

Do women improvise differently than men? If so, the third annual Festival of Women Improvisers, November 3 through 5, suggested no general distinction, nor was that the point. Coproducers Myra Melford and Marion Joans Brandis were correcting a widely perceived imbalance between men and women in progressive music. In a panel discussion preceding the final concert, blame landed on artistic directors and corporate funders for assuming that women write bad music, on the clique of white males who influence the downtown gig market, and on women musicians themselves for not "bonding," for failing to push each other's (and even their own) work. The music press took some punches for neglecting to discuss women as often or extensively as men. Typically, only a half-dozen males were present, not at all including those who most needed to hear the message.

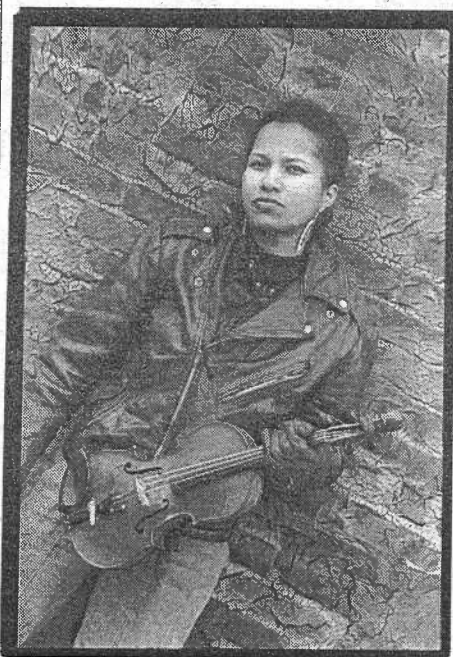
The music, though, made the strongest arguments. I went to the first two evenings at P.S. 122, and they simmered with implications. Why, for example, has the dynamite avant-garde gospel of Terry Jenoure remained unknown in new music (if not jazz) circles? This brilliant singer/violinist from a Jamaican-Puerto Rican background crooned an endless melody of "Hallelujah's" and "Jesus is Lord's" over Brandon Ross's subdued but equally vigorous electric bass. Then, when Jenoure took up the violin, the two spun riff after riff on a few basic tunes, in an echoing counterpoint rich with variation. Though rhythmically independent and inwardly focused, they were acutely aware of one another. So much so that a sudden break into unison for a quick close seemed like the inevitable convergence of two lines. It was the most thrilling improv moment I've heard in months.

The festival had irritating moments, too. Jill Burton's act was a stunning example of unadulterated self-indulgence that broadcast the urgent message, "Isn't

Festival of Women Improvisers

Jamming the Status Quo

BY KYLE GANN



C. M. HARDT

Jenoure: thrilling improv

it neat that I'm so uninhibited?" Mugging, toying with the microphone, rolling on the floor like a miscreant toddler, and shouting gibberish in a fake, Slavic-sounding language, she persuaded us that she has no talent whatsoever. She then ruined the impression by playing two piano chords over and over while yodeling;

one had to concede that *this*, at least, deftly imitated Meredith Monk. Men hold no monopoly on misplaced chutzpah.

But Jin Hi Kim, a Californian player of the *komungo* (Korean zither), was more impressive alone than she had been with Elliott Sharp two weeks earlier, or than she was with Melford and Brandis, either. Using sticks and fingers, she sculpted myriad bouncing, glissing, galloping attacks to produce small waves of melody that were cumulative in their power; such nuances easily get lost amid the abstract, unobtrusive virtuosity of Western instruments. Always conscious of line, she didn't labor under the deadly misconception that unfamiliar sounds are entertaining in themselves, as some performers did. Polly Bradfield and Leo Smith, accompanists for beautiful choreography by Sally Silvers, searched in vain for noises on the violin and trumpet we hadn't heard before. Their sonic background was adequate if too neutral, and Silvers's mock-awkward movements, well-shaped and endearingly, expressively human, deserved better.

Every possible "weird" sound on the piano, violin, Jew's harp, whatever, was used thousands and millions of times in the '60s. As texture, those sounds are threadbare; if you must use them, do so melodically. For the most part, the Mel-

ford-Brandis-Kinney-Lees quartet did just that. This ensemble, in which Michelle Kinney on cello and Julie Lees on trumpet joined the better-known Melford-Brandis piano-and-flute duo, ran off the motor of Melford's childlike energy. In one number she made the piano into a big, muffled marimba by beating it with soft drumsticks; another piece took its momentum from the rhythmic motives she poked out on the keyboard with visible enjoyment. Kinney, too, showed good group instincts; at one point she matched Melford's string-stroking with her own glissandi so well you couldn't tell which was which, and she bowed double-stops below the bridge delicately enough to blend in with Brandis's panpipes. When Melford played a slow chorale of impressionist harmonies, Brandis and Lees commented with thoughtful dissonances, and the ferocious climax was a four-colored whirlwind of counterpoint that humorously faltered to a halt.

On balance, the successes outweighed the disappointments to an extent that the music transcended the festival's so-

MUSIC

cial motivation. The barriers good composers face don't affect only women. The unfairness derives from an entrenched malaise—a music scene run by trendy presenters locally and closed-minded conservatives nationally. The academic women composers I've talked to, for instance, are perfectly happy with the status quo. Given the absence of standards, performers who sell themselves well get gigs while those who merely write good music (how rarely the two talents coexist!) scribble in obscurity. Like the conservative agenda in general, the situation hurts women more than men, but it hurts both. When performers like Jenoure and Melford take a backseat to less accomplished male counterparts, everybody loses.

...A TOUCH OF
GREENWICH VILLAGE

L.P.'s • TAPES • C.D.'s • VIDEO

LUNCH FOR YORK
Avant/Progressive
Art/New Music
25 Prince St.
841 1774

TOWER RECORDS/VIDEO

See Thomas Dolby and