

THE VIOLA AND THE BUTCHERS

ALBUM FALLING INTO PLACE



at
Ballroom
May,
21st



THAT POP THIS GOOD COMES ALONG."

— CMJ WEEKLY

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MUSIC

Two Buildings, One Work

GOD IS NOT IN THE DETAILS

BY KYLE GANN

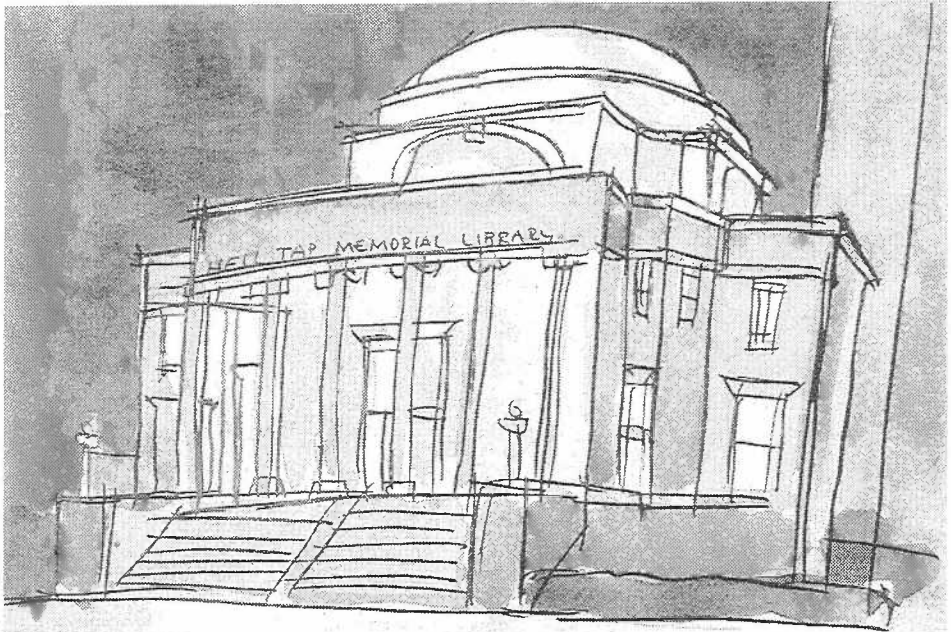
CARBON COPY BUILDING

The Kitchen October 2

Carbon Copy Building was a bold bid for a new music-theater paradigm at a time when we need bold new bids. First of all, it was visual art-driven, rather than text-driven or music-driven; second, it was a collaboration by three different composers with a cartoonist/librettist. The second risk was the one that I feared would fall flat; instead, it was the one that worked. Composers Julia Wolfe, David Lang, and Michael Gordon, who've been in bed together for 12 years as curators of the Bang on a Can festival, each wrote different sections of the opera, and kept their contributions so simple, so pared down in style, that they blended beautifully. No first-time listener could have divined that the selections weren't all by the same composer. And if you like the work of cartoonist Ben Katchor, you may think the first risk paid off, too.

something they participate in as an afterthought. Partly as a result, perhaps, much of the text was set in flat, rhythmically uninflected lines of steady quarter- or eighth-notes, unmemorably chanted with no attempt to make the words striking. This puritanical avoidance of anything resembling an aria or even melody, too, is a common recent trend—John Adams's *Klinghoffer* is similarly devoid of musically supported verbal images—and gives the impression that the composers are determined to avoid at all cost any sins of commission, no matter what sins of omission result.

Aside from that, Gordon, Lang, and Wolfe found between them an intriguingly workable theatrical concept and a musical style idiom light, unobstrusive, ostinato-based, and just the right density for theater. The music, performed by Martin Goldray on sampler, David Cossin on percussion, Bohdan Hilash on clarinets, and John Benthalk on electric guitar, was so note-perfect that I incorrectly assumed the



A BEN KATCHOR BACKDROP FOR *CARBON COPY BUILDING*

Unfortunately, I don't. I read his cartoon *Julius Knipfl, Real Estate Photographer* when this paper started running it, and while I appreciate his obsessive feel for the grimy details of the New York environment, I found those details ultimately noncumulative, a treacherous substitute for emotion, meaning, or linear narrative. Same with *Carbon Copy Building*. Visually, the opera was rather enchanting. The story, insofar as there was one, concerned two buildings several blocks from each other built according to identical plans. One, the Palatine on Park Manure Avenue, was host to an opulent range of professionals; the other, the Palaver in the "bent spoon district," had become seedy, run-down, operated by unscrupulous managers, and tenanted by ne'er-do-wells. Katchor's stylishly modest drawings of the buildings and their tenants were projected on a scrim behind which the singers sang.

The words were projected as well, which is a problematic trend in recent opera. Some of the lines were cute; the audience would get the joke, wait politely for the singer to sing the line they'd already read, and then laugh. I find that disturbing, and it relieves the composers from having to set the lyrics (and the singers from having to sing them) in an intelligible way. The drama becomes divorced from the actors,

accompaniment had been taped. The vocal cast, too, was interestingly chosen—virtuoso jazz improviser Theo Bleckmann, composer-singer Toby Twining, along with Katie Geissinger and Tony Boutté. They sang with wit and conviction, and were directed by Bob McGrath to much more charming visual effect than in Gordon's opera *Chaos* of last season. I'd love to see a new work based on similar premises. . . . but with a more compelling story line. Katchor proceeded, as in his comics, through numbing multiplication of details. In the Palatine Building, for example, the Ichor Foundation looked through projects to fund: "The Half-Closed Fly in 16th-Century Italian Painting," "The Architecture of Frozen Custard: A Photographic Study." Companies in the Palaver Building included "Solomon Gurak, Bonded Coin Bank Breaker," and "Botviak Chinchilla Feed, Equipment, and Supplies." Cute stuff, but extended at length it became formulaic, and the mass of detail never compensated for the absence of any emotional center. Katchor wins cartooning awards, so he must have fans (though, when you think about it, there are plenty of famous composers around whose music no one likes). But I do hope there's no one out there thinking things like, "Hmmm . . . it doesn't work as a cartoon, let's try it as an opera." ▮

BEN KATCHOR