

KYLE GANN

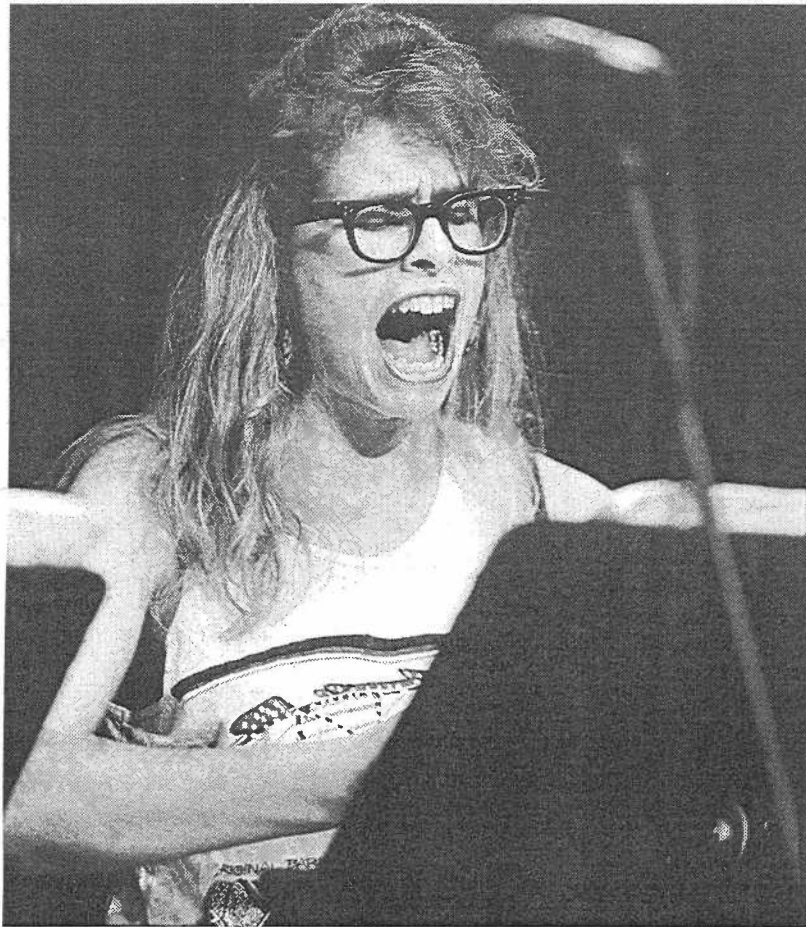
Liberating Schubert

Frying the Trout

An Alternative Schubertiade
American Opera Projects
September 19

Schubert inspires a different kind of loyalty than any other composer. When a wise guy asked Stravinsky didn't Schubert's music put him to sleep, old Igor replied, "Who cares if I fall asleep as long as, when I awake, I think I'm in paradise?" Beethoven convinces you with the passionate force of his logic, but Schubert has no need to convince; he seduces you with loosely strung, unhurried melodies that are the language of love. No matter how obvious his major-minor ambiguities and those sudden modulations toward the subdominant that feel like the floor dropping out from under you, you rush to the rewind button to drink them up over and over like ambrosia. "Schubert sweats beauty like a Christian sweats hate," announced H. L. Mencken in a resonant phrase, and swore he'd rather hear Schubert sneeze than someone else write symphonies. I couldn't agree more. But then I was raised on Schubert, and assumed I was alone in these feelings Downtown until the Alternative Schubertiade presented by CRI as part of the Downtown Arts Festival.

So I was pleasantly taken aback by the outpouring of affection that resulted from Phil Kline's invitation for Downtown balloon poppers, guitar bangers, and rogues to pay homage to the short-lived, bespectacled little Austrian songwriter. People whose enthusiasms I would have thought extended back no



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media. His *U R What You 8* orchestrated for electric guitars a passage from Schubert's Eighth Symphony, whose transcendent counterpoint, though still unfinished, survived the morph.

