

# Improv Questions

By Kyle Gann

## Doctor Nerve Blast

**Feels like old times**, now that the Kitchen's hired a curator with deep roots in the new-music community. Rhys Chatham, whose programming made history there in the '70s, says that a vital music scene requires three things: composers doing interesting work (which New York has rarely lacked), a space with enough vision to root them out (a problem during the '80s), and a receptive critic (ahem). The Kitchen's new music czar, Ben Neill, is a close Chatham associate, but he's attuned to the new era. His second Kitchen festival (the first was a November keyboard series) emphasized ensembles, appropriately enough; composers are dead tired of doing solo gigs, and ensemble work has mushroomed in importance. The fest also acknowledged that the '90s ensemble is a different animal. Gone were the no-rehearsal noisemakers of the '80s, replaced by intensely synchronized musicianship, though still in freewheeling, oddball, vernacular styles.

The transition to this decade was Nick Didkovsky's eight-piece Doctor Nerve (January 8). Though splintered and abrupt, their jazz is oddly un-nervous. It runs on irregular repeated phrases, frequent tempo shifts, and incommensurate rhythms

smashed together, but with a leisurely sense of humor. On the surface it's similar to John Zorn's takeoffs of a few years ago, but less frenetic, more composed, less dependent on allusions, more rhythmically interesting, and less derivative of '60s collage. In Doctor Nerve's "Wir Sind Dickhäuter," a crisp, staccato jazz tune popped note-by-note between different instruments. In "The Shameful Stain" ("everybody has one," Didkovsky shrugged), the band clapped a 7/8 pattern against the drummer's 3/4, while Greg Duboin squiggled on soprano sax. "Pain Waits Until 5 PM" featured Didkovsky's wailing guitar over a 13-beat drum pattern so fast its irregularity disappeared. Doctor Nerve rides its rhythmic incongruities as though they were the most natural thing in the world, and you begin to believe it.

Didkovsky also does his bit for postmodernism by "deconstructing" pieces. Joined by the Soldier String Quartet, the group took apart two Doctor Nerve compositions, as Didkovsky cued sections, gestures, solos, and tempos with elaborate hand signals. *Rite*, the final and tightest deconstruction, took its tunes from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; the stolen chords and rhythms were mostly from the middle of the piece, but at one point in the ruckus you barely heard Yves Duboin playing the opening bassoon solo on miked flute. Quotes were obvious when you listened for them, but the technique transcended the refer-

ence; the piece sounded more like Doctor Nerve than scrambled Stravinsky.

As invigorating as the set was, this kind of controlled improv has built-in discrepancies. Despite the split-second playing, ideas were sometimes slow to emerge because the construction was so loose, and after one played out, the group killed time until the next. Every piece traversed a wild variety of textures within its three to five minutes, and, paradoxically, that in itself made the set homogenous. The hand-signal business goes back to Earle Brown's mobile form pieces of the '60s, and, in improv turf, to Zorn's game pieces like *Cobra*. Aiding synchronization, those signals allow heady freedom and surprising textures, but can't cure diffuseness, a lack of focus. In the '60s, we overlooked that compositional looseness as the fault of a young style that more sophisticated techniques would clear up. It hasn't happened. Instead, each generation has passed it unsolved to the next, and those sympathetic to the attempt have simply become injured. Performers cover up the gaps with showmanship and exuberance, which Doctor Nerve had aplenty.

The group that followed made a brilliant contrast: Blast, a Dutch quartet formed in 1988 and never before heard in America. Their improv style was the opposite of Doctor Nerve's, narrowly focused and carefully composed. Electric guitarist Frank Crijns played re-



Dr. Nerve: a leisurely sense of humor

petitive riffs, Dirk Bruinsma and Wim Van der Maas ground out complex sax lines in counterpoint, and Ruud van Helvert drummed irregular patterns. (Thirteen was the evening's meter of choice.) They'd seep into a pitch sequence, then boil away in a disciplined polyphony that was all the more feverish for being under pressure. Occasionally Bruinsma would growl nonsense vocals, which fused not only with the sax lines but with taped voices that came out of nowhere. Save for some rambling solos in the long finale, Blast's music was better crafted than Doctor Nerve's, every detail worked out within a well-thought yet rough-surfaced Euro-structure.

But it wasn't as wild or exciting. And Blast, too, finally became homogenous; that's the risk taken by many recent groups whose playing

style is fixed as well as the instrumentation. (It's my only complaint, for example, about the superbly musical String Trio of New York, who played Merkin Hall last month.) If Didkovsky was the Stockhausen of group improvisation, Blast was the Babbitt, and neither approach is perfect. How do you keep tight control over improv's vocabulary, yet still allow for spontaneity and the unexpected? How do you open a group up to free association and retain your audience's attention? How do you extemporize en masse, but keep everyone on the main subject? Those are the Big Questions of structured improv. Sometimes this concert answered them, sometimes it didn't. But for the first time in years, the Kitchen looks to be leading the music scene rather than following. ■

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