

**O** *di et amo*. That sums up my relationship with downtown. Deep down, I believe that the *real* intellectual force of new music lies downtown; that the mere technical rigor of that Potemkin village of the mind called uptown is fake intellectualism, and that downtown's aesthetic exploration constitutes a more profound expression. Most of the time. Then there are moments when I blush for downtown's simpleminded solutions, its lack of adventurousness, its failure to follow ideas to their conclusions; nights when I lie in bed and wonder how I could shake downtown into living up to its potential. "The thought of what downtown would be like," I moan, echoing Ezra Pound, "if *discipline* enjoyed a wider application. It troubles my sleep." It really does.

By any standard, the winter-spring 1988 season was a dream. Still, there's no silver lining so bright I can't find the cloud, and I have a few cantankerous complaints and unprovoked slurs that I didn't get to use earlier because of all the fantastic concerts I was forced to gush over. In short, I'm cleaning out my files for the summer.

**M**ost urgently, New York's going through an epidemic of ostinatoitis. At half the concerts I went to, the music was based on ostinatos—repeating figures forming a background to improvisation or whatever. Carman Moore put them behind his exquisite chord sequences, Joshua Fried glossed humorously over a dozen-odd-foot tape loops, Michael Gordon spiced his up with weird rhythms, Carl Stone added and subtracted beats to avoid predictability, and Elodie Lauten just released an ostinato-laden CD. April 23 at Kraine, Tom Guralnick layered loops of sax sounds with one of those ubiquitous foot-operated sampling devices. (They should be outlawed before they render composers unable to think; I even see them used by musicians in Indian restaurants.) Luckily, Guralnick's loops were loud and long enough to merge into a thick drone, for which the rest of his sax improv merely provided an enlivening background; this was a classic Cagean case where, had the



Guralnick / Arditti Quartet /  
Schroeder

# Loving/Hating Downtown

BY KYLE GANN

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any real sense.

May 20, the only night I could attend, I heard Philip Glass's *1+1*, scored for fingers tapping on an ordinary table, and John Cage's 60-minute *Sonatas and Interludes* for equal-tempered piano prepared with objects that added buzzes and noise, but no microtones. Pushing the concept of alternate tunings into the public consciousness with a week-long festival is a fantastic idea, and I wish it every continued success. But it was not the moment to redefine microtonality to an extreme of vacuity, to include noise and indefinite sounds; might as well throw in Berlioz's "March to the Scaffold" for the sake of the bass drum.

**N**othing is so little understood as the generation preceding your own. The Downtown Ensemble's attempt to keep the '60s alive just as it was, sans revisionism, is the kind of quixotic gesture that steals my heart away. April 7 at the Greenwich House Music School, the ensemble gave a quick history lesson on old (older than they seemed, anyway) graphic scores: they interpreted shapes in Philip Corner's *Air Effects*, dots and letters in Robert Ashley's *Quartet*, a jumble of musical and verbal notations in James Tenney's *Ergodos*, and numbers in boxes in Feldman's *Intersection*. Except for Gavin Bryars's *Mr. Sunshine*, which funneled a small number of random keyboard melodies into a gorgeous continuum, the main thing these languid, directionless works had in common was their conduciveness to unspeakable boredom, an aspect of the '60s often forgotten by revisionists.

The music let the ensemble down, not vice versa. The problem is that it used to be *dangerous* to play this music, and nothing's dangerous anymore. You can reproduce the sounds, the clothes, the militant casualness, even the incense (they didn't), but you can't reproduce the decade's collective feeling that a huge crack had suddenly appeared in the history of music. We live with that crack now, and take snapshots over the precipice like jaded tourists. These facts make the Downtown Ensemble's efforts all the more heroic. Their refusal to let up on this repertoire is the aesthetic equivalent to the Vietnam memorial dance line in

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I'm always arguing with uptowners that downtown musicians are plying more exciting ideas and techniques. Then I go to Soho and hear composer after composer hung up on music's most trivial device. I realize collective attention these days is on technology, but I can't believe we've been through serialism, stochastic processes, linguistic analogies, game theory, information overload, moment form, mobiles, collages, drones, microtones, minimalism, conceptualism, all to end up worshipping a 17th century toss-off, the repeating ditty. If we've truly made peace with the past, why not resurrect other treasures: variation form, tone rows, progressive thematic development, fugue (why don't people write fugues anymore, because it's hard?), even sonata form? Otherwise, I may have to start using the nearly unlimited power conferred upon me by the *Voice* to slap stiff penalties on second- and third-offense loop abusers.

No matter how brilliantly they're used, ostinatos are a cheap means of continuity, the lowest rung of compositional difficulty. As for repetition in general, Schoenberg, in his essay on Brahms, said the last word anyone ever needs to say on the subject: "Evenness, regularity, symmetry, subdivision, repetition, unity, relationship in rhythm and harmony and even logic—none of these elements produces or even contributes to beauty. But all of them contribute to an organization which makes the presentation of the musical idea intelligible." To the extent that ostinatos promote clarity, they're welcome, but when they merely fill in gaps between ideas, it's time to get along without them.

