

Dary John Mizelle / Robert Ashley

# Calm Within Chaos

BY KYLE GANN

**W**ho understands America's attitude toward its composers? Why have we heaped honors on the likes of Edward MacDowell and Charles Wuorinen, while geniuses like Charles Ives and Conlon Nancarrow scribbled unheard music into their sixties? Are we doomed to forever repeat that history? Who decides where the spotlight will shine? What creates the illusion that, as Lou Harrison puts it, "American composers come with a self-destruct button"? Why is great American music always the underground, never the mainstream? If I had five minutes with God, these are questions I'd ask.

In defense, He might point to Essential Music's October 25 retrospective, at Symphony Space, of the music of Dary John Mizelle. Mizelle, a 48-year-old Brooklyn resident born in Oklahoma and California-trained, writes music that has long excited the admiration of colleagues, but has never worked its way into the imagination of musical power brokers. The obvious reason is its diversity: except for a general thorniness of idiom, Mizelle commits himself to no identifiable style, and can be pigeonholed only as a "lone eccentric," as the concert's program put it. One index of Mizelle's neglect is that three of the works performed here were world premieres, including a pair from



Mizelle: in the spiritual/experimental tradition of Ives and Cage

repeated pizzicato; then Wu played a fragile ostinato while Lamneck made slow glissandos. Usually one element is static while another moves, so that each can be perceptually measured in reference to the other. The music pivots from texture to texture in an abstract but followable method. Hints of this technique could be traced even to the We-hernesque Six Pieces for Violin and

effect of minimalism.

But nothing here even began to prepare one for the climactic finale, *Lake-Mountain-Thunder* for tarogato and 12 percussionists. All 12 began by striking wood blocks in unison: one electric rap, then another, then another, gaining momentum in well-calculated accelerando. The players knocked rocks together, marking rhythms by surprising unisons

quies of the Second Piano Sonata.

"The modern world is chaotic, my music only reflects the chaos of the world"—this popular argument gets good press, because the myth that our times are peculiarly troubled makes us all survivors, i.e., heroes. But the truth is that the world is formless until we give it form, and if we are too lazy or dispirited to give it a form other than chaos, that's the form it will take. The tranquility at the center of Mizelle's music suggests that the chaos is illusory, that what's real is the continuity of individuality, not only through time but into space. This Thor-eavian strain, this calm at the heart of random consciousness, marks Mizelle as a successor to the spiritual/experimental tradition of Ives and Cage. If there's any upside to the fact that not much of Mizelle's music has been played yet, it's the anticipation that we have a lot left to learn from him.

**T**hough he's far better recognized (by new music's meager standards), Robert Ashley is similar to Mizelle in that there's a dichotomy between abstract and concrete in his music, and that his multilayered activity is hectically meditative. Ashley's been complaining the last few years that there's no place to play in New York, and he chose to give his latest work, "My Brother Called," from a series of meditations called *El Aficionado*, its American premiere in Chicago, November 1 at the School of the Art Institute. Possibly burned out from the massive technical layout of his last opera, *Atalanta*, Ashley scaled this work to the slimmer requirements of a touring company: Thomas Buckner sang, Katharine Rosos (a talented Chicago singer) narrated, Ashley and "Blue" Gene Tyranny improvised at the piano, and John Erskine ran the computerized bass line over which they jammed.

The premise of *El Aficionado* is that the protagonist (spoken by Rosos, sung ad lib by Buckner) is an agent of something called *the department* and is ordered to carry out instructions he/she neither understands nor necessarily wants to. Sent to a café, he/she is told to describe every person entering or leaving an apartment across the street, in a code that takes the form of newspaper person-

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the '70s, and only two had been previously heard in New York. Yet his music has been influential among younger composers, including John Kennedy and Charles Wood, the founders of Essential Music. Given the year-old group's name and determination to correct inequities, it's appropriate that honoring Mizelle was a first priority.

Though subtle, Mizelle's musical individuality is confident, and hearing seven pieces in a row made it vivid. Mizelle plays the shakuhachi (Japanese flute), and his works, even when written for strings and percussion, project the feel of breathing. Another consistent trait is his melody, which winds by small degrees throughout the range of an instrument, like an elaborate doodle made without lifting the pen from the paper; he'll explore the far reaches of musical territory, but he leads you there helpfully. These qualities united in *Through a Glass* . . . (1987), for tarogato, a pungent wooden instrument halfway between a clarinet and saxophone, in which soloist Esther Lamneck outlined a series of discrete harmonic areas. The 1975 Violin Fantasy, played by Mia Wu, exploded that outline into a tremendous range of sonorities. This was the evening's most recondite venture, but Wu's firm, loud pizzicato chords and grating overpressure brought it to earth.

