

You had to be there. It was one of those concerts that aficionados will be boring their juniors with 20 years hence. On March 8, presented by Composer's Forum, the Arditti Quartet played a stellar, three-hour-plus, two-intermission concert of nine works, five of which had never been performed in America before. Town Hall dwarfed us, but the crowd was larger than the one that packed Merkin Hall to hear the Arditti last year, and consisted of people who had come to hear something serious and special. A few whined about the length, but even the most jaded of us licked our chops over the smorgasbord of experimental music by major figures. And the Arditti's sensuous tone, warm ensemble, and fervent precision made every piece larger than life.

The program was so diverse that only someone with an inordinately high wishy-washy quotient could have appreciated it all equally. Fans of the more serious works probably resented Mauricio Kagel's satire, admirers of John Cage's cheerful anarchy had little patience for Wolfgang Rihm's angst, lovers of Conlon Nancarrow's technical tour-de-force may have found Giacinto Scelsi's spirituality suspect. Myself, I gave up crawling across a 16-string Sahara by that most overrated American composer, Elliott Carter, and went for a drink. But the point of such a voluptuous program was brilliant: not to shock, but to set incommensurate philosophies next to each other in their most developed forms, each experience too complex (and too compellingly played) to shrug off in favor of the others.

Judged by the formula (importance of the composer) X (recentness of the piece) / (how often it's been played), the big event was the American premiere of Quartet No. 3 by Conlon Nancarrow, the Mexico City recluse whose seminal place in experimental music resides in his 47 rhythmic studies for player piano. The studies explore various combinations of clashing tempos, and the Third Quartet (his second, dating from the 1940s, was never finished) is a series of canons at rhythmic ratios of 3 to 4 to 5 to 6. That meant that when cellist Rohan de Saram began a tersely phrased line on the cello, violinist Levine Andrade soon chimed in

Arditti Quartet / Nancarrow / Scelsi

A Feast of 16 Strings

BY KYLE GANN



Above: Rohan de Saram, Irvine Arditti, Levine Andrade, David Alberman

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stuff their chamber music with five times as much complex, morose, existential, and analytical significance as Berg's *Lyric Suite*? It's because universities push them to amass a technical apparatus far beyond their expressive needs, and because they know that grants and awards go only to those whose music exhibits the expected pretensions. What were Nancarrow, Young, Cage, and Scelsi writing in their thirties? Modest, memorable pieces with clear aims and few enough notes to be deployed confidently, which is how they eventually became great. It's a lesson our professors, universities, and arts councils need to learn.

The Arditti's concert coincided fortuitously with the release (two months after the European) of Nancarrow's first CD—on Wergo, of course, the German label that is almost single-handedly preserving everything important in American experimental music. In 1977, now-defunct 1750 Arch recorded the Player Piano Studies up through No. 41, and this CD contains the first new studies to be heard since then: Nos. 42, 45, 48, and 49. It is one of five projected CDs to contain all 47 Studies (the last is numbered 50, but three have been recalled by the composer), to be released one every six months, a historic and long-awaited undertaking.

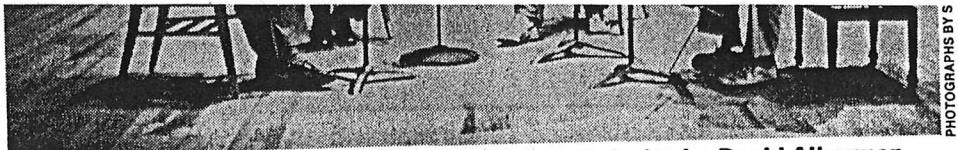
Not all of this first CD is top-shelf Nancarrow. Study No. 42 is one of his linear-crescendo textural experiments, and No. 49, similar in form to the Third Quartet but less spectacular (except for its final rip-roaring glissandi), is a series of canons at the same tempo ratio, 4 to 5 to 6. No. 45, however, is a three-movement return to the blues piano style of his early years, a second "Boogie-Woogie Suite," with a particularly charming slow movement. And No. 48 is one of the monuments of Nancarrow's career, a 20-minute double canon in which each pair of voices exhibits a tempo ratio of 60 to 61. The lower voices are a swirling mass of stride-piano patterns and wild arpeggios punctuated with echoing tremolos of a type he's never used before, while the higher voices sound haunted by the octave chains of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier*. Like Cage (who's a month older), Nancarrow continues to surprise.

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(now often it's been played), the event was the American premiere of Quartet No. 3 by Conlon Nancarrow, the Mexico City recluse whose seminal place in experimental music resides in his 47 rhythmic studies for player piano. The studies explore various combinations of clashing tempos, and the Third Quartet (his second, dating from the 1940s, was never finished) is a series of canons at rhythmic ratios of 3 to 4 to 5 to 6. That meant that when cellist Rohan de Saram began a tersely phrased line on the cello, violist Levine Andrade soon chimed in with the same line an octave higher and 4/3 as fast; next, violinist David Alberman entered still higher and 5/3 as fast; and finally Irvine Arditti twice as fast. Through all three movements, each member kept a tempo at variance with the others, and yet, as was audible at textural articulation points, they kept together with mind-blowing synchronization.