# DOWNTOWN

BY KYLE GANN

**C**irca 1973 it became difficult to track European developments, and though the information flow has resumed somewhat, an accurate picture remains elusive. England's Arditti Quartet gave incredible performances in eight American cities (I heard them in three), but I couldn't help feeling that their European programming was condescending. They played superb American works: Leroy Jenkins's *Input* (February 28 at Merkin Hall) was scored with refreshing disregard for the traditions of quartet-writing, Ralph Shapey's granitic 1965 *Trio* (March 12 in Chicago) sounded as if it were written yesterday, and a *rehearsal* of John Cage's serenely Thoreauvian *Music for Four* at Middletown melted me in my seat. But their European offerings—works by Ligeti, Ferneyhough, Rihm, and a noisy bag of effects by Xenakis—seemed designed to "catch us up with serialism," as though we weren't ready for whatever new, more accessible currents that are now rinsing the continent.

The Arditti's 400-work repertoire includes pieces by less conventional composers such as Gavin Bryars, John Buller, Alfred Schnittke, and Ivan Wjnschnegradsky, and as much as I admire the intricacy of Brian Ferneyhough's fragile abstractions, an update on new concepts would have been more enlightening than hearing the latest wrinkles in the old serialist shtick. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's May 22 concert by Vladimir Feltsman and others of the music of Alfred Schnittke contained some wonderful music in a less overworked style, crowned by the world premiere in Feltsman's impassioned hands of a new piano sonata. Schnittke's music "reverts" to a romantic atmosphere, but it's intelligently written, always original, and undercuts its more nostalgic gestures with a counterintuitive chromaticism. The problem with it at present is that it's perceived in America more for what it's not; Schnittke plays into the clutches of mandarin sensibil-

ities that are eager to hear composers concede that modernism was a mistake, that they've learned their lesson and will behave from now on. If there's anything composers should regret, it's good behavior.

Leave it to downtown to provide the season's best view of Europe: Swiss pianist Marianne Schroeder at Roulette February 28. The works she played by Dieter Schnebel, Walter Zimmermann, Hans Otte, Arvo Part, and young English composer Chris Newman painted a conti-

## MUSIC

nent bristling with ideas, accessible, often process-based, and challenging. Sadly, she had to cancel recent pieces by Morton Feldman because of the substandard pedal workings of Roulette's grand piano, and her fiery performance was repeatedly interrupted by outside noises and a neighbor's stereo. When such a pianist has to make the one New York performance of her American tour under such conditions, you have to wonder if New York is really four Clevelands sewn together.

**T**he American Festival of Microtonal Music, May 14 to 21 at La Mama La Galleria and Greenwich House, was downtown at its most quintessentially exciting and quintessentially misled. Players assembled by Johnny Reinhard premiered important works: early Harry Partch, Giacinto Scesli's *Maknongan*, the Toccata for cello of Ben Johnston, an ensemble work by the neglected microtonal master Julian Carrillo. Unfortunately for the perception of microtones, few works used more than one or two instruments, pointing up once again downtown's desperate need for an all-purpose ensemble like Philadelphia's Relache. Worse, the festival was diluted with pieces that weren't microtonal in

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**M**ore in the "Wasn't That a Time?" department: I always knew Beat poetry would make a comeback, I just knew it. The attempt to fuse confessional/social-crit poetry with jazz was never quite successful, but the idea was too haunting to leave alone. Sure enough, April 23 at Kraine's "Ceci n'est pas un voix" festival, contrabassist Paul Rogers fiddled while Sibyl Madrigal burned in impassioned poems about war (apparently not very nice), sex (holy), her menstrual cycle (don't call it unclean), and other timely topics. Rogers, obviously expert on his instrument, hit the end peg with his bow, covered the strings with aluminum foil, and generally played the old out-of-control gambit, the common conceit being that passion is conveyed by transgressing the "rules" in a wild frenzy. (Every good jazzer and classical pianist knows, though few avant-improvisors do, that the impression of virtuosity is created by *staying* in control, not by losing it.) Madrigal spat out her acerbic comments with sultry, antiestablishmentarian sincerity, and even prepared in advance against a negative review (I quote from memory: "I am a bad poet/Confessional, the worst kind/I lay myself naked before the public, the critics.../I terrify them"). It was pure Beat, without a shred of postmodern irony to mar the illusion.

What took my breath away was that, afterward, the woman in front of me enthused to her boyfriend, "They're so innovative, it's unreal!" Is there *anything* too naïve for New York to take seriously? Is there anything so ancient that downtown won't claim credit for its invention? ■