

Iso-Rock

By Kyle Gann

Mikel Rouse
Mark Lampariello

Mikel Rouse's Broken Consort played his *Quick Thrust* April 29 at the Knitting Factory. Although it's probably not the first 12-tone rock piece, I bet it's the first *isorhythmic* 12-tone rock piece: that is, James Bergman's electric bass played the 12-tone row in a 15-beat rhythm that repeated over and over again. That rhythm, however, contained only eight notes, so that two repetitions of the pitch row require three of the rhythmic row ($2 \times 12 = 3 \times 8$). This isorhythmic, pitch/rhythm phase-shifting was a common 14th century technique, neglected for 500 years until experimentalist Conlon Nancarrow ingeniously revamped it in his *Player Piano Studies* Nos. 6, 7, and 11. With Rouse it makes what I suppose is its club band debut, in a form so clear I figured it out from listening, then confirmed it on Rouse's album *A Lincoln Portrait* (Cuneiform) when I got home. (I also found that some of the rhythms are palindromic.) It's a nice trick; the medieval masters generally kept their isorhythms inaudible. And since Rouse never transposes the row, *Quick Thrust* could remind you of the 12-tone rows played at different speeds in Stravinsky's underrated masterpiece, *Threni*.

Pardon the obscure references, but Rouse sneaks such intricate stuff into his music that you have

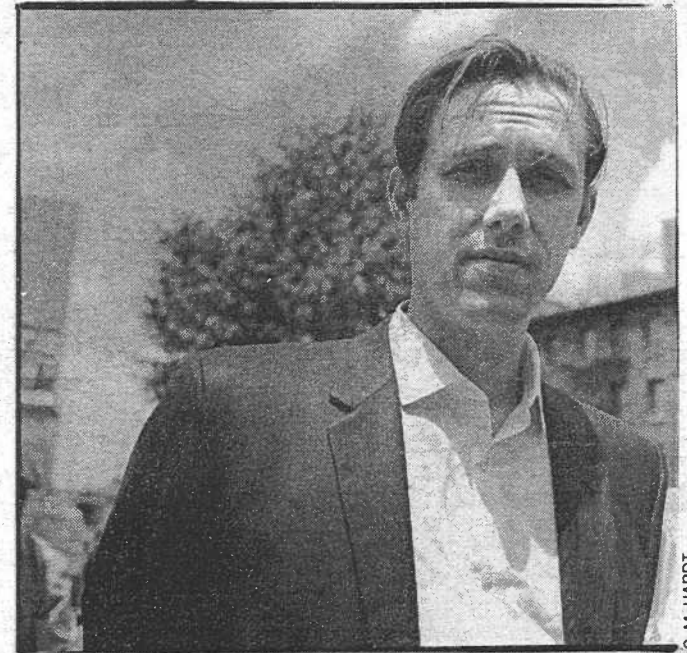
to ransack history for parallels. (Another one: Rouse's nontransposition of the row duplicates the surely apocryphal story they used to tell about Steve Reich when he studied with Luciano Berio. Reich allegedly repeated his 12-tone row over and over at the same pitch level, and Berio finally said, "Steve, if you want to write tonal music, why don't you just write tonal music?") And yet Rouse's music doesn't sound cerebral; it has a natural rock beat and an uplifting sense of melody. Most of the Factory crowd that night may have merely bopped along to what sounded like a surreally textured club band. But floating beneath the surface were all these engaging little processes that, once they snagged my ear, reeled me in and kept me hooked.

Rouse played synthesizer, Bergman bass, Bill Tesar drums, and Mark Lampariello guitar (in lieu of the sax Rouse used to use for melody), and four of the seven pieces were from *A Lincoln Portrait*. *High Frontier* was one of Rouse's pieces based on a five-against-four rhythm. It had access to two tempos at once: Lampariello fused them in his lithe guitar melody, Tesar switched back and forth. (Rouse called Tesar the only drummer capable of playing his rhythms, which wouldn't surprise me.) Similarly, *Full Flow* played off three against four in a 12/8 texture built from a single repeated note. And though I pride myself on a good ear for intricate patterns, *Ranger* slipped by me completely. Rouse repeated an or-

nate rhythmic cycle on keyboard, but each repeat slid so smoothly into the next that, though I knew exactly what was happening, I could never catch it in flagrante delicto.

Rouse's early tunes challenge the ear, but they're mostly one-idea pieces. The two works from 1990, *In These Rooms* and *Leading the Machine*, were more fleshed out. *In These Rooms* floated on a sea of fives, swimming in 10-note ostinatos and five-beat rhythms. *Leading the Machine* was the most voluptuous piece, partly because it sacrificed some surface complexity (though by concert's end, Rouse had so warped our ears that even its 4/4 ostinato sounded skewed). The expansive opening melody reminded me of *West Side Story*'s "There's a Place for Us," then returned after a faster middle section whose off-rhythms were as subtly outlined as Schubert. If this is the direction Rouse's music is heading, I'm with him.

It isn't so much that Rouse's music comes from minimalism as that minimalism made it possible. But his music shows how premature the serialist prejudice against minimalism has been. There's always been a side of minimalism that stripped down to a few notes and rhythms, not to abandon the serialists' ideas, but to create a context in which you could actually hear them. When I can sit in a downtown club with a beer, listen to a fast, hot rock piece like *Quick Thrust* and pick out the 12-tone structuring devices *by ear*, I feel like I'm getting a multiplicity of enjoyment levels I *should* get from the music of Babbitt and Wuorinen and don't. Rouse's music has a brainy cachet that isn't by repu-



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tation only. Those technical devices don't bog the ear down, but they do create a lively layer of complexity just beneath the surface, the kind of effect serialism had always claimed it was aiming for. My hat's off to someone who can sneak dodecaphony, isorhythms, and palindromes into the Knitting Factory without raising an eyebrow, disguised as just another rock band.

Rouse was followed by Lampariello's Vertical Fractures, an eight-piece band of winds, strings, and percussion conducted by Charles Descarfino. Lampariello's music, each piece named for a different highway, was closer to jazz than rock, and was more what an old-time critic might have called rhapsodic, through-composed, though carefully notated: *I-880, Oakland*,

California put violinist Mark Feldman through a virtuosic solo in harmonics; *Kancamagus Highway, New Hampshire* punctuated his and Laura Renino's unison flute/violin line with ostinatos in a static dissonant texture that created a quasi-tonal stability, as in Messiaen's music.

All the pieces had a strong rhythmic energy, but their outlines weren't terribly clear, and I had trouble figuring a meaningful overall shape from the frequent textural and tempo changes. They beg for further hearing. The rest of the audience, though, responded more vociferously to Lampariello's complex virtuosics than they had to Rouse's cool structures. Perhaps they were all medieval scholars, and found the isorhythms old hat. ■

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