

The Kids Are All Right

By Kyle Gann

S.E.M. Ensemble

Most people who perform avant-garde music are old enough to get a beer afterward. But on June 5, the S.E.M. Ensemble was joined at Paula Cooper Gallery by an extraordinary group: 20 music students from John Dewey High School. The school itself, located on the border of Coney Island and Bensonhurst, seems remarkable, a flagship of the New York system that allows individual student-set curricula in an eight-hour-day format. With the cooperation of the school's wind ensemble director Herman S. Gersten, S.E.M.'s composer/director Petr Kotik has been working since 1985 with Dewey's students—Haitian, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Russian, African-American, and white—in an experimental program called Introduction of Contemporary Avant-Garde Music to High School Students. If one can judge from the June 5 concert, it works.

The pieces weren't all new, but the program dripped with creativity. Each piece allowed improvisational freedom along set guidelines, just the kind of music to shake young players loose from both classical restrictions and jazz/rock conventions, and allow every player an individual contri-

bution. The program begged for a responsible attitude, and the students delivered. Stockhausenish *Nuerplay* by Ben Neill was the most conventionally musical work, dividing the players into three loosely interacting groups. The team Kotik conducted played irregular rock bass-line phrases with long rests; Chris Nappi's section broke in with sustained trills; and Gersten's group played a cheerful melody with dissonances. Neill's trumpet solo tied the three together, and the music, inspired by the structure of tribal interactions among the Nuer people of Sudan, jumped playfully between intense textures.

Jackson MacLow's *1st Milarepa Gatha* and *Free Gatha 2* were the kind of '60s-ish text pieces that have little left to teach those of us who lived through the era, yet I was glad to see students get a painless history lesson. In one, the readers whispered, hummed, threw out meaningless syllables, and made vocal noises; in the other they popped up with random words: "triage," "midtown," "delicatessen," "boyfriend!" In *All Thumbs 2*, digital master David Behrman set his computer to respond to Gwen Santiago's clarinet and Beavin Lawrence's sax with marimba riffs and impressionist harmonies. First Santiago, then Lawrence, improvised carefully



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Efficiently anarchic human activity

directed melodies, and the computer followed more closely than a flesh-and-blood accompanist could have.

The real test was Christian Wolff's *Changing the System*, less a composition than a political model, the kind of free-form work that can drive classical performers to childish acts. Five groups of four players each sat facing each other (you could just see them between the video-camera-toting parents). One word at a time, each group passed around the explanatory text: "It's the system itself that sets the priorities that we have, that distorts the facts, that twists our brains, and therefore the system would have to be changed in order to change priorities and to make it possible for us to really see what's happening." While that message subverted young capitalist minds, other groups made aural Securats with dots of timbre, or moved to the floor to bang various percussion setups.

Though random and devoid of conventional musicianship, *Changing the System* is no toss-off piece. I played in it in Buffalo in 1975; it's a kind of analogy piece to prove sonically that socialism works, and if the players aren't dedicated, it can prove the opposite. It takes leadership, since every collective noise is cued by one of the players. (In one group, Wolff was a follower, a teenage girl the leader.) These kids were more serious than our '75 hoodlums were, and every effect was tasteful and confident. The randomness was not that of nature, but of efficiently anarchic human activity, sound aggregates bumping into each other, allowed to mix and take their diverse courses, punctuated by stretches of relaxed silence. As the groups dropped out one by one, the last continued in unhurried concentration, a beautiful effect because the attitude behind it was beautiful.

So successful a performance points to a solid program, and

Kotik attributes that largely to Gersten's enthusiasm, his willingness to challenge students. "I had to take the class through history from the beginning," Kotik recalled, "so I played some Chopin mazurkas. I asked the class, 'How many have heard of Chopin?' Nobody. Finally one shy little Russian girl raised her hand. That's why these kids are open-minded. To them, Webern is no more strange than Chopin. Gersten says to them, 'Everywhere you go you expect to hear something you haven't heard before—except in music class. Here, you hear something new, you laugh at it. That's going to stop.' That makes all the difference. Because if the teacher laughs at the unfamiliar music along with the kids, it's all over."

Does playing these pieces really lead to an appreciation of avant-garde music? "For some of them," Gersten replied. "Whether they like the pieces isn't important at this phase. They find that they learn skills playing these pieces that they can apply to all music." The students, unselfconsciously absorbed in Wolff's bizarre systems, certainly gave them more devout attention than the New York Phil thugs gave John Cage's *Renga* a decade ago. That means that, in a very important sense, the Dewey students are already the better musicians. They deserve to be named: besides Santiago and Lawrence, Ana Valladares, Maggie Situ, Shu Wei Liu, Deslyn Downes, Tracy Joseph, Sandrine Rémy, Iris Chiu, Suet Ping Chan, Ronald Rivette, Maria Odessky, Aljith Hangad, Cheng Ang, Nicole Neckles, Jenny Cella, Michael Sherman, Madaid Lopez, Carl Wiltshire, and Bryan Hernandez.

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