

# Crunch and Counterpoint

By Kyle Gann

Henry Gwiazda  
Loren Mazzacane  
Evan Gallagher  
Denman Maroney

Had Henry Gwiazda lived in New York the last few years, instead of teaching on the Minnesota tundra, his music would be very hip by now. It combines many elements whose timeliness has brought fame to the less talented: sampling, fragmentation, collage, discontinuity, everyday noises, and a rock beat. But Gwiazda's music makes one of the best cases for isolation since Conlon Nancarrow's, for he's forged a style and technological method that are recognizable, yet versatile. And he's breaking a cardinal rule of being a Regional Composer: You're obliged to imitate what we do in New York, not do it better.

At his January 26 Kitchen gig, Gwiazda played guitar and sang a little, but his virtuoso instrument is the sampler. His performance setup is labor-intensive, and visually, he sometimes bit off more than he could gracefully chew: loading samples, pushing buttons, punching in discs, setting dials, all while playing both keyboard and guitar. He claims to use at least 30 different noises in each piece, including creaking chairs, snoring, telephones, alarm clocks, twittering sparrows, squawking crows, rooster crows, car horns, engines

turning over, ocean waves, lion roars, theater organs, laugh machines, harps, gongs, pianos. One piece, *afterglow*, showed an obsession with tools, and took much of its pulse from the buzzing minor third of a busy signal. Another, *keePingtHechiLdallve*, had babies crying and babbling, moving finally to a fugue of kung fu shouts.

It's cute stuff. But what made me really savor it was, like all great music—pardon the cliché—it worked on several levels. In *MANEATINGCHIPS-LISTENINGTOAVIOLIN*, the people who chuckled at each reappearance of potato-chip munching got the surface joke, but I liked the way the context abstracted that crunch and counterpointed it with the violin samples. Some of the sounds recurred audibly from piece to piece, and the real-life samples over a bopping guitar pulse scrawled the Gwiazda signature.

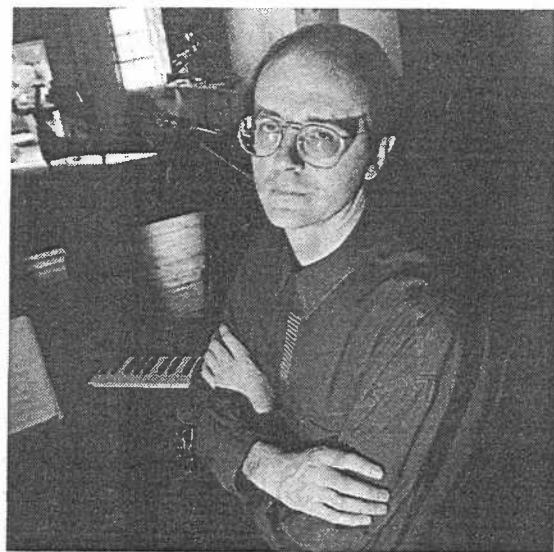
Each piece, though, had its distinct form, and while the constantly changing timbres kept you distracted, the vicissitudes of texture quietly sucked you in and made you hear noises differently. Several pieces blasted off with lots of samples all at once, and you'd adjust your attention to that kind of overload. *wherelyoulive*, though, slowly filtered down from revving engines and baaing sheep through luscious wooden flute samples until nothing was left but a lonely surge of bird cries. Other pieces reversed the formula, and you'd notice that the combinations of

babies and birds weren't haphazard, but set up in brief moments of evocative atmosphere.

Gwiazda started out in garage bands, but went through a well-pedigreed academic classical education, and that's a fertile background mix. What sets him above other sampling freaks is the super-saturated intricacy of his textures and the sparkling polish on every facet. He doesn't just offer a sound picture of the world (a superficial notion that impressed a lot of superficial people in the '80s), but creates a fantasy from the familiar, like a good novelist. He doesn't throw noises together randomly because that's the way life is (it isn't), but associates them in surprising, carefully

weighed combinations that shoot images into your brain. He uses bits of reality, but the way he puts them together is pure art.

Gwiazda was the midpoint performer on the Kitchen's "Unusual Subjects" festival of underexposed artists, and was preceded by guitarist Loren Mazzacane and singer Suzanne Langille. Mazzacane wrung slow, soft blues improvs from his instrument while Langille exhaled, and their set was so similar to the one I reviewed last October that I can't think of anything different to say. Mazzacane's impassioned pianissimo enchants me (end the press blurb here) for about 20 minutes, but he varies his shtick so infinitesimally that, after 10 songs, I feel like I've



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Henry Gwiazda: a fugue of Kung Fu

had 10 courses of hors d'oeuvres.

That's an improviser's pitfall; notation forces people to seek new solutions. The following evening, same series, Evan Gallagher offered a half-dozen piano improvs that combined the wild energy of a Muhal Abrams with the linear clarity of a Frederick Rzewski. Using all 88 keys to good advantage, he'd pit one calmly lyrical line against another angry and staccato, and maybe punctuate the whole with ultra-treble or bass notes that fell exactly where your ear needed them. The payoff was a prickly, intense, yet firmly etched texture that many atonal composers have only aimed at. The downside was, by the fourth improv you realized you'd heard Gallagher's entire repertoire of maybe three strategies. Just once I'd like to hear a free-improv pianist play an adagio—but a slow tempo would expose compositional weaknesses that frantic virtuosity conveniently covers up.

Another unusual suspect, Denman Maroney, made a long work from eerie inside-the-piano effects: metal rods and bowls on the strings, pitch bendings, subtleties of finger-damping. The twangs were titillatingly bizarre, but succeeded each other in such a choppy and redundant way that they never fused into a piece. Maroney was preceded, though, by a poor schmo from Columbia University (I'll spare him mentioning his name) who sang political songs so syrupy, so jazz-cliché-ridden, so Muzak-aspiringly, brain-meltingly trite that by the third offense fully half the Kitchen audience escaped to the lobby. For some people, the difference between underexposure and overexposure is about three minutes.

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