

It was reassuringly familiar, albeit a sight we hadn't seen in a few years: Glenn Branca dancing uninhibitedly with his guitar, leading nine other guitarists and a drummer. As the closing act of the Bang on a Can Festival on May 13, the sounds were familiar, too: a thundering strum of overtones, grouped into five movements of his Symphony No. 6, aptly subtitled *Devil Choirs at the Gates of Heaven*. If Branca's changed any while working in Berlin on a DAAD commission, it may be that his strums are less loud than they once were, or else the R.A.P.P. Arts Center absorbed them more generously than the Mudd Club did when I saw him there in 1981; in any case, I hardly used the \$1.59 Mack's "pillow-soft" earplugs I bought for the occasion.

Here's a capsule nasty review, echoing some I overheard after the concert: Branca's a Johnny One-Note, this Symphony No. 6 is just *The Ascension* or *Gloria* (Third Symphony) warmed over. If you came to hear a new phase in his career, you left disappointed. He's only got two licks, *strum, strum, strum, strum*, and *DAdaDAdaDAda*, and that habit of "conducting" with his feet is East Village show biz. In 1989, he's still running up and down the harmonic series with the same old instruments, trying to resell ideas that made him famous 10 years ago.

As far as it goes, it's true. So: Why did I love listening to *Devil Choirs*? Why did it do things for me his music had never done before?

First of all, discount the dance, the volume, the attitude. It's all window dressing, the piece of meat brought along to keep the dog quiet. Branca realizes as well as Stravinsky did and Boulez does (*Repons* proved it) just how much theatrical chicanery it takes to drive a complex idea into an audience's mind. That bit of knowledge is what separates the justly celebrated artist from the sincere one you've never heard of. (Branca majored

Glenn Branca

Heavy Metal Thunder

BY KYLE GANN

in theater in college.) I'm glad to see a composer invent his own extroverted conducting method as long as it works, and Branca went wild without losing control, his hand signals reining a tight performance.

Secondly, differences between *Devil Choirs* and Branca's earlier work seemed

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minor at first hearing, but they're decisive, right on the surface, and they increase with each laser read. (I'm listening to the piece on its Blast First CD release.) His experimentation with upper overtones in Symphony No. 3 has paid off, so that in terms of gradations of dissonance, *Devil Choirs* is his richest, most colorful piece I've heard (wish I had symphonies 4 and 5 for comparison). The movements are sharply and symphonically differentiated, from the second movement's overtone climb, to the third's unmitigated dissonance, to the fourth's repetitive, scherzolike melodies (this movement was omitted at Bang on a Can, though it improves the piece's shape). The final movement, reminiscent of his *The Spectacular Commodity*, is a full-fledged, harmonically defined climax, crashing overtone clusters into gorgeous consonances with the excitement of any stretto to a Beethoven finale.

Guitars or not, this is the most classical music around. By grinding unequally dissonant blocks of harmony together, Branca distills what the symphony is really about, the clash of tonalities. The only romantic who made that admission



DOROTHY LOW

The nasty reviews are wrong.

explicit was Bruckner, another one-noter for those who don't appreciate that note's magnificence. Bruckner's melodies can be such flimsy pretexts for his chord battles that, in a postminimalist era, Branca's replacement of them with *DAdaDAda* scans perfectly. When Branca calls these pieces symphonies, he's not being grandiose or ironic. He's claiming a title he's done more to earn than any other recent composer.

In *Devil Choirs* Branca compensates for his lack of melody with the varying density of his sounds, the layers of higher harmonics that thicken and resolve over and over with a self-assured logic. Note-to-note there's little to listen to, but if you can appreciate the underlying, large-scale voice leading in Brahms, you can be fascinated here on the same level. Too, Branca's return to the harmonic series

restores a tonal truth that romanticism's equal-tempered, triadic harmony always had to fudge. (Some say the lie of equal temperament caused the symphony's slow suicide.) As also with Bruckner, spirituality, not spectacle, is the issue here, and if you think I'm overreading him, remember Branca dedicated his Third Symphony to the mystic/composer/astrologer/philosopher Dane Rudhyar.

What I *could* wish for in the midst of Branca's impressive thunder is more lightning. Every now and then he shines a beam into his structure for a glimpse of it, such as when he ends the second movement with a brief, delicate electric monochord solo that hints at the piece's tuning basis. More moments like that could make the music not only viscerally compelling but brilliantly intelligible; even as it is, the repeated hearings it begs for help tremendously. Its harmonic directionality sounds confident but, depending as it does on upper frequencies, was difficult to read with R.A.P.P.'s muffled acoustics; on the CD it's far clearer, and my ears are becoming accustomed to its logic.

Bang on a Can, with its usual super-smart programming instincts, preceded Branca with works audibly influenced by his brand of artrock, but whose diverging aesthetics aren't yet as well integrated. *Requiem for the Fallen* by David Rosenbloom, one of Branca's former guitarists, was a lugubrious and enigmatically short dirge of simple drum patterns and droning voices. The Michael Gordon Philharmonic played Gordon's *Four Kings Fight Five*, a repetitive, Stravinskian array of angular melodies that reminded me of the highly structured artrock we used to hear from Jeffrey Lohn. But the piece that grabbed me despite my initial objections, that still rang in my mind (not my ears, thankfully) the following morning, was the purest of the three, its demonic noise so verging on heavenliness that Branca's Seventh may go right over the edge. ■

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