

Elodie Lauten/Daniel Lentz

Paris and Pink Sunsets

BY KYLE GANN

At first glance the New Sounds concert December 14 at Merkin Hall didn't seem that unusual a program. But the longer one listened, the more the contrast of Elodie Lauten and Daniel Lentz, separated by a classical Indian performance by Steve Gorn and Ray Spiegel, seemed indigestible. Academic composers complain about being ghettoized on new music programs, but there's something to be said for combining works that share some basic perceptual assumptions. This program flouted that requirement with a virtuosity that took one's breath away.

I recently wrote an entire article about Philip Glass without using the M-word. I doubt that achievement could be repeated concerning Elodie Lauten and Daniel Lentz, especially since the latter embraced minimalism with a convert's fanaticism. Lauten is harder to pin down, and I always have fun trying. French-born and New York-based, she is a pianist/composer of decidedly minimalist sympathies, but there is something about her work, a kind of personal *style galant*, that makes me suspect minimalism is only a temporary phase. In her Concerto for Piano and Orchestral Memory, and even more in her beautiful opera *The Death of Don Juan*, there are passages where a vaguely articulated atmosphere overrides minimalism's clarity, with a Scriabinesque *misterioso* that seems inimical to the style.

The present *Sonate Ordinaire*, its title appropriate only within the context of Lauten's other work, only muddied the waters. Nervous and quasi-improvisational, the piece flowed back and forth

between two moods: one a chromatic swelling and ebbing of diminished chords, the other a more triumphant, diatonically stable melody. Enigma was added to the intensely personal nature of the piece by the unaffected understatement of Lauten's performance, and just as it began to seem overlong, she'd suddenly slip into cloudy new areas. Most surprising, and unpredictable from her earlier work, was the music's neo-rococo quality, as though played extempore by some moody, postmodern W. F. Bach. Yet its fluid harmony also suggested the reincarnation of an obscure, fin-de-siècle, mystic impressionist, and it wasn't difficult to hear 1910 Paris in the sonata's ethereal upper-register chords. I always like Lauten's music, though most of it mystifies me; she seems like someone who could dart off tomorrow in some unforeseeable aesthetic direction.

Daniel Lentz made an early reputation for conceptual works and antimusic, including one piece scored for laughing machines and a reading of a list of American composers *not* killed in Vietnam. Today, he's a banner-waving, card-carrying min-

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imalist (though I think he's done his best work—the enchanting *Missa Umbrarum*, for example—by stepping outside that style). His brash, Los Angeles minimalism, though, could hardly inhabit a more different world than Lauten's half-Parisian sensibility. Subtlety is not in Lentz's vocabulary, but I've always been impressed with his music's clear and inven-



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tive sense of structure, and with its commercially slick surface. In the three pieces Lentz's ensemble presented here, the former quality was evident while the latter was oddly lacking, making me wonder if the slickness isn't the result of some fancy studio footwork.

All three pieces were scored for three digital keyboards, their players controlled via clicktrack and headphones, and mixed live by Lentz's athletic prestidigitation; two of these also used the cutesy, orange-juice-fresh voice of Jessica Lowe to ingenious advantage. *Time's Trick* and *Wild Turkeys* were both based on a structure of immediate tape replay, wherein each section of material formed an underplay for the next. The illusion of this attempt at sleight-of-mixer was never completely convincing, due to small discrepancies of timing and dynamics. Still, there was a carefree geniality to these pieces' twangy triads and sweeping timbre changes, as they straddled unending rows of 4/4 meter in humorously frenetic syncopation.

The Crack in the Bell was more com-

plex, and since its mechanical requirements were more modest, it came off with the glitzy precision Lentz's work demands. Pausing now and then to parody the national anthem and "My Country 'Tis of Thee," this crazy attempt at nonspecific political satire spun off its abruptly changing patterns without apparent logic, jerking one's rhythmic expectations like a roller coaster. This was two-dimensional music, the aural equivalent of high-tech video graphics; ask it what it meant, and it would probably grin and offer you a wine cooler. But I can't help liking Lentz's music, as though it were a big, socially awkward friend for whom everyone liked to make excuses. Lentz beats the minimalists at their own game (Minimalism was initially, let us not forget, a

California movement), but there's nothing at all New York about his crass, lumbering, cowboy minimalism. It quite audibly hails from the land of fast cars, pink sunsets, and endless vistas.

As if the contrast between Lauten and Lentz weren't harsh enough, the *Raga* and *Dhun* by Steve Gorn and Ray Spiegel that separated their performances gave the mind a judo throw. Gorn played a beautifully low-pitched wooden bansuri flute, and improvised against Spiegel's tabla with a subtle three-dimensionality that seemed quite out of place amid such minimalist (and indeed 20th century) surroundings. Slight shadings of tone and variations of motive forced ears into unwonted activity, and showed how mutually foreign the listening requirements of East and West remain. WNYC announcer John Schaefer attempted to homogenize the concert, which was broadcast live, by interviewing Gorn, Lauten, and Lowe. It didn't work. But for those who enjoy such aesthetic whiplash, the program made for three delightful concerts-in-one. ■

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several generations of hacks, is criticized for displaying "little sympathy for most developments in music of the 20th century," rather than noted as one of the few

as he develops his inventions, moving seamlessly in and out of jazz rhythms, the blue notes persuasively ornamenting the melodies without falling into cliché. The subject, of course, is a card game, a conceit underscored by Lewis's subtitle

improvising her head off. The CD version of James Moody's first album in 10 years (he's not in *Grove* either), *Something Special* (RCA Novus 3008), includes a blues jam—"Shake, Rattle and Boogie"—and the second half of his

"March of Time" Art Tatum footage, Fats Waller, Thelonious Monk, Errol Garner, et al. Find a friend with Bravo and a VCR, or call Manhattan Cable and say, "I want my Bravo."