

If the late Morton Feldman taught anything, it is to avoid the ruts musicians fall into under one another's influence. (As a critic, I admire that most about him: he could recognize a cliché minutes after its birth and track an authentic notion to the exact moment it became academic and died.) Bernadette Speach learned that lesson, assuming she learned it from him, most of all in the realm of texture. Her *Les Ondes pour quatre*, which I heard the Arditti Quartet play in Chicago last June, was reviewed askance there because, I suspect, it wasn't written to sound the way chamber music is supposed to. The instruments hardly seemed separate; evanescent gestures flitted from string to string, blurring them with a fluidity one sometimes finds in orchestral writing, never in a string quartet.

The same textural originality distinguished Speach's concert with Jeffrey Schanzer (her husband) September 23 at Roulette. She played piano, he guitar, two of the works were credited as collaborations, and each had a solo. Most of the pieces exhibited an impressionism thinly veiled. Speach's harmonies in the duet *Two in the Morning* and her solo *A Page Upon Which . . .* were often directionless seventh chords updated with added notes, and they melted into fits of diagonal melody as edgeless as a watercolor. What tied guitar and piano together in the former piece, aside from coincidences of rhythm, was the tendency to make motives from huge intervals that united several registers at once. That technique of fusing texture and melody is a key to Speach's work, if not always Schanzer's, and it reminded me that Feldman used to inveigh against composers too timid to use the whole keyboard.

The music of guest artist Michael Colquhoun showed up the textural contrast. Like Speach and Schanzer, he's a SUNY-Buffalo grad. (They all carry the Feldman

Schanzer & Speach Duo / David First / Jill Burton

Out of the Ruts

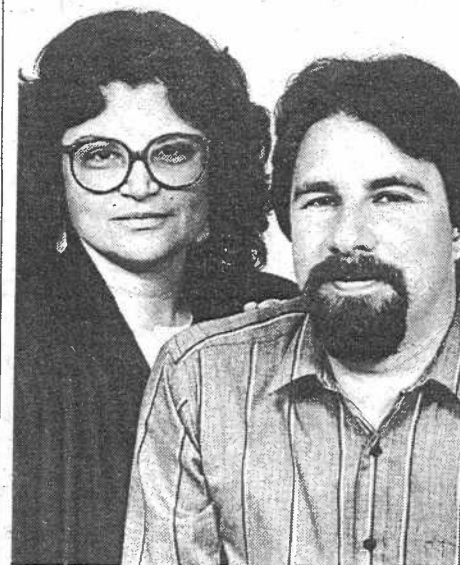
BY KYLE GANN

imprint somewhere.) Colquhoun's music fits more neatly into chamber music conventions. Featuring himself on flute, his trio score *One, Two, Three* divided three-note gestures between the instruments, one note each, with simple processes that sounded like Feldmanized Webern, distinguished by Colquhoun's extremely

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high yet soft whistling tones. Colquhoun's *Duplicity* for flute with digital delay repeated consonant motives in counterpoint à la Terry Riley's *Happy Ending*; given a less strained performance and a more spacious ambience in the sound reproduction, it could be a beautiful, restful work.

The other Schanzer/Speach collaboration was *Blue*, a carefully composed blues of a type popular in the '20s and '30s, enlivened here by postserial pitch thinking. Of course, to introduce that thinking into blues is to academicize it; no Earl Hines fan would find the early blues pieces of Copland and Nancarrow of more than anecdotal interest, and this *Blue*, similarly, was a well-written example of native exoticism for the classical connoisseur. Schanzer's solo *Tracings* lived up to its title by adhering to an Arabic-sounding Lydian mode over just a hint of a drone. Though probably improvised, the piece was so concisely wrapped around its extended mode that it never



Schanzer & Speach

faltered or repeated itself. None of this was goose-bump-raising music, but in these cliché-ridden days, originality is pleasure enough.

A snail of a cab took me to the Gas Station, where I heard a much longer guitar solo by David First called *Preludes and Prayers From Zero*. Where Schanzer hinted at Arabic improv, First melodized endlessly over drones in a style more folk/trobadador than avant-garde. At

last his tremolos began shifting slowly by microtones, building up the tiny-interval harmonies he makes with his World Casio Quartet, and sometimes dwelling on a chord as if he were determined to memorize the sound. First has hold of some good ideas, and I like his confidence: his press kit quotes a rave *Voice* review dated 1997. But I get a feeling he hasn't listened enough to the history of the direction he's merging into, for the chords he savored for half-minutes at a stretch were sonorities some of us have heard many times before.

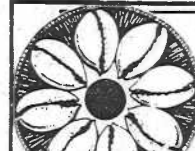
First was preceded by Jill Burton, who vocalized a steamy cadenza on the phrase "How can you do me this way?" She babbled in an ersatz (or real, for all I knew) Slavic language, crooned a really touching medievalish chanson in quasi Italian, did her Meredith Monk routine on Casio synthesizer, and had First join her on guitar in a sweaty Mixolydian tango. In perfect control of a gutsy voice, she jumped octaves with surefooted intonation, vacillated between screeching and dulcet alto, and made nice illusions by oohing forever and waving the mike close to her lips. Her facility, though, is a treacherous friend; she can spin out tone poems with such ease that, except where she had a song form to follow, she meandered, and her progression of emotions, covered by a layer of attitude that kept them from really connecting, left me behind.

Structure and passion are better married than they're given credit for; emotion creates events, events make emotion credible. I hate to subject anyone to comparison with Diamanda Galas, but Diamanda's passion is so patently motivated that it takes you on a journey. Burton's got the journey part down, but for now all we get are postcards. Stuck in one of those torture devices the Gas Station calls chairs, I could have stood to be transported. ■

the compact

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