

# Nerves and Blood

By Kyle Gann

Elodie Lauten  
Charles Wood  
Dary John Mizelle  
The Kitchen

Everyone knows John Cage's story about the anechoic chamber, the hermetically soundproofed room. Cage went inside and heard, instead of the silence he expected, two continuous hums, one high, one low. He inquired and found that the high sound was his nervous system in operation; the low one his blood in circulation.

That could be what Elodie Lauten was searching for in her October 12 performance at La Mama's La Galleria, the "Soundless Sound." For 45 minutes, we heard two high, thin tones alternating a whole step apart. Several octaves below hummed a soft drone. Once in a while the tones paused, then came back at different pitches. In one section, Lauten breathed into a microphone, during another pianissimo scale patterns swooped up and down. New tones crept in without my noticing. A video of hexagonal shapes flickered behind Lauten, and though the exploding snowflakes repeated their configurations, I couldn't convince myself that the video actually looped, though I tried for a long time.

This was the most beautiful yet of Lauten's attempts to externalize the sound she hears during meditation. I'm too much a Zen novice to vouch for those hums myself, and if this was a portrait



LONA FOOTE

Mizelle: the master of unusual timbre

of the drones I once heard in an anechoic chamber, it was highly poeticized. No matter; Lauten's wisps cry out for CD and the intimacy of home listening.

The same hyperminimalism permeated Charles Wood's *Time Is Change*, October 20 at the Brecht Forum, though he seemed more intent on disintegrating his nervous system than describing it. (A tiny crowd; good music gets played at La Galleria and the Brecht Forum, but audiences can't be enticed.) Wood and three other percussionists—Maya Gunji, Eric Kivnick, Michael Pugliese—hit big, round granite stones together at a steady clip for 50 minutes. The early '70s redux, you might have said, only no predictable process was evident. Instead, playful pattern-clouds appeared and vanished, involving canons, number rhythms, alterna-

tion between players, extended steady-eighth-note solos. The piece's inner strategy would shyly emerge, then vanish to reappear in disguise minutes later, re-creating Feldman's aesthetic in a style his own mother wouldn't recognize. The medium had the pedestrian concreteness of the '70s, but the message had a soft '90s mysticism.

What wowed the crowd was the group's split-second precision in intricate hocketing. Afterward there was rock dust all over the players' legs, and they looked like they needed arm massages. Gotta sacrifice for art.

At the same concert, underrated late-midcareer conceptualist Dary John Mizelle made less exhausting demands. In *Earth* from his "Soundscape" series, players rubbed sandpaper, and struck noises on clay pots and ceramic

doodads, while Mizelle's son rolled a marble at the bottom of a clay vase throughout. Mizelle's central shakuhachi (Japanese wooden flute) solo was theatrically accompanied by rocks banged in near unison ostinatos from the corners of the room. Rhythms were pointillistic, sometimes measured, sometimes chaotic. Similarly, *Glass* involved soft mallet tremolos on glass bowls and wetted fingers on goblet rims, while Mizelle moaned on trumpet in memory of Miles Davis.

Though Mizelle's aesthetic is Midwest-'70s Webernesque in origin, in this era of ubiquitous electronics he comes across as the live acoustic revival of *musique concrète*. The homely richness of his clay/glass tinkles remind you with a shock of how limited a sonic repertoire we acquiesce to when we filter everything through digital circuits and loudspeakers. There's a canyonlike rift between conceptualism and sensuousness in his thinking, and his more austere pieces leave you wondering what convoluted thought process was going on. But when he delves, as in his "Soundscapes," into the grittiness of common materials, he's the sensuous flip side of James Tenney; both rigorous, Tenney's the master of unusual logic, Mizelle the master of unusual timbre.

Reviewing benefit concerts is hardly cricket. But the three-night marathon that began on Halloween in honor of the Kitchen's 20th birthday had historical interest as a fast-forwarded recap of the space's history. Older composers were better represented; the Kitchen was defined in its heyday by association with Soho-ers who

played their own music, composers (Meredith Monk, Robert Ashley) whose performance style was their music. Inertia has kept the Kitchen focused on that type, although the best music has moved away from it. Inability to acknowledge that gives the space its aura of faded glory.

Nevertheless, Rhys Chatham's ear is as savvy now as it was when he began programming the Kitchen in 1971, and as curator of this binge he found a line between representing history and featuring the best younger composers. The funniest surprise of the two nights I heard was Michael Gordon's *Close 2U*, a new setting of the Carpenters' lyrics. "On the day when you were born," deadpanned Gordon into the mike, then his singers bounced that line around over minimalist synthesizer chords. Lois Vierk was a welcome representative of the new downtowners who write ensemble music, in a piece thrashed out with energizing vigor by A Cloud Nine Ensemble. Chatham's own *Souvenirs d'Enfance* for flutes sounded as though living in Paris had finally brought him into the Boulez fold. And David Behrman charmed us by warming his hands over a green lantern, while his gloves, studded with light sensors, drew luscious plucked arpeggios when he waved.

Strangest event: Tony Conrad aired a two-decades-old vendetta by chanting a diatribe, intentionally obscured via a vocoder. What came through was, over and over, "I believe that La Monte Young wants me to die without hearing my music." Before it was over I was ready for Conrad to die without me hearing any more of his music. ■

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DUII SDECTOD

# Dangerous.