

Future Twang

The orchestra of the future would do well to have the electric guitar as a backbone. Its advantages over classical strings are impressive. Violins and cellos basically offer two modes, bowed and pizzicato. Electric guitars offer three: plucked, sustained with E-bow, and strummed, an effect more sustainable than violin tremolo because the amplification burs and softens attacks. Glissandos are easier to pull off in tune on electric guitars, because one guitar is loud enough to substitute for many violins, who have trouble glissandoing in unison. And the E-bow provides a neutral, attackless, and versatile timbre.

Add to the core of electric guitars MIDI woodwinds, synthesizers, samplers, steel pedal bass guitar, CD players, and trap sets, and you've got an ensemble more fitted for American aesthetics (and more economical) than the blended SATB sections of the European orchestra. If no one is yet writing for such an ensemble, someone should be.

—K.G.

Music Writ Large

Wharton Tiers Ensemble,
Blastula, Phil Kline
Context Studios, January 12

BY KYLE GANN

who compose for it seem to think in easy-to-count eight-beat units, a habit in danger of becoming a cliché. These were especially present in Wharton Tiers's

No longer the exclusive domain of Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham, the electric guitar orchestra is here to stay. Branca's ensemble has spawned a number of similar groups who, however, sound no more like him than Berlioz does like Mozart. And when three of those groups—the Wharton Tiers Ensemble, Blastula, and Phil Kline's Orchestra of the Lower East Side—performed very different gigs at Context Studios on the same night, it became obvious that the electric guitar choir is now just another medium, flexible and open to a wide range of personalities. What the groups do have in common is inherent in the instrument: the electric guitar writes music large. It is conducive to subtlety, but not detail. Webern or Debussy writing for massed Fender basses is unthinkable.

And so guitar-orchestra music tends toward a Brucknerian sense of scale, with glacially paced harmonic changes, motives repeated in groups of four or more, and ascending melodies that climax with spine-chilling gradualness. Because of the instrument's home in rock, those



Blastula: leading the medium where they want it to go

music, whose broad melodies turned dissonant at odd corners, but whose rhythms (drum-driven, unlike the oth-

er two ensembles) rarely strayed from a rock 4/4. The group's fourth piece was the most ambitious, with anxious tritones in the melody and a passage of 7/4 meter. Toward the end, the music slipped into a cheery, repetitive, Beach Boys-like chord progression, analogous to the rustic folk tunes Haydn and Beethoven threw into their fourth movements to lighten up at the last minute. Century after century, archetypal musical impulses return.

Of the evening's composers, only John Myers of Blastula led the medium where he wanted it to go, rather than follow its tendencies of least resistance. His pieces were the subtlest: brief forms, minimalist repetitions, mild but unresolving dissonance, nicely sculpted contrapuntal images. His *Perception*, in gentle 5/4 meter, offered melodies plucked slowly like large bells, and his quick-strumming *Rapture* was convincingly bitonal, with an ecstatic seventh-chord melody over a drone in a different key. In *Dive*, he pitted slow glissandos against each other, an effect that David First has explored more systematically for years.

Likewise based on the creeping glissando, at much greater length, was Phil Kline's *Symphony No. 2* for nine guitars, *The Unbecoming* (it was hard to tell whether the title was meant as pejorative or ontological statement). Either the players had memorized their notes or they were choosing pitches within prearranged limits; for Kline conducted freely with hand gestures, Earle Brown-style, setting tempos for pulsations and pitch-sweeps. The technique made for juicy textures, but disallowed the elegant structural sense Kline gets with his music for multiple cassette players.

Professors want you to believe that music drawn in such bold lines doesn't have as much prestige as the intricate detail of a Milton Babbitt, but that's a complete fiction. Within a given musical language, scale is immaterial. It's why academia has never warmed up to Bruckner, who knew more about how to project an idea to an audience than Webern knew there was to know. Composers who write for massed electric guitars have that projection built in, and with so many finding such varied strategies, the genre will soon pass from Downtown oddity to acknowledged classical medium. ❖

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