

Experimental Intermedia
Foundation

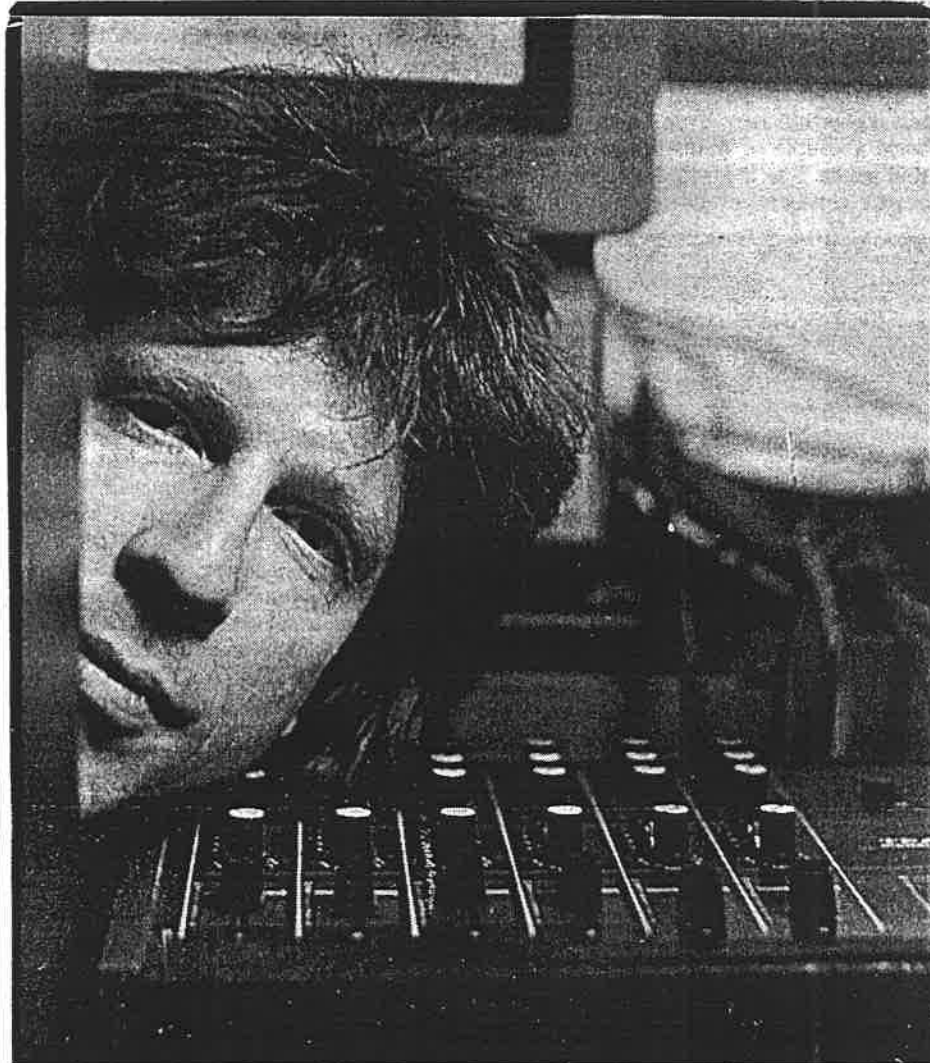
BYOB

BY KYLE GANN

By my calculation, new music left out its first yelp of confusion in 1967. It came between Steve Reich's *Come Out* and *Piano Phase*, when the avant-garde—whose premise was to see how much it could deny the audience and still have someone show up—blurred into a more generous aesthetic that literary and visual-arts types could consider hip. Thus the era was six years old when, in December, 1973, composer/video artist Phill Niblock opened the doors of his Centre Street loft to present six concerts of that emerging body of work, and inaugurated the new music series that has since continued under the moniker Experimental Intermedia Foundation. No statistics are available on how many fans have eventually succumbed under 15 years' ingestion of the \$4.99-a-gallon California Burgundy Niblock serves at each gig. But it says something about Niblock's catholicity and his central importance to the international music community that composers of diverse backgrounds, from Los Angeles to Eastern Europe, have united behind the hope that "Phill would do something about that rotgut."

