

Annea Lockwood / Linda Fisher / Brenda Hutchinson / Lois V. Vierk / David First

# Death, Cartoons, a New Decade

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Fried, Lockwood, Fisher, Hutchinson: new decade, new rules

Oops! The decade slipped past and I have a list of December concerts that shouldn't go without mention. So many recent concerts have projected a newer, freer energy that it's tempting to think the '90s began last month, perhaps even as far back as October 15 with Diana Meckley's *Strange Attractors* at Roulette. During the fall, people seemed to be *thinking* more and better about their music, not just trying to use more kickass clichés than the next dude, but bursting into new territories—even backtracking to

ent to support generalization, and each was easy to misunderstand if you judged its category too quickly. In *The Scientist*, for example, she sang over a tape of synthesized marimbas while making hand motions that ranged from the ritualistic gestures of Eastern dance to shrugging and cracking knuckles. Her topic (the song is from a work in progress inspired by women scientists and explorers) was how science's abstraction invests it with a specious holiness. Not until the end, though, when the music cut to the chirping of crickets and Fisher repeated her

series of recordings made at New York's state psychiatric hospitals, was too brief a slice of life to register during audition, but its crazed old man singing, "I want to be loved" left a disturbing memory. In *Sentences*, Hutchinson lay on the floor and shouted a fragmented poem by Robert Gregory through a megaphone. The dimly connected phrases—"unaccompanied cello!/dusty needle!/someone trying to sleep!"—seemed to hint at insanity, but the dominant prop was a single rose in a cracked vase, and the whole was illuminated in changing colors by the

parse into discrete events, yet is still rhythmically alive.

All of Vierk's works I've heard to date (except for the acclaimed *Attack Cat Polka*, canceled at this concert due to the unavoidable absence of accordionist Guy Klucevsek) deal with basically the same formal idea: a small, hesitant phrase growing into a wild, thick, bouncy texture through nonlinear increases in range, number of voices, and so on. Her pieces tend to be for groups of similar instruments, usually performed with all on tape except for a soloist. *Sylvan Vibrant II* expanded tiny glissandos on two cellos (Theodore Mook, live and taped) and muffled taps on percussion (James Pugliese) into a propulsive, wavy texture like Japanese street music. *Go Guitars* for four taped guitars and one played live by David Seidel grew from almost-in-tune ripples around an E into raucous undulations of octave waves. Vierk's music takes getting used to, since we're used to hearing glissandos as ornaments, not structural entities.

*Simoom* for eight cellos was the most exciting work, partly due to Mook's vigorous, exact performance: tremolos sped from cello to cello, burst into resounding open fifths, and finally ended, Ives-like, in thoughtful anticlimax. *Red Shift*, a repeating, sliding melody for cello, guitar, percussion, and synth, was thinner, and took longer to get off the ground, in fact, that's the built-in flaw of Vierk's form: each piece takes a few minutes to get going, to sound engaging and convincing. The form has the advantage that, despite the circuitous route often taken from one point to the other, the progression of each piece is clearly followable. Like Brahms, Vierk chooses intelligibility over slickness; had she opted for the opposite compromise, like so many celebrated '80s downtowners, she would have veered

U concerts that shouldn't go without mention. So many recent concerts have projected a newer, freer energy that it's tempting to think the '90s began last month, perhaps even as far back as October 15 with Diana Meckley's *Strange Attractors* at Roulette. During the fall, people seemed to be *thinking* more and better about their music, not just trying to use more kickass clichés than the next dude, but bursting into new territory, even backtracking to look for paths less traveled. I hear more complaints about new music (even the term) than I did three years ago; if '80s music is still in place, its smug self-assuredness has dissolved. For one thing, the worst pieces in last year's New Music America weren't as irritating, not bad in such obvious ways, as those in NMA '87 or '88. For another, I saw a lot of women perform last fall, though it might be that their ideas only seemed new because they hadn't been heard much in previous years. That's gonna change, folks. New decade, new rules.

Anea Lockwood, Brenda Hutchinson, and Linda Fisher performed at Roulette December 7 and 8, and the first two did pieces about death. Lockwood's *Delta Run* was a taped interview with a sculptor, Walter Wincha, who was dying of throat cancer; the effect of the disease formed both the piece's subject and a kind of nonelectronic voice modulation. With her usual restraint, Lockwood surrounded his words with only slight commentary: environmental noise, birds, the footsteps of joggers, and a single, athletically sustained theatrical motion in which she raised and closed a circle to suggest completion. It escaped morbidity because the interview was devoid of self-pity or even sadness. "A lot of people become very angry about dying," Wincha mused. "I wake up in the morning and notice I'm still alive, I say, 'Hmmm...' I don't really expect satori."

