

Bleeding the Edge

By Kyle Gann

New Music Funding

Wondering what happened to all the concerts? A survey of new-music impresarios explains why venues are closing down, performances ever rarer. In a survival of the administratively fittest scenario, nonprofit spaces focus on promotion and grantsmanship rather than art. Everyone's retrenching. Roulette, once presenting 60 to 70 gigs a year, now plans 50; Experimental Intermedia Foundation (EIF), the hardest hit, is down to 22 concerts from an average of 50; Composers' Forum will host five, not eight to 10. The Alternative Museum has increased from 11 to 15 events, though their 1991 move shortened last year's schedule. Overall, there's been about a 30 per cent drop.

The season starts later, too: in December at EIF, mid October at Roulette, and there will be only one fall Composers' Forum concert. Government funding cuts have drawn blood. Roulette was slashed 50 per cent by the National Endowment for the Arts and New York State Council on the Arts last year, and expects another 25 per cent reduction from NYSCA this year, about a \$24,000 hit in all. EIF was blanked by the NEA, and cut 55 per cent by NYSCA. The Alternative Museum's music program, after a temporary suspension, dropped from \$14,000 to \$3000—and then, zilch, suspended again. Compos-

ers' Forum's NEA grant is down to \$5500 from a high of \$19,700. As with most other groups, the Forum received only a third of what NYSCA initially awarded it. Everyone praises NYSCA's intentions, but the agency is broke. No one praises the NEA.

One widespread complaint is that new music—let's define it this week as music made by breathing composers outside academic circles—isn't represented on grant-awarding panels. The NEA's music panel for individual artists is dominated by professors. Just like the Pulitzers and Guggenheims, the NEA's composer cash awards are doled out by academics with no new-music sympathies. Given that the NEA's standard excuse for denying grants is insufficient audience size, that's a sad irony: the *nonacademics* are the ones trying to reach people. And the NEA's traditional anti-new-music bias is now matched by an anti-New York bias. Only one professor had New York connections.

As a result, people who run New York spaces jump through hoops for piddling sums. "I've watched it since 1984," says Bernadette Speech, music consultant (and former director) to the Alternative Museum's music program: "Government agency people say, you need to work on your marketing. The next year they say, you need more corporate support. Then next year, get your individual contributions up. Next year: more audience. They don't ask

you if you accomplished what they told you to do last year, which you did. They just give you something else." Quality of the music, she says, often gets lost in the paperwork.

We need an NEA, the theory goes, because art doesn't receive enough popular support. Yet this NEA, in practice, demands popular support as a criterion. The NEA praised EIF's programming, associate director Mary Jane Leach says, but cut it off for not drawing bigger crowds (also for insufficient cultural diversity; EIF is the only space that doesn't highlight improvisation). The Alternative Museum was also denied funding because of insufficient crowds, this of a place that holds 150 seats, which I've often seen filled. "Who do they want to fund," asks Speech, "Billy Joel?" Leach adds, "We'd all be happy to do community outreach, if they gave us money to back it up with." Roulette, new music's Rock of Gibraltar, has been asked to "stabilize its administration." Yeah.

Given these gloomy stats, it's encouraging how resourceful the organizations have been. Everyone reports that admissions are up. There's less competition from other concerts, for one thing, but it's also due to shrewd use of free advertising (on WNYC, WKCR, WBAI, and other outlets). All of the organizations have found new corporate and individual donors, though rarely enough to fill the gap, and with no guarantees for



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similar largess next year. "Who's taken over?" asks Speech. "The wonderful people from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust. They're open and supportive, which I can't say for the government agencies."

Who's hurting most? Unestablished artists and out-of-towners. Roulette's Jim Staley tries to balance his programming, but says that "with 10 to 20 fewer slots, it can't help but disproportionately cut out people who are just getting started." The problem with emphasis on numbers, says Betsy McClelland, director of Composers' Forum, "is that you're pressured to take fewer risks. We've always tried to mix people who were well known with more emerging artists, and bring in people who haven't played New York before. We can't afford to do that now." Funding also narrows the directions new music can take; the current dearth stifles the prevailing flow toward larger ensembles. EIF, Leach says, "has always been a space for composers who per-

form their own music, but that format has run its course. You can only write so much for yourself." Composers' Forum has moved from ensembles to soloists for budgetary reasons.

Accountability, planning, hustling grants, and hype are paramount for '90s nonprofit spaces, and the day of artist-run venues may be over. As Speech says, "Those who haven't got the talent, time, and chutzpah for fundraising are going to die." Like many who remember the pre-NEA era, McClelland doesn't see the cash pinch as endangering the quality of American music. "We've always had less money anyway. People are going to create art, whether they have an outlet or not. What's decreasing is the amount that's heard and seen by the public. The audiences are losing out. When the government says, we're not going to fund you because you don't have enough people at your concerts, they're denying more people access to art." ■

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