Hot Tub Angst

By Kyle Gann

Morton Subotnick
Maria de Alvear

Expressionism in music began as the nightmare of a woman who may or may not have murdered her lover. In *Erwartung* (1909) Schoenberg assembled the whole toolbox of modernism—disconnected motives, dissonance, atonality, angular vocal lines, constant changes of tempo, and textures whose detailed asymmetry defied memory—in order to recreate the *angsttraum* of his tortured protagonist. After *Erwartung*, though, "the emancipation of the dissonance" became the trivialization of modernism's signifiers. Fragmentation and asymmetry, freed from their original referents, were systematized into a new vocabulary. In tens of thousands of works by American professors, all those dissonant vocal leaps and wildly fragmented lines have come to connote (assuming they express anything at all) nothing more harrowing than the angst of tenure review, or, once past that hurdle, the repetitive anxiety of seducing one's students.

So along comes the Holocaust, an event more than worthy of Schoenberg's razor-edged nightmare technique. But how—now that the most horrific clash of blaring trumpet clusters is explainable as the intersection of passionless pitch systems—how do you express the Holocaust in sounds? You might as well try to capture the horror of the gas chambers in needlepoint as in today's innocuous modernist vocabulary. That's the historical problem Morton Subotnick went up against in his *Jacob's Room* at the Kitchen November 4 through 7. The video monodrama took place within the mind of a Holocaust survivor never seen, only heard as the voice of baritone Tom Buckner, electronically displaced around the room. Soprano Joan La Barbara was his doomed mother, forcing him to confront his family's fate.

Such an expressionistic scenario seemed a brave but odd choice for Subotnick, whose pioneering synthesizer works certainly contributed to the cool objectivity of the electronic language. The delicacy of texture that made *Sidewinder* and *4 Butterflies* atypically subtle for the late '60s brought a thin, tenuous musical continuity to *Jacob's Room*. From La Barbara's words one could tentatively piece together a broken narrative: "My Father in whom I do not believe," she prayed, "Thou knowest precisely what Thou hast done." Occasionally, the music gained a fragile momentum. Playing cello onstage, Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick would enter into counterpoint with the electronics in modal, repeated-note melodies. In Subotnick's electrically gorgeous *The Key to Songs*, such melodies expressed an energetic, angry mournfulness. Here, with Jacob in denial, it was difficult to sense what they referred to.

The extent to which *Jacob's Room* did work was due to the video images, projected on three large screens, by Steina and Woody Vasulka (founding directors of the Kitchen). At the beginning, a wrinkled, gray mass on the middle of three screens suddenly opened to reveal itself as La Barbara's eye, uncomfortably close and absurdly magnified. Filtered and accelerated images of faceless pedestrians gave a picture of a world grown unfamiliar, and a Kafka-esque sense of alienation that the music's splintered counterpoint could no longer achieve. La Barbara's tormented performance, directed by Herbert Blau and impressive in its vocal artistry, kept bringing *Erwartung* to mind, but the electronics suggested that this *Erwartung* had chilled out a few decades in a Santa Fe hot tub. That's not Subotnick's fault. Ironically, after generations of composers turned angst into music's standard classroom technique, angst is now the one emotion music is powerless to express.

Morton Feldman–like elements in Maria de Alvear's music include length and the absence of synactic momentum. That's not much; the day may soon come when one could discuss the music of this Cologne-based Spanish composer without mentioning Feldman. But de Alvear's *. . . to the north tree*, performed October 29 at the Kitchen by Hildegaard Kleeb and Roland Dahlingen in a heroic feat of concentration, is surely the first hour-long work for trombone and piano, an achievement that only Feldman could have previously envisioned. The piece's sense of ritual was visually reinforced: rocks and roots lay in circles on the stage floor, among watercolor paintings in blue and brown, suspended branches overhead, and strings leading from the perimeter of the piano to the ceiling.

ALEX FORMAN

Room with no view: Confronting fate in *Jacob's Room*

Vaguely based on Finnish epics, *. . . to the north tree* had no linear thrust from moment to moment, but rather than obsess monomotivically as Feldman's music does, it indulged in large-scale shifts of atmosphere. Motives would bounce around in the piano; there was a little John Adams section of sprightly keyboard patterns, Kleeb banged stately forearm clusters beneath Dahlingen's trombone blats, and a pointillism of consonant notes would give way to bursts of tonal melody. So slowly did these changes arrive, though, that listening was like hiking through a tough wilderness of varied terrain. Inevitably, the trombone, with its long, introverted notes and fragile gestures, became the subjectivity the ear identified with, while the piano's varied sonorities turned into a now desert, now alpine landscape. And, as a final metaphor, Dahlingen relocated further and further away from the piano in the closing moments.

. . . to the north tree was more structurally varied than de Alvear's one recorded piece, *En Amor Duro* (hat ART) for piano, but both are beautiful works of monumental spirituality. During this concert, the Kitchen had scheduled a theater event upstairs, the noise of which intruded on de Alvear's music at several points. But as I left with a friend, we remarked on how refreshing it was to finally hear, at that old noise-box the Kitchen, a piece of music so quiet and thoughtful that it was capable of being interrupted. ■