The Schubertiade also offered some straight Schubert performances (the best by pianist Inessa Zaretsky and baritone Gregory Purnhagen) and some ultrachromatically romantic compositions by Zaretsky, Gordon Minette, and others, whose relevance sometimes became dubious. I would have never expected to welcome the day that Downtowners devoted themselves to works from the Great European Tradition, but the liveliness of this event surpassed that of your average Downtown music marathon. Gee, when's the next Wagner centennial?

A new new-music series got off to a brash if uneven start September 7 at Anthology Film Archives. With Philip Glass as its guiding spirit, Music at the Anthology promises to focus on composers in their twenties and thirties, an elusive species to date. The retreat into knowing conservatism I've found among many twentysomething composers is a continuing disappointment, and there were moments in which this concert seemed like just another attempt by Uptowners to borrow Downtown hipness. At that end of the spectrum, Peter Alexander's *Phylum Mix* for string quartet sounded like minimalist Berg, as though Steve Reich had sprinkled the *Lyric Suite* with a few repeat signs to prevent its half-diminished seventh chords from resolving. *The Great Plate Dip Dada*

The Pool

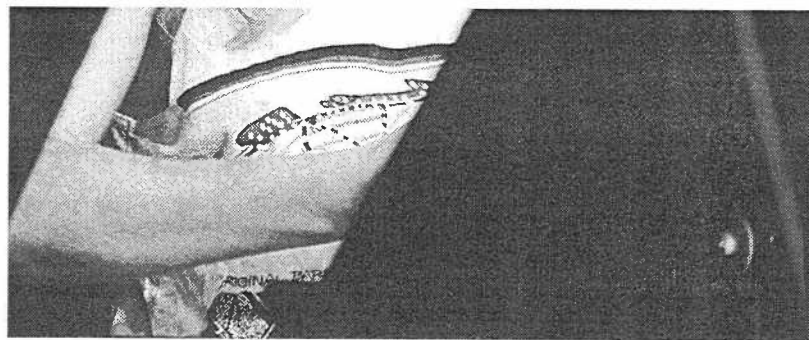
Roulette
September 18

The improvisatory video band the Pool hasn't come up with much to say, but it sure has become slick at saying it. It got my attention by relying on the music of one of Downtown's most mercurial musicians, David Weinstein; the rest of the group includes video artists Nancy Meli Walker, Angie Eng, and Benton Bainbridge, with Naval Cassidy providing further music. The video people played with objects in front of cameras, while Weinstein and Cassidy drew a tremendous range of sounds from a few samplers. The clearest yet least tangible success of their latest concert was the happy fit between visuals and sound. In the first of six vignettes, video images of wrinkled aluminum foil were illuminated by an equally crinkly noise collage of violins, radios, and roaring engines over a walking bass. In another colorful squares, triangles, and letters danced to a hot hi-hand beat

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So I was pleasantly taken aback by the outpouring of affection that resulted from Phil Kline's invitation for Downtown balloon poppers, guitar bangers, and rogues to pay homage to the short-lived, bespectacled little Austrian songwriter. People whose enthusiasms I would have thought extended back no further than Captain Beefheart suddenly gushed over the C Minor Sonata and the C Major Quintet. They paid him the highest kind of compliment by transforming his music into their own, refurbishing his various impromptus, melodies, and individual trills in a series of works whose most recurrent strategies were postmodern deconstruction and minimalist rescaling. It was amazing how much of Schubert's beauty came through; amazing until you thought about it, that is. The cohesive logic of sonata form was never very congenial territory for Schubert anyway, and his weakest passages are those in which he dutifully fills out the repetitions and transitions of his Beethovenian heritage. The Downtowners liberated his melodies from sonata duty, and his shards of beauty shone just as bright without being glued together.

