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MUSIC

Joshua Fried's 'Headphone Follies' Simulate Simultaneous Psychoses

WOMEN ON THE VERGE

BY KYLE GANN



JARBOE (LEFT) AND KITTY BRAZELTON PERFORM FRIED'S HEADPHONE FOLLIES AT HERE.

So septuagenarian Lorin Maazel is chosen as the next conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Pierre Boulez, now 74, becomes Carnegie Hall's "new" composer in residence. Donald Rumsfeld, at 69, is brought back from the Vietnam era to be secretary of defense, again. Pseudopresident Shrub dutifully reinstates the policies of his 76-year-old father, and takes advice from the old man's ancient cronies. The powers that be in America are desperately afraid to enter the 21st century, terrified of what my generation might bring, and, in music as in politics, are entrusting the country back to the generation before last in a futile attempt to hold on to the last moment of high modernism forever.

Not so Joshua Fried. (All right, that was a transparently tenuous segue, but I thought the above parallel was worth drawing to your attention.) Fried, only 42, has returned to blitz New York with more of his headphone-driven performance art, now marketed under the crowd-enticing title "Headphone Follies." In case you haven't been paying attention, Fried has, in the last 10 years, developed his own frenetic brand of music theater by having singers listen to sounds and voices over headphones and recreate those sounds and voices exactly and simultaneously. Meanwhile, the audience hears, along with the live singers, tapes of a different music, placing the frantic performers in a strangely distanced context.

No one is allowed to perform one of Fried's headphone pieces more than once, since the excitement derives from hearing someone try to instantly re-create something they've never heard before. The amazing thing is that, after so many performances, Fried can still find good virgin singers (well, with regard to his music anyway), and for his February 10 gig at Here, he enlisted some of new music's best: Kitty Brazelton, Jarboe, Lisa Karrer, Dafna Naphtali, Dora Ohrenstein, Kristin Norderval, and Sandra Vojcic of the D'Divaz trio.

Most of what the singers hear on the headphones are words, one gathers, and those words come out of the singers' mouths garbled into various stages of incomprehensibility. The effect must vary a lot depending on how one's brain is wired for speech recognition and production; Brazelton,

who performed with five others in the *Headset Sextet*, could replicate words with great clarity, while Karrer, who did the solo piece *Travelogue*, rendered hardly any words intelligibly, and it's not clear whether Fried finds success or failure preferable. *Headset Sextet* in particular is full of musical devices such as canons using different tempos at once, which one could perceive a little as the singers argued in cycling repeated phrases. More importantly, though, the wild theatrical effect of these women babbling—out of self-control, yet sometimes in alternation and unison as though something uncanny is driving them—drowned out any purely musical structures.

The technological effect of Fried's headphones is not entirely unique. It calls to mind Robert Ashley's use of click tracks in his recent operas, whereby several singers will suddenly burst into unison speech with no anticipatory eye contact (also the precision of the Swingle Singers' unison nonsense syllables in Berio's *Sinfonia* of 1968). But those are extremely well-rehearsed examples that give the effect of one mind inhabiting several bodies, whereas Fried relies on the frisson of pseudo-psychosis, singers not knowing what they're doing as they do it. And he quite elegantly offsets this frightening effect with appropriately cool music, an electronic rock background ranging from industrial metal to Kurt Weillish pop song, but always crisp, mechanical, and utterly impervious to the involuntary emotionality of the actors.

A third piece drawn from his dance collaboration with Douglas Dunn added movement to the mix, sending the singers sprinting around the theater space to various points in response to instructions over the headphones. It's unclear how much more Fried can draw from this medium: In a way he's using incoherent speech as his instrument, and its uncontrollability makes it by definition a limited instrument. His most recent music, which I've heard elsewhere, has turned to digital electronics. But the headphone pieces gain from performances by a variety of victims, and Fried will be back at Here on March 10 with a yet untried crew: Eve Beglarian, Tom Buckner, Nicky Paraiso, Milica Paranosic, Kitty Brazelton, and Dafna Naphtali presumably in different works, and Kathleen Supove. □