In the cases of Fisher and Hutchinson I have to qualify my objectivity, for they're friends of mine. I can add, though, that I looked up Fisher years ago because I was so impressed by her 1980 New Music America performance. At Roulette, her three pieces were too differ-

its category too quickly. In *The Scientist*, for example, she sang over a tape of synthesized marimbas while making hand motions that ranged from the ritualistic gestures of Eastern dance to shrugging and cracking knuckles. Her topic (the song is from a work in progress inspired by women scientists and explorers) was how science's abstraction invests it with a specious holiness. Not until the end, though, when the music cut to the chirping of crickets and Fisher repeated her hand motions in series, did you see how the motions drove home a point that the

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words had left oblique. *Scientist* wasn't a Meredith Monk-type theater piece with accompaniment, but a polyphony of symbolic languages: notes, words, gestures, each filling in what the others left unsaid.

Fisher's prettiest piece was an abridged dance score, *Four Relationships*, in as many sections: "Mother & Daughter," "Sisters," "Girlfriends," "Lovers." This was a richly detailed sampling study, each touch of a finger calling up an elaborate figure or noise. The mellow opening seemed to send pianos drifting through the space in diverse keys, and subsequent pings, cartoon-music snippets, and even crashes of breaking glass were rounded by recurrence into a smooth tone poem. *Big Mouth*, written to use the drumstick-triggered electronic circuits in Joshua Fried's tree of inverted shoes, was more extroverted. Flying through entertaining high-tech illusions and animated double entendres, Fisher and Fried tapped a conversation of lines from a Porky Pig cartoon, underscored by ostinatos and musical tones; when Fisher's shoes insisted, "Folks, he's crazy, but I'm all right," the music laughed at Viennese psychiatric pretension by responding with "The Blue Danube." John Zorn rants about Warner Bros.'s Carl Stalling being our greatest avant-gardist, but *Big Mouth* was the first piece I've heard that sounded drenched in a cartoon sensibility.

What hit me about Hutchinson's music this time around was the pathos it hides beneath a brash, nonemotive surface. The "Waltz" from *Voices of Reason*, a

a slice of me to register during audition, but its crazed old man singing, "I want to be loved" left a disturbing memory. In *Sentences*, Hutchinson lay on the floor and shouted a fragmented poem by Robert Gregory through a megaphone. The dimly connected phrases—"unaccompanied cello!/dusty needle!/someone trying to sleep!"—seemed to hint at insanity, but the dominant prop was a single rose in a cracked vase, and the whole was illuminated in changing colors by the glare of a TV screen we couldn't see.

Hutchinson's most disarming work was *EEEYAH!*, its title a phonetic spelling of a Thai pig call. Starkly punctuating herself with bass drum, Hutchinson yelled the title, eventually joined by herself on tape. The call's repeating whole-step descent was restful, yet its microtonal divergence from the tape made a grating texture as intense as any '60s voice collage. The piece's middle, over sounds of wind and breathing, consisted of Hutchinson quietly reciting, live and on tape, dates and relationships of people she knew who had died. It took a while for the significance to sink in, but, when the original pig call returned softly on tape at the end, I couldn't help but rethink its descending whole step as an intercultural gesture of farewell, like the same motive in Mahler's Ninth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*: "Ewig, ewig..."

Lois V. Vierk and David First were two backtrackers who found new paths. Both of them are making sound continuums from small glissandos. I'm not going to announce this as a New Trend and ask what it means (for that you'll need to pick up the *Sunday Times*), but it's interesting that, in looking for some corner of minimalism that hadn't been explored, they happened on the same phenomenon. One can imagine them independently searching for a middle path between Glass's doodly rhythms and simple modes on one hand, and Ligeti's and La Monte Young's static amorphousness on the other. Their concerts—First at La MaMa's La Galleria December 9 and Vierk at Roulette December 15—sounded nothing alike, but both solved the same problem: how to make music that avoids phrasing, that doesn't

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First is involved in a yearlong performance project he calls *In the Garden of the Beast*, "in which shared musical materials are placed in various instrumentations." At La Galleria he and six other performers played his fourth installment, parts one through four from (*Of*) *Carriage Horse Descent*. First's glissandos are far slower and more continuous than Vierk's, used not as motives, but to create aural illusions between slowly shifting microtonal intervals. *Carriage* was minimalist, not in the slick, rhythmic way of Glass or Adams, but in the older manner of Young or early Reich. For long stretches, there were no events in the music to speak of, but as First's synth players slowly shifted the tuning of their Casios, the resultant beats between almost-identical pitches sped up and slowed down in dramatic patterns. The notes played barely moved, but what you heard went whacko.

Part 1 worked in this austere manner with Casios, Part 2 with electric guitars, then the third was a kind of scherzo made of bouncy staccato notes in close, random sound masses. The most impressive section, though, was the last, a triad with added sixths and seconds that kept melting into dissonance and sliding back. With the general rumble filled out by Kevin Sparke on drums and cymbals, the movement achieved a sustained ecstasy as vibrant as Messiaen frozen in mid-climax, though with no motives save for a joyously defiant rising whole step. (*Of*) *Carriage Horse Descent* has deep roots in the musics of Young, Glenn Branca, and Phill Niblock, but it was more fluid, dramatic, kaleidoscopic than any of those, and not really like anything I'd heard: a new direction from an old starting point for a new decade. ■