



PETER COLLIE

Classical Clash

Rhys Chatham on Why He Wrote a Piece for 101 Electric Guitars

By Kyle Gann

MONTREAL—The stage at Club Metropolis was barely wide enough to squeeze in 101 guitarists on staircased risers October

as loud as the cheers that greeted it. *Angel's* introduction built up the first 11 harmonics slowly, culminating in crashing, syncopated sonorities that Mahler might have envied for the hammer blows in

panded version in which the frenetic Kane looked in danger of flying offstage.

There was fitting symmetry in opening Montreal's NMA with Chatham's magnum opus. Chat-

playing "Louie Louie." But this is the largest proper ensemble, and it's a special sound. Jonathan Kane has to run track for two months before we do this piece, because it takes so much

sense for a classical critic to review an improviser, or for a critic who knows improvisation to write about music from a classical context. I'm not laying the onus of blame on the critic. Composers have been guilty, in the last few years, of a fallacious policy that says rock is improvisation is jazz is art music. Everything's all mixed up, so you can't blame producers and critics for being confused. Our project in the early '80s was to break down these barriers, but now it's time to redefine our respective fields. I scream from the rooftops that I'm an art-music composer working with a rock instrumentation, and sometimes in a rock context. And the reason I don't call myself a rock composer is that I have too much respect for rock. It's not what I do, and I'm not going to say that I do it.

Gann: *You opened that can of worms yourself, by programming rock at the Kitchen in the '70s.*

Chatham: Composers like Frederic Rzewski were introducing improvisation into their compositions. [Previous music director] Garrett List wanted to bring guys like Don Cherry and Steve Lacy into the Kitchen so we could see where that music was coming from. I wanted to do the same thing; both as a composer and as music director of the Kitchen when I returned in 1977. There were composers incorporating the rhythms and sounds of rock into their music, but addressing formal issues peculiar to a classical context. So I followed Garrett's lead and opened the Kitchen to the more interesting avant-garde rock such as DNA, Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. This caused considerable consternation, not only in the art-music community, but also in the jazz community.

But the point had been made. It's been proven, to the New York intelligentsia at least, that there is no difference in worth between a

Rhys Chatham on Why He Wrote a Piece for 101 Electric Guitars

By Kyle Gann

MONTREAL—The stage at Club Metropolis was barely wide enough to squeeze in 101 guitarists on staircased risers October 29. But the sound was resplendent, a thrilling kickoff for New Music America 1990—the first such festival held outside the U.S., and possibly the last such festival, period. Seven of the guitarists were soloists brought from France and the U.S. by composer Rhys Chatham; the remainder were Montreal locals, some of whom had never played anything more highbrow than “Honky-Tonk Heroes.”

Chatham had promised me that, despite its numbers, *An Angel Moves Too Fast To See* would be less loud than his Guitar Trio; and though I suspected he made the claim because of partial deafness, he was right. What distinguished *Angel* from earlier works like *Die Donnergötter* wasn't volume, but layering and complexity. The piece is an ultimate extension of Chatham's interest in combining notated with non-notated music, players who can read music with those who can't. (In Montreal, all the guitarists could read but 10, which sped up rehearsals and allowed for the best performance yet.) The piece is scored for drummer Jonathan Kane and about 100 guitars; there were about 95 at the premiere in Lille, France, 125 in Dunkirk. At Montreal, festival organizers asked Chatham to use exactly 101 as a reference to controversial Bill 101, which attempts to make French the official language of Quebec. Chatham, now a Paris resident, complied.

The opening strum was hardly

as loud as the cheers that greeted it. *Angel's* introduction built up the first 11 harmonics slowly, culminating in crashing, syncopated sonorities that Mahler might have envied for the hammer blows in his Sixth Symphony. The next movement brought 12th century organum to mind, doodling melodies over the drone of a loose, balalaika-like strum. The aleatory third movement—titled “No leaves left; every blade of grass screams”—was the greatest departure from any mass-guitar music that had come before. The guitarists stepped through splashes of sound at individually varying paces, creating waves of reverberant lines over which Chatham's soloists soared like singing whales. This section, as I could tell from the videotape I once saw, exploded in antiphony at Lille, where the players were ranged across the balcony; here, on the narrow stage, the noises merged.

