

On the Strings

By Kyle Gann

Margaret Leng Tan
Gordon Monahan
Laura Kikauka
Jens Brand/Andrus Sippel
David Meyers
Ron Kuivila

The avante-garde hasn't had a performer like Margaret Leng Tan in years. People will tell you that if you haven't heard *her* performance of such-and-such a work you haven't heard it. She's one of those rare pianists whose performance style takes equal billing with the music. Specializing in music that requires playing on the strings and soundboard directly, she hovers over the instrument with a graceful authority that disarms the keyboard's status as a focal point.

Her October 3 performance of Asian composers at Merkin Hall, part of Composers' Forum's piano series, showed her in top form. *Gu Yue (Ancient Music)*, written for her by Shanghai-born Ge Gan-ru, is almost her signature piece, requiring her to create the sounds of gongs, zithers, lutes, and drums on the instrument's keys, strings, and body. She pressed the strings to create vibrato, hammered overtone layers on a single note, and scraped deliciously on the lower strings' bindings. Gan-ru welds such noises into continuity far more smoothly than George Crumb does, though I still find them more effective when I close my eyes and can't see how they're

produced.

A Cage expert, Tan's probably done most to champion the music of Somei Satoh. Satoh's *A Gate Into the Stars* drew gorgeous, crystalline images with a few notes, and the devotional atmosphere she wove around them showed tremendous control. His longer *Litania*, though, a kind of post-serial *Pacific 231*, was noisy with clusters, and doesn't wear well. Tan banged over a tape of herself banging, and the difficulty of fusing live and Memorex sabotaged the intended illusion. The most impressive composition and pianistic feat was *Time Sequence* by Fluxus composer Toshi Ichiyangi, a fanatical atonal-minimalist pattern piece that pit relentless, athletic left-hand passage work against simple right-hand motives. Though slightly shaky in the opening measures, Tan ground out thousands of cheerfully skewed notes with machinelike precision, proving that her hands acknowledge no barriers either on the keyboard or off of it.

Next Gordon Monahan, making his bid as the George Antheil of Canada, walked onstage and pounded his forearms on the keyboard of his prepared piano so violently that bolts and screws flew out of the piano's inside. Milder movements followed, with gentle chords rippling like a pond of jingle bells, then a friction of tiny clicks in the muted highest register, then fierce but precise elbow clusters. The brash confidence of Monahan's iconoclasm



Monahan pounded the piano with his forearms.

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would have scandalized 30 or 40 years ago; today it's an amusing reminder of the days when violent music could create a sensation. What most struck me about Monahan's *This Piano Thing* this time around was that it's the first prepared piano piece *not* reminiscent of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*.

Monahan's love for turning things on their heads was apparent at the October 11 opening of his sound installation *Music From Nowhere* at the newly reconstituted Generator (547 West 20th Street, third floor). Playing against our expectations of electronic sound, Monahan has set acoustic noise devices—dripping water, bird chirpers, wire brushes squeaking against one another—inside eviscerated old stereo speakers. Put your ear to the cloth, you hear actual acoustic vibrations: sort of a cute good-bye

to the days of all-acoustic sound art. Laura Kikauka's *Sound Scenes* in the same room features ominous boxes that roar with electronic crickets when you stick your head in, and stop when you emerge. A hammer containing a tiny speaker emits the crash of shattered glass when it hits, without breaking, a clear plastic pane. Fun, if hardly illuminating. Both installations run through November 16.

Nicolas Collins and Ben Neill played Generator that night, but I sped off to hear Jens Brand and Andrus Sippel of Dortmund, Germany, at Experimental Intermedia's European exchange festival. By the time I arrived, a 40-foot, one-minute tape loop was snaking its way across the loft, onto which Brand played baritone sax, riffing off his own ostinatos. As I stood there, suddenly a music box next

to me began to turn (at the flip of a remote switch, I guess), plinking a muffled tune. I moved over; drum beats popped out of a speaker behind me. The room was alive. Brand squawked to his own echo like a mating moose, sax fragments spun through space after he'd stopped playing, and the ostinatos blurred down to lugubrious bass when Sippel changed the speed on the tape machine. Simple tricks, none of them new, but entertainingly deployed.

I tried, the next night, to hear Ron Kuivila and David Meyers play electronic devices at Generator. Kuivila, though, had the effrontery to perform while someone in the audience was practicing her trumpet. That's right: a new low in downtown etiquette was reached when three women spent the concert shouting comments and drawing attention to themselves, climaxing in an actual trumpet being played from the audience in mid-whoosh. Meyers, in an alleged farewell performance (I can't blame him), did his trick of continually transforming squeals and burps from a black box with exceptional sensuousness and even a folksy beat. Kuivila fractured phonemes from an old Antonin Artaud recording, then drew beautiful shades of shimmering from a sampled cymbal. Kuivila and Meyers, expert sound sculptors, deserved a better environment.

It's tragic when new-music spaces fail, but when they do, it's often traceable to an unprofessionalism that keeps both artists and audiences from enjoying performances. (The recent demise of Webo is an example.) Maybe Generator should apply to NYSICA for a bouncer grant. ■