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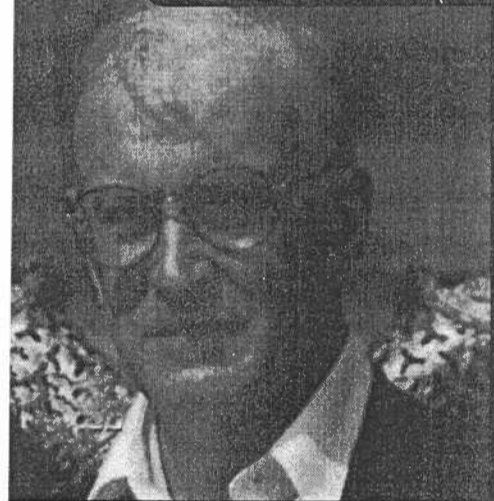
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Roscoe Mitchell (left) and Petr Kotik: the same finely orchestrated pointillism

Drunk Rat Melodies

S.E.M. Ensemble
Alice Tully Hall

BY KYLE GANN

Perhaps the mainspring of Petr Kotik's creative life dates from 1971, when he was teaching at SUNY Buffalo. He discovered, in a science professor's office, a box of graphs set out to be thrown away: graphs from experiments that measured the reaction time to alcohol in rats. Attracted to the gently undulating shapes, Kotik asked for the box and took it home. For years he based his melodies on those drunken rat graphs, drawing from them all of his major works of the '70s, such as *There Is Singularly Nothing* and *Many Many Women* (you may recognize the Gertrude Stein titles).

Today, Kotik no longer uses the rat graphs—by the early '80s he had internalized the serenely bumpy melodic style they suggested—but along the way he extracted from them an instantly recognizable idiom. The basis in "found" melodies gives his music a Cagean, egoless insouciance and allover consistency. The sense of hard work and craftsmanship he brought from his native Czechoslovakia brings a superb ear for balance and detail. And Kotik's peculiar habit of always stating his melodic lines in parallel fifths or fourths—a tic he picked up in the '70s while working with Julius Eastman, because it helped keep the errant singer on pitch—gives his music an incandescent contrapuntal luminosity, as well as rendering it sharply idiosyncratic.

All these qualities were evident in Kotik's massive and too modestly named *Fragment*, which he conducted with his S.E.M. Ensemble, and which finally gives me sufficient pretext to voice the overdue sentiment that he is one of the best composers working today. If you exclude theatrical composers, minimalists, and electronic musicians, and limit the field to those writing abstract works for ensembles of conventional instruments, Kotik stands very near the top and possibly at the top. He produced some of the most durable, though still little-known, musical monuments of the post-Cage '70s, and his output has been amazingly consistent in quality. Yet because his "day job" is as the perfectionist conductor of S.E.M. (which, characteristically, doesn't stand for anything), his career has been focused on rescuing earlier works of historical importance, and his own music, championed by almost no one, gets shoved to the side even in his own concerts.

With *Fragment*, it's time to change all that. Most of Kotik's music is highly linear, like Gregorian chant in random keys, but *Fragment* diffracted his usual lines of parallel fifths into

pointillist dots of sonority. As always, the fifths allowed for splashes of noble consonance—including bits of American-sounding brass fanfares that seemed sampled from Copland—but also tense clashes of conflicting lines. Adagio and allegro penetrated each other; the basses would pound out a massive descending scale, then suddenly the clamor would vanish, leaving a plaintive trumpet duo, like a muted message of pain in an alien language. Those bibulous rats taught Kotik to be as disdainful of conventional phraseology as Cage was, but Kotik's music is more human than Cage's, capable of both tenderness and power within a few measures.

Nothing I've heard an orchestra do in years has been more original, more surprising, and more exquisitely etched at the same time. Yet, as usual, Kotik's work was offered up as a kind of prelude to the concert's dual centerpieces, the premiere of *Fallen Heroes*, by free-improv saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell, and Morton Feldman's final magnum opus *For Samuel Beckett*. Mitchell's work had something of the same finely orchestrated pointillism as Kotik's, but in a much more conventional gestural style. Baritone Thomas Buckner sang a text Mitchell had pieced together from media accounts of famous martyrs, and while his voice competed powerfully with the orchestra, I couldn't, from the side aisle where I was sitting, understand enough of the text to take in the music's political impact. Mitchell's own sax solo near the end was unexpectedly brief.

For Samuel Beckett was the kind of historically crucial work that Kotik loves to champion, a meditative tapestry of floating chords and repeated gestures almost devoid of landmarks. Under his baton, the work sounded different than I'd ever heard it before: slower, more clearly in focus, and less prickly. I'm grateful for the performances of major works from the post-Cage school that S.E.M. has meticulously rethought for us in classic interpretations. Here they even threw in, incongruously, a scene from Handel's *Solomon* starring Met soprano Carolyn James, as if just to say, "We're good enough to do that too." The scene was the one in which Solomon settles the dispute of two women claiming the same baby, and I struggled fruitlessly to find in it some metaphor Kotik might have been making about the state of new music.

But for all its majesty, we've heard *For Samuel Beckett* uptown before (John Kennedy conducting Essential Music), and Kotik's homages to the repertoire aren't his most important work. The most severely underrated composer here, and the one he owes it to us to focus on most, is Petr Kotik. **V**