

# In Praise of Noncomposers

By Kyle Gann

Lois Svard  
Joseph Kubera

By irresistible coincidence, two of the noncomposing performers who are newly championing downtown music gave back-to-back recitals February 20 and 21 at Merkin Hall. Both were expert, but more polarized pianistic styles could hardly be imagined. Lois Svard, on the earlier evening, played with a light, feathery touch attuned to postminimalism's smooth emotional curve. Joseph Kubera excelled in crashing vertical masses more akin to serialism and improv. To drive the contrast home, each pianist played music from both extremes: Svard, constantly in motion, wove her atmosphere around each piece; Kubera was crisp, efficient, given to violent gestures and sudden freezes. Svard swept you away in momentum-gathering waves of feeling; Kubera could turn on a dime.

Even more interesting, for those of us who don't venture north of 19th Street without our passports, was the transformation that takes place with someone other than the composer at the keyboard. When the tunes were familiar, the touch was disconcertingly new. First of all, Svard brought out more colors and nuances than Hans Otte does in the silken stream of arpeggios that is the second and probably best movement from Otte's *Book of Sounds*. If you're used to "Blue" Gene Tyranny's spontaneous, matter-of-fact playing, it was



CHRIS BUCK

They bring us something we've missed downtown.

odd to hear Svard's smoother, more premeditated reading of Tyranny's *Nocturne With and Without Memory*; beautifully drawn, but no longer improvisatory. *Trapani (stream)* by new music's crazyman Jerry Hunt set bells on Svard's wrists jingling through an exhausting series of tremolos. She could hardly have duplicated Hunt's hilarious lankiness, and the piece must have totally nonplussed those who don't know Hunt's work. But I was fascinated to hear, for once, his surreal theater stripped down to its harmonic element.

For context, Svard established uptown credentials by wrestling Gyorgy Ligeti's mammoth *Etudes* to the floor. This tour de force, which demands Nancarrow-ish cross-tempos of fours, fives, sevens, nines, all from 10 fingers,

won Ligeti the 1986 Grawemeyer Award, and Svard is the first American to tackle it. Under her hands, the dense layers, each comprised of thousands of notes, drew apart like islands in a distant seascape. Ligeti aimed for, and achieved, rhythmic illusions analogous to those of M. C. Escher's optical paradoxes, but I find Ligeti, like Escher, a little dry. My favorite piece, and the one that gave Svard the most emotional latitude, was William Duckworth's *Imaginary Dances*. The gentle, blues-tinged perpetual motion these nine dances set up offered even more goosebumps per movement than the same composer's famous *Time Curve Preludes*.

Svard played with an emotionality that many pianists bring to Brahms, but not to post-Cage repertoire. Kubera's greatest strength

was an Alfred Brendel-like ability to keep any number of dynamic levels going at the same time. That talent best served *The Hidden Agenda* by downtown regular Anthony Coleman, which cut irregularly between four similar melodies, like switching channels between four cop shows. Kubera exercised control where Coleman would have provided frenzy, but he led the ear to long-range connections. Roscoe Mitchell's *8-8-88* needed the same connections drawn; it crashed together seventh chords and more dissonant aggregates in sequences that rendered the familiar sonorities fresh. David First's *Key Lights in a Palace Balloon* benefited from Kubera's ability to draw out internal lines, for it changed subtle notes inside atonal scales, reiterated with minimalist fervor.

Other Kubera performances were less violent, especially four vignettes by Laurie Spiegel. Spiegel's algorithmic computer tapes follow a compelling linear logic, but her piano pieces are refreshingly subject to whim. Peter Gena's heartfelt homage *For Morton Feldman* followed the logic of mourning; slow, Feldman-like but diatonic chords spelled out a long accelerando, then burst into an anguished cry of octaves before waving goodbye with the descending whole-step from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. Two early studies by La Monte Young proved that he could turn Stockhausen's idiom toward his own, sparser style. And one of the best pieces was *Harpo* (as in Marx), by the

one composer I'd never heard of: Carson Kievan, composer-in-residence of the Florida Philharmonic. *Harpo* bounced through syncopated, harplike melodies, gently out of sync like the early style of Stefan Wolpe.

Kubera climaxed with a full-scale sonata by the late Julius Eastman, the ambiguous title *Piano 2* marked on the manuscript. I would have guessed the piece was by Roger Sessions or some other atonal, post-Copland, 1940s figure: Eastman piled dissonances into craggy, Ivesian layers, and built fluid but conventional forms from chromatic motives. But one unmistakable Eastman trick was the perpetual eighth-note pulse that all three movements ran off of, culminating at the finale in repeated chords reminiscent of his pounding works of the '70s. Here was an idea of where Eastman was headed before his tragically early demise.

Composer-pianists, even great ones such as Tyranny and Rzewski, play like composers: forcefully, with attention to structure and the syntactic meaning of each rhythm. People who devote their lives to the keyboard bring us qualities we've missed downtown: gracefulness, an experimental attitude toward tone color, propulsive tempos, the literal feel for notation that comes from interpreting, not just speaking, a text. Besides, there are dozens of good composers who lack performance skills, and they've felt left out of downtown for too long. The composer/performer, we hope, is here to stay, for overspecialization is ultimately fatal. But noncomposers like Svard and Kubera are opening up the downtown scene in exciting new ways. ■

MICHELOB  
CONCERT SERIES

THE RITZ PRESENTS  
SATURDAY  
MARCH 30

927 W 4th St

THE  
SISTERS

COCTEAU