

Black Holes and Other Composers

By Kyle Gann

Terry Riley

Elodie Lauten

Joshua Fried

Linda Fisher

Richard Lerman

Conrad Cummings

Spring 1990 felt like New York's best new music season in nine, maybe 14 years. I've heard more exciting concerts in the last four months than I had in the previous three years—maybe that's a small exaggeration—some by older composers we hadn't heard from in a while, others by thirtyish people who suddenly hit stride. When I took this job in '86, five concerts in a row would be somebody blowing through parts of a trombone, or else screeching on the bridge of a violin, slapping a double bass peg, squealing a clarinet mouthpiece—the instrument changed, but the aims, methods, and misassumptions remained the same. I called it *The Avant-Garde that Time Forgot*. You can still hear it most weeks, but right now there's a tremendous variety of more original stuff. Does the change of a decade remind people that time is passing and inspire them to get their act together?

This is my end-of-season column, where I throw together the concerts I didn't get to write about and wanted to.

"What'dya think of the Terry Riley concert?" That question, asked with a dubious look and a curled lip, ricocheted for days after Riley's May 11 concert with his *Black Holes* Ensemble at the D.A.P.



LONA FOOTE

Lauten's music soothes, but doesn't take the path of least resistance.

loaded with VIPs, *In C* sounded muddy, ill-balanced, sclerotic. Beware performances born in the PR office.

There are composers composers like, composers critics like, and composers audiences like. James Tenney and David Rosenboom are composers' composers, Terry Riley is an audiences' composer, and Elodie Lauten, David Gar-

Multidimensional Man, Dora Ohrenstein's liquid soprano melted over Lauten's keyboard figurations until the piece ceased to be a separate entity. Rhythmically articulated drones were the music's basis, but Lauten has somehow Westernized, or Gallicized, Oriental spirituality until it feels like the slow, lonely end of a Truffaut movie. The traffic sounds locate the music somehow, keep it from

it took several verses to catch the tune. (For obvious reasons, each singer can only perform the piece once, and Iris Rose replaced Fuglistaller the second night.) *Travelogue* was brilliant, the performance analogue of automatic writing, but it needed shaping; the "Surfin' USA" bit, though funny, weakened the effect of the more expressionist material around it. As a result, the piece grew a little

drew patterns on them with small gas burners. The sheets popped as they expanded, then clinked back unexpectedly as they cooled off, while the small rods made ringing noises which decrescendooed after the fire passed. Lerman echoed the sounds with delays, making a delicate, rough-edged, directionless tone poem. It was a homage, he said, to the fact that it was the year's hottest day so far.

Then, in *Music for Plinky, Straw, and Other Objects* (an expanded version of *Music for Plinky and Straw*), Lerman swung straws through the air attached to contact mikes to make whirring sounds. Still using delay, he bent the straws to make crinkling noises, touched them with tuning forks, and clipped them bit by bit with scissors as the pitch rose with each clip. (A theoretical note that intrigued me: equal clips on the straws beeped an "undertone series," the inversion of the overtone series which is sometimes evoked to account for minor tonalities, but which is supposed to have no existence in real-life acoustics.) As one composer said when I described the effects to him, "Richard's music is always adorable." That's the word.

I missed Conrad Cummings's La Mama E.T.C. gig May 21 to hear Thomas Buckner, but I arranged to get a tape because the political aggressiveness of Cummings's music seems timely. He's writing a Vietnam opera, and judging from his other recent music it will drip with antigovernment sarcasm. His musical style is weirdly banal yet striking, a deadpan, over-simple neoclassicism with liberal dashes of Philip Glass and John Adams: sort of a postmini-

that time is passing and inspire them to get their act together?

This is my end-of-season column, where I throw together the concerts I didn't get to write about and wanted to.

"What'dya think of the Terry Riley concert?" That question, asked with a dubious look and a curled lip, ricocheted for days after Riley's May 11 concert with his Khayal Ensemble at the R.A.P.P. Arts Center, part of the Bang on a Can festival. Riley's singing style for his new songs was closer to jazz than Indian. He has a rough edge to his voice, and for all his concern about the purest of tunings, his frequencies didn't always divide well into those of his female colleagues a few octaves above. (They weren't in tune.) The songs with their homey lyrics were California mellow, and in fact reminded you more of *Rainbow in Curved Air* than anything else he'd done since. It was kind of hokey...

And yet: I only heard those songs once, and I remember the tune of every one. No bonehead present was so tone-deaf he couldn't figure the central idea, and Riley gripped you so firmly from the opening notes that when he spun distant variations on each tune with surefooted musicality, you had to follow. There's a reason *da-da-da-dummmmm* became the beginning of the world's most famous composition. Riley didn't spread a veneer of sophistication over what he had to say, he said it honestly, and you couldn't mistake it. The worst piece he's ever done hits you on a deeper level than most composers ever reach. The guy can communicate.

The succeeding assault on Riley's *In C* was something else altogether: less a performance than an excuse to squeeze famous names onstage (La Monte Young, Kronos, Tom Constanten, only Yma Sumac was absent). Over-

loaded with VIPs, *In C* sounded muddy, ill-balanced, sclerotic. Beware performances born in the PR office.

There are composers composers like, composers critics like, and composers audiences like. James Tenney and David Rosenboom are composers' composers, Terry Riley is an audiences' composer, and Elodie Lauten, David Garland, and Dary John Mizelle may be critics' composers; at least, they seem able to rack up plenty of positive reviews without quite taking off with the general public. I call such artists "publicity black holes," because they can swallow up any amount of good press without becoming famous.

