

# Italo-Afro Music

By Kyle Gann

Bernadette Speach  
Jonathan Kramer

**The Passage of No Return** is a hallway in Gorée, Senegal, through which newly captured slaves were once marched into the holds of ships bound for America. Its black stone floor was worn smooth by thousands of dragging feet. Thulani Davis visited Gorée in 1987 and translated the site into poetry. "I am crying," she wrote about hearing women singing their stories,

*for they saved me  
without knowing a word  
of my tongue . . . .  
I later told one  
how beautiful it was  
was it truly?  
was all she said.*

Composer Bernadette Speach set the poems in a work titled *Baobab 4*, which the pair performed with an eight-member ensemble April 9 at P.S. 122.

The aptness of Speach's melodic, jazz-tinged music to Davis's poetry flies in the face of the essentialism that decrees that minority art can only be interpreted by a member of the same minority—Speach is Italian American. Her recent work has a new simplicity; always original, her textures were once murky, but have settled into a rolling, reiterative, almost pop idiom. The influence of her teacher Morton Feldman is now so well sublimated, I hesitate to even

mention the name. For *Baobab 4* she conjured a minimalist jazz riddled with ostinatos and mild improvisation, which she sometimes initiated by playing a few notes on a xylophonelike African balafon.

Stately and pretty, *Baobab 4* drew its melodies, and the inflections of its three female singer-reciters, from Davis's own attractive speech style: counterintuitively accented, languid, deliberate, yet matter-of-fact. What the piece lacked didn't become clear until the ensemble played Speach and Davis's earlier collaboration, *Telepathy Suite*. Davis's *Telepathy* poems simmered with subdued anger and lust, tossing off quips about sex in the kitchen ("oh wow when his kneecaps cracked/on the ceramic tile/as my head hit the dishwasher") and the dangers of the Midwest for Blacks. In response, Speach's *Telepathy* music was more lively, gritty, intense. *Baobab 4*'s reverent litany needed some of *Telepathy*'s high-strung tension to justify the bittersweet release of its final chorus on "Oh Senegal," as poignantly repetitive as the final chorale from Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. The contrast suggested the disquieting conclusion that a horrible, racist society like ours provides better raw art material than a homeland seen through the mists of nostalgia.

**I hate postmodernism:** the idea that history is over, and all we can do is parasitize our past. Sincere art is drawn from life, not history's scraps. Musical sincerity produces images, the style of which is a by-



ALEX FORMAN

Bernadette Speach: Minimalist. Jazz.

product not subject to conscious control. "Writing in the style of" leads to superficiality. Asian, African, and computer musics show that we Westerners have barely scratched the surface of musical possibilities. Relinquishing the future to burglarize the past betrays a paucity of imagination.

So for Jonathan Kramer's self-consciously pomo *Notta Sonata* to have burst through all that resistance to amaze me at Merkin Hall April 12 points to an extraordinary power of persuasion. Kramer, author of a brilliant book on musical analysis titled *The Time of Music*, has lectured on postmodernism in the musics of William Bolcom and John Zorn, but I found his own latest work more convincing than his examples. The title *Notta Sonata* itself is a kind of historical, self-referential joke; the two halves were named "Notta First Movement" and "Also Not a First Movement." But

the piece worked because it applied collage as a metaphor rather than literally, raising the device to the status of stream-of-consciousness literature, far above the level of incongruous records played at the same time, or "Look, Ma, I'm writing like Mahler!"

*Notta Sonata* was scored for two pianos and percussion, like Bartók's *Sonata*, only with three percussionists instead of two. The pianos began in hesitant quiet, only to have the mallet players crash in with non sequiturs. The diverse "styles" referred to were more imaginary than real. Passages of rigorous counterpoint wavered between Bach and Hindemith, fragmented serialist gestures were a little too tonal for Boulez, and a climax of piano horn calls rimmed by ecstatic glockenspiels sounded like a Stockhausen reworking of the denouement of a Weber opera. Frequent unisons between the pianos and mallet in-

struments delineated an expert sonic design; thus unified, the piece wasn't a collage, but a set of disconcerting fractures within a single musical subjectivity. The work's ambiguity was invested in its meaning, not in its moment-to-moment perception, which was admirably clear. Instead of shrugging its shoulders in resignation, the piece opened up a new realm of the imagination.

The occasion was a performance by the Percussion Group of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory, assisted by pianists Frank Weinstock and Michael Chertock, a fantastically well-rehearsed ensemble; they could break into the trickiest, most exposed unison attacks in perfect timing without even looking at each other. At one point, all three mallet players whipped off lightning-fast arpeggios in unison that would have been simple on the piano, hair-raising on vibraphones. Their second most notable offering was excerpts from *Earth and the Great Weather* by Alaskan composer John Luther Adams, a totalist drum essay in which the three drummers pounded joyously complex and ever-shifting patterns over environmental recordings of thunder and running water.

Merkin Hall, though, deserves retaliation for its staff's phenomenal rudeness. Two minutes after the final applause, as the crowd ambled out, a pasty-faced usherette commanded our attention by yelling, "Can everybody here speak English? Out of the hall!" Not atypical. I've seen Merkin's ushers herd people out as the performers were beginning an encore. I'm starting a Rude Merkin Usher of the Month Award. Nominees are encouraged. ■