

# Notes From Nowhere

By Kyle Gann

## New Music Across America

**ATLANTA**—You wouldn't have known it in New York, but new music went national October 1 through 4. Reborn from the ashes of New Music America, a New Music *Across America* festival took place in 18 cities, 14 in the United States, two in Canada, plus Berlin and Amsterdam. The festival's New Music Alliance, whose main job during previous festivals was to look concerned and cluck disapprovingly, suddenly went into overdrive; they raised more than \$156,000 for the event, sending \$5000 to each sponsoring North American space and organizing national publicity.

As a result, new music crept out from its usual haunts into Honolulu; Helena, Montana; and Portland, Maine. Success varied. Seattle's Soundwork Northwest, Alliance president Tina Davidson reports, presented 53 artists in 10 concerts, getting crowds of up to 800. Cleveland's Sonic Disturbances offered six concerts (including Robert Ashley and Borbetomagus), got good press, but failed to draw a new audience. Most intriguing-sounding was the festival Philip Bimstein directed in Springdale, Utah (pop. 300), which drew up to 900 per concert. For one concert, Bimstein says, the audience hiked to a bend of the Virgin River to hear members of the Hurricane, Utah, high school band play a premiere by

Jimmy Miklavcic; at another gig, Henry Gwiazda played his electro-collages at the Bit and Spur honky-tonk to raucous response.

Why not New York? "We tried to stay out of cities that had already presented the festival," explains Tina Davidson, admitting that some previous locales—Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis—made the cut anyway. "New York had done it twice. We were a little worried that one site in New York might detract from the other festivals, who wouldn't get as much publicity. We were looking for smaller presenters who'd been in the trenches for years, who felt isolated, discouraged. We selected them on the basis of their history and work in experimental music."

Faced with 18 possibilities, I flew to Atlanta. Their programming was interesting, the Atlanta scene's really hopping, it's a nice town, and, uh... oh yeah, they played a piece of my music. Plus director Tayloe Harding brought Terry Riley and his new ensemble the Rescue Committee for the world premiere of Riley's *The Saint Adolf Ring*. Projected as an eventual four-night cycle, it's based on the art of Adolf Wolfli, an early 20th century schizophrenic who, confined to an asylum after an arrest for child molestation, produced a mammoth output of writings, paintings, and obscure musical notations. As these were projected in animation, singer-actor John Deaderick played out Wolfli's paranoid fan-

tasies with scary matter-of-factness. Masked and singing in Indian-ruined English, Riley did what he does best: improvise in jazzy modalities on piano and Ensoniq synthesizer.

Riley wasn't the only attraction. The New Music Alliance required each space to present at least one local composer, but Harding went further: most musicians there were from the area. Atlanta's Thamyris ensemble played an ambitious electro-acoustic score by Steven Everett, a flowing woodwind duo by Van Stiefel, and the slow, soft, but grittily physical *Et Nunc* by local big name Alvin Singleton. These pieces were complex without being opaque or austere, and the same could be said for James Oliverio's *Song Without Words*. He's known locally for TV and film work, and while his tuneful music showed pop influence, it was also intricately cross-rhythmed, and demanded the expert ensemble work it got. No 12-tone music in Georgia, apparently, and no pabulum either.

Howard Wershil's Atlanta Contemporary Chamber Ensemble gave a thrilling reading of Morton Subotnick's most dynamic score, *The Key to Songs*. Wershil ran the electronics, conductor Fyodor Cherniavsky led his mallet-wielders through hailstorms of notes, and though the performance risked falling apart it had explosive energy. Backed by the ensemble, tenor Sam Hagan crooned Harding's *Lines From a Roslyn Baptism*, a soulfully postminimal



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**Terry Riley: paranoid fantasies, scary matter-of-factness**

setting of the Book of Common Prayer. Wershil's own work, titled "to release... to allow... to emerge..." began in silence: the players raised their arms in flowing motions, dropped pebbles into jars, rolled Ping-Pong balls across marimbas. "Ho boy," I first thought, having survived similar shticks in the '60s. But as the piece gelled, it transcended its genre, crescendoing into beautiful and unusual textural flurries with a devotional choreography.

Publicity-wise, Atlanta's fest was drab; due to pouring rain and a deserted downtown location, Riley drew fewer than 100 people, the other concerts less than that, and media coverage was almost nil. But by exposing strong, unknown local composers, it filled a role NMAA should play: not to export New Yorkers to allegedly culture-hungry yokels, but to decentralize. New York cultivates its

artists, and also tends to grow them into certain directions; composers in the middle of nowhere are often wilder, refreshingly out of step. Everywhere I travel, I find bustling scenes with no ties to New York, and the artists involved know far more about New York than we do about them. That flow should be reversed.

What's the festival's future? Bimstein is charging ahead with New Music Utah next year, but Davidson says that national plans won't bear fruit until 1994. "Maybe every year we'll have a totally different version of the festival," she says. "Maybe a three-city tour in a month. Maybe a festival devoted to techno-linkups, video phones, radios, installation pieces, so the performances can take place in several cities at once." Let's hope. There's more new music across the continent than is dreamed of in our philosophy. ■

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