

Last week I reviewed New Music America '89 without reviewing the music on it. This week I want to mention a few pieces that made strong impressions.

TRIMPIN: As hordes crowded into the Baldwin Piano Company lobby in hopes of a glimpse, computer-operated instruments invented by the brilliant German musician/engineer Trimpin beat, wheezed, and dropped a mechanized but vibrant symphony. Strings of cowbells rose slowly and crashed to the floor, rubber bands on wheels bowed cymbals, ventilation hoses contracted and expanded like disembodied lungs, timpani booms circled the audience, and water dripped into metal pails with computer precision. Not just showing off, Trimpin revealed formal and timbral ideas of great subtlety, using sounds as tiny as the unarticulated clicking of xylophone mallets. BAM hadn't provided enough money or space to present the work whole, so this was only a fragment, yet it was widely discussed as being the festival's most exciting event. (Never has it been so obvious that NMA's ambitions have outstripped its funding and staff; time to scale it down.)

Trimpin also MIDI-ed live versions of Conlon Nancarrow's player piano studies numbers 37 and 48. The former was nicely divided between xylophones and pianos, but 48's thick, muddy textures made you realize how dependent Nancarrow's counterpoint has become on the spiky timbre of his hardened piano hammers.

JERRY HUNT AND KAREN FINLEY: I couldn't imagine how these two weirdos would work together at Merkin Hall, but they each did what they do separately, and somehow the combination was inspired. Finley, as usual, obliterated the life/art barrier: "I don't know why they booked us on electronic music night. I wanted to play BAM, but this is what I got." After throwing chocolate candy at

New Music America '89

Drips and Chocolate

BY KYLE GANN

the audience, she screamed one of her repetitive, slice-of-life poems, ending, "Whenever I see a rainbow in the sky, I just see an angel being raped." Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Hunt shook rattles and bells, played with mirrors, and blew through a shofar in surreal antiphony. It was unexplainable and irreducible, like most of life's significant events.

ROBIN HOLCOMB: A jazz critic asked me what was new about Holcomb's unstaged opera *Angels at the Four Corners* at Dance Theater Workshop. What was new lay beneath the surface: the emphasis on clarinets, the presence of angels, and the background dissonances that wouldn't quite resolve made the piece feel like blues painted over a Messiaen song cycle. Long passages of folk idiom sacrificed intensity, but when Wayne Horvitz's synthesizer added an eerie halo to Jearlyn Steele Battle's thrilling blues climaxes (she was the angel), *Angels* achieved a distinctive sense of mystery without vagueness.

ANTHONY COLEMAN: Coleman's best effects are his figure/ground reversals. *Light at End?*, a Boulez-meets-Braxton improv of which the Downtown Ensemble played two movements under the sponsorship of Composer's Forum, contained several. One was the quiet piano melody that Joseph Kubera plinked out beneath a strident chorus of clarinets and trombone, another was the ecstatic climax whose sonorities James Pugliese filled out by shimmering voluptuously from cymbal to cymbal. The piece lurched from one brilliant texture to an-

other, and transcended the jazz/classical intersection that created them.

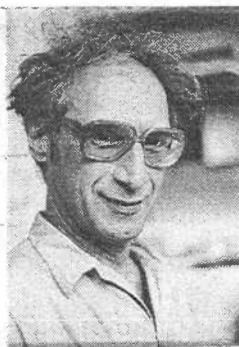
MUSICA ELETTRONICA VIVA: Gently descending through parallel chromatics in their opening notes at the Knitting Factory, Frederic Rzewski (piano) and Garrett List (trombone) quickly demonstrated what great group improv requires:

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well-prepared, detailed synchronicity. The elements were both individual and complementary: Steve Lacy's sustained melodic sense, List's meticulous feeling for when to fill a gap with counterpoint, Alvin Curran's smoothly unifying synth background, Richard Teitelbaum's weird electronics appearing out of nowhere, and—perhaps most distinctive of all—Rzewski's wildly imaginative textures. They trusted their material enough to settle into it, they stayed out of each other's way. Combine this musical maturity, this composition-derived discipline, this mutual respect, and, yes, improvisation becomes more exciting than composed music.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: What became evident over Symphony Space's five-hour "Wall of Rzewski" was that he's become America's most expert composer of un-inspired music, and that's not the back-handed compliment it sounds. The mallet-piano-clarinet pieces he wrote for *Zeitgeist* sounded like workaday commissions, but they were never less than inventive and listenable, full of intriguing

rhythms and angular, catchy melodies. That means, of course, that when Rzewski is inspired, this compositional technique stuns. In the *Antigone-Legend*, Rzewski and soprano Carol Plantamura spent a full hour at maximum intensity, hitting gongs, intoning exposed, unearthly textures, and steamrolling over us with ancient Greek emotionality, Stockhausenesque inventiveness.



FRED FRITH: His *In Memory* made the most musical use of noise I'd heard in a long time. Its core was a Stravinskyan dirge of quadrupled-guitar drones and chords, graced by strands of simple melody in four voices and occasionally supported by a backbeat. Over this burbled squeaking and grumbling noises in balanced counterpoint to a film of nervous stick figures, tied together not motivically, but by a 1980s atmosphere of quiet, repressed anxiety. If not the festival's best piece, it was the newest: it took risks, it pushed perception, its impression grew stronger afterward as you searched your memory for the premises that made it so compelling.

Nevertheless, I walked out on it. Frith's guitar playing was delicate, the singing was gentle, but they were amplified to a level of physical assault. Putting fingers in my ears distorted Frith's delicious timbres (as would have earplugs), the equalization was treble-heavy and shrill, and I couldn't find a way to listen comfortably. The adolescent egotism of overamplification is New York music's most tiresome cliché. I've had it with painfully loud music, at New Kickass Music America or anywhere else. ■

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