The Kitchen may have birthed new music, but since it lost interest in it Niblock has proved to be the genre's most low-key and reliable foster parent. For more than 600 performances now, EIF has run one of the few concert series in New York that not only sets standards, but keeps them from blocking creativity's path. Fifteen years is a dramatic milestone by downtown performing space standards, so Niblock commemorated it December 13 through 21 with eight concerts, six involving artists who had contributed to that historic first series. I attended the first four nights, which typified the space's overall history: technology-oriented but not obsessed, entertaining, informal, with the understated feeling that the concert you're hearing will be mentioned in history books 20 years later. In the Decade of the Trendy Presenter, Niblock has fanned the small, intense flame of experimentalism, and it's to his credit that the strictures of Reagan-era arts funding have never reduced him to muscatel.

The sole review from the 1973 series (it speaks volumes of New York that a new series in someone's loft was reviewed at



Rhys Chatham made a deliberately historical gesture.

equipment failure. Chadabe has become | results with only the tiniest of finger

a-half-hour opus for computerized orchestra, *Music for Trees*, which associates 24 trees each with a different hour of the day. "The Sequoia Tree at 6 in the morning" was a joyous, almost classically structured overture of reed sounds over a throbbing bass; "The Willow Tree" (9 PM) combined List's gentle trombone improv with synthesized big band and honky-tonk piano; "The Chestnut Tree" (10 AM) had List singing a silly refrain about "my chestnut tree and me" over a tuneful andante; and "The Monterrey Pine" (11 AM) played jazzy licks over a bass ostinato.

This crazy music was unashamed of its cheesy electronic sounds, formally ambitious but too unpretentious to be taken to task for its timbral naïveté. The tonality wasn't static enough to sound "artsy," and the rhetorical harmony sounded not like *new* music, just music. Though hardly romantic, "The Magnolia at Midnight" swelled with nobility, an emotion we haven't heard since Lou Harrison. Subsequently, with apologies for being forced to sing the role of Juliet himself, List offered an idea of his mini-opera, *The True Story of Romeo and Juliet*, which contained Lydian melodies over a boom-chigga-boom-chigga rhythm, a tango, and a crowd-stirring 6/8 finale that would have felt more at home in Berlioz's *Bettrice et Benedict* than in anything modern. It's been ages since a good composer, let alone a computer composer, has so concentrated on the eloquent portrayal of emotion in melody, and shoved technical and structural issues to the periphery where they belong. Though eclectic, the entire concert sang with one strong, confident, well-crafted voice, and I'm eager to hear *Music for Trees* as it's intended to be heard: played through loudspeakers hung from branches.

Bun-Ching Lam's *Lu* erupted at the Alternative Museum December 14 with wooden knocks, a wild splash beat out on blocks and gourds. From there percussionist Gary Beumee spread his forest of gestures to drums, cymbals, and other wood, skin, and metal instruments. Every flurry burst and evaporated with the vividness of some natural process, such as rainstorms or the ephemeral contours of wisp formations.

I would have appreciated *Lu* more had

Presenter, Niblock has fanned the small, intense flame of experimentalism, and it's to his credit that the strictures of Reagan-era arts funding have never reduced him to muscatel.

The sole review from the 1973 series (it speaks volumes of New York that a new series in someone's loft was reviewed at all) was Tom Johnson's notice in *The Village Voice* of a performance by Jon Gibson, better known then and possibly now as the agile flutist/saxophonist of the Philip Glass Ensemble. "A continuous whirr of multi-leveled sound," Johnson wrote, "but soon I began to discover that a whole lot of things were going on within the dense fog. . . ." That description could also stand for Gibson's 1988 performance of his more recent *Rainforest*, a tape of swirling electronic noises over which he played slow glissandos and then soft scales on a wooden flute. Other pieces were more texturally transparent; in *Criss-Cross* Gibson's modal flute solo echoed twice in digital delay, while in *Ballad* for soprano sax he created a similar effect without electronic aids. Only a brief video work exhibited the structuralism and mechanical patterns of Gibson's '70s music.

It seems obvious that Gibson's music has suffered from being similar enough to that of the other minimalists that its essential differences are obscured, just as George Perle's music has been hurt by its proximity to 12-tone music. Though he relies on repetition and canonic delay, Gibson's sensibility is more impressionist than minimalist. No perceptual trick is played, process retires into the background, structure is a tertiary concern. Gibson lingers over his seventh chords with the same loving hedonism as Debussy in "Girl with the Flaxen Hair," to a point that tempts one to wish he would append equally pictorial titles. Mellow and unassuming, Gibson stakes out a small but verdant territory more satisfying than the concrete landscapes of many more ambitious minimalist oeuvres.