My favorite section was the following Adagio. Figuring that guitarists who couldn't read could at least count, Chatham spread across the stage a multilayered melody made of individual notes repeated out of phase with the others: an A every nine beats, a G-sharp every eight, an F-sharp every five, and so on. As mechanical as a giant music box, the movement thickened into a wall of noise and crescendoed into the finale, a 4/4 jam that seemed little more than an everlasting cadential chord. Then, in an absurdly placed homage to Quebec nationalism, Chatham conducted a 101-guitar version of the Quebecois anthem, “Mon pays.” As the real finale, though, the group encored the Adagio, in a spontaneously ex-

panded version in which the frenetic Kane looked in danger of flying offstage.

There was fitting symmetry in opening Montreal's NMA with Chatham's magnum opus. Chatham was one of the organizers of the first, 1979 festival at the Kitchen, New Music New York, and this year's festival looks likely to be the last; at least, no city or organization has begun the two-year process of raising money for another. Back in New York five days later, I asked Chatham about his new work and about the festival's imminent demise:

Kyle Gann: *From 1983 to '85 you quit writing for electric guitars. Why, after that, did you decide to write for 100 guitars?*

Rhys Chatham: It started with a bet. I was touring with [dancer] Karole Armitage in 1980. This was the height of “noise-rock.” I didn't think I was doing noise-rock, but I decided to let the label stick. So I thought, wouldn't it be great to get 100 electric guitars, put them in a small room, lock the audience in, have them play really loud, and call the piece *Torture Chamber*? Karole laughed and said, “I'll bet you can't name 100 guitarists that would play the piece.” So I did it. I actually named 100 guitarists. After the initial joke, I thought, gosh, this isn't a bad idea. It was never my intention to get stuck writing only for electric guitars. I didn't want to be guilty of regurgitating. But after two years of not doing it I missed it.

It was scary, because no one has ever written a piece especially for 100 electric guitars. Guitarists have massed together; I think the world record is 265 guitarists

playing “Louie Louie.” But this is the largest proper ensemble, and it's a special sound. Jonathan Kane has to run track for two months before we do this piece, because it takes so much energy. When we do the encore, whatever energy he has left, he lets out.

Gann: *Montreal's New Music America looks like the end of the line. New Music New York came out of a closely knit community, but recent festivals have looked as if they were designed by quota system. Do you think NMA's run its natural course? Is it still relevant?*

Chatham: I think the festival's incredibly important for new music. Because this music's fragile. It has to operate outside a commercial context. The beauty of NMA going from city to city is it focuses the media and the public on a music they're not used to listening to. Musicians in Montreal, for example, felt completely ignored by the media. Now the local papers are starting to pay attention. I know the festival won't happen next year, but I hope it happens the year after that.

Gann: *Does NMA's significance get diluted when it programs commercial successes like David Byrne, or conventional jazzers like Lester Bowie?*

Chatham: I can't speak for the festival. In my view, it's supposed to represent advanced ideas coming out of rock, classical, and improvisation. If they include someone who's not in the vanguard of these fields, then it's bad programming. Bad programming can happen to anyone.

The project I find important right now is for composers, critics, and producers to redefine what they're doing. It doesn't make

such as DNA, Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. This caused considerable consternation, not only in the art-music community, but also in the jazz community.

But the point had been made. It's been proven, to the New York intelligentsia at least, that there is no difference in worth between a great rock song made by Chuck Berry or Screamin' Jay Hawkins, and a tune by Ellington or Copland. Now I feel it's time to delineate or circumscribe the different genres of music. But that isn't what happened. What happened was the producers became sloppy and confused about what new music was supposed to be. Was it rock, was it art, was it jazz? By 1983 we had improvisers back on the scene again. And I thought, oh my gosh, we had so much improvisation in the '70s that by 1976 I had gotten sick of it, and that's why I went into rock. I was horrified. Because it sounded exactly—*exactly*—the same as the music I had heard 10 years previously.

