

New Music From Japan

Godzilla Loves 4/4

BY KYLE GANN

In 1971 recent German music stopped flowing into America as abruptly as if a spigot had been turned off. In the early '80s French music flurried through, and now we are suddenly deluged with new art from Japan. Among non-Western musical cultures, Japan's has always been coincidentally the closest to ours: they too have had their trobadores, their counterpoint, their classical 18th- and 19th-century masters. The September 22 to 27 concert series "New Music From Japan," curated for the Kitchen by downtown omnivore John Zorn, portrayed a society at least as pluralistic as ours, and one whose lines of division are probably more sharply drawn. The Thursday night concert, devoted to new ways of exploring traditional music, gave three stunning examples of updating a tradition; Wednesday's performance art offered a more disturbing picture of American influences run amok.

First, Sato Michihiro, a longtime Zorn colleague, made a fierce attack on the *shamisen*, a three-stringed lute, banjolike in its resonance and intensity. A few decades old, this *shamisen* style has only recently emerged from its urban-whorehouse origins. Generating an endless, protominimalist melody from repeating motives, Sato roamed through a lush range of articulations. By striking the strings and soundboard with a large pick he could, by turns, make the timbre delicate or sharply percussive, and by nuancing his melody with slurs and staccato attacks he had the excitement of good rock guitar. This was a charming example of an *almost*-classical folk style; it existed at that magical threshold just be-

low where classical and popular impulses begin to diverge, and it gratified the mind and the senses indistinguishably and in the same breath. If technological society could sustain that unalienated state, music would be an unmixed blessing indeed.

Yamagishi Hideko's performance on the 13-string *koto* (the program described her as a master of the Yamada school) was far more subdued in mood, but no less moving. She sang in a dark, mournfully nasal tone that seemed to reverberate from ancient times, accompanying herself with confidently plucked lines. While the modal polyphony of characteristic motives in this gently picturesque drama held traditional connotations, Yamagishi explained backstage afterward that the chords and harplike effects that gave so much color to her performance were her own twists to a centuries-old but still malleable genre.

The evening's most virtuosic feat came from a 21-year-old *rokyoku* singer, Kunimoto Takeharu. Accompanied by Sato on *shamisen*, Kunimoto improvised (as I found out) a humorous, animated narra-

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tive in a half-speaking, half-singing style. In Japan this entertainment is reserved for older audiences, but Kunimoto's hip vernacular targets the young. Scattered laughter came from the Japanese speakers, who Kunimoto manipulated at will, and I later learned that his story was a pastiche of traditional situations, each one interrupted by the characters' sudden, gratuitous decision to go to New



Kotogawa Rin: turn it up, up, up

York. More impressive to me at the moment was Kunimoto's passionate, liquescent vocal delivery, similar in every respect to recent European recordings of the 12th-century Provençal trobador idiom. Hearing him demonstrate an improvisatory vocal technique that has been absent from Western music now for over five centuries was like glimpsing the birth of European culture through a Japanese lens.

A Japanese man who struck up a conversation with me at intermission deplored the fact that only a few Japanese had showed up for this traditional night. (Two evenings previous, the Kitchen had been swarmed with young Japanese seek-

ing autographs from pop singer Yano Akiko.) Zorn had a different complaint, that the older Japanese musicians in town snubbed Sato and Yamagishi simply because they have new ideas (sound familiar?). One has to wonder what a society so tradition-conscious thinks of performance artists Poppo (now a New York resident) and Kotogawa Rin, Wednesday's billing. Rin, in long black hair and pink negligee, gave a nervous, wandering, repetitive performance (his first outside Japan) in convincing drag. He began by instructing the sound technician to turn the volume (already quite loud) up, up, up, up, up, and he flaunted his considerable proficiency on guitar by playing it over his head, behind his back, etc. I stayed for 25 minutes, and when the latter 15 offered no new material, I stole out into the night for relief.

Poppo's opaque, symbolic theater piece was entitled *Sex Pistols Love Nijinsky*, but *Godzilla Meets Bambi* would have done as well. At first, his super-slow *Butoh* dance of violence and entreaty was amazing in its suspended virtuosity, while the soundtrack consisted of throbbing electronic timbres (made by an out-of-sight ensemble) whose isolation marked an intriguing transference of Japanese aesthetics to Western sounds. Then, as the dance reached motionlessness, the music burst into a deafening rock beat that flattened any further intended poetry. (Four/four meter is the West's curse on the rest of the world's music. In American Indian music, the only other tradition I've studied in depth, you can always tell how much early contact with whites a tribe had by how many of its songs are in square 4/4 phrases.) At the final climax Poppo melodramatically exposed his genitals, as though the entire point was the revelation, "Surprise! A dick!"

I suppose the purpose of this pairing of artists was to demonstrate that the Japanese are still capable of being shocked. I almost envy them. ■

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