



Sonami: Lend me your counterintuitive attention.

# Doing Windows

By Kyle Gann

Laetitia de  
Compiegne Sonami

Twentieth century composition, to bend G. K. Chesterton's comment on Christianity, hasn't been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult and left untried. No other century has tossed off so many musical devices, dozens of ideas used only once or twice, and then abandoned them. Few have

been developed long enough, or by enough composers, to become anything subtle, which is why even some important modern music exhibits the same tentative amateurishness as the first experiments with sonata form or recitative. Right now, though, more perceptive composers are picking up and reworking older techniques, and *humanizing* them so that they cease to be just technical tricks and become a means to a more enjoyable end. One of those

people is Laetitia de Compiegne Sonami from Oakland, who was at Experimental Intermedia Foundation December 6.

Sonami performed *Wilfred Wants You To Remember Us (Vertical Scanning)* with just a computer and microphone. The idea, as stated in the program notes, was to create simultaneous and ongoing layers of sound events, only a few of which were accessed (via "windows") at any given moment. Sound original? Of course not. That windows-opening-onto-simultaneous-layers idea has been floating around since Stockhausen's *Gruppen* (1955-57) and Elliott Carter's *Symphony of Three Orchestras* (1976), if not Ives's *Fourth Symphony*. The idea works in most Carter-clone pieces such that, for example, one layer of the music is based on the intervals of a perfect fourth and minor second, another uses a self-inversional hexachord, yet another mischievously quotes a 12-tone row from Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten*. Even supposing you've gone through grad school to learn to hear all that, it's still hard to give a damn.

Sonami, on the other hand, dug up that serialist/academic conceit and replanted it in the more fertile ground of computer sampling and Ashley-inspired text opera (what critic Arthur Sabatini is calling the *performance novel*). Her windows opened, not onto indistinguishable note thickets, but onto (1) loud knocks that moved quadrophonically around the room; (2) screeches, approaching and receding like a car that barely missed you; (3) a low, pulsing tone on different pitches; (4) two misty chords alternating a fifth apart; and (5) an anxious electric

piano sequence (aptly called *Blues in Hell*) preplayed by Jerry Hunt. Sonami opened most of the windows via computer, but one was a story by Melody Sumner that, amid all the activity, Sonami read in her wonderful, French-inflected, deadpan voice.

Halfway through, it hit me how much the piece required the same kind of counterintuitive attention as Stockhausen's early moment-form works such as *Hymnen* and *Kurzwellen*: the texture would thicken and thin out abruptly, each layer had its own crescendo/decrescendo pattern, and in long, low-energy moments you'd wait expectantly for a new explosion. Yet *Wilfred* had the feel of the *feminine* flipside of Stockhausen, because content, not form, remained central. *What the hell does that mean?* It means that the old moment-form style had an arrogant attitude toward its material; it focused on the ingenuity of the composer's formal imagination. The sounds that filled the empty form were arbitrary and interchangeable, often by design.

Sonami's materials, though, weren't arbitrary. The layers were carefully weighted and varied so that three or four could interpenetrate without eclipsing each other. The story was a delicate, unemotive, external description of a man and woman in a city square: "She pulled again at [his] arm—lifeless, heavy. . . . The eyes did not open, the body did not move. She became enraged, she railed, shouted entreaties to the crowd." The electric piano painted urban angst, the knocks and screeches suggested impending violence. Meanwhile, the formal concept slipped into a back alley. Instead of being impressed by Sonami's cleverness,

I found myself engrossed in connecting the bits of noise-texture, and in wondering where the text was going.

That's the whole point, isn't it, to involve the audience in the music rather than show off the composer's tricks? Last time Sonami played EIF, I couldn't quite pick up what she was doing; but *Wilfred*, with its dramatic use of space and texture, seemed like a breakthrough in the career of one of California's most personal voices. Sonami showed that it's too early to write off modernist ideas before they've been assimilated as second nature. They'll bear fruit yet.

The next night at EIF, I missed Chris Brown's electronics due to another concert, but I heard Richard Zvonar's *Kamikaze Music for Pearl Harbor*. Star contrabassist Robert Black played soulful phrases; Zvonar's electronics caught them and played them back in an ever-changing mosaic. The canonic counterpoint was gorgeous and varied, the playing intense. I was just thinking that it had been forever since I had heard such impassioned, well-crafted music downtown, when suddenly Black switched to the random virtuosis of the clichéd '80s improv style. His scattershot, all-over-the-instrument, constantly self-interruptive playing, the kind of crap you can hear here any night of the week, reduced the canon to a trivial series of echoing sound effects, jazz drained of all feeling. I suppose the title made the point. But I couldn't imagine why such expert musicians would decline to follow through on such a gripping inspiration. ■

**Kilimanjaro** NIGHT CLUB  
WHERE THE INTERNATIONAL MINDS MEET

Prices Effective Through December 29, 1990 • Copyright 1990 J&R Music World