There was a considerable amount of confusion in the '80s. I do admit to opening up a can of worms. I'm not sorry I did it. But I do think by 1990, the programming we're seeing looks more like a variety show than concerts of serious music out of any context.

Gann: *There are new musicians fiercely opposed to barriers, distinctions, definitions...*

Chatham: They're going to fall by the wayside. I'm sorry, but why do we make this music? It's not commercial, we're not doing it for the money. You don't get into this field of art music coming out of a classical context, what we used to call the avant-garde, unless you're driven to do it. If you're making this kind of music, it implies that you're not satisfied with what's happening in the commercial sector. You're put in the position of

being a philosopher.

Gann: *Or a critic.*

Chatham: Exactly. You have to know what happened in the past to guess what's going to happen in the future, to pose formal questions for yourself. People who say, we refuse to have barriers, who say rock and jazz and classical music are all the same, are either cynical or very naïve. How are they going to continue to develop art music if they don't define what they're doing? Many composers who grew up in the '80s have only the vaguest notion of the art music that allowed them to do what they do in the first place. In breaking down the formal barriers between the genres in the '80s, we now have a music that has no form. It's music that's nothing.

The question we're working on isn't, is this art? After all those Fluxus pieces we know that anything can be art. We're asking ourselves, what can be beautiful? To make an intentionally unpleasant piece implies transgression, doesn't it? That's a '50s notion. We're not *transgressing* against the academy anymore. We don't need to relive history. What's been frustrating about the '80s is seeing people repeat things that have already been explored. What this comes down to is freedom. We're finally free from the academy, and the society we live in allows us to make this music. Most people in the '80s have used this freedom to define a personal music. I think what will evolve is to investigate the nature of this freedom itself.

Gann: *Some composers feel complete freedom should mean freedom from form, freedom from notation....*

Chatham: That's absolutely ridiculous. You can't have freedom unless you have technique. That's the problem with a lot of composers who have come of age in the '80s. They don't have any. Once you have it you can't get it but

different from those of improvisation or rock, and that's not widely recognized right now. This doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to each other's music. I don't want to make the mistake that Boulez made and isolate myself from new trends in rock or improvisation. But we need to be able to admit that our formal concerns are different without feeling threatened. We should analyze what we're doing, and once we've developed a critical agenda, a theoretical platform, start another festival.

Chatham's newest work, The Heart Cries With Many Voices, for nine early music singers, six electric guitars, two trumpets and bass drums, on a text by Leopold Zappler, will premiere November 30 and December 1 at Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Essential Music

There was nothing new about Essential Music's October 23 concert at the R.A.P.P. Arts Center, and nothing should have surprised me. It was a retrospective of pieces 20, 40, 60 years old. Why, then, did the atmosphere get so intense? Why did these old, dead works act like a shock to the nervous system? Perhaps because we're at a juncture between decades, a still moment. "Free improvisation has run its course" (I read it in the *Times*, so it must be true), currents submerged beneath the previous decades' conservatism are becoming audible again, and we're listening for what direction the next years could take. Essential Music's philosophy is that we risk losing the experimental thread in American music if we don't sometimes go back to retrieve it. Their concerts of rare and forgotten avant-garde landmarks are even more ear-opening than their showcases for living unknowns.

First off, normally shy, soft-spoken composer Dary John Mizelle

al sonata form between 1923 and '32 in a pre-Cage attempt at "the union of art and non-art." Mizelle's exuberantly shouted *rumptillfoos* and *rinnzekete bee bees* also anticipated minimalism in their use of additive process. The comparison makes *Ursonata* seem formally timid in hindsight, though sonically it's still weird as hell.

Veteran concrete poet Jackson MacLow read the part of the mysteriously omnipotent protagonist in Kenneth Patchen's radio play *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*, as Essential Music's percussionists, boldly led by Linda Bouchard, recreated the background music John Cage wrote for it in 1942. The score was lost for four decades until discovered recently at the Lincoln Center Americana Collection, and this was its first audition since its radio premiere. Michael Stumm, who possessed an amazing array of underworld voices, directed an equally versatile cast, and the musicians hit all kinds of metal and wood in a vibrant, simple cacophony that anticipated much of the "found metal" percussion being done today. The banging was loud, but the beautiful compassion of Patchen's God-among-the-lowlifes vision shone through.

