

La Monte Young recently played me a tape of his Five Pieces for String Quartet, an early work. I admired the fact that all five movements were nearly identical in mood, tempo, and harmony. Young laughed. "Contrast," he explained, "is for people who can't write music." That's this column's official new motto.

Not needing contrast, Young eventually arrived at a rhetorical model with a venerable history: do one thing and sustain it. That model lies at the root of European music, but as Pascal noted, most people are unable to sit still. The model that evolved in Europe was nicely stated by Beethoven: start at zero, go somewhere, come back. By comparison, most aboriginal music, American Indian song in particular, inverts that pattern: begin at maximum energy and fade to inactivity. Dane Rudhyar theorized that this harnessed the powers of the gods, bringing them down to man's level; Europeans preferred to build their own way to heaven.

Similarly, Charles Ives turned the classical model on its head. In the *Concord Sonata* he began at maximum complexity and worked toward the essential. The classical model assumes an omniscient narrator who knows what he's going to say. Ives, however, followed the dynamic of conversation, an argument, throwing a network of questionably related ideas together with the faith that in their clash and clamor Truth would eventually emerge. The end of *Concord's* "Alcotts" movement sounds like that moment in which a man suddenly realizes how all the things he said a half-hour ago fit together. With "Thoreau," doubt returns.

The arrival of a new rhetorical model for music is a rare and exciting event. Morton Feldman invented one in his late works, those lasting 90 minutes and more. Now that he's dead the pieces have suddenly become available (why does America work this way?), and last month New York heard all three of Feldman's long works for a trio of flute, piano, and percussion. At a March 11 memorial concert, Susan Rotholz, Paul Hoffman, and

Morton Feldman/

Rhys Chatham/Anthony Coleman

Mottos and Models

BY KYLE GANN



Rhys Chatham's March 26 concert at Experimental Intermedia was touted as his return to New York (he lives in Paris). Chatham's earlier pieces for multiple electric guitars had stripped minimalism, that already stripped-down style, into even greater austerity—a sound, a beat, a volume. A large, curious crowd gathered to hear how he would follow the act, and few were disappointed. In *Manifeste*, Chatham intoned simple melodies on muted trumpet over a well-synthesized computer-percussion accompaniment, carefully adjusting his tuning to the computer's drone. Behind him was a seemingly motionless image of the Eiffel Tower—actually a series of slides that changed from day to night so slowly that it took a while to notice the effect.

What excited me about *Manifeste* was how well Chatham had used his earlier work as a base to build on. The interest in tuning and rock beat was still apparent, but much was added. The percussion occasionally went haywire, adding little blips and tones extraneous to the key, then bursting into chaotic improv. Like Europe's postserialists, Chatham integrated extremes of control and uncontrol, but unlike them he fluctuated in a way that was human, intuitive, and always entertaining. Through the vicissitudes, the form remained clear, Chatham returning each time to his four-bar phrases, making a model in between song-form and meditation. My favorite movement of the five was the flattest, a deadpan blip against which Chatham played only C and G. Chatham doesn't need contrast either.

Manifeste reminded me of movies like *Raising Arizona* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*. These films, after two decades of nonlinear atmosphere and character exposition, refocused on plot. Movies are the 20th century's collective consciousness barometer, a function music fulfilled in the early 19th century, and there's a change in the air. I predict that, in the 1990s, plot will resurface at the center of music; that is, memory of what has already happened in a composition will be important for understanding what's ahead. This is what Feldman's late and

America work this way?); and last month New York heard all three of Feldman's long works for a trio of flute, piano, and percussion. At a March 11 memorial concert, Susan Rotholz, Paul Hoffman, and Tom Goldstein of Gageego performed the 90-minute *Crippled Symmetry*. On March 29, Barbara Held, Nils Vigeland, and Michael Pugliese of the Bowery Ensemble performed *Why Patterns?* (30 minutes), and the same evening the S.E.M. Ensemble's Petr Kotik, Joseph Kubera, and Chris Nappi played *For Philip Guston*, his second-longest work, at Paula Cooper Gallery. I left the memorial concert to hear Anthony Coleman, and *Why Patterns?* to hear *Guston*. Among the 65-plus people who gathered to hear the latter, I was among the dozen or so who lasted the entire four hours and 46 minutes.

Not surprisingly, given Feldman's connections to Guston, Pollock, and Rothko, this rhetorical model's metaphors are artworld-related. One is the mobile. Feldman's associate Earle Brown had attempted musical mobiles in the '60s, but listening to a Brown module piece is like looking at a photo of a Calder. Only on repeat performances does the movement become perceptible. In *Crippled Symmetry* and *For Philip Guston*, Feldman floated short repeating motives in timeless suspension, and captured the movement perfectly. Every time the flutist repeated the motive (whole-step resolutions—like the *ewig* from *Das Lied von der Erde*—in *Guston*, permutations of an angular four-note melody in *Symmetry*), its relation to accompanying motives in the piano and vibraphone shifted slightly. Buoyed by S.E.M.'s meditative concentration, one heard the impression of a suspended sonority slowly revolving.

