

The Primitive Within

By Kyle Gann

Tibetan Singing
Bowl Ensemble
Sussan Deihim &
Richard Horowitz
Pamela Z

Le Sacre du Printemps kept coming to mind during the October 28 concert of the Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble at Florence Gould Hall. Not that director Raphael Mostel's meditative droning has much to do with Stravinsky's driving rhythms—quite the opposite. For most of the concert Mostel's ensemble quietly rubbed the rims of beautifully tuned metal bowls, the way you played your wine glass at your senior prom (if you went), but with a richer, more scintillating hum. *Music for the October Moon* opened, though, with a hideous blast from a thigh-bone trumpet, and all three works were overlaid with rattles, whistles, and the uncouth wail of a shofar. The shofar reminded me of the trombone glissandi in *The Rite of Spring*, for both Mostel and Stravinsky access the primitive within us. Mostel's "primitive," however, is not Stravinsky's, and the difference shows how far we've come.

In *October Moon*, a 1986 Rite of Autumn, Mostel made soft noises that sounded like he was rattling seed pods and breaking sticks. Meanwhile his ensemble's overtones wove a blanket of unintended melodies so engrossing that, when the piece died away



CHRIS BUCK

Bowl director Raphael Mostel

after 35 minutes, I thought only 15 had passed. (*October Moon* will be aired December 5 at 11 p.m. on WNYC, 93.9.) Even more subtle, *Wyrd*, a world premiere, melted gradually from the ringing of bowls into soft whistles, the change completed before I became aware of it. *Wave* was, by Mostel's standards, an extroverted work, dotted by accelerating wood-block gestures, soft drumming, glissandi, tones blown through long tubes, even fartlike sounds. In its final minute the music burst into a cacophony of rings, with a closing upward shofar gliss to echo *Le Sacre's* flute.

Le Sacre's primitivism had tragic undertones, for it implied that Western culture's sole hope for authenticity lay in a return to bar-

barism. For Mostel, the source of authenticity lies above, not below. In 1990 we mythologize the primitive as not driven by instinctual and possibly dangerous forces, but calmer than we are, connected to the universe by a less clouded spirituality. If *Le Sacre* answered Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, the cinematic counterpart to Mostel's music is *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Maybe it's still a white man's myth, but in 78 years the myth has changed from arrogance and ennui to humility and a willingness to listen. If that transformation is what the 20th century has been ultimately about, it's been worth doing.

The primitivism evoked by Sussan Deihim and Richard Horowitz

was ambient, not spiritual. On October 26, in a song series called *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue*, they conjured a Moroccan atmosphere in Town Hall with wind chimes, rain sticks, wood flutes, augmented fourths, and minor-key ostinatos. Horowitz had worked at Paris's IRCAM; it showed in his sophisticated sampling, but not in his formal ideas, which relied on ostinatos and the overused dramatic device of having the instruments drop out before Deihim ended. Heavily reverbed, Deihim overdubbed her amazingly agile and wide-ranged voice with tapes that made her sound as though she were using a harmonizer (the gizmo Laurie Anderson made famous). Once in a while, without apparent provocation, she broke into an anxiety fit and squealed like Diamanda Galas.

Why is this "new music"? It isn't. It's exotic pop with vocal effects, like Yma Sumac singing with Arabic recording star Abed Azrie. But pop's a hard business to succeed in, and these days, those who don't can fall back on the more lenient new-music circuit. Superficially, Horowitz's music sounded like the Arabic-derived music of Glen Velez, Layne Redmond, and Steve Gorn. But Velez and co. are expert, disciplined players who pull off more bar-line-defying stunts in 10 measures than Deihim and Horowitz did in an hour. A composer who can't compose without an ostinato is like a pianist who can only play in C Major; so when Horowitz's sixth song sounded like his first, I got up and took the No. 1 train to Roulette.

Glad I did. When I got there, Pamela Z was in the middle of a

deadpan song about "Cultured Girls": "They go to the opera/They support the ballet/They watch Mahsterpiece Theatah..." Her only accompaniment, a foot-operated delay unit, was repetitive too, but she got more variety than Deihim and Horowitz did at 1/2000 the expense. In one song Z hit hammer handles together menacingly, in another she beat a plastic bottle, elsewhere she banged a guitar. (In between she sipped lemon tea from a *Village Voice* mug. Nice touch.) Her persona was naïve folk/political, but frequent hints—a well-timed punchline, a splendidly warbled phrase—revealed a solid theatrical training and operatic talent. It was as though she had tremendous power at her disposal, and chose to let it out only in glimpses.

Like her expertise, Pamela Z kept her politics low-key. Her "Christmas Song" insisted that there were many Santa Clauses: "Every Santa has his territory, every Santa has his price." Her images could be a little Laurie Anderson-ish: "Sometime between the time I pressed the piano key and the time the hammer hit the string—you walked in." More often, she was vulnerable: "I don't know you/You don't know me/Why do you talk to me that way?" The hockets she sang against her own delayed voice, the counterpoint she kept going by herself, were so smooth that I'm eager to see what she could do if somebody threw some real money at her. Z's a fixture on the San Francisco scene, and it's hard to believe she'd never played New York before. She's too funny, inventive, and talented to keep secret. ■

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