The piece that knocked me on my butt, though, was even more absurdly simple. It was Robert Ashley's *Morton Feldman Says*, a distilled recreation of a 15-hour interview he did with Feldman in 1964. Slouched onstage, Thomas J. F. Reagan III whined the truest, most pretentious statements on 20th century music ever made, and a group of audience members read Ashley's questions en masse. Reagan, who's worked in street theater with Fiona Templeton, had curly gold locks, and he was angrier, less condescending than the Feldman I knew; perhaps that was a picture of the 1964 Feldman. But Reagan had the cigarette the presence and the con-

as it was then, and as pertinent to downtown composers who "justify" their music via Coltrane, Carl Stalling, ethnic music, and fractal geometry as to uptowners who justify theirs via Babbitt, Carter, information theory, and fractal geometry. I don't know if the text could have the same impact read as heard. You have to imagine it delivered in a Brooklyn accent fragmented by pregnant pauses. But it hasn't been published in 25 years, so allow me to give you a generous sample:

"I find that the only way I can work today is not to think of the present, but only to think of the past, the past of my own life, where I worked without being conscious of the ramifications of my own actions in the world. I certainly don't want to create the impression by those religious analogies that I think I was some sort of deity. But there was a deity in my life, and that was *sound*. Everything else was after the fact. All 'realization' was after the fact. Process was after the fact. Of course, what happens in the world when your work starts to become well-known is that you have to justify it. You have to make some sort of rationale. And even the most banal rationale is accepted—welcomed—by people who should know better....

"The whole temperament of this period is basically an academic one, academic because it is based on other people's work. That alone makes it academic.... The reason that music is ailing is that everybody is still following the same historical process—that Malraux idea—that Art comes from Art....

"Unfortunately for most people who pursue art, ideas become their opium. The sickness that you feel about the situation today is a piling up of multitudinous misconceptions, each tumbling over the other. There is no security to be one's self. There is only a total insecurity because people

tionalizations for how they could incorporate chance and still keep their precious integrity. [Reagan was interrupted at this point by spontaneous applause, led by me.] How can you have integrity when your whole life is based on the accumulation of ideas? Boulez began to work out a complicated schematic situation of systematizing chance by way of Mallarmé and Kafka. He tried to give it a literary justification.... But this work... didn't come through Kafka and Mallarmé. It came through a completely different world that did not *need* justification! That's what is important. When I wrote what I wrote, when I write what I write, I do not have to talk about Kafka. I don't have to make it human. I don't have to revise history....

"I feel that the prospects of the young composer are very, very poor, because all he can salvage, even from the work that he finds important, the work that he actually loves, is the furthering of his technical facility. And the demands on that technical facility are becoming greater and greater. This is the age of Picasso, and we know what Picasso did as a young man! After 15 or 20 years he started to look at Cezanne and to develop cubism. What has that got to do with Cezanne? We all say, 'Yes, look at what he learned from Cezanne.' And in a more crazy way that is exactly what is happening in music. 'Look what he has learned from Cage.' *From Cage?* It is Cage! You go to the various festivals and you see fantastic 'technical' equipment. And all the time you know that the young composer has immorally been given the moral license to lead a parasitic life. You find the same thing in universities. You find it in important centers like Tanglewood, where they're given this immoral basis for a really unproductive life.... What the schools and pedagogues are doing is just constructing a technical

freedom itself.

Gann: *Some composers feel complete freedom should mean freedom from form, freedom from notation. . . .*

Chatham: That's absolutely ridiculous. You can't have freedom unless you have technique. That's the problem with a lot of composers who have come of age in the '80s. They don't have any. Once you have it you can forget it, but you've got to have it.

In the '90s, continuing to break down the boundaries is self-defeating. The classical avant-gardists need to redelineate, not the boundaries, but the formal issues we want to address. Our issues are

essential Music's philosophy is that we risk losing the experimental thread in American music if we don't sometimes go back to retrieve it. Their concerts of rare and forgotten avant-garde landmarks are even more ear-opening than their showcases for living unknowns.

