

# KYLE GANN

Composer and Choreographer  
Together as Well-matched Equals.

# Echoing the Gods

## Spell for Opening the Mouth of N

By Joshua Fried and Douglas Dunn  
The Kitchen  
November 7 through 10

## Les Enfants Terribles

By Philip Glass and Susan Marshall  
Brooklyn Academy of Music  
November 20 through 24

stantaneously the sounds they hear over headphones, a trick he premiered in his well-known *Travelogue*. Since the effect depends on the element of surprise—the vocalist doesn't know what's coming, and has only a split second to react, resulting in a rather hysterical performance style—no one can perform Fried's headphone pieces twice. The four-night run at the Kitchen

loop effects, now computerized and nicely replicating in noise the speech rhythms of some of the spoken phrases. Most of the headphone voices and instructions came invisibly from the sound booth, but in one quietly climactic moment one of the singers (Susan Thompson) took a microphone and started whispering instructions into the headset of another (Claude Wampler), which the latter carried out with zombielike passivity. In this scene the headphone technique took on a psychological power that it can hardly achieve in Fried's concert works.

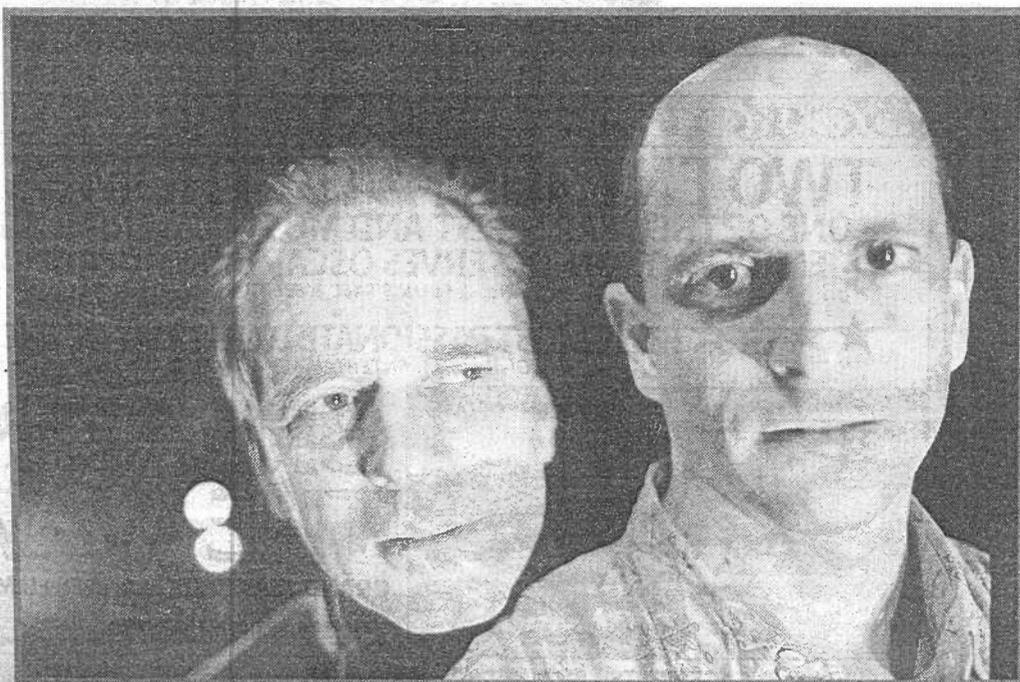
I don't know whether Fried and Dunn have read Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, which hypothesizes that in ancient times people heard voices—which they attributed to gods—because their left and right brain hemispheres weren't yet connected, an evolutionary trait that Jaynes claims was relatively recent. Regardless, in twisting Fried's glossolalia into a cultural context, *Spell* evoked an archaic yet believably lively atmosphere of a preconscious society, a land of helpless automatons and the serene gods who set them at war with one another.

*Les Enfants Terribles* by Philip Glass and Susan Marshall, on the other hand, painted a more modern, post-Freudian unconsciousness, and did so more through dance than music. Glass's score was peculiar: he, Nelson Padgett, and Eleanor Sandresky played three Roland electric keyboards set to

kind of theatrical cubism, as though we were watching four different views of the action through the eyes of the four protagonists.

The score, meanwhile, was one of Glass's smoothest and most elegant, with none of the embarrassing mannerisms (save for that one rhythmic tic) of his operas of the '80s. Its flat chord progressions, arpeggios, and repetitions never called attention to the music, but simply supported the singers' Debussyan, unresolved lines. Very light, very French, and to that extent, appropriate. But light, neutral accompaniments marked by nonsequitur harmonies were a specialty of quite a few French tunesmiths—Satie, Milhaud, Poulenc—any of whom would have brought a wit and charm to this project that Glass didn't attempt. Milhaud would have imparted some playfully exotic vernacular color; Satie (think of *Socrate*), a subtly spiritual nobility, a sense that the music was observing without comment.

