

First Avenue / Marimolin

Frame of Silence

BY KYLE GANN

That the classical avant-garde still has its own improvisation tradition is nowhere better illustrated than by the First Avenue trio. The instrumentation—Matt Sullivan on oboe, C. Bryan Rulon on synthesizers, and William Kannar on contrabass—isn't what makes it classical. This decade has inundated us with jazz-derived improv, with its riffs, trap sets, soloistic virtuosity, and volume calculated to drown out the serving of drinks. First Avenue's improvs contain none of those elements. Each one assumes a frame of silence from which sounds emerge and into which they vanish. Their blended ensemble sound rarely draws attention to any one performer. To get the effect of three playing as one, they listen to each other carefully, which in turn makes them a pleasure to listen to. One is tempted to call this tradition, drawn from AMM and Musica Elettronica Viva, a '70s style, but it isn't; '80s free jazz has merely pushed it to a back seat.

By method and their own admission, First Avenue's roots are less in AMM or MEV than in the meditative listening of Pauline Oliveros. First Avenue began their October 26 concert (celebrating *Two Suns*, their beautiful CD on Newport Classic) at Roulette with Oliveros's *Portrait*, a conceptual piece with built-in variation from one performer to another: the pitches are partly determined by the names and birthdays of the members. First Avenue crept into a smooth continuum in which Rulon's synthesizer figures made an aura around Sullivan's soft melodic permutations, while Kannar provided a barely distinguishable foundation for both. They personalized the music with buried quotations: Baroque harpsichord fragments on synth, seven recurring notes from the "Pastoral" Symphony on oboe.

As Rulon pointed out, their Oliveros is similar to their own improv except for the thought processes involved, and they demonstrated with five examples. The

first fused their instruments through common wind sounds, the second hinted at jazz when Kannar put a plucked bass under Sullivan's *Scheherazade*-sultry solo. Only once, in the penultimate noise-gesture collage, did they momentarily lose the thread and lapse into uncomplemen-

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tary licks. Rulon's approach to synthesizers is a model of discretion. He used three, two of them predigital—a Moog, an Oberheim, and a Yamaha DX5—and merged them so well that they sounded like different registers of the same instrument. Rather than go wild with the variety at his disposal (the mark of a poor synthesist), he modulated smoothly between noise and pitch, and in the process joined Sullivan's pungent tone to Kannar's growl.

First Avenue doesn't only improvise. Kannar, in his *Prufrock*, read T. S. Eliot's love songs through a vocoder or harmonizer while his computer tuned a happy cacophony of flute and plucked sounds, like an atonal calliope. The highlight of the program, though, was at least partly notated, and also the best piece I've heard by its composer, Elliott Sharp. *Versailles* began with a quirky pointillist texture, staccato notes in all three instruments, all of them somehow skirting the beat. The rhythmic force kept bursting into scale passages, then into charging, motoric chords. Sullivan's oboe wailed, the atmosphere was hectic, yet everything seemed circumscribed by a bemused calm.



From top: Sullivan, Kannar, Rulon

C. BRYAN RULON

With stunning compositional virtuosity, *Versailles* jumped back and forth between energy levels as well-nuanced as any serialist could have managed. In fact, except for its consistency of texture and irrepressible rhythmic energy, you might have mistaken it for a Nono or Boulez premiere. Under the title's suggestion, one could hear the tinkling and glittering of faceted glass in those ephemeral notes, and the piece's personality was so distinct I can still hear it days later.

Marimolin returned to Merkin Hall October 29. On paper they don't look appetizing: a Boston-based

duo of marimba (Nancy Zeltsman) and violin (Sharan Leventhal), creating a repertoire where nobody had missed one. In concert, however, they're very physical players, and they exude excitement. The composers they commission tend toward uptownish, but they also poke around in unusual corners; most of the works I've heard them play transcend specialty status. *Owed T'Don* by Steve Adams (who recently joined the ROVA Saxophone Quartet) paid a debt to Captain Beefheart and set its offbeat violin line over a wild series of 11-beat marimba patterns. New Yorker Andrew Thomas's marimba solo *Merlin* was a romantic view of medieval magic, a veil of mysterious tremolos opening on breathtaking virtuosics. Not your usual antiseptic uptown interpreters, Zeltsman dug into her bars the way a good pianist digs into the keys, and Leventhal glided around her strings with vigorous precision.

This program's most substantial essays were a Violin Sonata (with John McDonald, piano) by Boston composer Scott Wheeler and *Somewhere in Maine* by Lyle Mays, currently touring Europe as pianist for Pat Metheny. Wheeler underrated his sonata as "neoclassic"; actually, its motive-saturated atonalism was thick but transparent, the first movement spun from a short trill figure. Leventhal and McDonald glided through it with a light touch that distilled its most lyrical qualities, and it survived the weight of four movements because the scherzo, a spiky waltz, was humorously brief. *Somewhere in Maine* surrounded Marimolin with a technicolor tape. A synthesized marimba played hockets with Zeltsman from across the auditorium, and the pair wove their way through hauntingly reverberant echoes. Few instrument-and-tape pieces work, but Mays's tape was a multidimensional expansion of Marimolin itself, a halo that kept them at the center and offered fitting homage to their expertise. ■