First off, normally shy, soft-spoken composer Dary John Mizelle came onstage and, waving his arms like a politician on the stump, ranted what sounded to be the Czech version of Dr. Seuss's *Fox in Sox*. It was actually Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonata*, a collection of phonemes that the Dadaist collage artist arranged in convention-

most pretentious statements on 20th century music ever made, and a group of audience members read Ashley's questions en masse. Reagan, who's worked in street theater with Fiona Templeton, had curly gold locks, and he was angrier, less condescending than the Feldman I knew; perhaps that was a picture of the 1964 Feldman. But Reagan had the cigarette, the arrogance, and the conviction, and after a few minutes I unconsciously became convinced I was once again hearing the gospel from St. Morty's mouth.

Feldman's diagnosis of the sickness of the official contemporary music scene is as applicable today

the same historical process—that Malraux idea—that Art comes from Art. . . .

"Unfortunately for most people who pursue art, ideas become their opium. The sickness that you feel about the situation today is a piling up of multitudinous misconceptions, each tumbling over the other. There is no security to be one's self. There is only a total insecurity because people don't know who they want to be. This is not only true of the young people. This is true of Boulez. This is true of Stockhausen. You can see this in the way they have approached American 'chance' music. They began by finding ra-

tastic 'technical' equipment. And all the time you know that the young composer has immorally been given the moral license to lead a parasitic life. You find the same thing in universities. You find it in important centers like Tanglewood, where they're given this immoral basis for a really unproductive life. . . . What the schools and pedagogues are doing is just perpetuating a tragic syndrome, a tragic misunderstanding about what it is to be a composer. But then, perhaps they don't think of themselves as composers. I think that composing for them is just an incidental activity in the power struggle of ideas." ■

Haydn LORD NELSON MASS

CONCERTO #1 IN C MAJOR
ST. NICOLAS MASS



The St. Bartholomew's Choir
The Fairfield Orchestra of Period Instruments
James Litton, Conductor • William Trafka, Organist
Wednesday, November 28 at 8 pm.

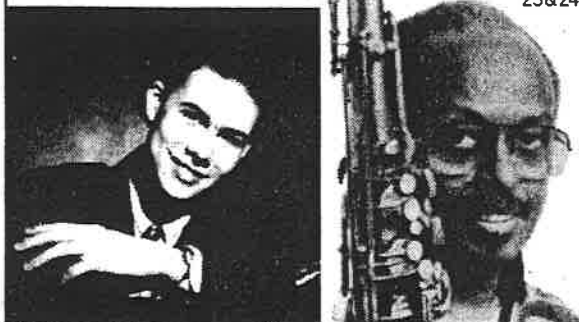
St. Bartholomew's Church, Park Avenue at 50th
Reserved Seating \$50. General seating \$15 at the door
Call (212) 751-1616 ext. 227

CHRISTOPHER HOLLYDAY AND HIS QUARTET and the JIMMY HEATH QUARTET

Fri., Nov. 30, 1990 at 8:30 pm
Colden Center for the Performing Arts
\$15, \$13, \$11

**TO ORDER, CALL
(718) 793-8080**

Colden Center is located
on the Queens College
campus in Flushing on
the service road of the
L.I.E. between exits
23 & 24.



AMERICAN CHORAL CLASSICS

CONCERT CHORALE OF NEW YORK
AMY KAISER, CONDUCTOR

America's songs tell a noble and gentle story - often touching, sometimes outraged - in a way that embodies the American spirit. Amy Kaiser and the Concert Choral of New York will perform some of the works of America's greatest poets and composers, as well as the world premiere of Robert Storer's "Night Thoughts," written in four languages and featuring chorus, piano, synthesizer, percussion and an intriguing use of media.

GERSHWIN THEATER
AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2,
AT 2PM
TICKETS: \$15
CALL (718) 434-BCBC

BROOKLYN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS AT
BROOKLYN COLLEGE/THE CHAMBER SERIES