

Neu musik von Köln! What a fantastic opportunity. Until the early '70s German music had been a central input in America's musical consciousness. But the cutoff in information circa 1973, due to a number of factors, cost America its best partner in aesthetic dialogue. For the last 15 years, unless you travel a lot, it's been difficult to perceive continuity in Europe's musical development from the contextless tidbits we've managed to cadge. Cologne/New York/New Music/Neue Musik, a five-day festival (April 11 through 15) organized by New York's Goethe House in collaboration with the Kitchen, Composer's Forum, the Knitting Factory, and West German Radio, looked like a marvelous chance to catch up, to reestablish connections, to infuse our own music with the energy of new ideas the way we used to with those wonderful old Deutsche Grammophon records.

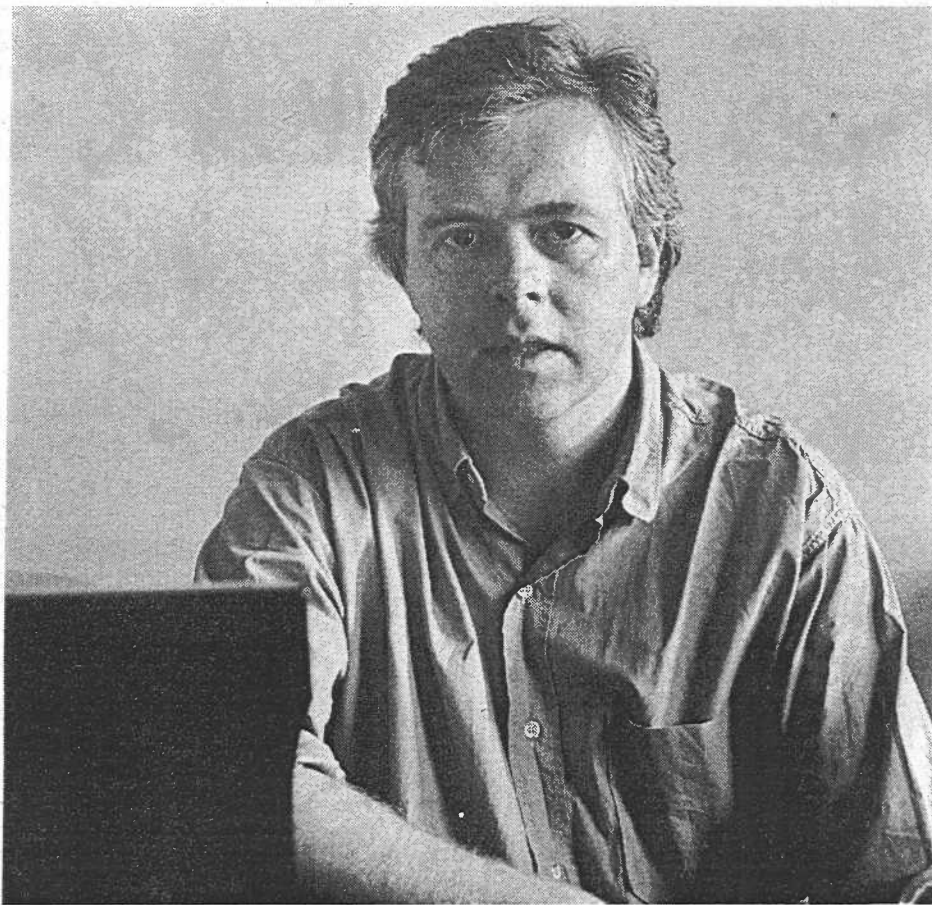
As it turned out, the fest was a camel, designed by committee. The problem didn't lie in the clash of genres (we're used to that), but in the lack of overriding viewpoint. What looked most exciting was the Kitchen's final, all-day marathon of composers from Cologne, composers associated with Cologne, and a few who merely wear cologne. But New York was represented by well-established masters (Ashley, Cage, Oliveros), Cologne by youngsters and some war-horses we'd all heard before, and enlightening parallels were avoided as if by design. True, travel expenses for performers prevent music festivals from achieving the same coherence one looks for in film festivals and art shows. But with no context for reinterpretation, dragging us through Stockhausen's tape piece *Gesang der Jünglinge* (impressive in 1956, so tired-sounding now) was like handing us a telegram that said HITLER INVADES POLAND.

