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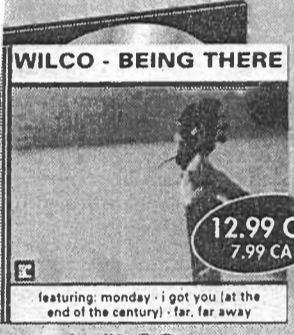


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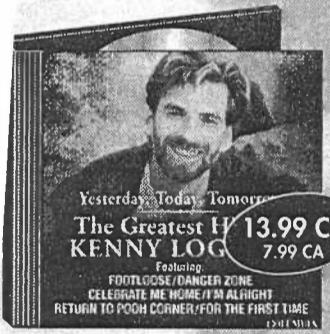


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# KYLE GANN

*Uptown Makes a House Call*

## Gentrification

Common Sense  
February 27  
Greenwich House

Derriere Guard  
March 20  
The Kitchen

According to an old tale, the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz once learned to play a transcription of one of Art Tatum's performances just to prove that he could replicate Tatum's whirlwinds of notes. Told of the feat, Tatum replied, "He may know what I play, but he still don't know why I play it."

The story has "apocryphal" written all over it (Horowitz and Tatum admired each other too much to harbor such one-upmanship), but it comes to mind frequently these days

as Uptowners invade the Downtown music scene. You can hear Babbitt and Xenakis at Cooper Union now, and Gregg Bendian is curating a modernist-classical series (Schoenberg, Stockhausen) at the Knitting Factory. Europhilic composers fresh out of Ivy League schools no longer rent Carnegie's stuffy recital hall for their debuts, but Greenwich House and Roulette. Even the Kitchen, for 25 years a living synonym for avant-garde, hosted a "Derriere Guard" festival March 20-23 with the quintessentially Uptown Absolute Ensemble, a fest dedicated to the proposition that "the only way for art to move forward is to go back and use elements of the past" (thus organizer Stefania de Kenessey). After sneering at us for three decades, Uptown has suddenly barged in with the effusive friendliness of a distant relative who needs money.

This means one of two things, and probably both: the rats are abandoning the sinking classical-academic establishment, and Downtown has come to look like the gateway to a hip career. The latter development started with the Bang on a Can festival, whose success was turning Uptown heads even before Lincoln Center picked it up. It does not mean any sudden conversion to Downtown aesthetics. Oh, the young Uptowners are more open-minded now—they soft-pedal their criticisms of John Cage, and make a show of informality and disdain for compositional rigor. But they still write carefully notated, cleverly formalist chamber music for mixed ensembles, with few or no rock or world-music influences, and with a peculiar allergy to electronic instruments. Their naive belief that they can endear themselves to Downtowners by disparaging rigor is amusing; they have no idea how driven Downtown mu-

sic is by theoretical concerns that go back to the tradition of Cowell, Cage, Partch, Oliveros, and Nancarrow. They think we're just a bunch of wild and zany guys.

Meanwhile, Downtown is especially vulnerable to a takeover at the moment. I reported three years ago that the number of Downtown concerts had dropped 30 per cent in the two years before that, and I'd roughly estimate another 30 per cent drop since then. The spaces are broke. But the Uptowners, with their greater access to grants and expert ensembles, aren't feeling any such pinch, and it costs them little trouble to divert an occasional gig south of 20th Street. Just as the '80s economy encouraged a flood of unrehearsed free improvisation, the '90s economy is selling the music scene to those who can afford to bid.

The invaders vary along a wide spectrum.



Common Sense: the young Uptowners make a show of informality and disdain for compositional rigor.

At one extreme are those whose southward move is accompanied by a rebellion against academia's morbid cerebralism and Europe-worship. That describes Common Sense, the composers' collective who presented their music courtesy of the New Millennium Ensemble, a quintet of violin, cello, flute, clarinet, and piano. Just like the Bang on a Can curators, the Common Sense composers studied at Yale with Martin Bresnick (and a third wave of Bresnick students is reportedly already concertizing in New York—won't somebody stop this man?). When I first heard them two years ago, their music still bore contrapuntal vestiges of their New England education. Now two of them (Dan Becker and Belinda Reynolds) have moved to the Bay Area, the rest to New York, and their newest works no longer bring Walter Piston to mind.

Instead they have converged, most of them, on a noticeably homogenous lingua franca that might be described—awkwardly, for we're dealing with hybrids that haven't crystallized—as a minimalist-tinged, quirkily tonal post-structuralism, a playful approach to ab-

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stract but accessible note-patterns. The idiom's most obvious feature is its John Adams-ish insistent repeated notes, a technique that allows you to hold your audience with your high energy level without having to change harmonies faster than they can follow. These were most apparent in *Spam* by Marc Mellits, whose Copland rhythms and tonalities led to a funereal ending, and in *coming around* by Belinda Reynolds, a counterpoint of tremolo melodies in which dots of repeated notes seemed to take the place of themes. Unobjectionable in any one piece, those repeated notes began to sound like a tic by evening's end.

