

Fast Forward/David First

# Body Language

BY KYLE GANN

Even Adorno had to concede that contemporary music had cut itself in half. It hasn't been that long since music appealed to both body and mind; Mahler is among the most analyzable of composers, but it's difficult to keep still during his Ninth Symphony. In our present musical "ghost in the machine" conundrum, popular music tends to neglect the mind, classical music the body. In New York the separation is more acute than elsewhere, the 100 per cent-mind people uptown, the 100 per cent-body people downtown. The mind seems easier to reapproach. I'm the first to admit that pop musicians trying to sound "new musicky" are invariably less pathetic than professors trying to come up with a pop tune. Too often, though, the body people seem content with music that requires little more than raw energy.

At first blush, this seems to be the appeal of Fast Forward, the British-born percussion artist who played at Roulette March 19. Like Z'ev's, his performance scenario resembles an industrial scrapyard tossed into a percussion classroom, but while Z'ev's purposes are meditative, Forward's are extroverted. Forward played steel drums, while his four cronies (Yuval Gabay, Kumiko Kimoto, James Lo, and Wes Virginia) played drums and did things that would have been described as irresponsible in a less artsy context: tossing metal rods around, randomly hitting amplified tubes, and throwing hubcaps in the air and letting them crash.

There's a lot of "trash music" around, made by people convinced that random

or careless actions are inherently fascinating. Several technical and musical points of finesse lifted Fast Forward well above that genre: his group's precision, their obvious careful preparation, his impeccable pacing. Though his tiny repeating motives give it little play, Forward's melodic sense can be stunning, as in one section where his long, Balinese-style tune was followed by drums in rhythmic unison. The steady tap of rimshots flatteringly set off the less foreseeable factors. In fact, there's a quality of sound, of jarring split-second unpredictability, in Forward's hubcap-spinning and other metal maneuvers that I haven't heard since Christian Wolff's early pieces; in particular Wolff's *Stones* where small rocks are bounced off percussion instruments. There's no plannable substitute for that quality, and I was grateful to Forward for capturing it.

Forward is the first musician to combine the sweet repetitions of Reich, the raw decibel power of Branca, the randomness of Cage and Wolff, and even the stochastic textures of Xenakis. It's a potent combination, carried out with irresistible momentum. What my mind wants to hear supporting this, though, is a theoretical structure that makes his

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dazzling moment-to-moment changes not only entertaining, but purposeful. I enjoy the energy and the sonority, but I'm ultimately not satisfied when I can't perceive the intelligence guiding the whole.

Too, I get nervous when I start describ-



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### Fast Forward: more pushy than moving

ing music as "irresistible." Music that seems to depend on volume for its effect always reminds me of what Hitler said: "Without the loudspeaker, we never would have conquered Germany." I love as much as the next person to get swept away in crescendoing waves of volume, but pure amplitude can grant music an artificial authority that a thinking person has to mistrust. Like Cage, I don't mind being moved, but I don't want to be pushed. Admittedly, what amplification Forward used (only on the swinging chimes and industrial springs) aided in timbral magnification; but the force of his drums in a small room shouldn't deaf-

en one to the fact that, aside from a few dotted values and mild syncopations, the rhythmic interest was not great. One did not, as with Reich's *Drumming*, listen for cross-relationships or the metamorphosis of a rhythmic idea, but merely to five energetic players tuned in to a beat.

My reaction to such music is that, after my body is finished with its ecstasy, my mind taps me on the shoulder (so to speak) and reminds me that the beat, the bristly textures, and the enticing melodies are not enough: I want to be intrigued. After all, some of the musician-ship was only a step up from adolescents destroying somebody's trash cans. Whatever theoretical origins its sensuous factors may have had, Forward's is clearly a body music. It's unusually compelling body music; like Branca's, it's music everybody should hear once, but not more than twice. I'll keep going, of course, because I want to see where Forward takes this when its novelty wears thin.

David First, who played at the Galleria March 8, is in a similar if less clear position. His ideas, using a modified jazz ensemble (guitars, keyboards, violin, cello, wordless voice) to create Ligeti-like continuum pieces, are very strong, even voluptuous. He, too, displayed a good sense of timing, and considerable variety in drawing snatches of melody out of a timbral environment. But in moving past the jazz idiom, First has lost his innocence; what he gave up by abandoning that familiar context must be replaced. His form has grown too subtle to still function in terms of jazz's either-crescendo-or-decrescendo transitions, and stands in need of a unified purposeful direction. He also needs to be weaned from the trap set, which his arrhythmic textures rendered superfluous.

First's pop background gives him a freedom to explore lively ideas that many academic composers should envy. Now, I hope he can develop the discipline (without losing the spontaneity—there's the whole catch) to sustain those ideas. ■

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