

# Life After Minimalism

By Kyle Gann

## Bang on a Can

The music press has been smugly announcing the Death of Minimalism. Anyone who's followed the Bang on a Can festival since its inception in 1987 knows that minimalism never died, but rather evolved via a logical, bloodless revolution into New Tonality, New Formalism, Postminimalism. It's a worldwide movement whose simple premises—a limited pitch spectrum, rhythms from world traditions, gradual textural processes—allow for an immense variety of personal styles. Should we just call it *Bang Music*? Every spring Boac showcases the movement's latest developments. Here are some of this year's highlights, heard May 12 through 17.

**Daniel Lentz:** Lentz, once a textbook postminimalist, broke from the pack this year with a complex, amazing, and ultimately sleazy work called *Talk Radio*. Listening to a clicktrack over headphones, the string players, percussionists, and conductor (Kevin Stalheim) of the Present Music ensemble made incredibly suave textural and tempo shifts: boppy patterns switching in midphrase to languid tones, rock rhythms, classical tunes, with a series of background quotations ranging from a classical quartet to Steve Reich's *Clapping Music*. The '80s improvisers often aimed (without looking) at live-performed collage technique,

but here, synchronized by click-track, the moods flowed like a steady run of inspirations and sobering thoughts. It was the most gratifying musical stream of consciousness since Berio's *Sinfonia*.

However, if the piece's technique was brilliant, its premise stank. Singer/speaker/actress Jessica Karraker cracked stale L.A. jokes ("only free parking is on the freeways"), applied lipstick, poured herself coffee, exercised her innocent pop soprano, stripped to her two tiniest garments, and showed much leg. I'm all for sex as a new-music marketing tool, but in this case the cheesecake and the intricate texture changes shorted each other out. *Talk Radio* was the fest's most exciting piece and its most adolescent.

**Rocco di Pietro:** Boac found this guy teaching music in Columbus, Ohio, prisons. In *Three Black American Folk Songs*, John Halle rippled nearly inaudible piano patterns, Evan Ziporyn crooned lightly on sax, and rich-voiced Pam Smith sang a soulful wordless chant with occasional song snatches, all over a taped assemblage of breathy or metallic tones. The layers weren't closely coordinated, but they complemented each other with a calm, natural beauty that honored di Pietro's sources. Moving toward a different type of collage, it showed postminimalism's versatility by moving beyond the usual rhythmic and formal grids, and also Boac's open-mindedness in recognizing

brand-new currents.

**Tania Leon:** The New Tonality was mellowier this year than last. Cuban-born Tania Leon's bristling *Ritual* for piano was the most conspicuously nonwimpy offering, departing from her more usually expressionist idiom by articulating dissonant harmonies in savage rhythmic patterns. The piano shook as Clemens Leske hit notes all over the keyboard with precision-hammer blows.

**Kazue Sawai Koto Ensemble:** One augury of postminimalism's future success is that, in this age of the performer, it's created a new performance style of rhythmic ensemble virtuosity. Without even glancing at each other, Kazue Sawai's 11 koto players strummed and plucked a wild dance over a pulsating background in 7/4 meter; this was *Genka* by Ichiro Higo. The other large ensemble piece, Tadao Sawai's *Futatsu no gun no tameni*, thundered from time to time with beats on the kotos' wooden bodies. The audience got a visible charge both times, not only from the hair-raising ensemble technique, but from the fact that each work outlined clear forms by bringing back earlier themes at thrilling moments, a revived sonata ploy. There are psychological reasons why sonata form hit big with audiences in the 1780s. Postminimalism is open to the idea.

**Piano Duo:** Tennis champs of the keyboard, Holland's Cees van



Jessica Karraker in *Talk Radio*, an exciting piece

Zeeland and Gerard Bouwhuis bounced sonorities back and forth so speedily that their playing transcended their repertoire. Jeffrey Brooks's *Composition for Two Pianos*, written for them, offered the same motoric energy that Steve Martland's *Drill* had in their hands four years ago. The Duo's two-piano arrangement of Louis Andriessen's orchestra piece *De Staat* made it sound even more obviously like *Le Sacre*, suggesting an attempt to graft postminimalism onto an abandoned neoclassic tradition. Throughout the week, *Die Staat*, *Genka*, *Lerchenmusik* by Poland's Henryk Gorecki, and a smoothly modal string quartet by Estonia's Erkki Sven Tüür suggested that minimalism's influence has infiltrated every corner of the industrial world (except Germany). Piano Duo's flash justified their selections, but there's a danger to organizing the fest around performers. Robert Black's contrabass solos—except for Michael Gordon's *Paint It Black*, the only piece to take ad-

vantage of the instrument's imposing physicality—made a dull bunch despite stellar readings.

**Alison Cameron:** Her *Blank Sheet of Metal* for guitars, keyboards, percussion, tuba, and contrabass clicked along gamelanlike over sustained, muted dissonances. On the surface it was typical Boac fare, but it suggested a diversity of simultaneous time frames. Drums and guitars pulsed at different tempos, bearings rolled in steel drums against the metronomic percussion, and staccato chords separated by silences spelled out the Fibonacci series. (From the side, I saw the conductor counting 5, 8, 13, 21, 34.) A final melody for unison guitars returned us safely to European musical time. The silences were awkward and the piece needed polish, but Cameron's Nancarrowian love of tempo experimentation was another unexpected direction. At this year's Boac, postminimalism was no longer a goal, but a springboard. ■

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