

An Excess of Riches

By Kyle Gann

"Blue" Gene Tyranny

PHILADELPHIA—"Blue" Gene Tyranny and Benjamin Franklin are an odd coupling. But Philadelphia's Electrical Matter Festival wanted an opera for the bicentennial of Franklin's death, and Tyranny figured "freedom and invention in our time" was a sufficient theme. Tyranny's eccentric and wide-ranging intellectualism covers unconventional notions about UFOs, magic, and weird medieval popes. Whatever Philadelphia wanted, I knew it wouldn't get what it expected.

As it turned out, old Ben made only a few cameos in *The Driver's Son*, presented at Philly's International House November 16 and 17 (I went the latter). Nor was the opera operatic. The sole singer, Tom Buckner, was surrounded by a spiky orchestra of vibraphone, marimba, and three (!) pianos. The latter were played by Double Edge (Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann) and Tyranny, joined by percussionists Jeff Berman and Bill Ruyle. Buckner spoke in meter, the music alternated between lightly following his speech rhythms and bopping along in gentle repetitions. Tyranny's improvises cover the whole keyboard at once, but his recent composing style is elegantly spare, an attempt to create abstract pointillism in a tonal idiom: Webern meets Oscar Peterson. *Driver's Son* was a good example of the new Tyranny—



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Unconventional notions about magic, UFOs, and Ben Franklin

delicate, rhythmically repetitive, minimalist in perhaps the way Satie's music was, but without nose-thumbing.

Tyranny used to be one of those rare musicians who could think better on the spot than at leisure. Paradoxically, his improvises have always been brilliantly lucid, while his composed pieces have sometimes felt like walls of mud. It wasn't that he lacked interesting ideas, but that he had too many; I've heard him give analyses in which he talked about trying to play three different musics, each

with its own structure and mood, virtually at once. In the last two or three years, his composed music has clicked, and it's done so because he's sharpened his focus. In perfect sync, he, Tilles, and Niemann bounced notes back and forth like holographic Ping-Pong balls. Some of the most delicious moments, though, were when the ensemble dropped out, leaving Tyranny to weave a few notes around Buckner's words.

"This is an update," Buckner began, speaking in rhythm. "I checked out of the Great North-

eastern Starlight Motel Bar and Grill, home of the Original Bottomless Cup of Coffee. Virtually bottomless, but coffee? Well, not exactly." The story, if you can call an opaque web of occult references that, concerns a musician named John telling a hitchhiker he picked up about his travels with his friend Tim. Tim convinces John to head for the desert to study the Mayan calendar, Franklin's magic square, and the electrical energy of the ancient Egyptians. "Many things in nature," Tim urges, "appear to act with purpose but are not actually intelligent." John replies, "I think I've played for some of them on Saturday nights."

Good thing Buckner's rhythms were well-shaped, for the text was dense. Stopped for speeding, John answers the state trooper, "Consider your average skull, a crusty integument of a three-pound universe, impulses floating like islands in a sea of light. . . Upon these planes of action, there is much we could share. But at the moment, we are committed to reenactment as in your goal to fulfill a quota." The tired trooper finally moans, "Forget the ticket, just tell me, do you ever think or feel you've . . . died and just don't know it yet?" Franklin flashes around the edges mainly in electrical imagery: "The cactus is often struck by lightning. . . In that instant the cactus is not a victim but encoded with universal knowledge. . ."

Tyranny's theater work is too indebted to Robert Ashley to ignore. (I suspect that will soon be true of too many people to require mention; what other persuasive new operatic model is there?) It consists partly in the counter-

intuitive speech inflections that put a peculiar spin on every other word. Act V's "First Step," "Second Step," "Third Step" progression of mental states could be traced back to the cataloguing of degrees of twilight in Ashley's *The Backyard*, light standing for consciousness in both works. But Tyranny counters Ashley's poetry with prose. Ashley fires one limpid seven- or twelve-beat non sequitur after another, Tyranny sculpts words into streams that meander toward the horizon. A feel for Midwest interstate highways is as much Tyranny's as Ashley's.

The density is another difference. Always pretty, sometimes spellbinding, *The Driver's Son* was still hard to digest, a quality that always makes me wish for second and third hearings. As the narrator drawled, "We agreed the task of the composer is to design the car, not to tell you where to drive it." The text was so continuous and arcane that it didn't let you listen to the music, and the music was so seductive that you could hardly wrench your ear away from it, a dilemma of excessive pleasures. Only the long piano interlude between acts IV and V let you sink in and indulge. The piece is technically still in progress, for Tyranny plans to add yet another layer of visuals, slides, and video, before a yet-to-be-scheduled New York performance. What it really seemed to need, though, was a fuller orchestration, for this miniature Carl Orff ensemble was overwhelmed by the richness of Tyranny's polyphonic fabric. His compositions sing now, but he still hasn't quite overcome the old problem: so many ideas, so little time.

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