

Legacy of the Green Screen

By Kyle Gann

Neil Rolnick
Twisted Tutu

I survived laser art. You kids don't know how easy you have it now, new music-wise. Back in the tough old days, the '70s, we used to sit watching little green screens where chortreuse neon ellipses whirled and mutated into cat's-cradle shapes in synch with bleeps and grunts generated by not-very-interventrically patched, random-voltage-controlled Buchla synthesizers. We'd stare at those screens as though they contained the meaning of life written into secret code, for this was the blueprint of our future: The Latest Technology. And afterward, in a barely comprehending daze tinged with a forchoding we struggled to disregard, we'd turn to each other and mumble aesthetic observations like "Uh-huh" and "Yeah, wow."

And so when Neil Rolnick brought the first totally computerized opera to the Kitchen, you could gawk if you wanted, but Sony (sp!) I seen it before. Rolnick's *Home Game*, premiered June 9 and 10, featured a computer-written libretto, different for each performance, to be read from a video screen by two actors; the libretto program was designed by Davis Porush, and the text written by Todd Hivnor. Another screen gave five musicians melodies to improvise around, directions when to solo and when to sit out and instructions as to what kind of textures and rhythms to create. Huge video projections behind the actors blended pretaped



Twisted Tutu's Supové: imagination leading technology

landscapes with images of the actors themselves computer-transformed in real time. The plot was a kind of futuristic comic book fantasy about a 22nd-century New York inhabited solely by people of color, and about the war that erupts when some attempt to relocate to the West Bank of the Hudson in all-white Jersey. You could only bow your head in reverence at the number of toys Rolnick had brought onstage, the amount of complicated programming the piece pulled together. But it didn't make *Home Game* art anymore than those old laser pieces were. In neither case did someone conceive a work and then

find the technology needed to realize it. I've always enjoyed Rolnick's sensitive musicality, but *Home Game's* premise, that the computer would redetermine the musical progression anew each time, didn't allow him to apply it. Instead, the musicians (including Rolnick on synthesizer) were limited to the noisy approximation of gross textures that provided a semblance of musical continuity. The computer didn't scroll through the text as fast as the actors. Valentine Bentrone and Jeremy Shamos, could read, so they would double back and repeat phrases. At first this was dramatically effective, but since the audi-

ence could see the text, we began anticipating, and the repetitions got cloying. The group performed the work twice each night so that we could see how performances differ, and on June 10, in the kind of massive screw-up only high technology can provide, the same story got loaded into the computer for both versions. A hundred times more interesting as a demonstration of new gizmos than laser art was, *Home Game* was still only a demonstration.

Cut to Roulette, June 22. Twisted Tutu, the duo consisting of Eve Beglarin and Kathleen Supové, performed Arthur Jarvinen's *Microscopas*, a group of itty bitsy operas. Beglarin spoke the words while Supové provided charmingly litte, old-fashioned chord organ. Here's one opera I transcribed in its entirety: "Gilbert is afraid of old people. He once saw his grandmother naked and it scared the shit out of him. Gilbert reads a lot of comic books." Next the pair played a piece Beglarin had written for the same chord organ, the fourth installment in her series *Machaut in the Machine Age*, this one based on the 14th-century master's "Ay mi!" She had attached a contact mike to the chord organ's plastic cover, and as Supové played variations on Machaut's tune, Beglarin tapped the cover with her hands in lively, African-sounding patterns that sometimes fought against it. The timbre of hands on amplified plastic was surprising, vaguely pitched like rattling bamboo. It was a technological solution to the problem of how

to make a primitive toy instrument from the bland 1950s sound lively and even ethnic, and it produced a stunningly attractive work of art.

The juxtaposition of these pieces from one month of Downtown listening is not meant to suggest that the development of new technology serves no musical purpose, nor to criticize Rolnick, who has created his own heady pleasures with low-tech stuff. It's to put in perspective the puny, peripheral role that The Latest Technology plays in music's evolution at any given moment. Now that 12-tone pitch theory has been discredited, technology has become the new serialism, the rational force that is superstitiously expected to automatically generate progress. University departments promise unlimited techno-wonders to reduce thousands of young composers into lives of endless tinkering and artistic obscurity, just as they used to with row matrices and time-point systems. Many of those composers never get a chance to learn that art happens when imagination leads technology, not the other way around, or that the most artificially fertile technology is often the kind that's been gathering dust. New equipment tends to relieve the composer of responsibility by dictating its own use, whereas discarded gadgets offer a free field for creative reinterpretation.

Home Game might turn out to be to computer-generated opera what Perl's *Farbridge* was to regular opera, the experiment that kick-started the genre. Listening, though, makes it apparent that the creative mind faced with a contact mike and a chord organ might come up with something wonderful, while the one determined to integrate 12 types of new software has already accepted, for the sake of some potential future payoff, a certain level of artistic disaster.

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