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Cologne / New York
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A Bad Connection

BY KYLE GANN



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you might disgust a Kitchen audience, but you'll probably just bore them. And the virtuosity-for-its-own-sake aesthetic, when not accompanied by some spiritual intent, is old hat even in jazz. Saxophonists with great chops, once a dollar a dozen, are now a nickel, and mere demonstrations are redundant.

Perhaps my expectations were too high, and I can blame that on *Mantra*, the 1970 composition for two electrified pianos by Cologne's grand, almost forgotten old man, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Like a Matterhorn the others hardly dared climb, it stood above everything else in the series partly because of its potent spirituality, partly because Pi-Hsien Chen and Richard Braun gave it one of the half-dozen most magical, communicative, hypermeaningful performances I've ever heard of any work. *Mantra* is, if not the greatest masterpiece serialism produced, the most audible, purposeful use of the serial idea in the repertoire. Drawn entirely from a 13-tone row (mantra) of not notes but simple formulas, it fuses the spiritual and technical sides of Stockhausen's output, and in its sparse, mercurial textures you can hear the influence of the row on moment-to-moment shape as you can nowhere else.

Mantra demands that its performers be more than pianists. Chen and Braun energetically beat antique cymbals, shouted with persuasive theatricality, and twisted dials on ring modulators that transformed their pianos' sound into varying degrees of noise, like prepared pianos with a dimmer switch. Their styles were quite different; Chen was fiercely motoric, Braun had a more good-natured flair, but both projected every psychological nuance of Stockhausen's humor (so rare in his other works, so abundant here), his poetry, his fantasy (in the lickety-split closing scherzo), his inward spiritual journey. The pianists lit up the stage every time they played, but Chen's presence was especially amazing. In Stockhausen's *Klavierstück IX*, instead of trying to make the opening decrescendo over 189 repetitions of the same chord mechanically even as most pianists do, she sustained a powerful mass of sound, and the piece's disintegration from that opening gesture was all the more compelling.

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Even the sets that failed did so in peculiarly familiar ways. Percussionist Manos Tsangaris seemed a sort of poor man's Fast Forward (as though FF weren't already a poor man's '60s conceptualist). He shook rattles as if he thought they sounded interesting, listened incredulously to a Coke-bottle radio, rolled metal hoops on the floor, and then, never breaking sweat, played a square-rhythmed trap-set improv of singularly slim inspiration. He lost the contest for the most puerile conceptual piece, though, to Carola Bauckholt's *Polizeitrieb*, in which Tsangaris and Michael Pugliese hit newspapers with flyswatters in careful execution of a score full of dull rhythms. (John Schaefer MC'd the marathon for live broadcast on WNYC, and the facade of earnest interest he maintained at this point deserves an Oscar.) Had Bauckholt scattered pieces of watermelon on the newspapers and opened a jar of live flies, that might have been a statement, but as it was the piece said nothing.

