

PARIS

**T**he city (God, what a city!) where polyphonic theory was born (Notre Dame Cathedral, circa 11th century) still has a rep for encouraging only the cerebral in music, but things are changing. A few short blocks from Boulez's stronghold IRCAM, at the Theatre de la Ville, Maria Rankov and Daniel Caux curated a series this fall aptly called "D'Autres Musiques," and devoted to the European version of minimalism. It's an odd take, skewed in a way that gives an American pause. Europeans don't seem to have picked up minimalism's Eastern, meditative basis, much less its relation to African drumming or rock (this despite African music's ubiquitous presence here). The pieces I heard November 29 and 30 turned minimalism to three purposes: system-for-system's-sake (seven-note serialism), a convenient context for Satie-inspired musical jokes, or a way to make Profound Metaphysical Statements via repetition.

The English-dominated first concert favored jokes. Gavin Bryars, Michael Nyman, and Ladislav Kupkovich recycled mannerisms from earlier styles with varying degrees of irony; Bryars was cute, Nyman tedious, but Kupkovich (Czech, born in 1936) managed genuine hilarity. His *Morceau de genre*, played by Alexander Balanescu on violin and Andrew Ball on piano, sounded like P. D. Q. Faure. It permutated cadences from a 19th century French parlor style ad nauseam, never quite made the same chromatic slide twice, returned relentlessly to phrases one had prayed were gone for good, and banged against my defenses until I finally dissolved into laughter. *Clavierübung* for four pianos (Ball, Martin Jones, John Lenehan, Richard McMahan) put pretentious Beethovenian cadences through a similar indignity, in a key that refused to stay put, and ended with a fugue that never left the runway.

Light stuff, but it made sense, and I

## D'Autres Musiques / Rhys Chatham

# Jokes and Metaphysics

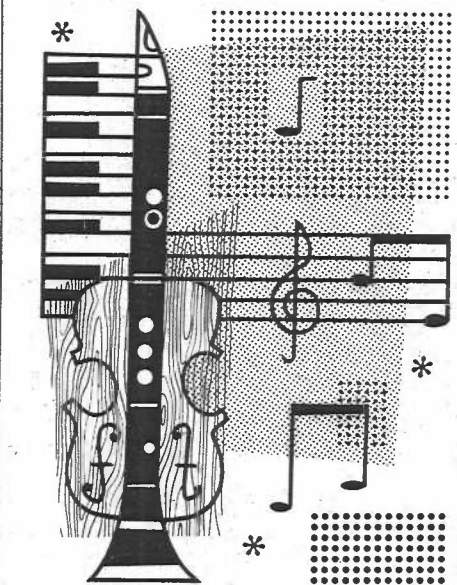
BY KYLE GANN

couldn't quite say that for the English works. Bryars's *Ponukelian Melody* for two pianos plunked Satie-ish staccato chords in progressions that promised to lead somewhere and never did, while his *Out of Zaleski's Gazebo* kept jumping from unresolved French sixth chords into

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cutesy cadences. Bryars's music is always pretty, but his classic process pieces from the '60s were more convincing. Nyman, who wrote some beautiful process pieces years ago, seems stuck in minimalism-as-system. His *Z.O.O. Caprices* for violin solo, which Balanescu whizzed through with an energy that left little horsehair in his bow by half-hour's end, applied strict procedures to now-folk, now-Baroque fiddling. Though tonal (and the evening's most recent work), they were as severe and mechanical as '50s serialism without half the textural interest, and they quickly fatigued the ear. There was something unheartfelt about these pieces, as though the New Tonality's systems and appropriations had become a clever mask to hide behind.

The East European second concert was quite the opposite—minimalism as the spiritual language of Existential Revelation. The currently popular Estonian Arvo Pärt and the 56-year-old Polish composer Henryk Mikolaj Górecki made a fascinating contrast with pieces so similar in style, so varied in success. John Constable played Pärt's *Pour Alina* (in the piano's highest octaves) and a tiny, ultrasimple theme and variations; one



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was two minutes, the other four. (Tom Johnson, sitting next to me, called Pärt the only minimalist who knows how to write short pieces.) *Fratres*, well-known here from its ECM recording, was played in a cello-and-piano version that had cellist Christopher van Kampen arpeggiating large chords, making the piece's mystic *sostenuto* overly busy. Even in such small statements, though, Pärt's spirituality came across as honest and without pretense.

The same wasn't true of Górecki's *Lerchenmusik* for clarinet (Michael Collins), cello (van Kampen), and piano (Constable). This series of "recitatifs and ariosos" aimed (self-consciously, I felt)

for a sustained state of mystic tension, moody and tinged with dissonance; the final movement seemed a geometric expansion of the opening phrase of Beethoven's Fourth Concerto, and though the piece lasted 45 minutes, its material could have been squeezed into 10. Górecki's intent and style sounded identical to Pärt's, but the latter succeeds for a clear reason: the simple arithmetic of Pärt's forms analyzes easily, but it isn't noticeable unless you're counting, so the music retains a sense of mystery. Górecki's heaviness-through-reiteration strategy was too obvious, like Messiaen with repeat signs, and the piece had excessive faith in its own profundity. (That faith was shared, I'll note in Górecki's defense, by a sizeable portion of the audience, my neighbor included.)

My high school French failed to get me to the concert I most wanted to hear, the premiere in Lille of Rhys Chatham's *An Angel Moves Too Fast To See* for 100 electric guitars and drummer Jonathan Kane; but I saw it on videotape the next day. Lille's l'Aeronef theater wasn't big enough for all those amplifiers, so the audience sat on the stage and the guitarists stood in the balconies. The music (less loud, the composer claimed, than his pieces for fewer strings) was in usual Chatham style, droning the entire major scale at once in huge, rhythmically articulated slabs of sound, although one section used graphic and indeterminate notation to produce random murmurs and explosions across the hall. (We're scheduled to hear *An Angel's* North American premiere at New Music America in Montreal next November.)

Audience reaction was so overwhelming that Chatham encored *An Angel's* finale, and Kupkovich's *Clavierübung* was repeated as well. The real news is France's cultural *perestroika*; not that I heard much ear-opening music in Paris, but that the New Simplicity has found both its audience and its promoters in the land of Boulez. ■

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