

Relache Downtown, Pennsylvania

By Kyle Gann

New York's downtown scene finally has a cultural asset it lacked in the '70s and '80s: an all-purpose ensemble. An ensemble capable of pulling off complex notated music, but also willing to work in unconventional ways with improvisers. An ensemble with the administrative backup to scrounge around for commission money for offset composers who never had a commission before. An ensemble as expert as Speculum Musicae and Parnassus, but specializing in accessible, conceptual, or ethnic-influenced music the uptowners won't touch.

Only problem is, the ensemble's in Philadelphia.

Relache was at the Greenwich House March 16 to remind us how devout an ally we have on the Delaware. Its willingness to try anything doesn't detract from its distinctiveness. Relache is reed-heavy, sax and clarinets in uneasy blend with accordion and synthesizer. Guy Kluczevski's accordion generates quiet momentum. John Dulik's synth timbres are like velvet. Laurel Wyckoff's flute adds a bright edge. And there's not another mezzo in the world like Barbara Noska, Philadelphia's answer to Cathy Berberian. I always hear Relache's colors as shades of red, maroon, orange, and rich brown, whether they're droning with Pauline Oliveros or



Filling a gap all by themselves

jazzing with George Russell. I recently played an Anthony Coleman tape at a midwestern college and a student asked, "Isn't that Relache?" No, but it sure sounded like it; how many groups could you make a mistake like that about?

Most ensembles haughtily refuse to deal with artists who haven't proven their chamber music expertise, but one of Relache's more endearing traits is that it commissions people who never write for ensemble. "What would happen," they must sit around thinking, "if we asked for pieces from a conceptual improviser like Alvin Curran, a downtown crazy man like Anthony Coleman, or jazz players like George Russell and Bobby Previte?" What happens is, Curran's piece gets postponed due to rehearsal snafus,

and the ink on Coleman's *Le Bleu du Ciel* is so wet that the performance slips and the third movement is missing. Relache takes those chances.

Consider Previte's *Gaboo Goes Down*, the concert's foot-stomping finale. It was a slick, written-out jazz, progressing smoothly from a piano solo to sax tune to trumpet to rickrolling close. It brought down the house, but it was calculated and trivial compared to most of Previte's intelligent quartet work. *Centrifuge* by long-time big band veteran George Russell failed in more interesting ways. Relache has little jazz sensibility, and they improvise the way certain '70s classical groups used to, carefully filling out sonorities and time without going out on limbs. Russell's heterophony of almost-unison melo-

dy wrapped itself around that bias. The group broke into small waves of free improv at first movement's end, then Marshall Taylor crooned a solo over lush chords of vibes and strings. Rough-edged and hazy, the piece died in a deliciously slow crescendo, and went sour when a drum machine tried to turn it into fusion. Relache has flair and intensity, but swing isn't its thing.

Anthony Coleman pushes their limits in other ways, and he's one of the composers whose friction provides sparks. *Le Bleu du Ciel*, his third Relache piece and a setting of scenes from a 1935 George Bataille novel, was a sort of '90s update on Berg's expressionist postcard songs. Guest soprano Dora Ohrenstein switched between historic whispers and a throaty sobbing, moaning about sex and disgust in a London hotel, Hitler youth, and a vision in a Frankfurt train station. Meanwhile, the music was post-jazz, evoking inept swing bands, military marches, and a tortured ambivalence of gaiety and despair.

Relache is most at home in music of a certain temperature, neither too hot nor too cold. *Parterre* by Mary Ellen Childs, performed here, is the quintessential Relache piece: a throbbing, postminimal continuum that has both grateful solos and a dark, humid atmosphere, especially during Noska's wordless vocalise. William Duckworth's *War* hit a midpoint between pop and minimalist styles that defined the center of Relache's rigorously-accessible aesthetic. "Every time it rains/I'm a girl who's lost again," crooned Noska in a come-

on voice over Dulik's lavish chords, in the evening's best performance.

The glitches suggest that Relache is trying to fill a huge gap in our musical life all by itself. It's the East Coast's only flexible-instrumentation, non-composer-run, mixed ensemble willing to rent itself out for experimentation. That New York needs an outfit like this becomes more and more obvious in the general move back to ensemble music. Lois V. Vierk, Michael Gordon, David First, Toby Twining, and others have formed ensembles of their own after the Reich/Glass model, at great personal expense and not always with professional results. Other solo performers—Nicolas Collins, Dan Goode, George Lewis—have recently moved into ensemble work, tremendously expanding their expressive capabilities. The downtown scene has survived for two decades on people playing their own music solo or with a few friends, and the genre's limitations have become a straitjacket. Downtown could blossom right now if we had the resources academic composers do.

That's why Relache ought to perform in New York more often. (This time the World Music Institute brought them in.) In performance and in its New Music America festival of '87, the group has shown dual allegiance, to Pennsylvania composers and to downtown New Yorkers that so worth is another Relache regular. *War* hit a midpoint between pop and minimalist styles that defined the center of Relache's rigorously-accessible aesthetic. "Every time it rains/I'm a girl who's lost again," crooned Noska in a come-

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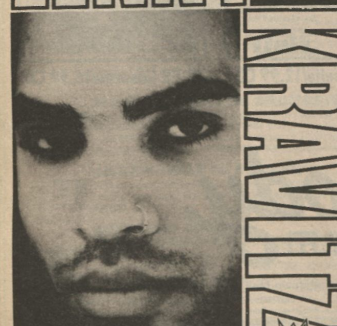
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