

Politics in a Can

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

If composers wrote great music again, would audiences come back to concerts? Or is our visual society so desensitized to sound that music alone can never be enough? The Bang on a Can festival, whose curators would rather fiddle with a winning format than let it go stale, decided this year to gamble a "yes" to the second question. Snugly ensconced at the Kitchen, they souped up their concerts with visual art, poetry, and politics, hoping to lure people who don't include new music on their usual beat. (Next year, they're taking over Lincoln Center, which is a big step up—for Lincoln Center.) In terms of politics, the gamble paid off erratically in two concerts, May 25 and 26. The first, dubbed "The Political Songbook," featured the premier of a new trio, Bermuda Triangle; the second repeated a work premiered at the Kitchen a few years ago, *ITSOFOMO* by Ben Neill and David Wojnarowicz.

Bermuda Triangle boasted superb soloists—soprano Dora Ohrenstein, pianist Kathleen Supové, and bassist Robert Black—but their debut got sabotaged. Cradled between piano and bass instead of foregrounded, Ohrenstein was often drowned out. In addition, she was gesturally upstaged by the flamboyant Supové, the Kitchen provided lyrics but not enough light to read them by (until people complained), and



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Was the Kitchen unprepared for Bermuda Triangle?

the overflow crowd brought a surfeit of body heat—not a happy evening. Cavalier at blasting its black box with electric guitars, the Kitchen seemed unprepared for the niceties of an acoustic trio. And if you listened past those problems into the repertoire presented, you heard music and politics shoved into an uneasy alliance, like former lovers stuck in an elevator.

Bermuda Triangle had asked 24 composers for political songs, but if politics isn't in the blood, a commission isn't enough to make it turn up convincingly in the music. The smart people laid low and wrote songs in their accustomed styles, choosing texts with some oblique political reference. For instance, Judith Weir set a Croatian

folk lament to elegant treble/bass counterpoint, and Linda Bouchard illuminated a lightly homoerotic poem with modal melody and brittle, arctic piano figurations. Tan Dun covered all bases by dedicating his *Memorial 19 Fucks* to "all those who have been fucked over"; the piece elicited giggles by setting the word *fuck* in 19 languages over haphazard slaps on the instruments. (The Taiwanese turns out to be *gan*, scuttling any idea I might have had of ever visiting Taiwan.)

Others force-fed us ideology without any musical dialectic to help us swallow it. Reading the text of Michael Daugherty's *KKK*, an authentic Klan speech attacking blacks, Jews, and gays, I wondered what he would do to under-

cut it with irony. The answer: nothing. Ohrenstein shouted and thumped a Bible, and in a less liberal context, the piece could have sounded like a sincere effort by the Klan's first atonalist. Hailing from the opposite persuasion, Oliver Lake's *Do You Know?* undulated on two notes over a jazz background. "Do you know," the soprano crooned, "the story of the Frenchman in Africa/German in Africa/Portuguese in Africa/Englishman in Africa/Dutchman in Africa/Do you know the story of the Blackman in America?" Yes, no, no, yes, sort of, and you bet, I answered, already converted before preached to.

Understandably, the best pieces—those that used music to alter social perception—were by composers who had made political music their life's passion. In *I Like To Think of Harriet Tubman*, Christian Wolff focused attention on the words with delicate unisons between instruments and voice, and with a drawn-out deliberateness that rendered Susan Griffin's poem about a heroic escaped slave deliciously pointed:

*Men who sit in paneled offices
and think about vacations
and tell women whose care it is
to feed children
not to be hysterical...*

I want them to think about Harriet Tubman

Likewise, Frederic Rzewski set a German bank director's comments about the deportation of gypsies with a waltz accompaniment and implied ellipses that subverted his every phrase: "Well, they... just... don't... fit... in."

ITSOFOMO (In the Shadow of

Forward Motion) was a 50-minute indictment of society's malign neglect of AIDS patients. The late David Wojnarowicz, present on tape, growled an angry monologue about "this killing machine called america," while Ben Neill played his Mutantrumpet into a computer and Don Yallech hit percussion. Neill's brassy echoes and troubled rock beat tuned the right tension, and words and music crescendoed together toward Wojnarowicz's description of his own AIDS diagnosis. Even here, though, the music's process-oriented logic seemed a cool response to the text's despair. Neill's Totalist (new ism alert!) structures layered numerical cycles and well-tuned overtones in large-scale geometric patterns. Deflecting the question of what constitutes political music, *ITSOFOMO*'s music stayed out of the text's way, but could have been just as engaging by itself.

For one startling moment, though, Bermuda Triangle zapped the project into perspective by bringing in two young rappers, Angel Morales and Julio Vargas (with drummer Rosa Vargas), to collaborate on a rap song, "Labeled as a Bad Kid": "I say what I say I do what I do/You might not like me but who the hell are you?" Smart stroke: it saved us from having all the fest's political music defined by postgrad, middle-class, artsy-fartsy types. Neither the concert's best song nor its worst, nor even its most communicative, "Bad Kid" crashed in from a reality compared to which new music is a flea on the back of a brontosaurus; an intelligent, scintillating flea on a rather dull-witted dinosaur, perhaps, but a flea nonetheless. ■

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