

The downtowners Alice Tully Hall books at its summer "Serious Fun" festival provide Lincoln Center subscribers some relief, I suppose, from the heavy intellectual demands made by all that Rachmaninoff. Still, those of us who grin listening to Mahler and wax earnest over Brian Eno, who bemoan the American prejudice that deems braininess and fun mutually exclusive virtues, have trouble with the distinction. To a few of us, all music is as fun as it is serious, and the Kronos Quartet playing Ben Johnston is just as worth a whistle as their Jimi Hendrix. But now that the fun's over, I'm wondering if the spirit of this year's lineup might not have been better captured by "Serious Confusion," both accidental and intended.

It seemed prescient to open July 14-16 with *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, written by the Composer Who Mistook a Medical Journal Article for a Libretto. The tale of a music professor who lost the ability to comprehend visual images may have made a riveting book, but Michael Nyman's repeated chords, filched from Schumann, added nothing to it. News reports that the simple-mindedly minimalist music followed and illuminated the progress of the patient's perceptual disorientation must have been copied from some overoptimistic press release, because nothing of the sort occurred. Opera demands a larger-than-life subject, theater demands characters we've been given a reason to care about, but even considerable talents like John Duykers, Marni Nixon, and Frederick Westcott couldn't find much to do in this stagepiece besides pace back and forth looking vaguely concerned. Nyman's written some charming works and a good book on experimental music, but this bland pretext for an hour's air-conditioning revealed no instinct for the theater.

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STEPHANIE CHERNIKOWSKI

Rhys Chatham's disturbing music demands absolute clarity.

Nyman, Chatham, Anderson, Duckworth
**Are We Having
 Fun Yet?**

BY KYLE GANN

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compensated with a passion that raised her spiel to the intensity (though hardly the depth) of a Lily Tomlin monologue. Rarely settling for her usual glibness, she shed her postmod pretensions with her high-tech objectivity, and gave us a glimpse of The Real Laurie so carefully absent from her records; that, too, was disturbing. Citing Jung, she vented spleen over the tightly scripted personalities each of us creates for ourselves, complaining of her own life, "Who wrote this, anyway?" The countryisms that tinged her infrequent songs weren't coy, but touchingly authentic, and despite her index cards she pushed audience buttons—embarrassed silence, incredulous laughter, riotous cheers—like a showbiz pro. It was her worst performance and her best: worst because it was the least inventive set by a performer who set new standards of inventiveness, best because she was more personal, honest, and compelling than she's ever been.

My friendship with the composer bids me moderate my praise for William Duckworth's *Time Curve Preludes*. (Tom Johnson lauded the work amply in these pages years ago.) Like Chatham's music, it poses a problem as to how it's to be perceived. Composed in 1977-78 and partially inspired by bluegrass, the *Preludes* sound minimalist, especially due to the modal pitch spectrum and processlike character of the first few numbers. In reality, because their tonality is closer to 16th century than 19th, and because they spin off the Fibonacci series (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc.) rather than additive process, they belong more to the world of Bartók and Messiaen than that of Reich and Glass.

That affinity is made belatedly clear by a few of the preludes, especially the sharply dissonant nos. 10 and 12, in a way that may confuse the unforwarned ear. But it's a matter not of internal contradiction, as in Chatham's music, but of difficulties of perspective related to the composer's milieu. Listen carefully, and they tell you how to hear them: most of them retreat about two-thirds of the way through into quiet introspection, providing a sense of formal closure that true minimalism's never had. In fact, the ear is better prepared for their intimate aural space by Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* or

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If the idea was to create tension among the listener's reflexes, it succeeded wondrously. Phenomenologically approached, all music reveals the manner in which it is best listened to, and *Minerva* and *Donnergötter* gave off a plethora of contradictory signals. What the hell were we supposed to do to this music? Dance? March? Meditate? Listen for rhythmic levels? Admire the counterpoint? Drop acid? The answer switched every 16 measures, but the music stayed the same. Compounding the predicament was that *Donnergötter* and *Waterloo No. 2* in particular made a fetish of Western music's most problematic datum: the cadence. From Machaut to Boulez, musical ingenuity has been geared toward making phrase-closing chords sound less than final, to keep music from stopping too soon; even minimalism's gone out of its way to keep repetition from suggesting cadence. Then Chatham comes along,

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grabs the speck of dirt around which so many pearls have been formed, and holds it in our faces until you're ready to scream "So end, already." Satie approached the cadence with some irony, but Chatham seems to suggest that, if the avoidance of cadence, taken to its logical conclusion, eventually lands us in the wastelands of 12-tone music, the solution is to start over from scratch, and make a virtue of the offending tendency.

