

David Rosenboom/Trichy Sankaran

Let There Be Noise

By Kyle Gann

Avant-garde music has never gotten credit for an advantage it has over virtually every other type: freed from the demands of stylistic coherency, it's the perfect vehicle for sonic archetypes, a channel for the unconscious. Perhaps that's its ultimate meaning. In illustration, David Rosenboom's *Systems of Judgment*, excerpted April 19 at Merkin Hall, began with thunder. Not a boom, but a resonant, pulsating drone, a divine force whose recurring forward thrust created an air of expectancy that anything might happen. Let there be noise.

And there was noise. Rosenboom, who teaches at Mills College (please don't confuse him with guitarist/composer David Rosenbloom), performed his orchestral epic by himself, with piano, violin, and a tableful of digital gizmos. Talk about power trips. The drone's harmonics flipped restlessly between major and minor, yin and yang. Part two started, the drone gave birth to stochastic rain-thickets, filter-swept winds, and a "Theme of Wonderment" on the violin. This theme—the image of the Subjective Self—played against a marvelously real computerized string section, as calm amid creational chaos as the "contented river" of Ives's "Housatonic at Stock-

bridge." River: there's another archetype Rosenboom caught vividly, the *stream* of consciousness.

The program notes braced me for musical gobbledygook, but they turned out to be worth the effort: "There is a conceptual paradigm which guided the creation of the musical form. It attempts to elucidate parallel views of evolution by examining and speculating about processes which we, any organism, or any system must use to learn to make differentiations, be self-reflexive, and arrive at judgments from which language may be formulated. The counterpoint of the form is conceived in a multidimensional *concept space* linking three views of evolution. The first focuses on an ontogenetic view, the evolution of the individual of a species. Its imagery involves using the idea of the drone, a sonic singularity, to represent birth or the beginning of self-consciousness. . . ."

Rosenboom studied at the University of Illinois; I was educated in the Midwest too, a few years later, so I've read tomes of similar chin music. Until Rosenboom's concert, I had never heard it in the actual music. I attended Rosenboom's lecture at Studio PASS (Public Access Synthesizer Studio) the evening after the concert, and though I was hard put to negotiate his software mazes, he had clearly come up with some multidimen-

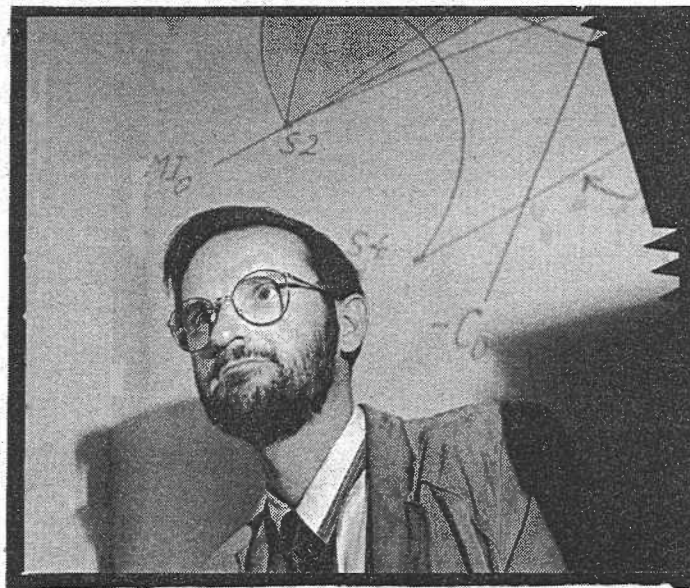
sional ways of characterizing musical processes that make it easy to move between diverse listening experiences. If the satirical [THE] duo exposes the hocus-pocus in '70s conceptualism, *Systems of Judgment* is the payload it was searching for.

Unfortunately, at the concert Rosenboom played only three parts of his seven-movement, 64-minute work, and you could feel that stages were missing. So it's a good thing that the entire piece has come out on a Centaur CD. In a live hearing the noisily climactic

seventh movement finally lost me, but on the CD the piece gains impressive magnitude with clarity. Rosenboom conceptually bridges La Monte Young's primeval tone and the stochastic noise textures of Xenakis. In between, you encounter Scriabinesque piano harmonies, Ivesian layering, African rhythmic articulation, tensely minimalist stasis, joyously wild *Messiah*-like melody, drizzle, storms, limpid pools, mountain climbs, all audibly referring back to that opening thunder. And yet, the framework wraps these into a unified, uncultivated landscape, each terrain just a logical footstep away from the others. The piece sums up the 20th century, and sounds ravishing in the process. Finally there's a CD your whole family can enjoy: the minimalist, the aleatorist, the improviser, the just-intonationist, even that hard-to-please serialist.

Rosenboom shared the Merkin program, part of the World Music Institute's American Music Series, with South Indian *mrdangam* (two-headed, barrel-shaped drum made out of jackwood) virtuoso Trichy Sankaran. Sankaran played two hot solos of progressive rhythmic variation on his drum, one of them accompanied by drones it triggered from Rosenboom's computerized tamboura. Then Sankaran and Rosenboom collaborated on *Layagnanam*, in which the latter's computer echoed and transformed the drum patterns. I couldn't quite hear that this lived up to its program-note claim of analyzing the *mrdangam* patterns well enough to really accompany them. Computer-improv systems range between two extremes: one at which the electronics echo the instrument in a mickey mouse manner, the other at which the computer's transformations long ago lost any audible relation to the instrument. For now, anything well in the middle must be counted success, and *Layagnanam*, occupying that middle, was fun enough to listen to.

And another Rosenboom-conceptual improv, *Is Art Is* played on piano and *mrdangam*, spun jazzy circles on superfast irregular rhythmic patterns, Sankaran outlining Rosenboom's ostinatos in cliff-hanging unison. It brought the house down, and showed that Rosenboom has more tricks up his sleeve (including dazzling finger technique) than a small sampling of his work would suggest. But it was *Systems of Judgment* that seemed to fulfill a dozen 20th century promises at once, the most *intellectual*—in all good senses of the word—new work I've heard in a long, long time. ■



Power tripper Rosenboom

KRIS MCKAY

BANG ON A CAN FESTIVAL