

The avant-garde may not remember where it was when Kennedy got shot, but it was in Ann Arbor. The names—Ashley, Mumma, Reynolds, Caccioppo—have gone to the coasts or a better world, but the legendary multimedia ONCE festivals still resonate (and are being resuscitated in revival). From Ann Arbor the taproot was transplanted to Urbana (Johnston, Martirano, Brun, Hiller, even Cage and Xenakis), with offshoots at Oberlin and Iowa City. In the early '70s the midwest opened a west coast branch at the U. of Cal., San Diego, with increasing competition from the hot scene at SUNY at Buffalo. All of these were, and to an extent still are, places where the words "academic" and "music" don't grate when rubbed together, and where academic freedom means "try everything." Glass and Reich recentered attention on New York just as the Midwest was losing steam, but for over a decade the national center of musical experimentation lay along Interstate 80.

It's partly, I think, because midwest composers weren't on hand, as Babbitt was, to greet Schoenberg when he arrived in New York. Consequently, rather than the Schoenbergian influence (diluted by Sessions) that New York composers absorbed in bucketfuls, the Midwest took its cues from Webern and the Darmstadt crowd: a milieu that insisted on rigor, yet inspired a freewheeling conceptualism. (Oddly, Webern's effect on America was to open up possibilities; Schoenberg's was to intimidate and restrict.) Rather than worship or reject 12-tone theology—the choice we have here—the best midwest composers *generalized* it, throwing away the letter and turning the spirit into multimedia, improv, even jazz.

This intrepid experimentalism, grounded in a technique that can be taken for granted, was what made Salvatore Martirano's October 12 concert at Roulette so exciting intellectually, sensually, and musically. Martirano was one reason

Salvatore Martirano

I-80 Avant-Garde

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for the University of Illinois's luster in the '60s, but while he's been with the school for 24 years, he's no academic; 12-tone vestiges survive in his music, but fused with the spirits of jazz and theater. That so important a composer would appear in New York at Roulette was a fitting homage, for Roulette, the point of legitimate entry into the New York music



Martirano: Life can be so rude.

scene, is itself an Urbana transplant.

The concert opener evinced both the technique and the excitement. *Sampler: everything goes when the whistle blows*, for violin and tape, bore a typically whimsical Martirano title, and was intended (the composer said) to suggest "how rude life can be." This was a rugged contest between instrument and machine,

dramatized by the passionate, expert playing of violinist Dorothy Martirano (the composer's wife). Violin and computerized klangs ran circles around each other with fuguelike vigor, and the violinist endured a series of jarring interruptions from the machine, which seemed determined to break her spirit. The attempt failed, and they ended together on a last, mournful octave.

Martirano's theater piece *L's G.A.* (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) for film projectors, tape, "helium bomb, and gas-

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masked politico," is the Midwest's *Le Sacre*. Martirano revived a fraction of its chutzpah with a three-monitor video version called *L's G.A. Update*: a perfect title, because it was to the original what the '80s are to the '60s, smaller and less shocking. Sonically, the work's rocket roars, elephant squeals, and reinterpretation of Lincoln's words in an exaggerated JFK voice made a mosaic of '60s protest. Visually, the images were vitiated by miniaturization: it was difficult to see the toy tanks moving on a nude woman's body, and the distorted images of TV newscasters were more cute than troubling. But the piece's concluding Muzak, painting a postholocaust world in which Reaganesque spokesmen still insist nothing is wrong, was as chilling as ever.

Dorothy Martirano played another work with tape by North Texas State's Larry Austin. *Montage* was free of the Cagean conceptualism that marks Aus-

tin's more expansive works: the violin began with soulful two-note motives, the computer tape responding with pensive near-tonality. In most such pieces, the instrumentalist holds everything together while the electronics run wild, but here the case was refreshingly opposite: Martirano's impassioned doublestops feigned impatience with the tape's stately sostenuto counterpoint. I don't think of Austin as an emotionally affective composer, but *Montage* was one of the most moving instrument-and-tape pieces I've heard.

S. Martirano's *Robot* was the evening's virtuosic and conceptual climax. The core of *Robot* is a computer program (Martirano calls it "artificial stupidity") designed to improvise on materials fed into the computer by the two Martiranos on violin and DX-7. At first, like a sleeping giant woken only with difficulty, the computer played in unison with the violin, adding buzzes and cymbals to each note. Gradually it began to create its own contrapuntal lines, reacting with complex canons that reminded me of Dufay's points of imitation: each DX-7 motive echoed in various configurations, then gave away to another. Finally the machine was so full of information that the duo paused to let it play itself out, and, as they watched, it erupted in a furious coda of crashing chords, a spontaneous, computerized *Eroica*.

The generalization of the principles of *Sampler* needed to create *Robot's* cogent improv revealed a breathtaking quality of compositional thought. That such thought is less celebrated in prestigious music circles than that of Babbitt and Wuorinen seems to indicate geographical prejudice as well as a disparity in self-promotional talent. (Martirano's wife relates that she found an unopened letter, dated eight years before, inviting him to write a tape piece for the opening of Lincoln Center.) Whatever the case, this concert was an overdue New York reminder that Sal Martirano is one of our most astonishing composers. ■