

S.E.M., Downtown, North/South Consonance Ensembles

Group Photos

BY KYLE GANN

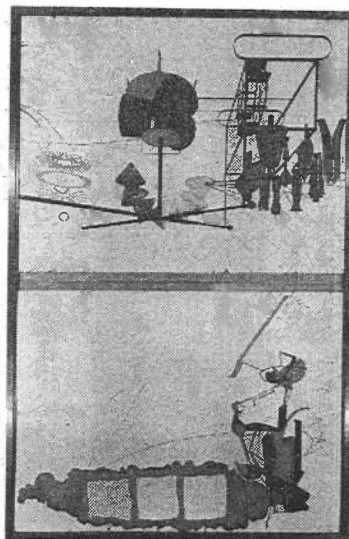
The first time I heard the S.E.M. Ensemble, in 1974 at Oberlin, they exuded the same aura they do now: a deadpan absurdness, which then induced a class clown to try to interrupt the performance by banging on the concert hall doors. It failed: the banging simply became part of the music. At the time, S.E.M. (a referentless acronym) consisted of only flutist Petr Kotik and singer Julius Eastman, intoning long, meaningless works in utter obliviousness to applause or outrage. Their single-minded attention made a lasting impression and brought to mind words from the *Tao-te Ching*: "The sage is not humane; he regards all people as straw dogs."

Though the ensemble has grown to over half a dozen players and lost Eastman (one of the great composers of our time; where is he lately?), they continue to avoid the general mellowing process that has softened the contours of the avant-garde. Their enthusiastically attended May 19 concert at the Paula Cooper Gallery of works by John Cage and Marcel Duchamp was as dry and unremitting as ever, even if their expanded instrumentation made for a prettier sound. Kotik's realization of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, made by randomly dropping balls inscribed with pitch names through a funnel, was delightfully poker-faced, flowing in aimless counterpoint with all the seriousness of a Brahms quartet. Though lower keyed, the lethargic, angu-

lar polyphony of Duchamp's *Erratum Musical* demanded—and received—astounding virtuosity from three guest singers (Dora Ohrenstein, Lois Winter, and William Lyon Lee).

Cage's *Music for Five*, in S.E.M.'s intense rendering, took on a taut drama that I had missed in the Bowery Ensemble's performance earlier this season. The group's penetration, with special thanks to Chris Nappi's fearless percussion, gave a surprising illusion of dialectical struggle and reraised questions about Cage that defy solution: namely, whether his chance music is only a Jungian "hook" for whatever projections we are likely to make anyway. Has music *ever*, he seems to ask, been more than an aural Rorschach test? Cage's concluding realization for music boxes of Duchamp's *Musical Sculpture* raised not questions but smiles.

The Downtown Ensemble I'm tempted to call the "Downhome" ensemble, for their tender, informal performance style and the intimacy of their venue at the Greenwich School. Their rough-hewn minimalism was represented in their June 5 concert by William Hellermann's *Ancient Virtues (part II)*, an inexplicably brief, '60s-pure pattern piece. Tom Johnson's *Bedtime Stories*, typically metamusical, combined Hellermann's narration with Daniel Goode's clarinet to illustrate the intersection of musical logic and everyday life: in one story, decisions about the order of household errands to be run were translated into note permu-



The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even—Duchamp

tations. The presence of a baby in the narrator's arms seemed intended as an added performance obstacle, but if so, seven-week-old Elspeth Broer-Hellermann was uncooperatively well-behaved.

The ensemble's spirit was best captured in violinist Barbara Benary's *Sun on Snow*, a set of variations on a 25-word poem readable in two directions. That the original tune set each word to one of four pitches based on its number of letters seemed an unpromising premise, but out of such simple threads Benary wove a multicolored afghan. First she sang the poem in a plaintive, untrained voice; then

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it passed around among Goode's clarinet, Hellermann's guitar, Guy Klucevsek's accordion, and James Pugliese's marimba, each variation adding a new layer of warm polyphony. Every time you assumed Benary's invention exhausted, another dazzling set of colors would quietly

burst. Rarely has the "new tonality" sounded so heartfelt.

Max Lifchitz, director of the North/South Consonance Ensemble, has a good idea—he sees New Yorkers as the most provincial audience in America, and he programs music from across the country, Florida to Washington, to cure us of our tunnel vision. He's got a point; Iowa City keeps better tabs on new music in New York than vice versa. From the scores of scores Lifchitz receives, he selects music not unlike his own: fresh, energetic, nonexperimental, naive. The funny thing is that it all sounds so provincial.

The ensemble's June 9 concert at Christ and St. Stephen's Church showcased seven works as conservative as they were pleasant. The main problem with conservative music, since its language is borrowed rather than built, is that it is infinitely extendable. Chamber works by Clare Shore, Judith Shatin Allen (both from Virginia), and Dan Locklair (North Carolina, though all three studied in New York) were charming, but I was afraid I might die waiting for each of them to end. A better-proportioned piece by Montreal composer John Rea made the concert worth attending, and reconfirmed that Canadian music is in a state of blossoming that America could well envy. Rea's music always has a good feel for sonic shape, and *Les Raisons des Forces Mouvantes* for flute (Lauren Weiss) and string quartet had a simple but electrifying opening effect: a slow, chromatic ascent in the flute with the strings tremoloing downward. Elsewhere, the piece treaded a Bartokian line between tonality and atonality by means of a chromatically displaced do-re-mi motive. This was the evening's high point, but it was typical of the clarity of thought that the other pieces expressed. You don't hear many honestly exposed ideas in big-city concerts; perhaps the provinces could make us less provincial after all. ■

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