

David Garland/Frankie Mann

# Ironywares

BY KYLE GANN

A friend of mine insists that irony—the inability to be naïve—is the source of all artistic failure in the 1980s. I think she's right. Still, for the moment irony remains a potent musical force, as New York composers Frankie Mann and David Garland proved in separate December 3 performances. Both are songwriters in a newly extended sense of that term that almost presupposes ironic intent. But while Garland's irony comes in hints and glances, Mann wades hip-deep in the stuff.

Frankie Mann has long used irony as a means of savage social criticism, yet her target has never been so diffuse as in the music she performed at the Philip Morris Building, sponsored by the Whitney Museum. The mock-traditional suite and song cycle she presented featured impressively slick performances by Joseph Hannan on piano and herself on synthesizers and other electronic equipment. Inexplicably, her proficiency was turned toward the most banal of musical ends.

The Prologue and Epilogue of Mann's *The Seven Deadly Sins* recalled Kurt Weill's opera of the same title, but most of the work's harmonic arbitrariness suggested Satie, if minus the dry, inconspicuous quality of his irony. Each movement, "Pride," "Sloth," "Envy," and so on, pursued a stylized idea—love song, classical variation on a nursery tune, *moto perpetuo*—with unyielding rhythmic regularity and studied melodic aimlessness, but the music was less simple than it seemed. Every now and then its counterpoint would ease into Schoen-

bergian dissonance, then sidle back into childlike kerplunking as if nothing had happened. Another Satiesque touch was the music's tangential relevance to its program, a narration about an artist's struggle between integrity and ambition. Without that relation, it was hard to tell what was being parodied.

The harsh incongruity between the sophistication of the performance and the fake naïveté of the music posed many such difficult questions. The building's corporate-looking lobby, the elevated loudspeakers, and the cloying synthesizer timbres conspired to create the insidious aura of Muzak. So monotonous was the music's rumpy-tum rhythm that it invited the tapping of feet even as it ridiculed the expectation of variety, as though inviting us to participate in our own humiliation. Underneath the *ostensive* parody of social values seemed to be a more

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subversive parody of compositional technique itself—of the very idea of music-ality.

Thanks to its text, the social protest of *Scenes from the Recent Past* was more easily located. Using the military drum march as a symbol for Western imperialist arrogance is as old as Mahler, and its presence in "Bismarck" and "War" screamed the obvious. Even here, though, the intentional *gaucherie* of Mann's lyrics, blankly intoned by Eric Barsness, so dripped with gelatinous irony that its hatred seemed randomly directed. Given

that the world is a remarkably unpleasant place, doesn't the artist have an obligation to say more than that?

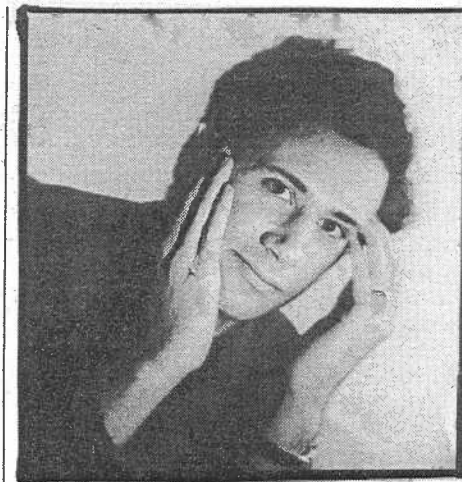
Only in one suitably climactic song did the relevant issues slide into focus. In the fetching melody of "Nun Scientist," a litany of professional stereotypes described a sterile, suffocatingly perfect world. Whether "The short inquiring engineer and the staid pediatrician" hailed from a '50s sitcom or futuristic horror film one could only queasily guess. In either case, Mann's equation between utopian thought and the repression of human impulses finally became clear, if her prognosis went unstated.

Cut to Roulette, where David Garland, with expert accordionist Guy Klucsevsek, performed some dozen of his "Control Songs." Here, too, was irony, but in the ear of the beholder. These songs criticized, but rather than ridicule they sublimated frustration into an art of charming simplicity. His comic timing finely-honed, Garland never abjured technique even as he made his most bitter points:

*They think forests harbor dangers.  
They think woods should be cut  
down.  
But the truth is, their behavior  
Differs little in the town.*

There was nothing false about Garland's naïveté; when he accompanied his singing with a toy piano, as in "My Pony's Falling," or by knocking on a contact-miked slab of styrofoam, he by God not only meant it but made soulful music out of it. Irony came in our relation to the work. Garland's little dances were the motions we make during favorite records when we think no one's looking; recognizing our own suppressed creativity in Garland's un-self-consciousness reminded us not only that we put a shell around our lives, but that that shell can be broken at will. What more honorable service can art provide?

And yet Garland's childlikeness is not undisciplined. Each tune had a repeating



MICHEL DELSOL

David Garland: breaking the shell

rhythm, but subtle touches of variety—birdsongs, gently displaced phrases—were always there when needed. Garland's melodies, too, seemed to progress aimlessly, but unlike Mann's their sly, text-related logic always became clear in retrospect. Here the songs were also indebted to Klucsevsek's nimble fingerwork, which lent a sweet and sensitive freedom to their simple structures. This was what critics used to call "artlessness," a quality in danger of extinction.

Garland is a natural genius of some kind, maybe even *the* ironic songwriter *par excellence*. "Play Within a Play" and "Keep in Touch" could become theme songs for a generation that sees commitment as a career obstacle. Unlike Laurie Anderson, Garland doesn't seem to know or care whether he's being clever, and unlike Mann's his smidgens of musical invention are perfectly sincere. His fidelity to standards of artistic quality may make him incapable of effecting the wide-ranging condemnation of Western ideology on which Mann seems intent. But for the audience, David Garland is like being tickled with a feather duster; Frankie Mann is like having a bank fall on you.

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