

Ouija Songs

By Kyle Gann

Nicolas Collins
Elodie Lauten
James Tenney

Those who follow Nicolas Collins know that part of his music's pizzazz comes from the electronic ventriloquism with which he shoots noises to different speakers around the room. Think, then, what theatrical situation he might gravitate toward in his first operatic attempt, and give yourself high marks for imagination if you answer, "A séance." *Truth in Clouds*, April 27 at Roulette, centered around a séance held with two 19th century figures: Anna Mary Howitt, pre-Raphaelite painter and spiritualist, and her friend Elizabeth Siddal, wife of poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Collins's wife Susan Tallman wrote the libretto, and Shelley Hirsch and K. J. Grant played sisters who contact the dead via what Collins calls the first "Ouija-to-MIDI-converter." As they moved an inverted goblet across an antique table, unseen ranging sensors attached underneath the table spun their voices to speakers hidden all over Roulette.

It wasn't the piece's only shrewd idea. Collins's gizmos put the voices through weird timbral changes, made them sound distant or close, used them to trigger bird chirps, drums, and tuned cymbals, and surrounded them with a synthesized halo. Hirsch merely did what she normally does in perfor-

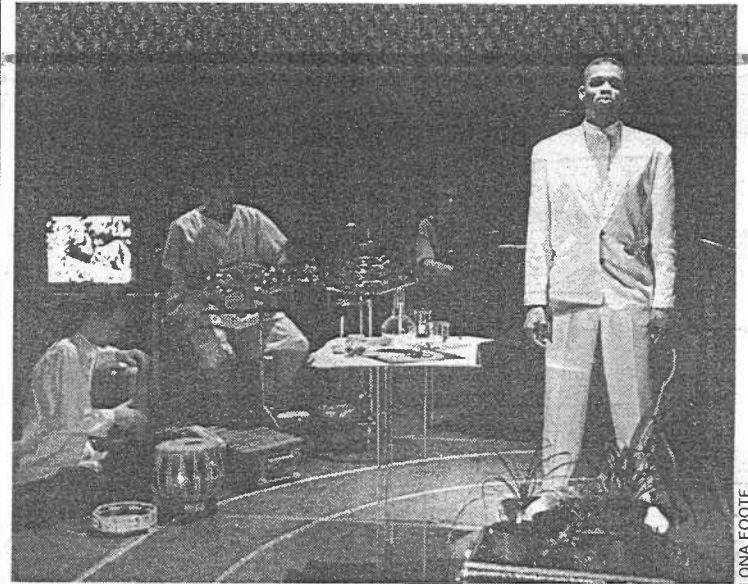
mance (namely, shriek and warble as though channeling demons); she's waited all her life for a spiritualist opera. Or rather antiopera, for, dramatically, the piece grew static after the first few effects. But that deficiency forced a mental flip-flop in the listener similar to that of Collins's *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*. As the Howitt/Siddal letters became monotonous, the droning, squealing voices became simply music, and what was happening to them was more intriguing than what they said. You started out looking for plot, but you ended up listening for timbral and spatial relationships, as in a Lucier or Mumma electronic piece. In Collins's aesthetic, even ghosts are primarily sonic.

Elodie Lauten's *Existence*, at the Performing Garage April 11 through 14, was also on a subject characteristic of her: everything. In an old-fashioned interior set not unlike Collins's, a fine vocal quartet (Mary Hurlbut, Susan Trout, Jesteena Walters, Frank Haye) declaimed and chanted texts from Pascal, Pythagoras, and the Dhammapada about man's place as "a middle point between all and nothing." Lauten, streamlining her style, played mellow jazz patterns of early-Terry Riley purity, with small percussion (including a nice steel drum solo) added by Mustafa Ahmed and Scott Robinson. Jarringly, Act III jumped into a word collage of advertising slogans, and, as final warning, closed with virtually the

work's only dissonance, a sustained, inconclusive augmented triad underlaid by the rapid sitcom patter of a tiny TV.

If there was one composer who I thought wouldn't be done in by the cosmic vagueness of the harmony of the spheres, it was Lauten: no one else is so good at capturing Neptunian concepts without lapsing into sentimentality. Her *The Death of Don Juan* at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art a couple of years ago was thick with levels and layers of meaning, video, piano, singers, and trine (a justly tuned harp she invented) creating a gentle friction that sparked feminist and Freudian resonances. But as Robin Williams says, "Reality: what a concept!" Existence is specifically an idea without resonance, and these flashing computer videos of dinosaurs and planets didn't get very deep into the psyche. Electronics were limited to one soft, swirling buzz at the outset, and her trine and gorgeously definitionless melodies renounced for mundane 3 + 3 + 2 rhythms. I still love Lauten's music, and if this piece had been titled "A Pleasant Evening," it would have fully satisfied its billing.

Whether you liked Essential Music's James Tenney retrospective (May 2, Greenwich House) or not, every Tenney work is different, and each one makes a distinct, indelible impression. The most surprising was *Three Indigenous Songs*, rigorous instrumental transcriptions of the phonemes of various texts. Tenney chose his texts (by Jaybird Coleman, Walt Whitman, and an Iroquois chant translated by Jerome Rothenberg) partly for their repetitiveness, so that



Scene from *Existence*: What a concept!

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the musical form riffed off the same shapes over and over. Rhythm and contour hewed closer to speech patterns than any instrumental music I've ever heard, and the texture—two piccolos and flute scrambling around each other's lines, with occasional percussive punctuation—was so fluid, arrhythmic, and exact that you wouldn't have thought it could be notated. The audience included so many notable composers that had a bomb dropped on the hall, new music would have ended. (And the *Times*'s Donal Henahan would have written the most cheerful obituaries in the history of music.)

Perhaps the richest Tenney piece appeared, though, not on EM's program, but at the Town Hall concert two days earlier by the piano duo Double Edge (Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann). *Chromatic Canon* was built, as

Tenney's notes mentioned, from a Webernesque-structured 12-tone row. But Webern would have never based a row on a triad, and *Chromatic Canon* started and ended with the pure consonance of open fifths. Discord grew in the middle, as the row built up note by note (slowly enough to write down and worth quoting: "B flat, F, D flat, G, B, E, E flat, A flat, C, F sharp, D, A). On one level, it was one of the most beautiful minimalist pieces ever written, perhaps the first to encompass consonance and dissonance in a single gesture, and played with the same devotion Double Edge brings to Reich's *Piano Phase*. On another level, it was a clever critique of minimalism and 12-tone music, and suggested that both could have gone in myriad more imaginative directions than the ones chosen by Glass and Schoenberg's imitators.

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The Jolly Boys

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HAPPY