

I always thought to myself how wonderful it would be were the avant-garde to become more professional, to tighten up the works, and have a neat little house in which to perform....

—Carman Moore, *Village Voice*, November 7, 1968

Leafing through back issues after Carman Moore's April 16 concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, I chanced on the above comment and couldn't help thinking how perfectly Moore has achieved his aims. Moore's composing career has come into focus slowly, partly because he's been doing other things. Since what we now call *new music* was then still on the drawing board, few people know that in the late '60s and early '70s he wrote a perceptive column on experimental music, holding that repertoire to high standards at a time when standards were difficult to locate. Since then he's written for the *Times* and *Vogue*, and authored books on black and popular music. Only recently does he seem to be giving his music the promotion it deserves.

Moore's Skymusic ensemble—including Katherine Hay and Robert Cram on flutes, Leroy Jenkins on violin, Gordon Gottlieb on percussion, and Marianna Rosett on piano—sounded more orchestral than it looked thanks to Kenneth Bichel and Eric Johnson on synthesizers. They played four works, three by Moore, one by Bichel, whose *Cathedral Calls* made an ear-catching opening; it was charming to hear gestural discontinuity in a *tonal* work, full of whispered electronics and triumphant flurries of activity fading away in well-sculpted, Eno-like timbral succession.

Moore conducted his *Variations on a West African Lament* by beating on African bells, his ostinato a prelude to the chromatically expressive theme. This was an odd venture: an honest-to-God variation form in an improvisatory, ethnically



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influenced style. Once you got used to the sudden changes between ideas, the piece offered unusual pleasures. First the theme went off in several keys at once, then Jenkins spun rough-hewn arpeggios around the harmony; the ostinato reappeared and disappeared, Bichel dechromaticized the melody in a softly rolling piano variation, and the whole at last vanished unexpectedly into one of Moore's typically modest endings.

The Persistence of Green, whose title (Moore noted) referred not to money but

to spring, combined colorful music with slides ("lightscares") by Caterina Bertolotto and a dance by Angela Verdurmen. So many of these trimedia pieces seem like arbitrary, ad hoc assemblages, but the combinatorial idea here was inspired. Bertolotto's images were thick, all-over textures, and dancing in their illumination, Verdurmen appeared to be a gracefully gliding bush. The dancer's well-calculated tableaux were mirrored in the synthesizer chords and piano arpeggios in which the music's periodic bursts of momentum ended, all of which gave a feeling of suspended motion. Moore despatialized the music not only by darkening the ensemble space, but by moving the flutes to the back of the cathedral, where their echoing flurries created delicious atmospheres.

It was *Righteous Heroes*, though, that reminded me of Steve Reich's too-soon-forgotten formula: "Obviously music should put all within listening range into a state of ecstasy." Like Morton Feldman with a beat, *Heroes* grounded its wash of iridescent harmonies in a muted rhythmic ostinato, leading to a series of solos

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so well circumscribed by their context that it took a while to realize they were improvisatory. Earthy cadenzas by Jenkins and Bichel complemented the work's calm atmosphere, and the return of the flute chords kept bringing the piece back to center. I could have wished for more variety in the ostinato, but *Heroes* made

its points with leisurely calm and ended all too soon, with a waving E-G-E-G motive that made the most gracious finale I'd heard in ages. *Rain Dance*, an early work played as an encore, was equally elegant, its rising-third-based materials so simple and clear that every improv was securely rooted.

In method and style influences Moore's music has much in common with a lot of what goes on downtown, but personal touches reveal a rare and powerful unity of vision. For one thing, every piece here had a point at which the music paused to gain perspective, backing off from the ostinato (or whatever) into anxious tremolos for a moment of soul-searching before resuming tempo. Even in *Rain Dance*, the solos gave way to an agitated stasis that dispersed like an April rain. Too, Moore's avoidance of climax allows him to create beautiful effects that the old improv cliché of linear-crescendo-to-maximum-intensity precludes. Each work had an ebb and flow as calm and undirected as surf, and no sense of destination distracted from the journey. That's the other reason recognition for Moore has been so long in coming: lasting talent develops slowly, and an *individual* eclecticism takes decades to jell.

Other details are worth dwelling on. The sound system was excellently deployed and the instruments closely miked, so that any discrepancy between acoustic and digital sounds disappeared, leaving a finely polished surface. Moore's "neat little house," the world's largest cathedral and one with a several-second echo, fit the music with an acoustic luster of which its fading sonorities took good advantage. The music's sculptural clarity was a model uptown needed, the consideration Moore showed the audience at every step was one for downtown to note. If all new music were so professional, so tightly written, so patently made to gratify the ear rather than theories, mandates, and pretensions, the market for dead people's music would collapse. ■

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