

Hobos and Hurricanes

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

Last week I did a rundown on the Bang on a Can festival. Here are some specific highlights:

Michael Maguire: For me, the mind-boggling, undecipherable high point of the '89 fest was Maguire's *Seven Years*. This year, his *Discipline, Obedience, and Submission* was subtler, more varied, and equally weird. A raucous noise-tape blasted through the speakers, and over it, following a click-track on headphones, the Relache ensemble jerked around jazz fragments in automated unison. *Seven Years* had drowned out its instruments, but here the woodwinds and keyboards outlined the structure like bright oil paint on a chaotic charcoal background. Everything would bop along slowly, then at an unheard signal suddenly speed up, then thin down and mellow out. Maguire's from Vancouver via Eastman, but this was the music Downtown's been pointing to for 10 years: a fusion of vernacular and anarchy, jazz and noise, with none of the back-references to '60s structuring props that make so much New York noise formally retro. It sounded like a drunken jazz concert on a ship in a hurri-

cane, frozen in surreal slo-mo, and its closing Boris Badenov quote taped from *Bullwinkle* made the perfect non sequitur ending.

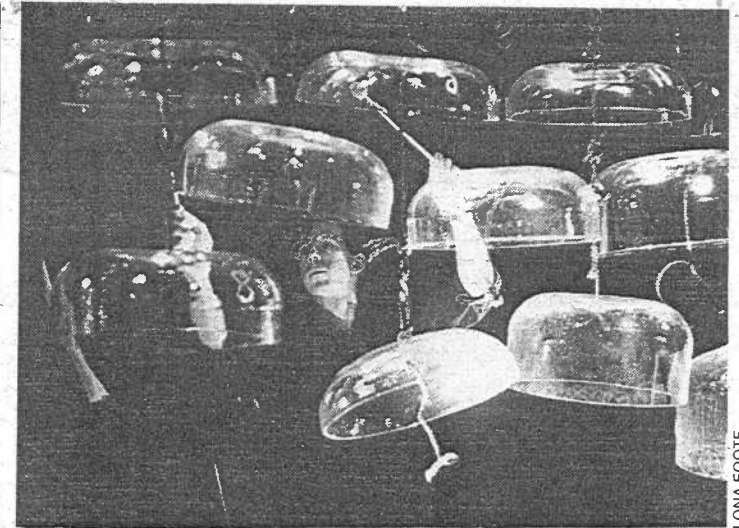
Robert Ashley: Before the concert, I asked Ashley whether he was performing in the piece he wrote for Relache. Ashley, more of a combiner of other people's talents into innovative multimedia works than a note-composer, looked apologetic and shrugged: "They asked me to write them a piece, so I did it." As its title wryly suggested, *Outcome Inevitable* sounded a lot like the music "Blue" Gene Tyranny provides for Ashley's operas: soft, languid seventh chords floating along beneath a repeated guitar note, underlaid with subliminal bass and drums. Each ensemble player had his/her own solo, like characters in an opera, and the hallucinogenic mood enclosed your mind in its own world. A drug-suggestive *Scheherazade* for the '90s, *Outcome* was no major discovery, but a revealing off-guard glimpse into the mind of one of our most far-out conceptualists.

Glenn Branca: When I heard that BOAC had commissioned a string quartet from this high-decibel guitar-banger, I imagined the demure Cassatt Quartet walking onstage,

bracing violins on their pelvises, and letting go with an enormously amplified TWANNNGG! That didn't happen. Instead, they bounced diatonic motives back and forth with a momentum as gentle as Lou Harrison, or the eccentric quartet attributed to Benjamin Franklin. The counterpoint was textbook-smooth, and the engaging textural flow continued for 25 minutes using only (my count) eight pitches, with neither modulation nor a single structural articulation aside from one rather arbitrary break between movements.

Put any name on the program besides Branca, and I would have heard the piece very differently. But Branca's derivation of huge, arched structures from the overtones of a single pitch wouldn't have jived with the ebb and flow of "normal" quartet writing, and this prolongation of a single scale was an even more imaginative solution than expected from him. Chalk Branca's Quartet No. 1 up to shrewd calculation or uneducated naiveté as you prefer, but I loved it.

José Evangelista: These days, lots of people jumble what they understand as Balinese gamelan structures into their otherwise slapdash music. But Evangelista's *O Bali*, played by Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, began with what sounded like a Balinese flute melody, then carefully threaded that melody like a tone row through a charming moto perpetuo of strings, piano, and vibes. Here was a very Western piece willing to learn from the East, without pretending to cross any boundaries it hadn't been invited to cross.



Cloud chamber bowls for Harry Partch's *The Wayward*

LONA FOOTE

Newband: No music happening in America today is more culturally crucial than what Dean Drummond's Newband ensemble is doing to recreate, restore, and preserve Harry Partch's theater works; by comparison, Lincoln Center's Mozart bicentennial is a mammoth, self-indulgent game of Trivial Pursuit. Not only does Newband play with a meticulous fidelity and a physicality Partch would have loved, Drummond is gradually duplicating Partch's one-of-a-kind instruments, and the group explores dramatic possibilities with a devotion that, like Partch, isn't afraid to go off the deep end. Their performances at Circle in the Square of *The Wayward* (redubbed Henry Partch's *The Wanderer* on the theater's answering machine) went over that end a couple times, but big deal. Perry Arthur Kroeger's costumes (masks enlarging the top halves of their heads) were good caricatures, and tall, lanky, Wilbur Pau-

ley was the Partch performer par excellence. Pauley's rough, poignant intonation was so close to Partch's own on the recordings (except that Pauley was sober), I was convinced he had listened to them carefully.

The spectacle was only marred by the dramatic direction of the well-touted Tom O'Horgan, for in *Barstow* and *U.S. Highball* the bums' repetitious prancing interfered with musical clarity. Even worse was the crude way in which the characterization of hobos as feckless clowns from the picturesque past dissonated with the world outside the theater. On my way there I'd turned down two beggars for handouts, and Partch's indigents made me wonder what kind of saint in disguise I'd said no to. The bitter truths that Partch mixed into his rhythmic chants will live long after Madonna and Zubin Mehta are forgotten—partly thanks to Newband's loving efforts. ■

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