The contest seemed to be whether the high-decibel reiteration of materials so charged with banality could shift the meaning of those materials to another level of perception. I suppose it's a particularly subjective question; this was music

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from which everyone took home a different impression (did most of my fellow listeners think it was merely a rock concert?). For me, *Minerva*'s virtuosic piccolo trumpet section (played by Ben Neill and James O'Connor), with its scurrying English melodies reminiscent of Cornelius Cardew, and *Waterloo No. 2* never left the level of military parody. But *Donnergötter* eventually accumulated a severe beauty, like the static sonority of the 12th century Magister Perotinus writ loud, like a Gothic cathedral framed in unpainted steel. That they were disturbing works was in itself an achievement, because sharp discomfiture requires absolute musical clarity. How many of Chatham's successors in the downtown avant-garde, aside from Borbetomagus, have written anything clear enough, stark enough, to disturb anyone?

Following that act, it was difficult to tell who was confused during Laurie Anderson's weirdly uneven July 30 concert.

Concert is the wrong word, for there was hardly any music, though the violin solo with which she opened, spiraling through soulful fifths like impassioned Hindemith, was as substantial a bit of melody as she's produced. What followed was not postmodern art, but standup comedy read from index cards. Much of the material was made funny only by Anderson's breathy, dry delivery: "Now that Sonny Bono's mayor of Palm Springs, it's changed a lot of things for me." Painstakingly enunciating the "surreal" lyrics of "Yankee Doodle," she drawled "If you can understand 'Yankee Doodle,' you can understand anything in the avant-garde today." Good point; art's to live with, not to understand.

But she also brought up an interview in which she was asked, "What's the difference between pop culture and high art?" Her impatience with the latter's demands lent dark undercurrents to her routine. Self-revelatory, often self-congratulatory, she jumped between stories without always reaching the point, like the drunk in Twain's "The Story of the Old Ram." Much of her anger was directed at the of celebrity, and her sarcasm in the tale of the car commercial that plagiarized "O Superman" was thinly veiled. Occasionally no punchline was intended; the average woman, she preached to the already converted audience, makes 63 cents to the average man's dollar, and at the present rate of increase equality won't be reached until 3888 A.D. Probably true, certainly unfair, but we learn that much from newscasters. Artists are supposed to do something about it, place things in context, sublimate the sad facts into beauty, humor, or at least philosophy.

If this was hardly the old Laurie Anderson of the cleverly reinterpreted social misperception, the new, angry Anderson

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Because of that intimacy, choice of performance space is crucial. The Riverside Park Arts Festival's 79th Street Runda, so conducive to outdoor jazz and dance, so problematic for chamber music, turned out to be the perfect space for Neely Bruce's July 23 performance of the *Time Curve Preludes*. The stone arches captured and reverberated Bruce's crisp, pinging tone, and the cloisterlike atmosphere brought out a latent medievalism in the work that no large auditorium would reflect. Too, there's enough Cage in Duckworth's numeric structures that passing cars and boats created no distraction. The *Preludes* contain some devilish rhythmic hurdles, including in no. 9 a quotation from Satie's *Vexations* that grows a sixteenth note faster with each repetition, a cunning justification of the appellation *Time Curve*. Bruce whipped off such intricacies with artless nonchalance, as though 7-against-8 rhythms were what he tapped while waiting for the subway. The performance's warm ambience augured well for Riverside Park's attempt to branch out in more experimental directions.

It also made the *Time Curve Preludes* sound like what they really are: not a group of inexplicably brief minimalist vignettes, but a series of meditations with a neo-Renaissance emphasis on number, proportion, and quotation. Along with Cage's *Etudes Australes* and the Messiaen works named, they're likely to be one of the 20th century piano cycles most often performed in the 21st. It's a good bet that the audiences of that century will hear them differently, and with less confusion, than we do. ■