Admittedly, Lauten's music is an enigma, though I always feel there's more to it than registers at the moment you hear it. May 24 at La Mama La Galleria, she played old piano pieces and some excerpts from her new opera, *Multidimensional Man*. Over and over, she started up a tape of urban environmental noise, traffic sounds and such, then played above it a piano improv that was like a sketch for a minimalist piece, not smooth with the transitions filled in, but with abrupt changes, odd modulations. She always reminds me of Bach's sons, not in style, but in evolutionary level: there's a kind of self-imposed restraint, a sense of a form whose dramatic potential hasn't yet become conscious. The music soothes, but she doesn't let it take the path of least resistance. She's saying something, and I'm not sure even she knows what it is.

Layne Redmond accompanied her on frame drum, and the piano-and-drum combination worked far better than I would have predicted; it was a natural. (John Pietro played small percussion too, but without finding the right wavelength.) In arias from

Multidimensional Man, Dora Ohrenstein's liquid soprano melted over Lauten's keyboard figurations until the piece ceased to be a separate entity. Rhythmically articulated drones were the music's basis, but Lauten has somehow Westernized, or Gallicized, Oriental spirituality until it feels like the slow, lonely end of a Truffaut movie. The traffic sounds locate the music somehow, keep it from becoming distant and unworldly. Hard to say why I like it so much, except that it has a powerful effect on my mood.

Several of the pieces Linda Fisher and Joshua Fried performed at La Mama E.T.C. May 26 and 27 have been reviewed in this space, but the most striking pieces by each were ones I hadn't heard before. Fried has long seemed eager to put his entertaining shoe gimmick behind him (he releases spurts of sound by drumming on electronically wired, up-turned heels) and get on to a new trick. He did it here. In *Travelogue*, Ruth Fuglistaller was instructed to listen through headphones to a tape Fried had made and mimic everything she heard, instantly, as closely as possible. She seemed possessed. Over Fried's various repetitive electronic backgrounds, she cried, screamed, babbled, tried to sing, visibly couldn't grasp what she was supposed to sing, all with a terrifying intensity born of the difficulty of translating.

The result was much like the stream-of-consciousness vocal theater of Shelley Hirsch and David Weinstein, but Hirsch, when playing an out-of-control person, is still in control. Fuglistaller, a stunningly uninhibited performer, seemed at the tape's mercy, as if controlled via brain waves. In midcatharsis she sang "Surfin' USA," and it helped that, being Swiss, she didn't know the words;

it took several verses to catch the tune. (For obvious reasons, each singer can only perform the piece once, and Iris Rose replaced Fuglistaller the second night.) *Travelogue* was brilliant, the performance analogue of automatic writing, but it needed shaping; the "Surfin' USA" bit, though funny, weakened the effect of the more expressionist material around it. As a result, the piece grew a little long, and there's no reason such a horrific, Hitchcockian, mind-blowing theater piece should seem too long.

Fisher's *Big Mouth* is hot right now, but *Girl Devil Dancing* was the most compelling thing I'd heard her do. The "girl devil" was ostensibly Lilith, Adam's troublesome first wife whom God replaced with the more compliant Eve. Fisher began with a not too unconventional text ("Eve's Monologue") about a visit from a woman extraterrestrial; as UFO music, the piece would make a good companion to "Blue" Gene Tyranny's *Somewhere in Arizona, 1970*. But what followed didn't fall into space-music clichés. Fisher had rigged her synthesizer to slide upward by a major seventh at the end of each chord, and the music careened up and down with a vibrant momentum unlike anything I'd ever heard. Sometimes (as here in *The Scientist*) Fisher's music criticizes society, but it's at its best when it comments with chilling matter-of-factness on some borderline psychosis. That girl devil is herself.

At Roulette, April 28, Richard Lerman made the most original musical use of fire since Annea Lockwood torched an amplified piano. (Credit the trend to Wagner, who sent Valhalla up in flames.) In *Changing States* Lerman amplified rods and sheets of metal, while Bertrand Moon and Kurt Stallman (following a score)

Mama E.T.C. gig May 21 to hear Thomas Buckner, but I arranged to get a tape because the political aggressiveness of Cummings's music seems timely. He's writing a Vietnam opera, and judging from his other recent music it will drip with antigovernment sarcasm. His musical style is weirdly banal yet striking, a deadpan, over-simple neoclassicism with liberal dashes of Philip Glass and John Adams; sort of a postminimal Virgil Thomson cum Kurt Weill. Had Jesse Helms walked in on *Photo Op*, he might have thought he'd discovered the new right-wing Beethoven, for the irony of Cummings's political pronouncements is so deadpan that you have to persistently read it in. "Let's never give up on more jails for more criminals," intoned Larry Adams over earnest repeated chords, and Dora Ohrenstein crooned as commentary, "I believe in something: I'm trying to remember what it is."

Photo Op was a perky cantata of political platitudes, lyrics by James Siena. *Insertions* was an almost neo-Handelian setting of sex-related texts by Siena and others, both pieces performed with prickly energy by the Cummings Ensemble: in addition to the singers, Gregory Fulkerson on violin, Andrew Sterman on winds, Daryl Goldberg on cello, and Cummings on keyboard. The latter piece ended with a virtuosically speedy cadenza on the pleasant thought, "By keeping things exactly the way that they are we'll find truth in the smallest things which are just as good as the big ones that keep this country great." The music was so repetitious you couldn't escape its barbs. Over and over, in *Photo Op*'s "Good Night," Ohrenstein and Adams sang with hand-over-heart sentimentality, "I love my country so much I want to fuck it." I want to watch the Republicans weasel their way out of funding *that*. ■