The most sophisticated and yet archetypal homage came from Nick Didkovsky. He fed a performance of Franz's Impromptu in E-flat Major into a computer, did a statistical analysis with some new piece of Java software, then had the computer spew out a recomposed version. Wrong notes at the beginning disintegrated into a Nancarrowian mess, through which ghosts of the original melodies could always be heard. Norman Yamada had a similar inspira-



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tion, simpler technology: in an approach he explained as derivative of Shenkerian analysis, which strips music down to its basic underlying pitches, he slapped out selected pitches (D, E-flat, E, G, A, and B, I believe) from the C Minor Impromptu, creating Cagean silences that didn't entirely obscure the original. Collage was less common. DJ Firehorse blended Schubert records into a dance mix, but seemed bedeviled by electrical problems. Anthony Coleman played tune fragments from many pieces to haphazardly punctuate a story about hearing voices in a Schubert piano CD while he had an ear infection, and finding later that the voices had been mice caught in a trap.

Minimalist treatments were popular, threatening to extend Schubert's "heavenly length" to theoretical eternities. In *Thought You Said Sherbet*, David First played an unnamed cello and piano work on his guitar at the rate of 1.3 beats per minute. At that rate the performance should have lasted for 75 hours, but First quit after 15 minutes—what a rip-off! Phil Kline drew one of his trademark crescendoing, electronic-continuum pieces entirely from the enigmatically ominous trill in the B-flat Major Sonata. Annie Gosfield sampled several moments from the C Major Quintet and treated us to a kind of disconnected *Reader's Digest* version that extended single chords into ghostly phrases, their resolutions denied. The most austere reduction was that of Judy Dunaway's trio, which squeaked some

Schubert piece on balloons of limited melodic capacity. (Had rubber been around in the 1820s, Dunaway mused, Schubert might be alive today.) It was Roger Kleier, though, whose *Sighted Sub, Sank Same* suggested what Schubert's music might have sounded like had he survived to embrace postminimalism. Within a lovely, restful continuum of drones Kleier conjured up internal melodies from the Ninth Symphony, sustained and echoed by (I suppose) digital delay.

Schubert might have found such re- and deconstructions of questionable musicality, but he could only have been amused and chastened by Kitty Brazelton's *Fishy Wisby*, a kind of vocal arrangement of the Trout Quintet. Feeling condescended to as a singer by the fact that the Quintet setting is far livelier than the song on which it was based, Brazelton set words to the Quintet's entire pianistic texture and, along with sopranos René Santer and Dasna Naphtali, sang the athletic results with fetching Viennese abandon. The extra text required was filled in with happy phrases like "fishy my love," and included references to a politically incorrect fourth verse that Schubert didn't set, one in which the poet warned women not to let themselves get snared by men as the fish had. In this breezy performance Schubert found himself updated, but not violated. In the same vein, I would have been curious to hear more people do what John Myers did, translate Schubert's notes to late-20th-century

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Frances White's *Lesser celandines* for piano quintet and tape had more potential. The strings blended into electronic chords that swelled and ebbed with beautiful stillness as pianist Lisa Moore played mournful minor-key motives. Feldman's influence was evident, though Feldman would never have let the work run on for so long without offering more pitch variety. Singer-pianist Jonathan Hart Makwaia shocked the concert into a wider consciousness by fluidly singing some African-inspired songs while accompanying himself with pentatonic melodies on the piano. Erik Santos's *Guernica Dances . . .*, with Lisa Moore and Ted Baker on duo pianos, galloped through virtuoso Stravinskian textures, including a ragtime section, and brought the afternoon to a rousing close. We desperately need a venue like Music at the Anthology, one that will draw a younger crowd of artists into the new music circuit. I only hope it reveals that the new generation is going some direction—a any direction—besides backward. **U**

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Most of the pieces were opaquely abstract despite their liveliness. Much determined by the medium, the message was often about the viscosity of both fluids and sound textures as altered in real time by current digital technology. The evening's sole approach to narrative came when Walker, in apron, wig, and curlers, cooked an omelette on a small burner as the camera zoomed in for extreme close-ups of congealing yolk. Completed, the omelette was requested by two famished audience members who wished it had been salted, but nevertheless consumed it with theatrical gusto. Who says Fluxus is dead? —K.G.

Correction: Oops! In one of the more glaring faux pas of my career, I attributed Jeffrey Schanzer's latest CD to his fine work with the Soldier Quartet. I meant, of course, the Sirius Quartet, which split off from the Soldier years ago and probably didn't appreciate the inadvertent reminder.