

Ego Threats

By Kyle Gann

Feminine Instincts

Women composers have a hell of a time getting heard. Several years ago I said as much to one, and she replied, "It's because men composers don't come to women's concerts." I shrugged, but I started watching, and sure enough: while women composers show up at each other's concerts, their counterparts stay away in droves. Nothing illegal about that, but the vast majority of new-music programming is done by men, mostly composers, and why would they invite people they haven't heard? Soon after the above experience, I mentioned Elodie Lauten to one of New York's most influential new-music moguls, and he said, "I've never heard her music, what's it like?" Lauten had only been active on the scene for 15 years.

All of which made the Kitchen's "Feminine Instincts" festival (March 29 through April 1), curated by Ben Neill, especially impressive. I was as much struck by who wasn't included as by who was. Absent were those, like Shelley Hirsch and Zeena Parkins, who have served as the token women at male-dominated festivals these last 10 years, women who, because they do something "feminine" like sing or play harp, don't threaten male egos. Neill sought out both emerging women composers and some who have been around for a while without

receiving due notice. Bernadette Speach and Eve Beglarian, for example, both play keyboard and write notes on paper, a double threat to men. In fact, ever since the Kitchen renounced political correctness and resumed making artistic quality top priority, their concerts are more ethnically and sexually diverse than ever. Funny, isn't it?

Downtown's startling new discovery lately is Beglarian, who writes the music for Twisted Tutu, her duo with pianist Kathleen Supové. An electronic postminimalist with more than a dash of rock, Beglarian is both a solid composer and a performance artist with a glib stage presence, equally effective behind and in front of her synthesizer. She proved her composing chops in *Machaut in the Machine Age I*, a set of perky variations on a 14th-century tune. Then, in *Hungry Ellen*, she and Supové danced with kitchen implements to a taped rock song about housedresses as Juliana Luecking made love to some dishwashing detergent, salad tongs, and a rolling pin. The other pieces fell in between. *Touchtone Tony* had Beglarian outlining a musical additive process with slick hand gestures, and in *No Man's Land* she drew, in a dark poem, a surprisingly depressing picture of the corner of Church Street and Sixth Avenue. It was smart, engaging stuff, and I only wish the texts had been more audible over the music.

Speach unveiled her latest collaboration (the third I've heard)

with poet and novelist Thulani Davis. Though less fun than their earlier, jauntily naughty *Telepathy Suite*, *Woman Without Adornment* did a smoother job of integrating text and music. Davis read from her novel 1959 about a woman growing up motherless: after several poignant episodes, she concluded, "I am the mother to the me that is today." Meanwhile, versatile Alva Rogers sang in a goose bump-raising mezzo, as Speach and ensemble plinked out a delicate background on piano, guitar, and bass. Speach also played a lovely modal piano solo based on the same material, called *Angels in the Snow*. Anna Homler was the only woman more performance artist than musician. Holding various noise-making toys up to the microphone and singing soulfully over Darryl Tewes's quiet guitar, she was touchingly sincere but a little bland for this raucously innovative context.

Although the improvising soloist is a staple of Downtown festivals, "Feminine Instincts" limited itself to one strong example: Martha Mooke, playing a blue, five-string amplified viola with delay and reverb. Her modal ostinatos were haunting, her range remarkably wide due to the fifth string, and within her medium's limitations she found tremendous conceptual variety. One vignette drew ambient wisps of melody in the air, another crescendoed through rhythmic contrapuntal tremolos, and a tribute to John Cage jumped between textural effects. Chinese vocalist Liu Sola revealed a similar range, singing repeated phrases that catapulted from a sultry alto to a nasal soprano with stunning theatrical power. Virtuoso Wuman accompanied her on the *pipa*,



Women's intuition: improv violinist Martha Mooke

strumming in furious rhythmic counterpoint. It was a wild performance, though the references to Chinese folk and operatic idioms were a little opaque to the uninitiated.

Cellist Maya Beiser appeared as performer rather than composer, and played one piece that took such a new approach to the instrument I have to describe it even though it was by a man. Michael Gordon's *Industry* did little more than repeat a few triadic figures at different pitch levels; with the cello amplified to the point of distortion. What the distortion did, though, was bring out the difference tones, the perceived tones resulting from the difference in frequencies between the pitches she

was playing. What you heard in *Industry's* grinding repetitions was an unearthly, three-part counterpart of which she played two lines and the third was below the instrument's range. Other works, by Chinari Ung, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Franguiz Ali-Zade, were more conventional catalogues of cello techniques, unified by a mournfully wailing atmosphere. But she played them passionately enough to breathe life into their tiredest gestures.

I heard three of the four nights, missing the evening of Bonnie Barnett and Trans Jam. Just for the record, number of male composers I recognized in the audience: two on Thursday, one on Saturday. ■

SANDRA LEE PHIPPS

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