

When in doubt, mumble. Insecure composers often blur their music, wiggling fingers on keys to obscure melodic contours, tapping on electronic components to create obfuscating static, adding dissonant accompaniment to distract from a weak tune, singing or speaking indistinctly. Most good musical ideas sound naïve when nakedly stated, and the quantity of faith required to expose them can hardly be overestimated. Think how many masterpieces, from Beethoven's *Fifth* on, open with starkly banal ideas. Truth often sounds less impressive than we expect. Beethoven was great because he wasn't afraid to speak clearly.

And yet, like everything else in our irreversibly relativist aesthetics, mumbling has its time and place. It's appropriate when the words are less important than the act of speaking, as when a Catholic reels off the rosary, or a bride the wedding vows. Translated into music, mumbling allows a composer to de-emphasize the composed material in favor of the ritual process of the performance. Elodie Lauten's near-inaudible ragas, as I've said here before, capture a feeling of distilled musical experience with all the logical, ear-leading elements subtracted. Cellist/singer Arthur Russell, who often performs with Lauten and vice versa, writes music that is very different from and more pop-oriented than Lauten's, but which shares the same sense of denied foreground.

Possibly because folk music is so vulnerable to commercialization, few composers imitate naïve music the way painters like Chicago's Hairy Who school have imitated naïve or primitive art. Russell is obviously a new music sophisticate; his early music is cleanly minimalist, and he's played the music of a number of mainstream avant-gardists. But even such Glass-y works as his 1983 *Tower of Meaning* are rough and homespun, and the songs he performed with ensemble at

Arthur Russell / Yoshi Wada

Don't Speak Up

BY KYLE GANN

the Alternative Museum May 18 were marked by a *faux naïf* quality. Russell's voice, flitting between baritone and falsetto, is breathy, calm, and comforting, like a weary mother singing a lullaby. He glides his bow across the cello in quick, light strokes, almost as if trying to avoid contact. His lyrics are chosen for sound more than meaning, and in this performance were mostly indistinguishable.

While Russell sang, Peter Zummo played little melodies on a small electric keyboard, Lauten and Steven Hall plinked guitars, and Mustafa Ahmed hit drum machines lightly with his hands.

MUSIC

Most of the songs used a rhythm box, yet rhythmic edges were so softened that you couldn't always tell if the ensemble was together. Far from seeming sloppy, though, it created a feeling of independent but parallel involvement, as though, like monks, each player were focused on his own task, and all the lines had been composed to fit together no matter what happened. Each song didn't so much end as disintegrate when the players ran out of material, and the pieces were so similar that even the starting and stopping seemed arbitrary. Floating beneath this nebulous surface were some fetching pop tunes based on simple motives.

The sore thumb in this performance was the rhythm box, which is why I preferred Russell's two solo songs to the balance of the evening. Even when enlivened with additional accents by Ahmed's am-



Russell and cello, or vice versa

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plified hands, the box injected an assembly-line technosheen whose discrepancy with the overall homemade ambience became irritating. Russell could take a cue from David Garland and get away with just tapping on a cardboard box or piece of Styrofoam.

Sound-sculptor Yoshi Wada is a very different kind of *faux naïf*. Like Russell, he's abandoned a severe minimalism for a gentler, more personable style, bringing naïve materials into a clash with technology. Unlike Russell's, though, Wada's clash creates not a dissonance, but a fun-

ny underlying paradox. I hate to call Wada's *The Cloud Under the Clock*, which he performed May 19 as part of the Clocktower's series "The Anatomy of Sound," a *soundscape*. That term has been too often misapplied to works that merely sprawl. But Wada's Rube Goldberg-like assemblage of clumsy-looking mechanical instruments, incongruously run by computer, sounded like a landscape as much as it looked like one. (The highly structured, unnaïve drone pieces by Mary Jane Leach that followed Wada's performance beg for discussion in another context.)

The Cloud began with a thunder sheet periodically shaken by a string tied to a revolving lever. Next, hammers slowly lifted by strings crashed down against huge pipes, chiming clunkily. The centerpieces of Wada's machinery were two racks of 24 organ pipes each, one wood, one metal; triggered by computer and operated by a gigantic air pump, these played a long, wheezing, out-of-sync chorale, moving blithely through dissonant harmonies that proceeded by slow addition and subtraction of pitches. The piece's understated climax came in the mournful wail of a siren accompanied by plodding chords, a moving effect, though one worthy of P. D. Q. Bach.

This was unpolished, but rather than casual, it seemed as intuitively unstudied as a Japanese watercolor. Nonchalant melodies, eerily punctuated by the periodic rumble of the thunder sheet, crisscrossed with apparent randomness, but felt afterward as though placed by a delicate but confident hand. What provided the piece's existential hilarity was the performance setup, Wada quietly working at a computer to control a chaos of levers and pumps. This was an image of futuristic naïveté, a postholocaust musician, reduced to cave-man sensibility, using the technological detritus of the 20th century to a purpose far less subtle than it was intended for. Let's hope the 21st century yields music this poetic. ■

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