The conceptualism of the '70s is part of Mizelle's background, so a frequent Mizelle strategy—as silly as it sounds to put it this way—is to have one performer do one thing while another does something else. Thus in *Interplay* (1979) Lamneck played an angular melody against Wu's

repeated pizzicato; then Wu played a fragile ostinato while Lamneck made slow glissandos. Usually one element is static while another moves, so that each can be perceptually measured in reference to the other. The music pivots from texture to texture in an abstract but followable method. Hints of this technique could be traced even to the Webernesque Six Pieces for Violin and French Horn of 1963: brief, cheerful, and 12-tone with sharp tonal allusions, played by Wu with Robert Carlisle.

Mizelle's Piano Sonata No. 2, subtitled "Polyvalence" and hammered out impressively by Gary Klein, was altogether different, a stream of consciousness more concerned with emotional than formal issues. Pounding, *Le Sacre*-like chords would cease, then Klein's hands would wander chromatically to another pair of chords and resume pounding. Much of the work brooded in slow, dissonant counterpoint; a few loud notes that tried to instigate a new idea vanished without making an impression. Finally, a locomotive momentum arose from the bass, leading to Ivesian, rocklike lines in double octaves, and then to a curious blues passage marked "In Memoriam Thelonious Monk"—the only part of this puzzle that felt forced in.

If anything can be said to represent Mizelle's best-known vein, it's his shakuhachi meditations, as introverted as the drone meditations of Pauline Oliveros and La Monte Young, but denser, more melodic, less Eastern. In *Polyphonies I* (recorded on Irida), Mizelle sat on stage breathing quiet melodies into the shakuhachi, each line picked up seconds later by electronic delay. The echoes built up hovering chords, which neutralized the soft rage of electronic noises that swirled around him: concrete and synthesized sounds of wind, water, the crackling of fire. The delineation of psychic and physical space, a central Mizelle concern, connected center to periphery as well as distinguishing them, and when he settled into repetitions of a three-note motive, he drew the listener into an emotional focus far different from the mesmerizing

effect of minimalism.

But nothing here even began to prepare one for the climactic finale, *Lake-Mountain-Thunder* for tarogato and 12 percussionists. All 12 began by striking wood blocks in unison: one electric rap, then another, then another, gaining momentum in well-calculated accelerando. The players knocked rocks together, marking rhythms by surprising unisons among duos and quartets that spanned the stage, while other players beat auto springs or glass jars to a contrasting pulse. The brittle chaos of stone, wood, and glass sent tingles up the spine, while shifting vectors directed the ear through simultaneous crescendos and ritards, as if this junkheap of percussion were one of Nancarrow's pianos blown to smithereens—none of which would have become clear without the precision of Linda Bouchard's conducting. And in the middle of this forest was occasionally heard the lonely wail of Lamneck's tarogato, like the engulfed human figure in a Turner landscape. It was the strongest sound concept I've heard in a 1980s work, and a startling, earthy answer to Varèse's *Ionisation*.

Rarely does such theoretically abstract music threaten to drown out the intellect with sheer visceral power. A spacey guy, Mizelle has had spotty success as an academic, but (there's a connection here) he knows something the tenured don't: that music is not a series of pieces of information, but a physical and even magical presence. When, in *Lake-Mountain-Thunder*, eight or more players shimmered a loud wood block tremolo in unison, it gripped the listener with a sensation that was neither purely nor merely musical, but went straight into the body. The protagonist in Mizelle's music, the quiet but undisturbed voice at the center of chaos, is one of the cleanest metaphors in contemporary music, and though he discharges an impressive analytic arsenal in order to create it, its effect takes hold through the simplest phenomenological means: the tranquilly sustained dissonances in *Polyphonies I*, the tarogato in *Lake-Mountain-Thunder*, even the hesitating melody in the solilo-

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By Ashley's operatic standards, this 75-minute collage of only three things to follow at once was a bagatelle, less inexhaustible and less exhausting than anything he's done since the early versions of *Perfect Lives/Private Parts*. But still present and still disturbing were the verbal snapshots that Ashley covertly slips into your brain, perfectly mundane, but presented with the eyebrow-raised assumption that something very spooky is going on. After the text described a man taking a dog out of a car on a leash, Ashley's sultry monotone urged, "It was very dramatic in a way that's hard to describe." Tyranny's pianistic metaphor turned the stunt into music: he played an innocent enough modal improv that gradually, before you could tell how it happened, metamorphosed into a weirdly dissonant pointillist filigree.

That this Chicago audience was too stunned to know how to respond proved that Ashley had succeeded again. He does in every piece what Stockhausen claimed to do in *Gesang der Junglinge*: place the everyday in a context where we'll see it for the weirdness it really is. That anything exists is a miracle, and that things are the way they are is indescribably strange. Ashley sees the magic, but most of us have a veil of ordinariness over our eyes, so he reaches over and lifts it up. ■