

# Let Sounds Be Sounds

By Kyle Gann

Tom Hamilton

Ben Manley

Essential Music

Tom Hamilton's *Ejector Room* intriguingly crossed Stockhausen with Steve Reich, omnivorous appropriation with nice-guy mellowness. Hamilton began, December 18 at Experimental Intermedia, by inciting twittering sounds and little out-of-phase bleeps on his analogue synthesizer. One by one, videotaped improvisers appeared on four TV monitors: Michael Pugliese on small percussion, Jon Gibson on sax, David First on electric guitar, then J. D. Parran on alto flute and sax. (Pugliese also played live.) The placement of monitors was symmetrical, but the sonic field wasn't. Pugliese's tinkering blended with the electronics, the saxophones crooned an antiphonal duet, but the growl of First's twanging drones was anomalous. Hamilton has presented *Ejector Room* as a walk-around installation, but here we sat in the middle, soaking up the spatially meandering polyphony.

*Ejector Room*'s ethos was another hybrid, an uneasy mix of improvisation with John Cage's let-sounds-be-sounds aesthetic. Each improviser seemed to play in his own style, perhaps within Hamilton's adjectival guidelines. In particular, Gibson's repeated arabesques reminded me of his music, and First's pitch-bending drones were typically Firstian.

Hamilton had created an open-form counterpoint in which the performers' chance interactions could combine without dissonance or masking, but the playing field wasn't neutral. Once Pugliese's video blipped out before First's entered, you could predict, correctly, that *Ejector Room* would climax, and that the climax would be the one moment in which all four instrumentalists were playing at once. By the time you saw that coming, you were only 15 minutes into the piece, and the climax was still 45 minutes away. It was like figuring out the butler did it in Chapter Two; what do you look for in the next 10 chapters?

Aesthetic absolutes, as Adorno said, do exist. One is that the presence or implication of a climax draws your attention away from sounds as such to the future, to what structural point is coming up. As England's AMM group and a few others have abundantly proved, improvisation can be nonclimaxing and Cagean. Most New York improvisers, though, prefer catharsis, the jazz metaphor of performer-as-hero-summoning-and-releasing-emotion. Since improvisation became pervasive in the '80s, it has often found itself in contexts (Cagean, minimalist, highly structural) in which that metaphor sticks out like a bagpipe in a mandolin quartet. Here, catharsis was heavily sublimated, only a gentle swell three-quarters of the way through an 80-minute piece, but the obviousness of the form was enough to

spark a conflict in your attention: I kept thinking what elaborate microforms *Ejector Room* might have created had it used Cage's rigorous chance methods rather than follow a common European plot.

The real payoff came just after the climax: Parran (on video) turned a lithe jazz solo as Gibson's wooden flute and Hamilton's electronics emitted a racket of bird chirps, a moment whose very gorgeousness clashed with the rest of the piece because it was so well calculated. Hamilton's analogue noises can't quite shake their nostalgia for a predigital era, but he's an imaginative synthesist of gritty textures. *Ejector Room* pushed those textures into the background, making the piece, though pleasant, less satisfying than his usual solo stuff.

Ben Manley's December 10 gig at the same spot went beyond Cagean purity to Fluxus absurdity, even though Manley looks to have been a mere lad during Fluxus's heyday. Low-tech and high-imagination, Manley stepped behind a screen so we couldn't follow his actions, and fire alarm bells began blaring at points around the room. He came out and switched from bells to dog barks through little speakers. He placed weights on keyboards to send raw electronic tones in and out of phase, and, performing on car alarm sirens, re-created the ambience of the Alphabet City apartment I used to live in. Most Fluxus-like of all, he turned on an AM radio and shut



Hamilton: the payoff came after the climax.

C.T. WEMPLE

it up by enclosing it in a mason jar, taking it out occasionally to change channels. We sat listening intently to nothing, enjoying Manley's unpretentious technogames.

Equally unpretentious was Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning*, performed by Essential Music December 12 at the Society for Ethical Culture. In my *Voice* choice, I confused the piece with Cardew's *Treatise*; *Learning* isn't a graphic score, but a detailed instructional work based on sayings of Confucius and written to be performed partly by amateurs. EM's 15-member chorus included composers such as Wendy Chambers, Dary John Mizelle, and Dan Goode as well as other people who don't sing for a living. Following intricate instructions as to when to pause, when to combine sounds with other players, and so

on, the chorus yelled the texts on apparently random pitches, beeped whistles, and hit small objects. Diverse noises were tied together by sustained tones on the Society's organ played by Marsha Long.

Cardew wrote *The Great Learning* because he felt, in 1968-69, that avant-garde music had become elitist; having Mizelle croak your music is about as nonelitist as you can get. Yet despite (or because of) its disdain for professionalism, *Learning* came off as beatifically serene as a Zen Buddhist service, a droning hymn to music intended for only the devout. And only the devout were present. The blizzard that followed the great storm that day turned Manhattan into a swamp and the audience was outnumbered by the performers, making the experience unusually special. ■

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