Glass's music didn't observe; it ran through its preordained, monochromatic, 16-note paces willy-nilly. The singers were fine—Arand's lithe, silken soprano especially delightful. I can't feel either disturbed or delighted, though, by music that so obstinately refuses to be innovative, mysterious, or even pretty except for a moment here and there, and whose highest virtue seems to be a plodding, workaday consistency. Glass seems to have churned out the piece only because some years ago he decided to



Choreographer Douglas Dunn and composer Joshua Fried

MICHAEL SOFRONSKI

If you kids who want to required four separate teams of singers

**THE VOCALIST**  
 doesn't know  
 what's  
 coming, and  
 has only a  
 split second  
 to react.



Choreographer Douglas Dunn and composer Joshua Fried

MICHAEL SOPENSKI

All you kids who want to grow up to be opera singers, don't quit your dance lessons at the Fred Astaire School quite yet. These days, singers run around onstage amidst the dancers, swaying, leaping, pirouetting, and sweating with their more limber colleagues. At least, it happened in two productions this month, which is trend enough for today's column. The sad thing is, I find dance the most mysterious and inscrutable of the art forms; people who can write about it lucidly impress me, for I can't describe Gene Kelly and Merce Cunningham in terms evocative enough that you could tell them apart. You know, they bend their legs, they flap their arms, like that. But I know a successful collaboration when I see it, and whatever else you could say about *Spell* for *Opening the Mouth of N* and *Les Enfants Terribles*, they certainly put composer and choreographer together as well-matched equals.

Joshua Fried and Douglas Dunn, who teamed up for *Spell*, were the riskier and more surprising combination. Fried—an electronic composer with a knack for pushing brilliant conceptions three steps past what you supposed was their limit—pioneered a technique of having vocalists replicate exactly and in-

required four separate teams of singers, though Dunn's dancers were the same every night.

Dunn and Fried kneaded the headphone shtick into a vaguely Egyptian motif, nailed down by the giant sphinx behind the stage and the vocalists' exotic blue headdresses. There was something fundamentally stylized about the piece that I associate with ancient Egypt and Greece: an anti-Romantic refusal to make distinctions between life and death, ugliness and beauty, comedy and tragedy. The dancers moved with a kind of limpid majesty, into which the vocalists burst with comic awkwardness. If the dancers were the impassive gods, the singers were an unruly crowd of malcontented humans, babbling in words that, because of the headphone technique, only occasionally became intelligible. "We are a pair of lovers," stammered a tall singer hesitantly, as if compelled to say something he didn't understand. "I wish we'd all been ready," croaked old crones at intervals. But ready for what?

This wasn't the roomiest showcase for Fried's headphone tricks, which in more abstract contexts can reach a dazzling degree of complexity; he seemed to subsume his ideas to those of his more famous colleague. In between the vocal parts ran a collage of Fried's tape-

sizes that in ancient times people heard voices—which they attributed to gods—because their left and right brain hemispheres weren't yet connected, an evolutionary trait that Jaynes claims was relatively recent. Regardless, in twisting Fried's glossolalia into a cultural context, *Spell* evoked an archaic yet believably lively atmosphere of a preconscious society, a land of helpless automatons and the serene gods who set them at war with one another.

*Les Enfants Terribles* by Philip Glass and Susan Marshall, on the other hand, painted a more modern, post-Freudian unconsciousness, and did so more through dance than music. Glass's score was peculiar: he, Nelson Padgett, and Eleanor Sandresky played three Roland electric keyboards set to only one timbre—a tinny piano sound that made the whole opera sound like a low-budget provincial production. That was curious, but not objectionable. More fatiguing was the rhythmic aspect of the music, whose patterning in 3/2, 6/4, and 12/8 meters seemed intended to never let us forget that 12 can be evenly divided by six, four, and three. I went believing that 12 might be divisible by five or seven, but 100 minutes of Glass's arithmetic convinced me otherwise.

*Les Enfants*, taken from Cocteau's 1929 novel and later film, is a surrealist-symbolist tale about an orphaned brother and sister who live out their fantasies in an ongoing Game whose rituals become more and more sadistic. Narrated by their friend Gerard (Hal Cazalet), the story culminates when the sister Lise (Christine Arand) intentionally prevents the love affair of her brother Paul (Philip Cutlip) with the mysterious Agathe (Valerie Komar) by getting Gerard to marry Agathe, whereupon Paul takes poison. The story's narcissism and jealousy weren't much illuminated by the music, but Marshall's choreographic concept was breathtaking: each singer, in bathrobe or nightgown, was inexactly reflected by three dancers who went through more or less the same motions. It was a

brought a wit and charm to this project that Glass didn't attempt. Milhaud would have imparted some playfully exotic vernacular color; Satie (think of *Socrate*), a subtly spiritual nobility, a sense that the music was observing without comment.

Glass's music didn't observe; it ran through its preordained, monochromatic, 16-note paces willy-nilly. The singers were fine—Arand's lithe, silken soprano especially delightful. I can't feel either disturbed or delighted, though, by music that so obstinately refuses to be innovative, mysterious, or even pretty except for a moment here and there, and whose highest virtue seems to be a plodding, workaday consistency. Glass seems to have churned out the piece only because some years ago he decided to write a Cocteau trilogy. The only inspiration involved was in asking Marshall to do the choreography.

Ten years ago last week a freelance critic from Chicago in a coat and tie, weighed down by a portable typewriter, an overly academic vocabulary, and a vague apprehension crept into the dirty old *Voice* offices on 13th Street to meet his new editor who, to his relief, was clad in a torn T-shirt and faded jeans. Having never kept a job for more than a year before, it was my goal—for as you've guessed, I was that critic—to hold on to this one for three. Instead, I've held on through six music editors, 370 columns and articles, and enough earthquakes in both the music scene and the newspaper that I don't jump out of my skin as easily as I used to. I hope I've brought about a few changes in that scene myself by championing some people and ideas that needed championing, and by puncturing a few hot-air balloons. And having gotten really tired in those first years of being unfavorably compared to my formidable predecessor from the '70s, Tom Johnson, my mischievous new goal is to exceed "St. Tom"'s longevity at the job—which will take only another 15 months. ♦