Eurhythmics

By Kyle Gann

Wim Mertens

"Blue" Gene Tyranny

S.E.M. Ensemble

Western Europeans can't hear rhythm. I want to test this theory, but I have the suspicion that their ears convert everything into either a march or a waltz. Certainly they never aspire, as Downtowners routinely do, to the complexity of an African, Indian, or Caribbean beat. (Seriously, I recently referred to world music in an article for a European catalogue, and got back a fax asking what it was.) Dutch reviews of Amsterdam's June Bang on a Can marathon regurgitated the Euro-chestnut that American music is fun but naive, and if you subtracted the elaborate rhythmic intricacy from Bang on a Can, it *would* sound naive. Except for the Hungarians—who have an ancient tradition of hot rhythms, and who have produced the best Euro-minimalism—rhythmic innovations fly right over European heads. Consequently, their minimalism can be squarer than anything the blandest, most doped-out California pattern-groover ever dreamed of.

That's sadly true of Belgium's Wim Mertens, who made his American debut at the Walter Reade Theater on July 19 as part of Serious Fun! (which included new music this year). Mertens's stateside reputation rests on a 1980 book he wrote about minimalism, *American Minimal Music*, and I hoped that his approach to the style wouldn't be as doctrinaire as that achievement suggested. Couldn't fault his performance; he played 12 small piano pieces with a deft flair, sometimes singing into a microphone in a high, pinched, and spookily reverbed voice. For his texts, Mertens uses meaningless strings of fake French or Latin words coined for their phonemic evocativeness, though I couldn't swear he did that here.

His first solo—a frothy foam of doodling seventh chords over droning fifths—made Harold Budd's synthesizer washes sound rigorously structuralist by comparison. The subsequent vignettes were based on eight- or 12-beat repeating phrases, ostinatos of impressionist ambiguity, deedle-y arpeggios, and cadences whose poignancy thinned with each recurrence. His tempos weren't driving and rigid like Philip Glass's, but atmospheric with wispy rubato. Pleasant enough, but I finally quit jotting down capsule descriptions of each piece because they were coming out indistinguishable. And when I began transcribing one piece in notation, I found it repetitive enough to capture every note. Mertens's program bio, which detailed a stellar continental career in recordings and film music, mentioned that he was at first reluctant to make his music public. He shoulda held that thought.

One week earlier, same space, same festival, "Blue" Gene Tyranny gave an opposite impression. Like Mertens, Tyranny often uses simple tonalities, filigree arpeggios, and even the occasional ostinato. Complementing his prodigious improv technique, however, he's developed an ear as keen as Morton Feldman's: each harmony is weighted to cancel out the last, so that the music's color shifts wipe out the past as they go. His free reconstruction of his *Nocturne With and Without Memory* kept returning to a single treble note, reharmonizing it consonantly, dissonantly, and in-between, with the ethereal stillness of Liszt's angelic moments. *The XYZ Harmonic Windows* from his opera *The Driver's Son* flowed from a gentle ostinato rhythm that didn't simply repeat, but grew and developed.

For a "Meditation," Tyranny placed electromagnetic feedback devices over some of the piano strings to sustain pianissimo drones beneath his tiny, unrepeating gestures. In *We All Watch the Sun and the Moon (For a Moment of Insight)* he created prickly discords with Webern-esque, two-note motives in a calm, tonal stasis. The audience could see the pages he was playing from, each as dense with notes as the sheet music that makes Bugs Bunny blanch in the cartoons. But if these were typical Tyranny scores, the dots you saw were only a small percentage of the myriads he played, just a harmonic framework for memory's sake. The most original aspect of Tyranny's works is the way they create continuity: they're tonal, yet rigorously asymmetrical. They satisfy the ear without letting it take anything for granted. They evolve, not with the cyclic predictability of everyday life, but with the labyrinthine irreversibility of deep psychic forces. They say what they have to say perfectly. You sense the form in retrospect, but with no disturbing hint of any deliberate construction.

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Wim Mertens should have kept his music to himself.

Petr Kotik, too, has a fine-tuned ear and enduring technique, in a more austere, less emotional aesthetic. June 25 at Brooklyn's Willow Place Auditorium, his S.E.M. Ensemble played his *Letters to Olga*, scored for keyboard and pairs of flutes, trumpets, guitars, and reciting voices. The texts were letters Vaclav Havel wrote his wife from prison, filled alternately with intransigent philosophy and the mundane trivia of prison life; Kotik met with Havel to work on them before the latter's rise to political prominence. Jackson Mac Low and Thomas Buckner recited the letters, whose intimacy got somewhat lost amid the music's epic, impersonal, contrapuntal lines of parallel intervals. The real beauty lay in the artless, chromatic key shifts of Kotik's chantlike melodies.

Then, as an unadvertised treat, Kotik led the S.E.M. Orchestra in a preview of a work with a wild underground reputation, Morton Feldman's *Turfan Fragments* (the official American premiere is scheduled for fall). One of Feldman's prickliest scores, *Turfan* tickles the ear with repeated chromatic slides, little woodwind squeals, and staccato string/woodwind clusters, in reiterative rhythms with no perceptible pattern: five times, 12, 13, seven, 11. Totally original in its inner syntax, the piece subjected us to pure, brightly colored sonic structures, which S.E.M. delineated with superb cleanness. ■