

# Noise Is Not Enough

By Kyle Gann

Visual Sonic

Ben Neill

We heard Yoshiaki Ochi before we saw him. Over and over, from behind a huge white curtain, came "clack... clack... clack," in three different pitches: C on the right, A in the middle, G on the left. Ochi and two other Tokyo percussionists, Yoshihisa Ochi (his brother) and Yukio Tsuji, emerged tapping wood blocks, while Ochi also blew mournfully on a high-pitched whistle. They seemed to be testing the acoustics of La MaMa's Annex Theater, for the reverberation increased, and breathing sounds began to emanate from speakers on the sides. Sticks of wood and drums of all sizes littered the stage, ropes strung with wind chimes reached to the ceiling, and the percussionists, like the stage, were dressed in white. Mari Azuma, however, was in black, entering from the audience with a large lily. This was Ochi's theater-music piece *Visual Sonic*, which I heard November 20.

From one wall hung a pair of strings supporting a series of irregularly shaped bars of wood—a flexible, random-pitched xylophone, in effect—descending to the pile of sticks on the floor. The Ochi brothers struck the sticks, then the xylophone, with mallets. You would have expected a kind of desultory, random noise, but despite the unevenness of the ma-

terials, they tossed lightning-quick rhythmic motives back and forth, letting the randomness of the sticks translate their movements into more complex pitch patterns than they could have planned. Meanwhile, Tsuji played rhythmic motives with drops in an amplified bucket of water. Before he had finished, the Ochis had moved to African mbiras (thumb pianos) and were sweeping arpeggios across them that sounded anything but African. Volume and timbre were constantly in transition.

*Visual Sonic* started with what looked to be a collection of clichés from the '70s, then transcended them through energy and inventive musicianship. Sure, this was a Japanese sound-world, with the kind of earthy, natural noises and spare textures Tan Dun also uses. But when the Ochis and Tsuji began their virtuoso drumming, they borrowed African and Arabic techniques as much as anything Asian and kept up an intense three-way dialogue that was never simple echoing. Even Ochi's high-pitched whistling underwent motivic transformation.

Interestingly, I had heard New York drummer James Pugliese the previous night at Roulette. Pugliese played hot drum duos and trios with Christine Bard and Michael Evans, each banging rhythms off the other with split-second coordination. But while Pugliese's music made me notice his virtuosity, *Visual Sonic* drew my attention to the power of well-

timed drumming to marshal a space's acoustics. Lots of people have "gotten into" natural noises, but noise for its own sake wasn't Ochi's point. The '70s were about sound, the '80s were about maximum money for minimum effort, but the more spiritual '90s are about shaping sound for deep psychic effect. What Ochi sought, and found, was resonance: the resonance of the room, of the echoes, of the cumulative drumbeats, and of the diverse cultural references.

Ben Neill's *Schizetudes*, which he played November 20 at Roulette, are truly schizophrenic. His invention, the mutantrumpet, has three mouthpieces with different timbres and computerized effects; each can interrupt the others, so that a different buzz is always cutting in midmelody. In Groningen, Holland, I heard him play a *Schizetude* based on the letters A, I, D, and S. At the end, the sound disappeared from his trumpet and reappeared, ghostly and reverberant, from the back of the stage. It was an apt metaphor that took you by surprise.

Roulette, however, isn't large enough for dramatic spatial effects, so the *Schizetudes* were less impressive here than Neill's newer works for mutantrumpet and computer. *678 Streams* was based on the numbers 6, 7, and 8, totalistically interpreted not only as rhythmic proportions but pitch ratios. (6:7:8 comes out G, B-flat, C, with the B-flat a little flatter than usual.) That intrigues egg-



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Sticks, no stones: Visual Sonic

heads like me, but the more visceral effect was a rich, rippling texture in the computer background that matched the complex, geometric slides by Jim Conti projected across the performing space. After a while I could no longer tell how the computer was drawing arpeggio streams from Neill's changing drone notes, nor, once the computerized drumbeat started up, how its evolving patterns were derived from 6, 7, and 8 (though I could enjoy the dissonant half-step clashes between the different overtone series). That's what totalism's about: creating perceptual complexity through the layering of simple transformations.

Neill's *Music for 'The King of Thule'* played off a figure most composers identify with, Faust, and a 19th-century artist most composers love, Berlioz. Trig-

gered by trumpet, the computer transformed the French rhymes from the eponymous ballad of Berlioz's *Faust* into slow, two-note motives, while Neill played melodies within different overtone series and pictures of Berlioz were projected across the stage. A little enigmatic, but also sad, pretty, and brief.

**What you read** in my column isn't always what I wrote. In my Dutch article two weeks ago, I referred to the Swedes picking up minimalism, not the Swiss. The first name of the Dutch composer Mutsaerts is Sonia. In my article on Cage in Poland, *puer*, not *pur*, is the Latin word for the Jungian eternal-child archetype, and Europe has a Hegelian *goal* drive, not gold. Conlon Nancarrow has worked in the same studio for 45 years, not 15. And so on. ■