

Private Bells

Moondog/Conlon Nancarrow

BY KYLE GANN

In "Why Composers Write How," Virgil Thomson's treatise on how economic factors determine style, Thomson defined as a *naif* any composer who made his living outside music. Present economic reality has blurred the category, but the description is classic: "Naifs are rare whose technique is ample enough to enable them to compete at all with the Big Time. They mostly flower unknown and unheard. Those whom we do encounter are angels of refreshment and light, and their music is no small scandal. Its clarity is a shock to the professional mind. It doesn't hesitate about being lengthy or about being brief, and it neglects completely to calculate audience psychology. It is not made for audiences. As Tristan Tzara said of Dada, it is a 'private bell for inexplicable needs.'"

Thomson mentioned Ives, Mussorgsky, and Satie, but he might have referred more accurately to Louis Hardin (born 1916 and better known as Moondog) and Conlon Nancarrow, both of whom will make rare New York appearances this week courtesy of the New Music America festival. Longtime New Yorkers may remember Moondog as the eccentric who dressed in Viking garb and hung around 54th Street and Sixth Avenue in the '60s, writing music in doorways, playing drums, and selling his mimeographed metaphysical poetry. Blinded at 16 by an exploding dynamite cap, Hardin felt singled out by providence, fated for nonconformity; he began dictating his music to people who would write it down for him, took his pen name from a pet which bayed constantly at the moon, and wore Norse clothing as a gesture toward his ancestral heritage.

The manifesto that served as liner

notes for Moondog's first, 1969 Columbia record (just rereleased on CD) marked a one-man counterrevolution unlike any in recent centuries. Moondog's music was clear, simple, often canonic (using the same melody in each voice at different times, as in "Row, row, row your boat") and, when it came to rhythm, infectiously jazzy. As to harmony, it went religiously by the book. In his voice-leading (the manner in which contrapuntal lines move against or with each other), he declared himself "a purist, as much or more so, than Palestrina; yes, more so, for even he broke a rule here and there. To me, bad voice-leading is bad taste. . . . If 'Rules are to be broken' is itself a rule, then I can break that one and say 'Rules are not to be broken.'"

An unapologetic classicist, Moondog called himself a "European in exile." In 1974 he went to Germany for a performance of his music by the Hessischer Rundfunks Orchestra, and, until this week, never returned. There he met Ilona Gobbel, who took him home to her family and became his amanuensis, publisher, record producer, and companion. Today they live in Oer-Erkenschwick, West Germany. His music gets performed in Germany and France, and in December German-based Roof Records will issue a three-CD set. To hear him talk, he's never swerved from that stance of radical conservatism:

"As far as I know, I'm the only composer who doesn't break the first two laws of counterpoint, which are changing notes and passing notes. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, broke them all the time. In the first fugue of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, I found the first mistake in bar two. There are only about 20 measures, and I went over it with a pianist

CONTINUED ON PAGE 92



FRED W. MCDARRAH



BETTY FREEMAN

NANCARROW: ON A (PIANO) ROLL

Tale of Two Cities," since it begins with a piece called *Paris* and ends with his beloved *New York* (written in 1958 and not yet performed in America). In between will be excerpts from the first Columbia record, including *Good for Goodie* and *Bird's Lament* (dedicated to Benny Goodman and Charlie Parker). Though Moondog titled his early pieces *Symphoniques* or *Minisyms*, he wrote his *First Symphony* in 1984, and this concert will give us a movement from his *Symphony No. 50* (fast worker, eh?). "Most of the pieces," he says, "are jazz-oriented, but I wanted to do one piece to show my classical training." *Passion Flower* for string orchestra. And, you can hear the works free in open rehearsal at the Majestic at 2 p.m. Moondog will conduct "from the drums," and is bringing the same drums he used to play in the doorways of New York. "It'll be good to come back to New York," he says. "I miss that city very much." Those of us who have held his legend in the back of our heads for 20 years will find that return just as exciting.

Naïf is a paradoxical term for Nancarrow, for in certain respects he's written the most rhythmically sophisticated music any Western composer has yet produced, and has come to have a considerable influence on the European avant-garde. The core of Nancarrow's output is a series of 47 *Studies for Player Piano* (numbered through 50, but Nos. 30, 38, and 39 no longer exist), which experiment in almost every conceivable way with the problem of playing different tempos together at the same time. Study No. 1, dated ca. 1948, plays wild variations off a 4-against-7 beat, the recent No. 48 is a canon at a speed ratio of 60:61, and No. 41 sets tempos of 1 divided by the cube root of pi against the cube root of 13/16. First-time listeners, though, find the sound more outrageous than the proportions, for the music is blindingly fast, and Nancarrow hardens his player-piano hammers to achieve a crazily strident sound. In October Nancarrow turned 77, but even his recent work sounds like the chaotic experimentation of an uninhibited youngster.

