

# Homebodies

By Kyle Gann

First Avenue

It must be inherent in this job to grow impatient with the new music scene's insularity. I arrived impatient. Nonelitism is the heart of my vision of Downtown, and communicativeness is my second favorite virtue, after originality. I presuppose that the scene is merely a breeding ground from which the next Laurie Andersons and Steve Reichs will emerge to find a mass audience. If there's any hope that serious music will ever again capture the public imagination as the symphony and novel did in the 19th century, and as movies do today, it's a Downtown hope. Therefore I imagine that everyone aspires to the career of Philip Glass, the most communicatively successful composer of our era.

But they don't, of course. If the new music scene is only a thousandth as big as the classical music business, it is astonishingly more heterogeneous. Because there is no career path available aside from the academic one, new music's house contains almost as many strategies as composers. Some, such as the Bang on a Can curators, crash through its front door with a momentum calculated to carry them quickly through and out the back, where richer pleasures presumably await. Others—for example, Elodie Lauten, Mikel Rouse, Glenn Branca—gingerly skirt the fence outside, avoiding

contamination by the scene's perennially picayune ambitions. Still others walk in, unpack their bags, and settle down, never to emerge. Then there are a few like me, who harangue the scene with pep talks and urge its occupants to add several stories and a few new wings to a structure that, truth be told, may never bear the weight.

Those who don't struggle to emerge are difficult to review. They are often solid musicians, but hard to explain to outsiders. Even when I like their music, I can't say to my nonmusician friends, "You've gotta hear this guy, he's great!" Thus my ambivalence about the First Avenue multi-instrumental improvisation trio, who performed December 1 at Washington Square Church. The beauty of their improvisations is often patent, but rarely so striking or simply delineated that it would win over hundreds of listeners at a stroke. They practice a classical style of improv more widespread in the '70s than now, a style whose reliance on careful sculpting of texture rather than audience-wowing virtuosity makes me think rather more of their musicianship than less. And yet, just after they break through to a more accessible level of music making, they'll slip back into an old-fashioned, noise-banging randomness that seems calculated for only local consumption.

In this concert, an archetypal First Avenue conception began to emerge. Oboist Matt Sullivan occupied the foreground often on

English horn, exploiting the instrument's exoticism with such restraint that the underlying clichéd associations never quite rose to consciousness. William Kannar sculpted the background, either on bass or electronics. And twice, in *Another Opening and Improv 72.8653*, keyboardist C. Bryan Rulon framed the improv by switching from synthesizers to piano. In each case, the music's amorphously atonal yet gently streaked cloud of timbres evaporated into tonal, comforting piano arpeggios, an image of sadness emerging from confusion.

First Avenue muddied the stylistic waters by collaborating with Ben Neill, inventor and player of the computer-wired Mutantrumpet. Neill's cleanly geometric computer structures contrasted with the trio's open-ended tonal blurs about the way the '90s contrast with the '70s: less full of possibility, but more focused and determined. First Avenue's clouds of sound floated amiably inside the electronic grid of Neill's *Inimitably 7*, for he has a good imagination for structure, they for textural detail. Their attempt to switch roles, however, reduced Neill to tapping his Mutantrumpet with a stick, a ridiculous parody of the instrument's high-tech resources.

In *Are You There*, an homage to the late artist Layman Foster, whose paintings adorned the space, the group's improvisations MIDI-triggered video images of the players that jerked jumpy between different poses like a film being zipped forward and backward. The video component, exploited without much effort as an artistic statement, was so entertaining that I couldn't afterward recall what the music was like.



Improvisation trio First Avenue

BECKET LOGAN

In yet other works, such as *Improv 27.5*, the trio gave rein to squeaks on the oboe and bleeps in the electronics, as Rulon swung rapidly between instruments, playing random notes here and there. There's a small audience for this kind of squeakfart music in New York, consisting primarily of the people who make it, a situation that mirrors Uptown's 12-tone cult. To be capable of such moments of atmospheric clarity as First Avenue is, and then to make this kind of music instead, signals to me a smallness of ambition, a contentment to live within the new music scene's narrow confines and tiny, specialist audiences. When a nonmusician hears a Boulez sonata and scoffs, "My kid could play that!" I can defend Boulez from the charge (unless the comment came from Maurizio Pollini's father), but I can't defend

this kind of hit-anything improv from it. I'm not sure my kid couldn't play it.

After all, in a sane music scene it would be against the law to blow into a wind instrument without its mouthpiece. I mean it. The police should be able to burst in and haul away anyone caught doing it. In the '60s it was crucial to leave nothing unexplored. But making wind sounds in the body of an oboe or clarinet is one of those things of which, after the third attempt, someone should have had the presence of mind to say, "That sounds stupid. Let's not do it anymore." Unfortunately, however, no innovation is ever so devoid of significance that it is allowed to die. That's another problem with the new music scene. It's cluttered. The people who live there never throw anything away. ■

# VERDICT

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