

Ideas in the Raw

By Kyle Gann

Larry Polansky
David First

For years Larry Polansky has had a reputation as a composer likely to make a big noise. The first few times I heard him, though, his music left me cold. The ideas were intriguing, the results flat. Then on his new CD last summer, *The Theory of Impossible Melody* (Artifact), the ideas sprang to life. A former James Tenney student, Polansky continues the Cowell-Nancarrow-Tenney experimental tradition more directly than any other young composer; his rational pitch/tempo structures trace back to *New Musical Resources*. Like his predecessors, Polansky often writes pieces "just to see what would happen, if..."—that's the experimental attitude—and those pieces sometimes misfire. Also like them, his ideas are so potent that when they do make their way into the sounds, they carve out a new perceptual space.

Polansky's instrumental pieces expound the logic of overtone and tempo systems, while his computer works, three of which he played at Experimental Intermedia December 13, explore new internal logics for music of the 21st century. Like others, he seduces the computer into improvisation, and in 1991 the state of that art is still pretty limited. The box makes up its own riffs about the way Samuel Johnson said a dog walks on its hind legs: "It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done

at all." Generally, computer improves only entertain those who recognize what software barriers have been surmounted. That limitation applied to a new Polansky work, titled *There is more headroom, but one's feet are forced into slippers of steel*; but it was transcended by some solos and duets with digital delay that followed.

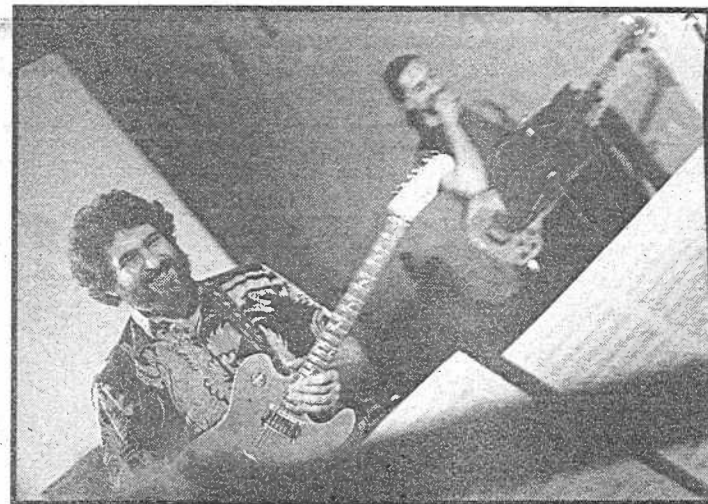
Headroom contrasted what he calls "layers" and "hits," layers being streams of sound that changed gradually, hits being computer gestures that the performers—Polansky and Nick Didkovsky on electric guitars and other plinky things—had to react to as quickly as possible. That much was aurally clear, but so much randomness was built into the system that, though the textures were interestingly shaped, the feedback blasts, pointillist plinks, and virtuosic scrambling didn't lead the ear anywhere. It was a sonic video game, and we weren't playing.

The improves that followed were far more lucid; Didkovsky twanged, Polansky moved a mouse, and the computer drew Didkovsky's wails, glissandos, and pings into loops. As you saw the parameters move on the computer screen, the sound loops changed duration, and the undulating, self-transforming ostinatos were restful without being pretty. The real-time computer transformation of sound has never been so clear and meaningful. During *Headroom 1* I tried to look impressed, but the solos created listening structures not only original, but enjoyable.

The premiere of *51 Melodies*

showed that the computer still ain't shucks to loud, fast ensemble playing. Accompanied by Greg Anderson on bass and Leo Ciesca on drums, Polansky and Didkovsky started and ended in unison with "Melody 1" and merged in the middle on "Melody 2." In between they took different, computer-set routes, playing sort of together and sort of not, like ancient heterophony. You could hear the structural points ease into focus as their lines merged, and the nine-measure source melody (doing as clever an illusion of eight-measure symmetry as Mozart could have managed) kept you off guard. Above its energy, *51 Melodies* had a Stravinskian, unpredictable repetitiveness, in which the gesture becomes familiar but the notes never fall where you think they will.

David First, another experimentalist in the Cowell mold, has been obsessing lately about a very Cowellian idea: the analogical treatment of pitch and rhythm. For instance, the rhythm 4-against-5, sped up mechanically, becomes a pitch interval, a major third. Cowell never succeeded in making the idea aurally relevant. Neither has First, but he's unearthed some interesting strategies. At the Knitting-Factory November 19, First's World Casio Quartet played his *Escape Dust*. As in his other Casio works, the synthesizers changed tuning in extremely slow glissandos, stirring up wild beat patterns between microtonal lines. Unlike his earlier



Polansky: carving out new perceptual space

music, single notes started tapping rhythms, speeding up and slowing down against each other in exact analogy to the pitch glisses. The piece only achieved one thing, but for me the chance to hear that pitch/rhythm counterpoint distinctly was worth doing.

Similar in principle but more multidimensional was First's *The Good Book's (Accurate) Jail of Escape Dust Coordinates* that he premiered December 11 at Experimental Intermedia. (La Monte Young has set off a competition for long titles.) Matt Sullivan bent oboe tones, Elaine Kaplinsky played synth, and First drew a drone from a guitar with a bow. Kevin Sparke beat occasional drum patterns too, but here the rhythmic element fell by the wayside. What took over was a monster timbre, a rich, thick, harsh sonority in which individual lines were indistinguishable and overtone activity too frenzied to pin down: Acoustic illusions such as bells and the clatter of tin cans

came and went, and when, after 40 minutes, the monster began to exhale its last decrescendo, the unexpired remainder was golden.

For those more attracted to pretty tunes than to raw ideas, it wasn't the best concert week. Polansky and First—along with Susan Stenger, Lois V Vierk, and others—represent a new austerity in '90s minimalism. Call them the Phill Niblock school; in addition to running Experimental Intermedia, Niblock has influenced many composers toward a fluid minimalism based on slowly evolving sonority and tiny pitch changes rather than pattern. It's amazing to hear that austerity again after the whatever-you-feel-like '80s. As experiments, it's unfair to demand that these pieces work. What you can demand is that they attempt to solve problems so well-defined that you can learn from listening how to hear them. In that respect, Polansky and First treated me to musical relationships I had never imagined. ■

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MORE WILL FOLLOW
BUT THIS IS THE ORIGINAL