

KYLE GANN

Techno goes post-classical

Any Similarity Purely Coincidental



who harbor rock beats like Carl Stone, those noise samples are the starting point and focus.

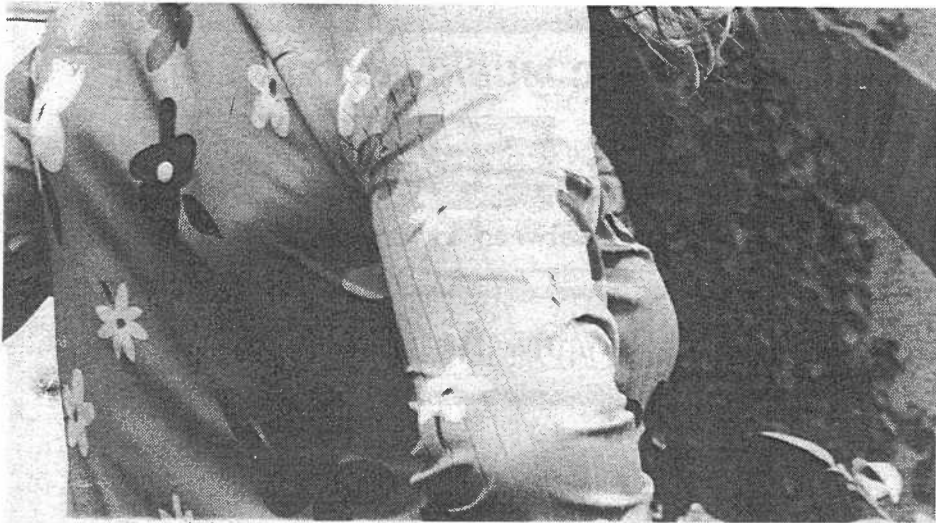
Beck's sampling techniques, more interesting and pervasive than the others, illustrate the curious and apparently permanent phenomenon that musicians who burgle other genres never steal the new, sparkly stuff, but only the materials a decade or so old. Post-classical types, for example, spent the '80s pretending they were ripping off Metallica, but actually sounding more like vintage Stones. And now Beck, in the last 75 seconds of "Novacane" from *Odelay* (DGC), enters the '70s sound world of early Gordon Mumma, a chaos of analogue electronic tones and glissandos. In "High 5" from the same disc, his clip from Schubert's "Unfinished" knocking up against burbling sine tones reminds me of Cage's *Credo in US* of 1942. It's as though, in order to get away with a cross-genre reference, you have to steal from a public image that sank in years ago, not one still in formation.

Techno, of course, shares a limb of its family tree with post-classical music, having picked up threads from Brian Eno, Harold Budd, and Steve Reich that the classical types dropped all too soon. Still, there are two qualities that, for me and even for composers I know who love techno, immediately shelve it on the pop side. The most obvious, of course, is The Groove. Few technoheads attempt to get by without a repetitive beat, and since that beat now so often stems from computer-looping a sample, it's acquired a mechanical, discolike exactness to it that grates on me, with none of the variability or surprise of a rock drummer. Admittedly, post-classical musicians also learned circa 1979 that they could get away with practically any old noisefest by laying a backbeat behind it.

The more stripped-down techno, like that of Spacetime Continuum, often reminds me of computerized process pieces from the 1980s by David Behrman, Maggi Payne, or Ron Kuivila. But in Behrman's or Kuivila's music, the surface has a somewhat random flavor, flowing from a logical process that is the music's real subject. Spacetime Continuum's *Emit Ecaps* (Astrawerks) is more one-dimensional, starting up grooves and letting them run, and channeling other patterns through simple pop progressions. Again, I enjoy DJ Shadow's *Endtroducing* . . . (London), with its humorous collage interruptions between dramatic pop textures, and I admire that someone can accomplish all that via sampling. But the disc's occasional fragmented vocal sound bites seem like window dressing to set off the "real" music, long passages that are smoother and more pop-influenced, whereas in a post-classical aesthetic, the "weird" elements are always central.

My favorite ambient group—or person, or whatever—has long been Aphex Twin, for his Eno-ish willingness to repeat simple, subtle musical images. The newest Aphex Twin album, *Richard D. James* (Elektra), is more ambitious than earlier ones, and doesn't fade into wallpaper, largely due to an elaborately composed and aggressively foregrounded drum track. The greater detail, though, detracts from the endearing sensuous blankness of his earlier discs, making this a hybrid in-between ambient and composed music, not quite succeeding as either. The best tracks are songs—including one that runs, "I would like some milk from the milkman's wife's tits"—for song form is one compositional idea James can handle.

