

Carl Stone

# Free Samples

BY KYLE GANN

Los Angeles composer Carl Stone, in modest gray sportcoat and tie, drinks coffee from a Styrofoam cup, the glare of a computer screen reflecting off his horn-rim glasses. Looking thoughtful and restless, he drums his fingers on a table loaded with electronic equipment, shifts arm position every few minutes, and occasionally punches a button on the keyboard. A deaf person, walking into Dance Theater Workshop April 11 while Stone performed, might have queried, "Why are these people watching an accountant?" Admittedly, the setup looked like a depressing, futuristic image: a sedate, humorless technician-musician churning out sterile sonic abstractions from a computer. What belies that scenario is the music, which is warm, sensuous, engaging, joyful.

Stone's *Shing Kee*, I'm convinced, is the first classic of computer-sampled music. Its apparent nonsense syllables ("ahhh-mey, ahhh-mey") ebb and swell in breathy waves, supported by classical harmonies. Almost imperceptibly, those waves become slower, until at last Stone presses a key and (nonsimultaneously) they break onto a new pattern. At one change, an endless trill begins, sustaining a dominant chord until the ear abandons hope of resolution. But if the harmonies seem as strangely familiar as a repressed childhood memory, the sound is charged

with an unearthly exoticism; I thought of the Stefan George poem Schoenberg set, "I feel an air from other planets blowing." Not until you learn the source of Stone's sound samples—a recording of a Japanese pop star singing a Schubert lied—is the music's gorgeously enigmatic aura explained.

*Shing Kee* was the concert's anomaly; all three other works sported additive textures over a rock beat. What *Shing* did with Schubert, *Hop Ken* (Stone titles his works after ethnic restaurants) did with Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Stone played the opening trumpet fan-



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Stone: unearthly exoticism

fare against itself in a halting collage, then burst into a danceable rock chorale with the theme always more or less audible. He had refined the piece considerably since his Experimental Intermedia performance a year ago, cleaning up its samples, increasing its resonance, and its stuttering "Great Gate of Kiev" finale was at once hilarious and compelling. *Wall Me Do* and *Sonali*, Stone's most

recent creation, were muted, early-Terry Rileyish rock continuums, the latter crescendoing to a triumphant choral finale diffracted from *Die Zauberflöte*, another borrowing I didn't recognize until told.

Unlike most artists in this genre, Stone phases his layers of metallic melody so that rests arise at the most unexpected moments—the rhythm switches giddily from measure to measure. Both *Wall Me Do* and *Sonali*, additive and square-rhythmed, sounded noticeably like Joel Chadabe's music, and I later overheard that Stone is using software Chadabe developed. That's a peril of MIDI, but also of any new instrumental technology; the early repertoires for harpsichord and violin include many indistinguishable works and techniques. At some point you have to ask whether our Romanticism-induced expectations of individuality are applicable in times of collective technological exploration.

Neil Rolnick, bearded and casual in black and white, performed at BACA Downtown April 22 with similar racks of MIDI-controlled boxes, but in slightly more conventional circumstances; for every note he played on his DX-7, about 30

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emanated from the speakers, rather than thousands. If Stone's processes move one step at a time like early minimalism, Rolnick's music flits from one idea to another in an odd impressionist dream, as if each passage is remembered rather than created. In *A Robert Johnson Sampler*, each press of a key elicited a phrase sampled from Johnson's *King of the Delta Blues Singers*. At first Rolnick played phrases against each other in an easygoing quasi-improv, but this gave way to an introverted organ chorale, then to thickets of plucked notes that sounded as though Robert Johnsons were multiplying schizophrenically. Rolnick's sense of form isn't frozen by his preset computer

instructions; I heard *Sampler* six days later in Chicago, where its path was quite different.

Rolnick's techniques also vary more from piece to piece than Stone's. The twittering noises that open *What Is the Use?* stayed close to predigital electronic music, which reminded me that Rolnick once worked at IRCAM, where computer music isn't so tonally oriented. After a fade-out, Rolnick split his keyboard four ways to play samples of the words of the title, with which he built a kind of spoken-on-pitch samba. *Vocal Chords* went after yet another vernacular tradition: Rolnick had Kathleen Myers, a former singer for Duke Ellington, sing a repertoire of scat melodies, which he altered with delays, echoes, and computerized variations. The techniques involved were so simple that the piece's success hung on the singer's involvement, and Myers gave a kind of soulful, cute, crafty performance that we new-music types are rarely treated to.

I'm always impressed by what West Coast composers have done with minimalism; rather than a formula for rigorous limitation, they've seen in it a pregnant beginning. In the musics of Stone, Ingram Marshall, Peter Garland, Daniel Lentz, Stephen Scott, John Adams, and Rolnick (who, though he lives upstate, was schooled in San Francisco), those repeating patterns provide a base in which the music becomes centered enough to take flight. Toward the end of *Sampler*, Rolnick paused in midrepetition to suddenly lift everything up a half-step, then after a few seconds did it again. Humans are too quickly desensitized to listen to the "metamusical" acoustic details of early minimalism forever, and Rolnick's unexpected moves re-focus ears that are prone to drift off. Such devices also recreate a welcome sense of tonal form and steer *minimalism* in a direction where its -ism falls off from disuse, and it becomes once again simply music. What better direction to take it? ■

Nobody beats the

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