

# Anxieties of Influence

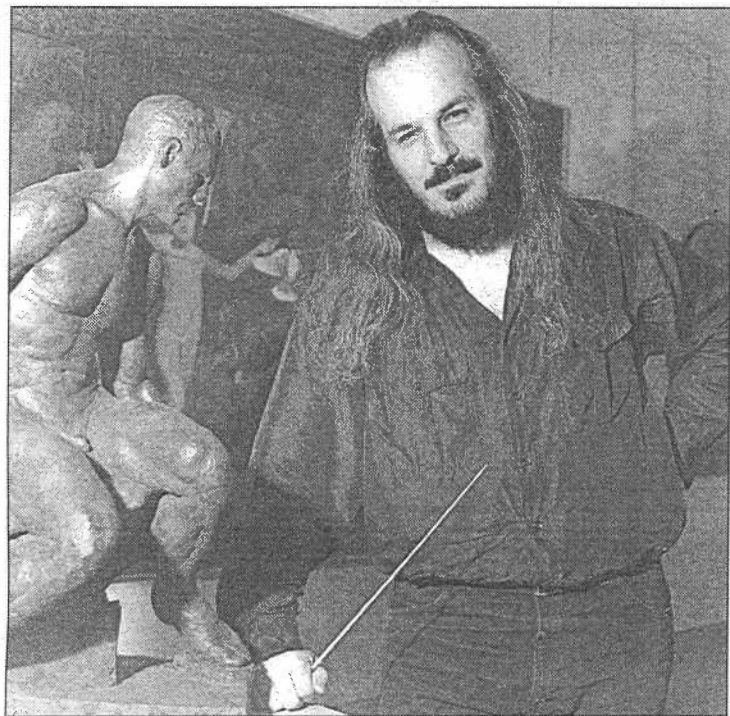
By Kyle Gann

Crosstown Ensemble

**These days** one can go for months without noticing the seismic fault on which the Downtown music scene rests uneasily. The rift is the result of two equally powerful gravitational pulls: jazz and minimalism, to put it simplistically.

Composers on the jazz side consider dissonance and dislocation the natural vocabulary of dissent, difference, and freedom. The right to use any noise in any context was a hard-won privilege. To abandon it, they feel, is to wimp out, to succumb to lobotomizing capitalist mandates. Since their music is a protest against bourgeois conformity, they can't be much concerned with whether audiences follow what they're doing. They share that attitude with Uptowners, who use dissonances that are equally complex, but emasculated by meticulous systems. So the Downtowners find their freedom archetype in jazz, seeking a fusion in which the influences of Thelonious Monk, Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman flow together equally with those of Edgar Varèse, Anton Webern, and John Cage.

For composers on the other side, minimalism represented a new beginning, overthrowing the old order of which macho noise-making was an integral component. The early works of Glass and Reich are their Gregorian chant. Therefore these composers don't think much in terms of history, which only started in 1967, after all, or influence, since minimalism's building blocks were too simple to be copy-righted. For them the consonance/dis-



ANDREW GOLDBERG

Making connections: the Crosstown Ensemble's Grunin

sonance distinction is dead, for with repetition discord loses its transgressive power; a major seventh becomes a syntactic marker, no more inherently pungent than a major triad. These composers look back to Cowell, Partch, and Nancarrow as precedents, but only insofar as those innovators also started over from scratch. They hold a grudge against modernists for having scared audiences away, partly by building their music ever more elaborately on that of earlier composers.

So we have the improvisers versus the totalists, or—to momentarily give them problematic but more inclusive

names—the jazz-modernists and the postmodernists. In practice the line isn't clear-cut. People cross it, defect, and dance on both sides. In the '80s the jazz-modernists enjoyed total control over the Downtown scene. Around 1990 the tide turned, and now the Kitchen and several record labels have given postmodernists the edge. Yet even when glossed over socially, one's attitude toward history makes a deep psychological difference. When you're alone in your studio, pencil poised over manuscript paper, who's looking over your shoulder? Varèse and Monk? Or the BAM audience? The current truce

is preserved only by keeping mum about where Downtowners stand in relation to history.

And now that Eric Grunin has started the Crosstown Ensemble, we can keep mum no longer. Composer-conductor Grunin has put together a 20-piece orchestra to commission works from Downtowners and present them, radically, in historical context. When Grunin honors composers, as he did Anthony Coleman May 20 at Tribeca Hall, he plays one of their pieces and has them program the rest of the concert with works that influenced them. To surround his new *Latvian Counter-Gambit*, Coleman chose works by Morton Feldman, Monk, Webern, and Stefan Wolpe.

So far, Grunin's admirable project suffers from physical circumstances. The rickety loft building that houses Tribeca Hall was so sonically porous that, in Feldman's quiet *Instruments II*, I couldn't distinguish the music's delicate timbres from the musicians rehearsing upstairs. Without a sound shell, the ephemeral motives of Webern's Opus 13 lieder, though nicely sung by Melanie Mitrano, scattered to the corners of the room. (The influence of loft acoustics on Downtown musical styles will make a good doctoral dissertation someday.) What came off best were Coleman's premiere and a rousing, stylistically authentic rendition of Monk's *Brilliant Corners*. In the latter, an athletic tuba cadenza by Marcus Rojas garnered the most applause, Elizabeth Panzer's abstract harp solo was the least audible, but the most eloquent rendering was Coleman's own on piano, Monkishly sparse and lucid yet dashed off with spontaneous Colemanisms.

Named for a difficult chess move conscientiously outlined in the program notes, *Latvian Counter-Gam-*

*bit* sounded like a cross between contrapuntally thickened Varèse and sped-up Feldman, restless and luminously orchestrated. In other circumstances I might have looked for the piece's roots no further back than the mid '80s, but here we were virtually commanded to notice the similarity of the growling bass lines to Monk's quirky melody, and how the expectantly hovering sonorities echoed Wolpe and Feldman. I was surprised the program omitted Varèse, distinctly brought to mind by Coleman's elegant timbral sculpting of chords and discords, right up to a riveting fortissimo close in glockenspiels and piccolo. In notated works Coleman molds brilliantly counterintuitive yet memorable textures that no figure of his generation can surpass. And yet while *Latvian Counter-Gambit* held its own with these exalted precursors (more compelling than the Webern, smoother than the Wolpe, and denser than the Feldman), it seemed almost old-fashioned in its devotion to modernism, a perception the concert's premise reinforced.

This is a new strategy for Downtown; I'm no longer used to concerts where most of the composers are dead. On the other hand, it adds immense weight to the musical dialogue, drawing unexpected connections and allowing artists to show where they hear their music coming from and, by extension, going. The idea, though, flows from the jazz-modernist side of Downtown thought; no totalist would have considered it. And it will be particularly interesting to see what happens when Grunin invites postmodernists to program, as happens next December with Eve Beglarian. By highlighting Downtown's quiescent philosophical divergences, will Grunin's bold new venture heal them or reopen them? ■

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