Guston sounded less like music than aural public sculpture. One reason was mere scale, since the piece was too large to take in as a unit; you had to listen from *within*. The comparison with Young's *Well-Tuned Piano* (only a few minutes longer) is telling. Young's forms progress gradually, and are best served by sustained focus, but *Guston's* progression was nonlinear, with little compulsion to follow the train of thought. Rather, the



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mind wandered in and out of the changing forms, and, like the elephant's blind men, everyone present inevitably got a different feel for the work.

Another metaphor is the museum. In Young's *W.-T. P.*, variety is a surface illusion: ultimately the tuning melts everything into one tremendous twang. But *Guston* moved. It did so without contrast, for the expectations contrast creates would have destroyed the timelessness. (It's a nice musical paradox that the longer the piece, the less contrast it can handle. Listen to how flat Beethoven's longest movements are, the Adagio from the *Hammerklavier* or the hymn from the *A-minor Quartet*.) Unlike the *W.-T. P.*, *Guston* made me scared to leave for fear I'd miss something totally unexpected. Like the *Concord Sonata*, *Guston* divided into passages of prose (unstructured repetition) and poetry (the vibraphone's excruciatingly pretty *ostinati*). In each part you'd hear a repertoire of sonorities, and then the piece would wander to a new set, as calmly as walking from one room of paintings to another. There were clearly marked transitions, like hallways, where the music would momentarily reduce to three or four chromatically consecutive pitches. Every hour or so, Nappi tapped a series of sextuplets on the marimba, and you felt as though you had reentered a room you'd already seen.

In an essay called "Crippled Symmetry," Feldman remembers his teacher Stefan Wolpe persistently asking him "why I did not develop my ideas but went from one thing to another." *Guston* fits that bill, but to leave it at that is too simplistic. True, Feldman was an avowed

MUSIC

enemy of ideas in music. (Once a student shouted to him "You're full of shit!" and Feldman shot back "So what are you full of? Ideas?") But unless one is forced to resort to contrast (and Feldman *could* write music), one hardly writes a five-hour work for three players without developing *something*, and *Guston* offered a breathtaking development of images. It opened with all three players nonsynchronously intoning a C G A-flat E-flat motive (I don't possess perfect pitch, so I make up pitch levels); 85 minutes later that motive returned, but played in three different keys. The *idea* remained the same, but the *image* marvelously diffracted into a dozen muted colors.

If Young's sense of time is a *rediscovered* sense, one that might have been accessible to Eastern or ancient peoples, Feldman's is entirely new, inspired by painting, but hardly duplicative of visual experience. The inconceivable thing is that any critic could have ever formed the misconception that Feldman was repeating himself, simply because all his music is soft. The journey from the squiggles of his early graph music to the stasis of the *Durations* series, to the lush sonorities of the early '70s orchestral works, to the prickly, ruglike textures of *Spring of Chosroes*, to the mobile form of the endless late chamber works—besides Cage, Stockhausen, and Beethoven, what other composer's personal voyage isn't dwarfed by such an odyssey?

change in the air. I predict that, in the 1990s, *plot* will resurface at the center of music; that is, memory of what has already happened in a composition will be important for understanding what's ahead. This is what Feldman's late and Chatham's recent work, otherwise so disparate, have in common. It's good to see Chatham, who's proved he's no one-idea composer, at the head of that movement.

Also at Experimental Intermedia: Anthony Coleman's *By Night*, performed by a quartet March 11, seemed based on an Ivesian model, layering different musics. Guy Klucsevsek on accordion and Doug Weiselman on clarinet played mournful Balkan folksongs, while Coleman on synths drifted into his own atonal musings and drummer James Pugliese followed along with punctuation. At times a fetching sense of distance was evoked, as the soft folksongs emanated from a different perceptual space than Coleman's introspective figures. I admired the music's impulse; it had things to do and did them. Unfortunately, what those things were never quite became clear.

In *Ethnic Slurs/Critical Lists* at New Music America '87, Coleman had disparate instruments (synth, harp, piano, accordion) playing similar material, and the effect was gorgeous. Here, he had ever more disparate instruments playing contrasting lines, and to make them sound as though they belonged in the same piece would have been challenge enough. As it was, Pugliese hadn't been given enough information to know how to fit in, and Coleman seemed off in his own world. This was an orchestration problem, the kind that arises when a composer conceives a piece, then looks around to see what instruments he has available: in *By Night*, an orchestral collage trying to make do with a jazz quartet. Feldman would have told Coleman to start with the instruments.

By Night contained beautiful spots, but it wasn't clear enough for me to feel I was reading its intentions correctly. As Feldman loved to remind us, Stendahl kept on his desk a sign that read "To be clear at all costs." That's this column's *unofficial* motto—unofficial, because it's so damned difficult to live up to.