As in the player piano music, the net effect wasn't mechanical, but free as a flock of birds, as though each player had decided how fast the piece should go and refused to compromise. A grace-note motive would start up in one instrument, then echo in the three others at different speeds, and you could hear the distance between those echoes contract and expand. The pentatonic second movement, its delicate harmonics unlike anything else in Nancarrow's output, made a quiet winter landscape whose pizzicati evoked the falling of snow. At the end of the glissando-ridden finale, the quartet had to accelerate together at different rates, and come out climactically on a unison final note. Given that hair-raising challenge, the Arditti didn't quite manage the player piano's effortless panache, but its pinpoint ending probably won't be duplicated by any other quartet for many years.

The Fourth Quartet by the late Italian master Scelsi, written in 1964, had never been played this side of the Atlantic, and its two recordings are no longer available. While Nancarrow rubs close tempi together, Scelsi works with close pitches, and this single movement writhed in the vicinity of certain tones with fanatical focus, a technique achieved via a complex score with a separate line of music for every string. The Arditti squeezed



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY S

through this sonic funnel with fierce intensity, in a slow, maximum crescendo that never sacrificed their warmth. They were equally gorgeous, but much calmer, in Cage's *Music for 4*, which he composed for them to play at Wesleyan's Cage celebration last year. (Other versions from Cage's *Music for...* series have been played here by the Bowery and S.E.M. Ensembles.) The players spread themselves randomly across stage facing different directions, synchronized by stopwatches, but paying no attention to each other. The casual overlap of their floating lines had the same happy feeling of inde-

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pendence as in the Nancarrow, unified not by structure, but by mood. I find it impossible to listen to this recent, quiet phase of Cage's music without thinking of Walden Pond.

Anhang Zwischenblick: "Selbstenker," meaning "Appendix Between-look: Self-Hanger"—gad!—by Mr. Darmstadt Jr., Wolfgang Rihm, was less morbidly parasitic of earlier styles than some of his work has been. Somehow inspired by Nietzsche's Place in the Great Heritage of German Literature (you may genuflect), its mercifully brief shudder of violent tremolos, suggestive of orgasm or perhaps a particularly troublesome bowel movement, evaporated while most of us were still staring glumly at the title. Forceful here, the Arditti was less focussed in La Monte Young's *Five Pieces for String Quartet, On Remembering a Naiad* of 1956. Young's first and nearly last 12-tone piece, this Webernesque vignette could have been played more slowly, for its sustained intervals mark the historical junction at which minimalism was born of serial technique.

A contrasting historical outlook came in the form of Kagel's grim prank of a

quartet (No. 2, 1965-67), which provided a negative climax by deflating the medium's every convention. In this classic bit of '60s theater, the players bowed with sticks of wood, donned black gloves mysteriously, made oinking noises on the strings, and tapped their instruments with drumsticks. Arditti gazed incredulously at his score as if his pet termite had died on it, then placed a funeral black cloth over Alberman's strings (on which the latter continued to play despondently), and finally, in a gesture of resignation, de Saram played his cello upside down. Program this just before John Zorn's less outrageous *Cat o' Nine Tails*, and you'd see what a pale reflection of the '60s the '80s can be.

The Arditti had provided a service the night before by reading works of younger local composers, and they reprised two at this concert: *Three Dances* by David MacBride, and *Delusions of Grandeur* by Paul Siskind. The title *Three Expressionistic Tone Poems* might have given listeners a better idea of what to expect from MacBride's dances. MacBride's simple opening motive made an effective, ghostly reappearance later in the work, and his dense, Viennese counterpoint moved so lucidly from idea to idea that it captivated the listener's attention for a solid 15 minutes: at which point, unfortunately, the piece was only half over. Siskind's *Delusions* was a tautly arranged panorama of highly effective string gestures that could have been culled from any 200 European quartets written between 1950 and '70.

The strange thing was, had I listened with no prior knowledge, I might have gotten the impression that Cage and Nancarrow were fiery young men with brash ideas, and that MacBride and Siskind were huge, German sexagenarians with Brahmsian beards and miserable histories behind them. Why do so many Americans under 40 feel compelled to

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Scelsi, too, has suddenly exploded onto CD with four new releases. The most revealing is of Jurg Wyttenbach conducting the Philharmonic Choir and Radio-Television Orchestra of Cracovie in seminal orchestral works from the '60s and '70s, *Aion*, *Pfhat*, and *Konx-Om-Pax* (Accord). Stripped of melody, harmony, and usually pulse, these symphonic-sounding pieces growl, swell, moan, and jerk their way from one microtonally inflected pitch to another as though trying to wring passion from the whole-note line of a Schenker analysis.

The other Scelsi recordings were made by remarkable solo virtuosi. Recently I wrote about Marianne Schroeder's stunning recording of Scelsi's meditative Piano Suites No. 9 and No. 10 (Hat Art), and an incredibly passionate, theatrical vocalist, Michiko Hirayama, has just recorded 19 of Scelsi's *Canti del Capricorno* (Wergo), of which five were previously released on Ananda. Hirayama throbs, sobs, and vibratos her way through highly focused lines of microtonal precision, accompanied at times by strident saxophone and Middle Eastern percussion (and once by Alvin Curran on gong). What Hirayama does with her voice, Joëlle Leandre accomplishes on the double bass in three Scelsi works (Adda), along with pieces by Cage, Bussotti, Betsy Jolas, and herself. Leandre uses her own voice to eerie advantage in *Maknongan*, and her spirited technique makes the inertia of her instrument vanish into a febrile continuum.

These five discs, representing two composers who waited a lifetime for recognition, are among the most searing, provocative, and rewarding new music titles available. We're indebted to the Arditti for bringing their music to us live. ■