Glimpses of a Theme

By Kyle Gann

Larry Polansky
S.E.M. Ensemble
Phil Kline

Ever since Beethoven overreacted to a request from Diabelli, supplying him with 33 variations instead of one, the theme and variations has been a forum for composers to flaunt their chops. Given a reasonably straightforward theme, you can range as far as you want without losing your audience; if one variation flies too far "outside," just touch base again with the next. That formula makes Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* the most popular recent piano work despite its brainy compositional virtuosity. And April 5 at Roulette, a new variation set was unveiled that promises to be an important addition to the repertoire. Larry Polansky, a wide-ranging experimentalist in sampler electronics and alternate tunings, usually emphasizes concept over technique. So I was unprepared for an achievement as supremely musical as his *Lonesome Road (The Crawford Variations)*, which lasted 90 minutes and required three pianists to perform.

Actually, the three-pianist rationale was more notational than digital, for the present 122-page score is a mass of barely legible notes. Polansky couldn't find anyone to undertake the project whole, but the piece looks no more difficult than Brahms's fierce Handel Variations, and certainly less trouble than Kaikhosru Sorabji's four-hour *Opus clavicembalisticum*, which several soloists have assayed. Polansky began with the folk song "Lonesome Road" in its arrangement by the undersung '30s avant-gardist Ruth Crawford, published in Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag*. Through 51 variations divided into three groups, Polansky splintered the song via dissonant four-part chorale counterpoint, phase shifting, additive processes, whirlwinds of arpeggios, thunderous quadruple octaves, evocations of Balinese gamelan (he wrote the piece in Indonesia), and most of all, a continual Ivesian blurring of harmony into bi- and even tritonality. Only occasionally did the theme emerge from the chaos of chromaticism, appearing like those vistas that suddenly justify an arduous hike through canyonlands.

For all its thematic murkiness, *Lonesome Road* was at every step gesturally clear and surefooted in its transitions. Some variations were delicate, a couple sentimental, and the final one heartbreaking. American vernaculars like blues and jazz rumbled beneath the surface, an undercurrent not always divined by the Swiss pianists who are touring the work and offered this American premiere. Thomas Bächli played the first 17 variations with a dry, crisp ferocity, and Martin Christ (who plans to learn the entire set) was powerfully colorful in the last 17. Urs Egli, entrusted with the middle 40 minutes, lacked the passion of the other two; chugging through with eyes glued to the score, he smothered some delicious blues passages. The work may never rival *The People United* in popularity, nor be taken up by any but the most idealistic pianists. But if less flashy or formally lucid than Rzewski's masterpiece, it was subtler and more soulful, gutsy rather than brainy. No work this masterfully written will be denied its place in the repertoire.

Petr Kotik's achievement April 2 at Willow Place Auditorium was equally impressive for different reasons. First, conductor Herman Gersten led Kotik's *Exercise*, a construction of thickly dissonant chords and single notes. It was an aggressive performance, with only an occasional cracked attack betraying to the ear that the performers were fourth and fifth graders, members of the Louis Marshall School Band. Next, the Midwood High School Symphony Orchestra, supplemented by Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble, played his Variations for two orchestras and trumpets. Gersten and Jules Hirsch directed the orchestras on either side as Kotik led the trumpets in the middle. In austere, thorny sonorities, like Carl Ruggles shorn of all the emotional ups and downs, those trumpets blared out Kotik's characteristic chant-like lines in parallel fifths against sustained chords in the orchestras.

For several years now Kotik has been teaching contemporary music to groups of Brooklyn students—to initiate not only them but incidentally their parents as well. (I seemed to be the only audience member unconnected to the school or students.) Complex though they were, the works were well geared to the capacities of teenage performers. Student Lisa Bueno confidently conducted another version of Kotik's *Exercise* that violinist Leroy Jenkins turned into a concerto by adding a soaring solo part. Other soloists played works by high school composers David Miller and David Gordon. In John Cage's Concert for Two Orchestras, the young brass players were refreshingly enthusiastic about their sforzandos, although one giggling trumpeter ripped paper to make noises not suggested by Cage's score. It proves that even the best-directed Brooklyn teenagers can descend to the same bestial level of irresponsibility as the New York Philharmonic.

Phil Kline, taking his music out to a different public, led 30 boom box–carrying volunteers through three floors of the Whitney Museum on April 7. Where Kline's *Carol*, the ambulatory sound sculpture he leads through the East Village each Christmas, is silvery and pretty, this work—*To Be Heard on the Water*, although it wasn't—was darker, artsier. A dense, Brucknerian opening chord gave way to urgently repeated plucked minor harmonies, a forest of marimba clicks, an energetic Russian-sounding dance, all crashing after 40 minutes into an ethereal string chord from which something like a horn call intoned its final, fateful notes. The echoing melodies, identical but out of phase due to discrepancies in boom box speed, created rhythmic patterns of geometric intricacy as the group fanned out among the galleries. Quite a coup; Kline brought musicians like me to see the Biennial, introduced a captive audience of visual art fans to the newest music, and created, in an art museum, a Symphony Descending a Staircase. ■

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Team and variations: Polansky and his three pianists