The most elegant work was Dan Becker's *S.T.I.C.*, which he explained stood for "sensitivity to initial conditions." He also called it a process piece and declined to explain the process, which he said was too "in your face" to require description. It wasn't quite in my face, though; the quintet confined themselves to a small repertoire of melodies, chords of open fifths, and chirpy cadences, yet the piece grew and expanded and turned corners with a logic I tried to pinpoint and failed. Nothing could have been clearer than what the piece was doing at any particular moment, nor more mystifying than how it got there. I'm usually bored by continual mystification, but *S.T.I.C.* made the experience frustratingly enjoyable. Other works, similar in style, took even more circuitous routes. John Halle's *Vox Pop* jumped collage-like

deeply emotive, this should have been the easiest work to play on the program, and was—an Uptown stereotype come to life—the only one the expert New Millennium Ensemble had problems with.

The Kitchen's *Derriere Guard* festival was at the opposite extreme. I was afraid it would be a pompous attempt to claim hipness for Uptown; instead, it was a pompous attempt to claim validity for incompetence. Composers who still write like Debussy and Verdi are nothing new; hundreds of them quietly inhabit the subprofessional composing world. But never before have they taken over the Kitchen, declared the avant-garde dead, and claimed unimaginative epigonism as the next wave. Judging from the first night of *Derriere Guard*, I thought Downtowners were being taken for chumps.

At least an epigone, with his models there to copy from, should exhibit a certain polish. But Ken Lampf's *The Irrevocability of a Vanished Past*, muddily orchestrated and unconfidently played, tried to replicate the ambience of Barber's *Adagio* in the outer sections, and in the middle aimed at Mahler. Ed Green's *Concertino* for piano and orchestra had even less self-assurance: unable to decide whether to imitate Copland, Chopin, or Prokofiev, it alternated among the three in little two- and three-measure bursts. Pianist Alexander Markovich jovially tried to make the best of the solo part, which

too often limped along in spare unaccompanied octaves. Stefania De Kenessey, on the other hand, knew what she wanted: excerpts from her opera *The Other Wise Man*, orchestrated à la Verdi, sounded like the sequel to Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* that we didn't know we were waiting for.

Two worthwhile pieces seemed miserably out of place. Charles Coleman's *Young Words*, a chamber music suite, was in a conservative post-Bartok mode, but at least honest and beautifully idiomatic for the instruments. And the orchestra played one work by a prominent

Downtowner, Bernadette Speech's new *Parallel Windows—Unframed*. Anthony de Mare's repeating riffs on the piano spread slowly into the orchestra, eventually culminating in a gentle undulating rhythm in which everyone joined. If less clever than Speech's previous piano concerto *Within*, it was her most atmospherically emotive work yet.

With these two exceptions, the *Derriere Guard* composers reminded me of minor British impressionists like Sir Arnold Bax—tempted toward sensuousness but restrained by academic misgivings—except that Bax was at least competent. I've been a critic too long to enjoy shooting at sitting ducks, but I feel goaded into it by this festival's pretentious posturing as representing the "new classicism." The word classicism has connotations of formal logic and balance, and to apply it to the dog's breakfast of impressionist clichés in this concert was an act of intellectual mendacity, a cynical willingness to play on the layman's uninformed stereotypes. At least Common Sense has figured out what we play Downtown. But no Uptowner yet has taken the trouble to learn why we play it. v



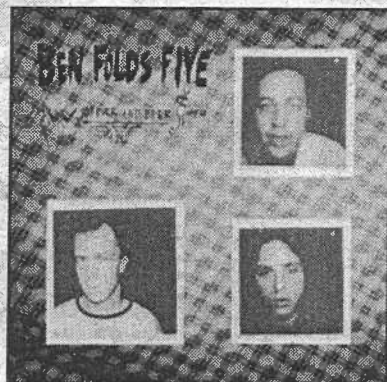
from one simple motive to another, sometimes shifting totalistically back and forth between beats of different speeds, and interrupting itself for violin and cello cadenzas. Ed Harsh's *not a single night's sky* opened with a furious gesture leading to a stasis of sustained and repeating notes, dotted with quick, chromatic bits of melody.

My two favorite works, though, were the least clever and least abstract, and coincidentally the ones that didn't use repeated notes. Randall Woolf's *Alternative Music* had pianist Margaret Kampmeier playing a slow recurring progression of cheesy chords on a synthesizer, as above them the strings played lithe, simple melodies ending in sighing glissandos. The piece did almost nothing, in fact, besides present its languid sonic image without variation or commentary, which is perhaps the central and most anti-European tendency in Cagean aesthetics; the piece felt right at home Downtown. Likewise, Carolyn Yarnell's "Lapis Lazuli" (slow movement of a longer work entitled *Rock Music*, with other titles like "Geode" and "Slate") was the only truly slow work, sliding through bittersweet harmonies marked off by deep bass notes in the piano. Honestly and

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