

# Don't Wannabes

By Kyle Gann

Toby Twining Music

**Rawness is overrated.** The exuberant response that greeted Toby Twining Music at the Kitchen's Gruppen festival January 15 proved I'm not the only person who thinks so. Twining's vocal group—Lisa Bielawa, Gregory Purnhagen, Jeffrey Johnson, and Twining himself—sang what you could call avant-garde barbershop quartet. His fairly traditional jazzy tonality was diffracted through a surreal range of vocal effects: lipped filter sweeps, falsettos, whoops, nonsense syllables, and harmonics (singing two pitches at once). Bielawa enlivened a solo by aspirating a trill within sustained notes, while the men wiggled fingers over their lips for a convincing Jew's harp illusion. In *Munu Munu* the group sang patterns on the title syllables while quickly waving their hands in front of their mouths, causing a vibrating chord that could have passed, in a blindfold test, as electronics. Twining's music reminds you of Meredith Monk's, but its formal principles are broader and more complex; instead of riffing over an ostinato, he builds up rich tapestries that move back and forth among different techniques.

What was amazing about this performance, even more than the singers' artistry, was their elegant, supremely confident stage presence, polished down to the choreography of simple hand movements, and their continually

flowing position onstage. The music, every note sung from memory, so glowed with inner conviction that you reflexively accepted its most cockamamie premises. And the audience, visibly moved, whooped, whistled, and cheered. (I was affronted that Twining's group quit after what seemed like 20 minutes, then looked at my watch and realized it had been over an hour.)

You see this kind of polish among Monk's and Glass's generation, but rarely among younger composers of the last 15 years, most of whom affect a slovenly nonchalance. Why is such professionalism so rare in Downtown performance? I've had a lot of long evenings to ponder that question. Let's hypothesize that most people who love avant-garde music enough to make it were probably the oddballs of their high schools—speaking from personal experience, it seems a defensible generalization. What does an oddball teenager do as an adult? Prove that the people you grew up with were wrong about you by finding a group you fit in with. Where does a new music composer fit in?

Certainly not in the world of "serious" classical music. First of all, that world has outlawed composers who don't slavishly follow their hidebound European guidelines. They pretend we don't exist. And who wants to identify with that starchy crowd anyway? In America, classical music stinks of effete elitism, and Peter Schickel's recent humor proves that

your average American finds it hilarious when stuffy classical musicians get their comeuppance—serves 'em right for putting on airs. Classical's not a crowd whose approval would redeem your congenital weirdness. So partly in revenge and partly in honest repulsion, the new musician rejects everything associated with classical performance: formal concert attire, rigid seating, elegant playing, the concept of the masterpiece, even rehearsal.

Where else could you fit in? In rock. Rock is hip: raw, masculine, impervious, loud, egalitarian. So, post-1980, an entire generation of new musicians became rock wannabes, pretending their music was a kind of rock that *seemed* weird, but would eventually be the norm. They upped amplifiers to hall-shaking levels, took their precious leisure doing sound checks, extemporized aimlessly, didn't rehearse; rehearsing wasn't macho enough, showed an effeminate concern for petty accuracy. The entire scene exuded a kind of internalized homophobia, a fear of not meeting '50s criteria for masculinity. The prime symbol for this wannabeism was the Kronos Quartet's inevitable *Purple Haze* encore; on record it's impressive enough, but live it sounded pathetically fragile, like a hamster trying to roar.

Likewise, the old Soldier Quartet sometimes tried to prove what party animals they were by dancing and rolling while playing their violins. The Sirius Quartet, which split off from the Soldier (carrying



Why is the polish of Toby Twining Music so rare Downtown?

three members with it), didn't essay any such shenanigans at their Kitchen gig January 14, but they did play a quintessentially wannabeist piece: Michael Levine's *Hunter's Moon*, with movements titled "Mowdown," "Funk," and "Blooze," arranged pop clichés for string quartet, as though string quartet fans had never heard any pop music before and might find its conventions fascinating. The best piece Sirius played was Laura Seaton's *Song of Miss-chief*, whose counterpoint in a long, winding, one-movement form conveyed deep seriousness despite some insouciant gestures.

New music, as Seaton's work demonstrated, is not rock: we care too much about form, counterpoint, voice-leading, harmonic complexity, synchronization, process, texture, and so on, to ever convincingly project the slapdash coolness of a stoned-out bass player. Our sounds, form, styles, and

techniques have nothing to do with Europe or the NY Phil assembly line, but our performance standards are inherently classical standards.

That's why Twining's elegant professionalism seemed to herald a welcome new era. Twining's singers didn't apologize for their music's weirdness, for the fact that it doesn't belong in classical, rock, or anywhere else in American society. They had the courage of their originality; the world they fit into was the one they created onstage, and they were at home in it. They also weren't ashamed to reveal evidence of a tremendous amount of rehearsal time and a painstaking concern for visual presentation, an admission that what they were doing was extremely important to them. Too urgent for irony, they symbolized a higher stage in new music's self-acceptance. And we, bowled over, took them at their word. ■

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