the 20th century; pioneered by Erik Satie, perhaps. And since Speech was once a nun, it may be an old instinct she's sublimated into her music. Technique is something that many composers learn an excess of anyway, and often cram more of into one piece than an audience can swallow. It's a brave thing, when you know how to do some wild chord progressions, and striking instrumental effects, and dazzling arpeggio patterns, and instead you sit there with 70 people in the room watching you just play those two notes, like your soul is those two notes and you refuse to hide it anymore or dress it up for company.

Of course, for it to blow people away those better be two damn good notes, and in some of these pieces they were, and in others they were so-so. In her piano piece *Angels in the Snow*, the two notes were a half-step apart, rocking slowly back and forth as a fluid line of melody encircled them. This beautifully direct, courageously simple work achieved a heart-touching sincerity, and so did *Viola*, played by a violist named Rozanna on the title instrument (though *Viola* was also Speech's mother's first name) and Anthony de Mare on piano.

Unabashedly romantic despite its postminimal austerity, *Viola* opened with just one bowed, soulful note over and over, and, after a few twists and turns, it reached a climax the same way, one octave poured out again and again against the piano's chordal protestations. That was a risk, and it paid off.

One thing that keeps the risks interesting is that Speech still nurtures an interest in bizarre textures. Sometimes the notes drew a line through different registers; more often, they bounced back and forth from one instrument to another, between viola and piano in *Viola*, and between toy piano and Jeffrey Schanzer's prepared guitar in *Chosen Voices*. And so she created musical surfaces in which notes were linked yet appeared out of nowhere; surfaces that were neither harmony nor melody, neither horizontal nor vertical but diagonal, like Webern's, yet, unlike Webern's, sensuous and marginally tonal.

Such risks paid off least well in the pieces with spoken text, for paradoxically, while Speech's renunciations make for sparse accompaniment textures, the soul-baring and unusual note choices are so dramatic that they compete with the words, and make it difficult to focus on them. This was especially true of *Your Friend, Susan*, a piece we heard three times in slightly different versions for piano and voice, the last time with Supove doubling Speech's piano on synthesizer. The work gave a keyboard background to the reading of a letter from a now-departed friend, and the main advantage of hearing it three times was that one eventually absorbed the entire text while trying to listen to the more interesting piano.

It was less true of *Passages and Outtakes*, Speech's latest collaboration with poet and former *Voice* writer Thulani Davis. This was a work in progress, and while its overlappings of sung and spoken text—Davis reciting and Alva Rogers jumping in to sing in quasi-unison at times—stood in need of theatrical finesse, they promised to be potentially effective in some more polished version. It's a tricky business, for Speech is a quintessentially musical composer, and the fact that her music has renounced the sin of intellectual pride (as mortal in art as in religion) makes it more intense, more demanding, not lighter or more versatile. ▣