Statements were in. Aside from New



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York-style humorous/virtuoso improv, the major genre seemed to be theater pieces exploring Germany's cultural conscience, the musical equivalent of the canvases of Anselm Kiefer. Tsangaris's *Flesh Meat* was the best, a skit that poked scabrous fun at stereotypical German pretensions. As objects swung from the ceiling and furniture moved ominously across the stage without visible help, British composer Chris Newman (in the dry, mock-pompous voice that made his rock group Janet Smith so funny) read a story about Karajan (or Carrion?), who

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invented "digital blood sausage" and suffered anxiety over whether the sweat on his testicles was sufficiently historical. The arrogance Newman so brilliantly spoofed appeared all too earnest in *Schloager*, by Arno Steffen and Dieter Krauthausen, who made obvious but opaque references to Kennedy and the Berlin Wall, and eventually filled the hall with smoke. That drove a few listeners out coughing, but I stayed until one of the miscreants swung a can around by a string, illuminated in bona fide 1967 manner by a strobe light. What's the point of living in Cologne if you're still wowed by effects that Tulsa realized weren't interesting years ago?

As for the art of composition in Cologne, that, too, was a mixed bag. Bauckholt's more serious composition, a soft, sostenuto trio for piano and two cellos, sounded like academicized Feldman. A sparsely accompanied imitation-blues song cycle called *Rrrrrrr*... (each song title began with *R*) by postserialism's most gimmicky figure, Mauricio Kagel, skimmed a fine line between conceptual piece and satire, and I can't improve on the review I overheard: "Even for an Ar-

gentine Jew who became a German trying to write blues, that wasn't very good." The one computer piece was pleasant, though I've heard more fascinating work from its composer: in Clarence Barlow's *Verhältnisse 6*, Riessler played fluid circles over a rich, digital-sound continuum that acted as a high-tech tamboura, an Indian raga concept transferred to jazz computer improv.

The best argument for recent German composition came from Frederic Rzewski, who played works by Nicholas Huber, Walter Zimmermann, and himself in a recital that showed off his thundering pianism. Zimmermann's *Daimon* had Rzewski playing a tremendous counterpoint of tritone-filled melodies all over the keyboard at once, and in Huber's *Darabuca* he somehow elicited various harmonics from a single note. Huber's intrusion of march rhythms into African drumming patterns made one of the week's subtler political points, and Rzewski drew his own in a charming set of variations on a Yiddish workers' song, "My Little Son." The piece used the same tricks as *The People United* and was a little long, but even at his most facile Rzewski's genius provides the listener far more gratification than most of his colleagues.

If the fest sounds dreary, it often was. Gone are the exciting, even inflammatory aesthetic differences that drew sparks between American and German experimentalists 20 years ago. The two countries are in identical pickles, and we can no longer look to Cologne for guidance and stimulus, only confirmation. Symptomatic of both is the artificial resuscitation of dead aesthetics. The startled "Is this music?" reaction Bauckholt must have hoped to create with her flyswatters is no longer possible. The shock strategy is useless, victim of rising thresholds. Bite the head off a weasel, crap on the stage,

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Heard at the week's beginning, *Mantra* posed a question that the festival never answered: Where are the Cologne composers who *learned* from Stockhausen's example? Where is the *neue musik* that absorbed from serial technique its incredible range of nuance, its ability to work in four or five musical dimensions at once and keep them tied together? Where is the improvisation, either here or there, that goes *beyond* the artificial open-form structures of 1960? Where is the music that sounds *more* avant-garde than Stockhausen did 25 years ago?

It may not exist. What hasn't been recognized about the avant-garde is that it isn't cumulative; its inventors heard through to its furthest potential almost immediately, just as modernism's most bizarre possibilities are already encapsulated in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and Ives's chamber music. The perception that we're at a historical dead end results from an illusion that music has been moving linearly all along; in reality, it takes hundreds of musicians decades to explore the interior of musical continents whose boundaries were already known to the first discoverers. By not recognizing that once a space is mapped out we have to learn to live in it, we've trapped ourselves in the paradox of "exploring" the same territory over and over. That's why composers on both continents are trying to remake points made 20 years ago, why *Gesang der Jünglinge* can still show up on a new music festival, and why penetrating curatorial concepts for new music festivals are virtually unheard of. It's why the Cologne/New York marathon was one of the duller evenings in my listening experience, and why *Mantra* was a religious revelation. ■