

Heavenly Buzz

By Kyle Gann

David First

Lois V Vierk

Essential Music

Few Downtown phenomena are as quietly impressive as the single-mindedness with which David First has pursued his shimmering vision. March 18 at Merkin Hall, in First's *Jade Screen Test Dreams of Renting Wings*, that vision fell into focus. In the six years I've been following First, his music has revolved around gradual pitch-bending and rhythmic proportions, based on number ratios and tone rows several dozen notes long. A sucker for arithmetical mysticism, I love to hear the savage beats bark as his Casio tones merge, and I try to figure what relation the rhythmic patterns have to the pitch ratios. Sometimes the drones seem long or the drumming arbitrary, but over the years his pieces have become smoother and more convincing.

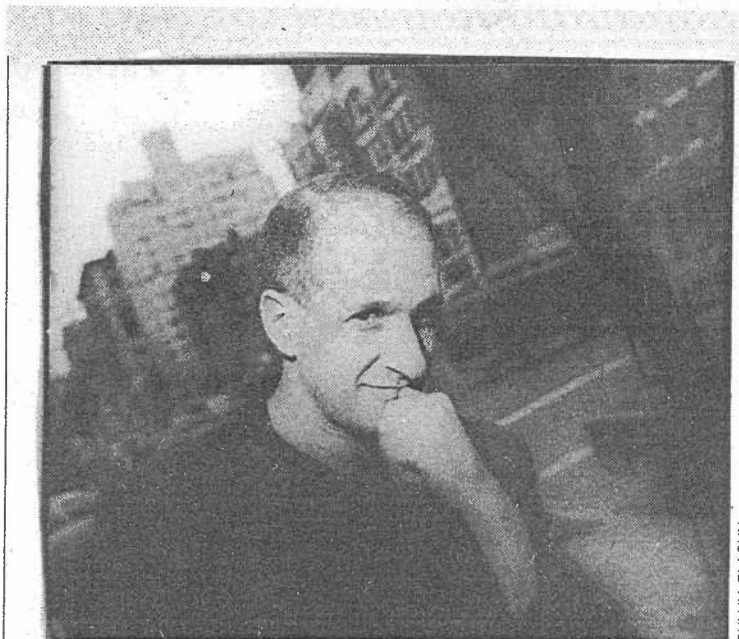
But *Jade Screen Test Dreams of Renting Wings* transcended all such issues. (The title refers to a mythical female figure who wishes she could fly.) As usual, a drummer listening to a clicktrack on headphones thumped a slow beat, and the ensemble—five guitars including First, violin, cello, English horn, and bassoon, plus two more drummers—slid through slow glissandos past tones emitted by a computer module. Then the piece took flight. The melody instru-

ments blended into a glowing, pulsing, mournful sonority, beneath which First strummed a bitter lament. Except for the drums, which eventually built quicker overlays of polyrhythms, you couldn't match up any sounds with what you saw onstage. And you didn't care. For 35 minutes, a heavenly buzz enveloped the group. Its internal structure twisted and churned almost subliminally, but its surface hovered immobile, ecstatic, a womb of writhing tones that sucked us in unprotesting.

Once the noise died into silence, a listener yelled, "Play it again!" and I bet if he had First wouldn't have lost an audience member. *Jade Screen* didn't mark a big advance over First's last few pieces, but it crossed the line past which music becomes magic; or, if you prefer, the line past which compositional technique becomes music, a threshold infrequently reached by composers of any era. It'd be fascinating to learn what pitch scheme he developed to get that effect, but part of me doesn't want to know. All those number tricks and tone rows vanished as you heard, for the first time, what they'd been aiming at for years. "Unfortunately, for most people who pursue art," said Morton Feldman, "ideas become their opium." First melted his ideas into irresistible vibrations, and gave us the spiritual thrill ideas only get in the way of. (Joy-buzzers, another First ensemble, plays *Roulette* April 17.)

Jade Screen followed three works by Lois V Vierk, most notably a brass sextet called *Jagged Mesa*, conducted by Marcia La Reau. Two antiphonal trios glissanded in and out of major triads, gradually working into a majestic chorale whose triumph was marred by a rough-edged performance. Structured around exponential curves, Vierk's works gain momentum slowly, and her ability to sustain interest in the process has become confident. She has a highly original ear, evinced by *Mesa's* deliciously squirming textures. Further example: her "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah"—a piano paraphrase of the Beatles song, in a blunt but dexterous reading by Alan Moverman—was a tremolo piece, but unlike tremolo pieces by Curran, Montague, Satoh, and everybody else and his brother, she had the good sense to halt the vibrating and let the music breathe. A final work, *Twister*, accompanied tap dancer Anita Feldman with cello and marimba. Feldman tapped charmingly on a platform that turned her steps into tones, but I had trouble fusing the music and tapping into a single process, or following them in parallel.

William Duckworth's *Gathering Together/Revolution*, premiered by Essential Music March 25 at Washington Square Church, may be the best piece he's written. Not only an infectiously joyous essay in interlocking rhythms for mallet percussion, drums, and keyboards, it's a compositional landmark: the first chance-determined postminimal moment form. Side-stepping the whole postminimal issue of linear process, Duckworth took his cue from Cage and used



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David First: melting ideas into irresistible vibrations

the *I Ching* to pick tonalities and durations (from a few beats to many measures) for the 93 mini-sections into which the piece is divided. And yet, nothing about the work sounded random. Duckworth's characteristic jazz-inflected modal melodies clipped along with the easy charm of early Terry Riley improvis, darting at sharp angles that always seemed intuitively right.

One written for Italy's Ars Ludi ensemble, the other for Essential Music, *Gathering Together* and *Revolution* were separated by only a split second. The juncture came when the percussionists switched to drums, the synth players switched to piano, and all those boppy melodies you'd just heard turned into intricate, ever-shifting noise patterns. As fun as it was innovative, *Gathering Together/Revolution* seemed poised to zip into the maw of the ever-ravenous

percussion repertoire.

Brushing and hitting four sets of gongs, Essential Music also played Robert Ashley's *Revised, Finally* (April, 1961–April, 1973), *For Gordon Mumma*, an attractive but impersonal early conceptual work. And in Sorrel Hays's *Dreaming the World*, written for baritone Thomas Buckner, pianist Joseph Kubera, and EM's core percussionists, they got whirring sounds by twirling large buttons against metal plates and bells. Hays's layering of soft noises over curvaceous melodies and ostinatos creates evocative atmospheres in her electronic music, but here the layers clashed rather than floated, and Buckner's melismas were drowned out by the explosive percussion. More performance finesse than this premiere could afford may bring the work's recalcitrant charm to the surface.

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