An occasional techno disc does cross over to satisfy me the way good post-classical music does. For example, *Orbus Terrarum* by the Orb (Island), whose scintillating tonal textures are reminiscent of early Terry Riley, or—more accurately, since they're so richly layered—Elodie Lauten's *Tromik Involutions* from the



Terre Thaemlitz: perfectly post-classical, even riffing off Kraftwerk

Rock, jazz, and new music spent the '80s on a collision course. By decade's end, though, they seemed to have retired to their respective corners, with audience and economic barriers back in place. Now rock, mostly in the form of techno, has circled around and is creeping up on new music from behind. Friends report to me hearing a moment from what they guessed was a John Cage recording that turned out to be Beck, and finding more new technical ideas in technopop than in what for today I'll call post-classical music (a term I discovered on the Internet, imperfect but less fuzzy than "new music"). So at their recommendation I've immersed myself lately in recent rock and especially techno, a confusing world in which merely identifying the performers, record labels, and techniques is as perplexing to me as the nooks and crannies of my usual fare must be to outsiders.

Yeah, yeah, it's true: you now hear noise samples dotting the songs of Beck, Tricky, Faithless, the Chemical Brothers. Rockers and classicists are now working with the same tools—Digital Performer, Sound Tools, Unisyn, and other music-editing software—which means they have the same vocabulary at their disposal, even if they choose different words. Trent Reznor and Philip Glass alike make their music staring into a computer screen. Inevitably, since tools seduce the brain, they're beginning to think the same. Still, the rock groups mostly stick noise samples in as decoration; or as illustration, as in the sampled chimes and tinkling clocks in Faithless's "Insomnia" on *Reverent* (Arista). For post-classical composers, even those

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The more permanent dividing line is fine but instantly recognizable. Post-classical works are almost always unified by some underlying structural idea. Even though Ben Neill has become something of an ambient star, every rhythm and melody in his computer pieces springs from some numerical relation, such as the ratios 6:7:8:9; you can hear the logic beneath the surface. Mikel Rouse's music sounds like rock, but his operas return to the same themes and rhythmic structures in varied guises. David Behrman's instrument-triggered computer improvs have ambient qualities, but they flow from a software logic that ties the piece together. In general, post-classical composers don't want you to merely listen to the surface moment by moment, but to hear through to the ideas underneath.

By contrast, techno pieces seem to polish up the surface, and the hell with underlying ideas. This isn't necessarily a negative. It means that techno often uses the technology in slicker and more arresting ways, and nearly always with a more engaging rhythmic momentum. The pieces wander more, and are more eclectic in their source material. Everything depends on what level of musical info you like listening to. Notation, structure, thematic correspondence, theoretical relationships, canonic devices—these are obstacles to creativity, and much of the pleasure classical types like me get from music is hearing the composer leap these self-imposed hurdles. Technopop, to my ears, avoids stringent disciplines and plays

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Likewise, *Viral Sonata* (Asphodel) by Paul D. Miller (*Voice* hero DJ Spooky) is rich and sensuous, slickly cinematic in its slow moves from one texture to another, and with its occasional groove buried subliminally underneath. Even so, within its new medium it explores issues of timbre and continuity more similar to those of 1960s musique concrète than of recent post-classical work. Terre Thaemlitz's *Die Roboter Rubato* (Mille Plateaux), on the other hand, isn't reminiscent of anything. Even though Thaemlitz came from the DJ world, the disc sounds perfectly post-classical, and the more refreshing because it isn't dragging along any diehard modernist assumptions. Thaemlitz uses a heavily reverbed computerized piano to riff off of pieces by the techno group Kraftwerk; his whimsical tonal patterns hang in the silence, bouncing among recurring motives unpredictably, but with keen focus.

Those are my favorites of what I've heard, and they will probably baffle techno fans as much as techno fans' preferences in post-classical music would baffle me. I'm glad techno has people listening again to extended instrumental works—an endangered genre in every historical period. Post-classical music and techno are shaped by such disparate social pressures and histories (DJ Shadow's liner notes thank a tremendous list of forebears, only a couple of whose names I even recognize) that I can't imagine they're in any danger of merging. But it's intriguing that their trajectories are so gingerly intertwined. □

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