

Peter Van Riper

# Getting Into Trouble

BY KYLE GANN

**W**hen is a sound interesting? In his mean-spirited book *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, the late Cornelius Cardew recalls an incident decisive for the avant-garde. An early follower of John Cage, Cardew had been inculcated in the Cagean doctrine that all sounds are, in themselves, interesting, "if only we had ears to hear." Then one day, during a concert in which he was plucking isolated notes on his electric guitar, Cardew suddenly realized: This isn't interesting at all. The moment changed his life. He abandoned the avant-garde, helped form England's Marxist-Leninist Party, and began writing inept arrangements of Irish protest songs.

I don't think Cardew understood Cage. There's interesting, and there's interesting. Cage has never claimed that, given the right attitude, the accidental sounds of everyday life could be interesting in the way that *Guernica* is interesting. The interestingness of *Guernica* involves the ego, or rather two egos: Picasso's in proclaiming what is interesting, and yours in deciding what interests you. Cage's concern is to rid oneself of attachment, and to arrive at a state in which interestingness—insofar as it involves the ego-act of discrimination—ceases to be relevant. (Remember the story in which the Roshi smiles beatifically at his hostess's cracked rendition of a third-rate Italian opera.) Cardew, like most people, preferred to remain attached to his desires, and so he became bored. Sainthood isn't for everyone.

Of course, the official Western position

has always been that a sound is never interesting in itself, but only as a marker in a syntactic process. Cage's emphasis on sound in its unemotionalized physicality has weakened that conception and inspired many composers to experiment with sonic meditation.

Among young composers, Peter Van Riper is a major proponent of this "get into" aesthetic, and the sounds he asks us to get into are subtle indeed. His February 20 concert at Roulette, in collaboration with visual artist Eugenia Balcells, involved a number of unusual sound sources, most of them productive of quite complex and seductive tones. Chief among these sources were two rows of sawed-off aluminum baseball bats, which when struck were surprisingly mellow and chimelike. Accompanying these were Balcells's slides of mostly simple geomet-

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ric patterns in black and white, in keeping with the music's contemplative nature.

Much of Van Riper's interest is in tiny acoustic phenomena that are usually overlooked, especially the effect of movement on sounds. Part of the shimmering, erratic ring of the baseball bats came from their freely swinging back and forth. (Balcells's diffraction of her slides through a prismatic lens made a neat visual parallel.) During Van Riper's one soprano saxophone solo, consisting of brief chromatic motives, he swung around in different directions and shook the saxophone to achieve slight vibrati



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Van Riper: too much and too little

and glissandi. Likewise, toward the end he ran across the space as he slapped two metal strips together. As it appeared, though, the Doppler effect in such limited circumstances is almost imperceptible; the sound of Van Riper's footsteps on the wooden floor was louder than those modifications, and thus had to be reckoned as part of the piece. Christian Wolff once defined modern music as that which was not interrupted by extraneous noise, but in Van Riper's delicate context the latter seemed quite intrusive.

In sustaining such prettiness for so long and with such minimal change, Van Riper provided too much and too little. From a Cagean point of view, he need not have gone to so much trouble to make his sounds interesting; hitting a cardboard box or playing scales on a clarinet might have done as well. The important thing would have been the avoidance of egoistic action, whereas Van Riper's performance was rife with careful discrimination. On the other hand, if the creation of interestingly complex timbres was the point, more astonishing phenomena could have

been achieved via computer generation (which has recently made strides in the area of sound-location synthesis; this wasn't the case five years ago). By splitting that difference, Van Riper created a meditational music on a level analogous to TM; brief by Buddhist standards, the concert seemed intended to seduce weary Westerners into contemplating pretty sounds in hopes that it would prepare them for the hard stuff later.

The sound installations of Alvin Lucier provide a telling comparison. Lucier, too, draws sustained sounds from physical phenomena, but his brilliance lies in his ability to create surprising analogies between sound and nature. In his *Music for a Long Thin Wire*, for example, he takes an omnipresent process—the movement of air in a building—and isomorphically transmutes it, via electronics, into audibility. As analogy his music's appeal is not primarily sensuous, but cognitive. The sound is fascinating because we know how it is produced. Unlike Lucier, Van Riper omits the analogy, yet unlike Cage, he doesn't quite let the sound be itself. Instead, his strategy seems to be to entertain the senses and hope that they'll convince the mind to shut down for awhile.

None of which is to say that Van Riper's music wasn't pleasant. An inconsistent epistemology is not necessarily fatal. The repetition of elemental patterns on his baseball bats was soothing, and the performance flowed seamlessly. His silhouette against the whiteness of Balcells's slides in the darkened hall made for a nice bit of '60s-reminiscent music theater. The collaboration of slides and music was among the best I've ever seen, both artists on the same wavelength and neither overshadowing the other. It was a charming evening.

My only fear is that some day Van Riper is going to stop suddenly in mid-swing, and think, "This isn't interesting." I hope he writes better protest songs than Cardew did. ■

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