

Film for Music

By Kyle Gann

Todd Levin

John Cage

I've heard everything. Perplexity in the face of sonic phenomena is not something I experience often. But I walked late into Todd Levin's October 30 concert at Thread Waxing Space and thought, "What the hell is this?" Levin on synthesizer accompanied an ensemble of three electric guitars—Stephen Gabriel, Ben Sher, and Jeffrey Allen on bass—and vocalist Tony Moore crooning wordlessly. Behind them on a huge screen, scenes from Hollywood films played. The piece that caused my confusion was entitled *Jungle: Ride the Planet While It Still Spins and Shout Predictions*, and on Levin's new CD it confuses me still. Its opening hits staccato chords like a chase scene, and the counterpoint that follows sounds like medieval polyphony with a pumping beat. Later, melodies outline triads with such textural and rhythmic intricacy that it's difficult, even after several listenings, to discern what's repeating.

To a point, it's easy to hear what elements Levin's brought together. His CD is on Philip Glass's Point label, and his music has deep minimalist roots. There are some arpeggio patterns, and a couple of chord progressions that would have sounded at home in *Koyaanisqatsi*. More common is the inconspicuous use of cyclic

repetition (listen for that to become *the* structural device of the 1990s, uniting a diverse set of composers). The rhythmic irregularity is inconspicuous but lively enough to tickle the new-music ear. Other references are contradictory but equally obvious: the guitar solos frequently growled à la Hendrix. It's timbrally sophisticated stuff, packaging its ornate postminimal structural ideas in seductive '60s-rock surfaces.

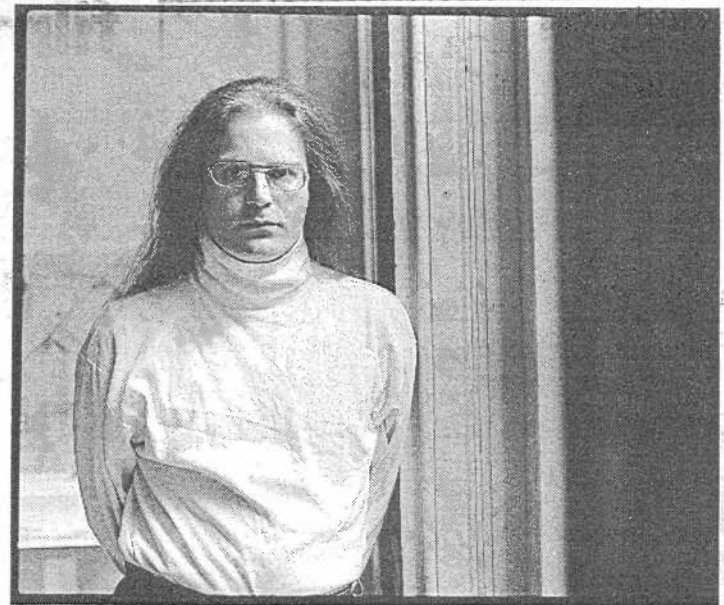
The pieces, with one-word titles and evocative subtitles, varied tempos and methods within a single, intense mood. *Heaven: You Must Have One Grand Passion* hammered away on a three-pitch theme in early minimalist style, overlaid with a soaring guitar solo. *Anthem: Hands on Your Breast Can Keep Your Heart Beating* had the most heavenly melody, a recurring chorale turning sublimely from minor to major, like Holst's "Neptune" as heard up close by Neptunians. My favorite and the longest piece, *Prayer: In a Dream You Saw a Way to Survive and You Were Full of Joy*, slid over and over from B-flat down to F over a sumptuous chord progression and a slow, sensuous pulse, crescendoing into a slow, orgasmic climax (the female type). *Marine: It Is Heroic To Try To Stop Time* returned to hard-hitting, fast, unison melodies.

One engaging thing about the concert was the use of film, a weird perceptual reversal, backgrounding the image rather than the music. Downtown artist Peter

Halley had asked several video artists to interpret Levin's music, and they did so partly via quotations. *Prayer*, for example, played over Madonna and Sean Penn meeting in *Shanghai Surprise*, while *Jungle's* collage included scenes from old TV dramas. Watching a miscast Madonna threw a wild, ambient spin that kept you engrossed, and I sometimes had to close my eyes to concentrate on the music.

Many composers who tried to fuse rock with classical music in the '80s produced Frankensteins that satisfied neither arena nor concert hall, so many that I once wrote off the attempt as futile. Recent music by Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, and Ben Neill has been convincing me that the time just wasn't ripe, that we needed to wait for composers young enough not to feel the contradiction. And now here's Levin, who's got an ear for putting across information at a rock pacing and on a rock perceptual level, in classical structures of up to 20 minutes. Besides that, his music's pretty. As original as he is slick, he's got the best titles since La Monte Young, and he enchanted an SRO Thread Waxing crowd of more than 300 (and this was the gig's second night). You're going to be hearing more about him.

Cagemusicircus! began November 1 at Symphony Space with Yoko Ono smashing her forearms on the piano (in a realization of 0'00", which Cage wrote for her).



RICKY FLORES

Levin: timbrally sophisticated, seductively rocking

It ended, appropriately, in silence, as the light dimmed on a vacant reading desk, a glass of water on top and one of Cage's jackets slung over the chair. John Kennedy and Charles Wood, two of the youngest musicians involved, did an incredible job of galvanizing 73 Cage-connected performers into a solemn but crazily beautiful memorial tribute. Laurie Anderson read newspaper texts in Cage's *Speech*; Pauline Oliveros, William Duckworth, and Christian Wolff played radios; Kosugi wrote a letter with a contact-miked pen; and members of the Chieftains played traditional Irish music used in *Roaratorio*. These performances happened not sequentially but usually four at a time, from across the stage and around the balcony.

The memorial had really begun on the 29th, when Petr Kotik con-

ducted his 86-piece S.E.M. Orchestra in *Atlas Eclipticalis* at Carnegie Hall. *Atlas* isn't my favorite Cage piece; it's his pointillistic tribute to European serialism, and he'd already done more interesting things than the serialists had dreamed of. Still, Kotik drew a devout performance, the 86 players made the piece lushly thick at moments, and piano legend David Tudor came out of a long retirement to play *Winter Music* concurrently. But with the possible exception of *Europeras I-IV*, the Cagemusicircus! was the most compelling Cage concert I'd ever heard; if you couldn't grasp what the man was aiming at in this glorious welter of noises, gestures, and quotations, you're just not susceptible. I could go on for pages, but Cage is whispering over my shoulder that reviews are for the living. ■

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