

Just a Headline

By Kyle Gann

Experimental Intermedia Festival

"Nothing to listen to, just a review": that's what I should call this article in hallowed Phill Niblock style. Niblock's "A Festival With No Fancy Name" at Experimental Intermedia was a solid, exhausting, two-week program of people we hadn't heard from in a long time and people we had never heard from at any length. I'll have more to say about the festival (which concluded March 24) in future columns, but here are the first week's highlights:

March 9: Most of Sorrel Hays's works were short continuums, breathy and languorous, of echoing environmental and vocal sounds, with Brian Charles on oboe and didjeridoo. But one piece, *Take a Back-Country Road*, was a contrapuntal/improv tour-de-force. Hays, playing Casio-sax, had programmed her computer to slide between dominant-seventh chords based around notes she and Charles played. With its trite harmony and glittery digital timbre, the piece sounded naïve at first, a slick, electric version of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. But that was a setup. As the solos began to writhe, the chord changes got thicker and stranger, while the glissandos gelled into churning counterpoint as seamless as a Renaissance motet. The piece turned corners for half an hour, the plot thickening at every one, until finally splashes of swirling color came careening from who

knows where. It was a brilliant solution, using the computer to meld two improvisers, and it resulted in cumulative ecstasy.

As a Southerner, I also appreciated the serious and affectionate way Memphis-born Hays treated the South in each work. Her leisurely pace stemmed not from her "natural-food music" aesthetic (Greg Sandow's pejorative but nail-on-the-head term), but from an emotional tempo foreign to New York. I felt right at home.

March 10: I'd heard Neil Rolnick's pieces before except for *Macedonian Air Drum*, in which he played digitally wired rhythm sticks in the air. The right stick triggered one rhythmic pattern, the left another, and every flick of Rolnick's wrist ushered in a new layer of timbres. He's a showman.

But what blew me away was a film by Barbara Hammer, consisting entirely of moving X rays. Skinless skeletons danced and applied lipstick, and when they drank milk, you saw it splash a quick, straight line down the esophagus. The film was called *Sanctus*, and Rolnick's accompanying score was, very tastefully, a collage of bits sampled from Sanctus mass movements by composers from Machaut to Verdi. The repetition of choral soundbites sanctified Hammer's skeletons, inspiring reverence rather than squeamishness as you saw, as T. S. Eliot put it, "the skull beneath the skin;/and breastless creatures underground/leaned backward with a lipless grin." The Zen temple I once attended had a skull on a table with the motto,

"As I am, so shall you be." *Sanctus* drove the point home.

March 16: Ben Neill and Nicolas Collins collaborated, Neill playing his extra-belled trumpet attached to a computer, Collins his sampler-controlling device in the form of a trombone. Their relationship was asymmetrical. When Collins led, as in his *Ta-babo Fonio*, Neill's trumpet underlining seemed like window dressing, pleasant but dispensable. In the pieces where Neill's trumpet dominated, though, Collins supplied ghostly, slowed-down echoes, issuing from his trombone, from Niblock's sound system behind us, from a trumpet-bell speaker way off to the side. It was a concerto format with Collins as movable orchestra, and they used it to gloss Haydn's E-flat trumpet concerto in a piece called *After Haydn*. Poor Papa Franz got splintered, and only a shard here and there was recognizable, but it showed what form concertos will survive in once conventional orchestras cease to exist (which, from a creative-music standpoint, they might as well).

This was a highly yang (not to say male) approach to new ideas and gizmos: showing off the formal processes and circuitry took precedence over the material run through them. One suspects the transformations could have been just as fascinating with less generic melodies. But the fun, mystifying, loose-edged atmosphere Collins and Neill created took me back to the old Sonic Arts Union days, revamped for '90s technology.

Eliane Radigue, who flew in from France, doesn't perform live; she composes by painstakingly mixing and filtering tones from



LONA FOOTE

Eliane Radigue, whose tape drones range as far and wide as symphonies

her Arp synthesizer, all on tape. I love her CDs, but it's worth listening to her tapes in concert now and then, because casual attention doesn't do them justice. In 15-second clips, you might think her music was an amplified refrigerator. But Radigue's drones do change, subtly and gradually. Here, the drone began pulsating, first in slow waves, later as a fast beat. Upper harmonics entered at vague intervals; distant melodies emerged from cautious filter sweeps. The form ranged as far and wide as a symphony, each frequency a new leitmotif, and on close inspection you heard an exhaustive complexity of tone-mixing. I'm wowed when abundant work and detail combine for an

effortless, natural effect, and that's as true of Radigue's drone pieces as it is of Pollini's Beethoven performances.

Odd thing was, as an encore Niblock played Radigue's new CD on his own XI label—*Kyema, Intermediate States*—and the crowd took that as a signal to stand up and schmooze. I admit, I'd listened to the CD the day before, it was now after 11, and I would just as soon have listened again at home the following morning. Still, though identical to the first piece in method, *Kyema* was dramatically different in mood and color, and sounded so rich on Niblock's speakers that I left suspecting we were all missing something wonderful. ■

IMAGINE A WORLD OF NATURAL HARMONY.