Joel Chadabe's homage to the '70s was



Rhys Chatham made a deliberately historical gesture.

equipment failure. Chadabe has become known for his auto-compositional software (Intelligent Music), which is so distinctive and popular that it's become common to hear Chadabe's music without his name attached. This concert was a sextet of works improvised by the composer and associates on a mouse and other instruments. Chadabe accompanied Garrett List's trombone improv with synthesized vibraphone, responding with more disjunct, abstract jazz than a live vibre player might have, but still musically meaningful. In two pieces, Antony Widoff drove the computer via trumpet, accompanying himself with parallel lines of rich texture. A lot of information went into

MUSIC

the computer, a lot came out, but the relationship was vague, and ended each time with peculiar abruptness; I found out later that the computer had crashed. Thanks to technology's never-ending growth, music continues to fail in ever more dramatic ways.

More successful aesthetically because the system worked were tone essays by Richard Lainhart, who transformed Chadabe's program into an Eno-ish wash of sensual tone decays. Soft chords formed a suspended background for loud attacks that took an eternity to die away, and the aptly titled *10,000 Shades of Blue* diminished into ambiguously bittersweet dissonance. A more industrial-strength work, *Pain Test Area* smashed together repetitive patterns of heavy, rebounding noises. The Russian and Italian futurists of the 1920s would have given their right hands to produce sonatas such as this, and had they seen Lainhart achieve his

results with only the tiniest of finger movements, they would have dropped dead from envy.

Only Rhys Chatham made a deliberately historical gesture, by recreating the 1973 concert in which he played amplified gongs for an hour. For 63 minutes Chatham and his original co-performer Yoshi Wada hit two suspended gongs with soft mallets, first at a slow regular pulse, then in a quick, beatless continuum. Tom Johnson, in a 1972 review of the work's premier performance at the Kitchen, called the process "a radical new kind of minimalism which almost negated the whole idea of composition." Minimal it may have looked, but the thickly harmonic noise shimmered, writhed, sparkled, and flared up in a sonorous band as unpredictable as it was changeable. Still, as a gesture it was nowhere near as brash as La Monte Young's pulling a gong across the pavement behind him, or Nam June Paik's smashing a violin. Despite the incense Chatham burned in an attempt to reconjure the original atmosphere, the piece was less provocative for its '70s connotations than for its curious relation to his subsequent music, for some of Chatham's electric guitar works have comprised no more elements than this early gong piece: a high-decibel sound with a beat.

The concert that totally threw me for a loop, that suggested the 1840s or 1990s more than anything connected with 1973, was Garrett List's evening of computer music with voice and trombone. Neither the improvisation List did with Frederic Rzewski and *Musica Elettronica Viva* in the '60s nor the jazz he's done since would have given much hint as to what he's doing now. Half of the concert consisted of excerpts from List's three-and-

there percussionist Gary Beumee spread his forest of gestures to drums, cymbals, and other wood, skin, and metal instruments. Every flurry burst and evaporated with the vividness of some natural process, such as rainstorms or the ephemeral contours of wasp formations.

I would have appreciated *Lu* more had it narrowed its focus, wrung more variety from just the wood blocks, or just the bowed cymbals. But I decided afterward that that was an American prejudice. We're so polarized between the macro-expressionism of Elliott Carter and the micro-meditationism of Reich that anything in the middle (where most normal music is) inevitably smells of compromise. Asian composers have different reflexes, and perhaps because they're closer to the meditative tradition our minimalists emulate, they cling to it less slavishly; one thinks of Takemitsu, whose quiet, Feldman-like aesthetic never really strays from serialism. Our jaded senses boggle at the hypnotic power of Buddhist rites, which over there are no more mysterious than Baptist Sunday school.

So, after reflection it seemed natural that both Bun-Ching's Movement for String Quartet and Jing-Jing Luo's *Wind*, both played by Mia Wu and Johanna Jenner, violins, Marlow Fisher, viola, and Michael Finckel, cello, used simple materials to effect a tense, Schoenbergian idiom. *Wind* climaxed by reducing to octave transpositions of an anguished half-step, and expired in a flight of upward glissandi. Bun-Ching's quartet melted soft, dissonant chords into tense tremolos, and finished with an emphatic Bergian gesture. The imaginative texture of Jing-Jing's *Autumn Sounds* stemmed from odd devices such as echoing single notes between Barbara Held's flute and Xin Wei Zhang's voluptuous soprano tone, occasionally adding grace-notes. Certainly the music was pervaded by a strong Chinese flavor, but unlike that of so many white musicians moving in the opposite direction, it was never superficially exotic. ■