

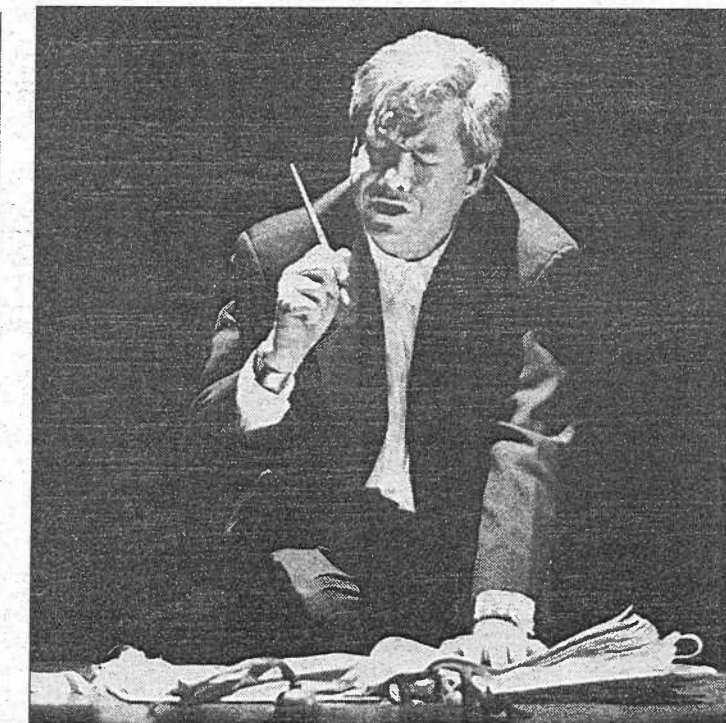
Drone On—Please

By Kyle Gann

**The Manhattan Book
of the Dead**
Elodie Lauten

In David First's music, the thought "Ooh, those instruments are out of tune" is followed five seconds later by "Hey, this is getting interesting." I should know that by now, but April 27 at La MaMa, his *Manhattan Book of the Dead* foisted the same old surprise on me in the first two minutes. The piece opened with drones elicited from Joseph Kubera's piano strings by E-bows (increasingly common in Downtown piano performance), whose pitches were smudged by Elaine Kaplinsky's synthesizer. Pay-off came later; the opening scenes were low-key and the theatrical premise not always compelling. No matter, for in the last two-thirds the music grew and grew in scintillating, illusionary beauty long past the point at which you thought it could still surpass itself.

Baritone Thomas Buckner starred as the Survivor, a person grieving the loss of a significant other. A TV-style voice collage drew his attention to a book that could save people from death and/or despair. Presently, a Mercurial messenger with winged hat brought him the book, whose words, as Buckner began to sing them, underwent slippery alchemical transformations: from "silence, devotion" to "island, ocean" to "idle, motion." Meanwhile, three Ambivalent Angels (whose dramatic function was ambiguous indeed) provided com-



Loss leader: Buckner in *Manhattan Book of the Dead*

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mentary in the form of scat singing, jazz harmony, and eerie vocal effects. Finally, the ghost of the returned lover led the Survivor to realize that the meaning of the book was not to read from it, but to write the meaning of one's own grief and pass it on to others.

We're used to minimalist operas that use one texture per scene, but First proceeded even more organically than the minimalists. The piece grew inexorably from that opening drone without leaving it behind, fusing the opera's musical strengths with its theatrical weaknesses. How

would you stage an opera by Ockeghem or Bach or La Monte Young, one whose form consisted of a gradual contrapuntal transformation? There must be an answer, but no one involved quite found it. During the gorgeous "Separation Dance," as Petr Kotik's ensemble seethed and bubbled with a slow-swelling frisson of beats and overtones, the conventionally expressionist dance onstage (performed by Pascal Benichou and Cavin Bodoujn) seemed extraneous, the pounding of their feet infringing on the music's subtlety. The drama was best integrated in the

"Wake Fantasy," where the mourners' mundane taped comments, the Angels' burbling, a subdued rock beat, and swirling harmonics blended in a steady-state chaos in which words and acoustic illusions could hardly be distinguished.

If Buckner had little to do with his body besides pace glumly, his idiosyncratic voice was wonderfully used. It's better suited to unconventional demands, and no one except Robert Ashley has found a better tonal milieu for it than First, whose undulating glissando textures blended smoothly with Buckner's wide vibrato in long tones. Even the rock songs were drone-based and minimalist, drawing phrases from the same pitches over and over, with overtones (pun intended) of the Velvet Underground. Just to show that First could depart from his drone-continuum style and get away with it, the Angels also sang (not terribly well, unfortunately) an otherwise ethereal "Wake Prayer" in three-part chordal jazz style.

But in those passages where glissando-driven acoustic beats took over, everything was forgiven. As with Young's sine-tone sculptures, pitches shifted when you turned your head. Much-sought-after Downtown sound engineer Tom Hamilton, who controlled at a mixer, told me at intermission that he had to keep moving to hear everything that was going on. The finale, "Chrome Sun Hat's Beautifully Thought Out Regrets," was a chorale propelled by a funeral drum beat, its harmonies fuzzed via continually sliding synthesizer and strings. The effect was like Ives's *Unanswered Question*, or the muffled version of "In the Sweet By and By" from his Second Orchestral Set, played underwater: ineffably sad yet sparkling with an otherworldly aura, as though denizens of

Jupiter were looking down and comforting us with a lullaby. Hey, I'm a Wagner fan; to hear music this cathartic I'll sit through any kind of theater.

Living in Albuquerque as she now does has left its traces on Elodie Lauten's subject matter, but not on her musical methods. Her return to New York with armfuls of new work, May 4 at Experimental Intermedia, still featured the rotating contrapuntal lines couched in unearthly timbres of her other recent music, but the titles have changed: *Lost in Los Lunas* and *Gusty Winds May Exist* (a New Mexico highway sign I've seen myself). On overdubbed Proteus keyboard, Lauten works now in what she calls Universal Mode Improvisation, which, while I haven't figured out the theory behind it, gives her a smooth range from modal playing to polytonal to atonal. Her melodies can cascade down or waver microtonally, and even her atonal pieces, like *Clearly Identified Floating Objects*, are uncannily restful.

A Warhol-influenced rocker from way back, Lauten returned to singing after long abstinence, and gave her rendition of a Pueblo folk song, "At the Sundown," in an unsettlingly husky whisper. The best, longest piece, *Unknown Presence at the Mesa*, featured Andrew Bolotowsky on Baroque flute, playing a warm, unpredictable melody that stood out over a background of plinking glockenspiel tones and misty vocal chords on off-beats. Lauten's melodic cycles have long created this fluid feeling of stationary motion, hovering busily in space. But the expanded contrapuntal freedom is new, suggesting that moving to the frontier has opened up for her a new sense of spaciousness. ■

Marcus Roberts

THE STONE ROSES