There are several parallels with Moondog. Nancarrow never made money off his music until 1986, when he received the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" award. He's an expatriate, living in Mexico City; a die-hard (though anti-Soviet) socialist, he fought in the Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, and upon returning, found that the United States government considered him too suspicious to grant a passport, so he left. As with Moondog, canons account for about half his output (two dozen of the *Player Piano Studies*). And, a Bach admirer, he places great emphasis on counterpoint and voice-leading: "I have really no harmonic sense, of harmony as harmony. I never studied it. I've always been interested in voice leading. That's the important thing in any piece I make. I think of how voices move to produce a certain effect. This fine point of where you make a decision between having a bad combination of sounds (bad in the classical sense), or sacrificing that to have the voice leading good—maybe I got it from studying strict counterpoint with Roger Sessions: the voice leading was always the important thing."

Until recently, the only way to hear Nancarrow's music live was to visit the studio in Mexico City where he's worked since 1948. There, in a garage-type structure whose creative vibes and geniuslike disarray make it an intense new music shrine, sit two player pianos, a punching machine, and the unique 70-odd rolls which contain Nancarrow's life's work. Last year, however, a brilliant German engineer/musician named Trimpin (who lives in Seattle and goes by his last name only) invented a machine which uses air-pressure to "read" piano rolls and trans-

late their information to a portable Mac-Intosh computer. Last December Trimpin took his machine and his computer to Nancarrow's studio and duplicated everything. An insatiable and brilliant inventor, Trimpin has developed mechanical means to play every instrument from marimbas to clarinets to a monkey-grinder's organ, and he can now reproduce Nancarrow's music on any instrument imaginable.

Trimpin has given a few private and incomplete performances of Nancarrow's *Studies*, but the official premiere (along with one of Trimpin's own spatial works) will be during NMA at the Baldwin Piano & Organ Co. Showroom. Controlling everything via computer, he'll present quadruple-grand-piano arrangements of *Studies Nos. 26* (a seven-voice canon all

in one tempo) and 48 (the mammoth, three-movement 60:61 canon, Nancarrow's second-longest and possibly greatest work). Trimpin will also present *Study No. 37* in an arrangement incorporating over 100 percussion instruments hanging in a circular configuration; this is a gripping series of canons in 12 tempos at once, their proportions drawn from the notes of the chromatic scale. With luck (he's recovering from minor surgery), Nancarrow will be in New York for only the second time since he bought his first player piano here in 1948. The Baldwin Showroom is smaller than Trimpin's instruments needed; seating will be limited and interest great, so get there early. No aspect of the festival has generated more advance interest than the return of New York's septuagenarian expatriate naifs. ■

Village Voice

Sussan Deihim

BY KATHERINE DIECKMANN

Dubbed one of the "New Americans" ("immigrants who combine native traditions with influences from the New World") on a mini-bill tucked into New Music America's daunting BAM finale—"1 ticket, 4 theaters, 12 groups, 4 hours!"—Tehran-born Sussan Deihim is understandably anxious that her haunting, meditative vocals may get lost in this inadvertent battle of the bands. (Not only is she competing for attention with the Butthole Surfers, the Ordinaires, and salsa king Cachao at different BAM spaces, but she's also sharing the bill with Cambodi-

an popsters Thoeung Son Group and Ethiopian singer Aster Aweke.) The concerts Deihim performs with composer and real-life companion Richard Horowitz, who scores for and plays the Moroccan ney flute and synthesizer, beg sustained attention, not door-opening perusal. "We begin with a feeling that is mystical, contemplative, ancient," explains 33-year-old Deihim, "then build into something pretty crazy, toward the land of the way out."

Unlike better-known Indian and Middle Eastern wailers like Najma and Ofra Haza, Deihim has no desire to lay her meticulously trained voice over catchy pop-funk riffs to help smooth the route



SUSSAN DEIHIM: BUILDING "TOWARD THE LAND OF THE WAY OUT"

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 89
and found 20 mistakes. The *Brandenburg* Concertos are bristling with mistakes. I don't think Bach had time to go back and analyze his music and eliminate the mistakes. No one makes more mistakes than I do, but I go back and take care of them. And yet, strict as I am," he rightly adds, "my music still flows and sounds spontaneous."

Asked about recent projects, Hardin enthuses with the cautious intensity of one who half expects to be misunderstood: "I've done a lot of research on the overtone series for 15 years, and I've found some laws in the first nine overtones which may apply to the entire universe. Apparently no one else has ever discovered them." He's written a paper titled "The Overtone Continuum" which, in 54 axioms and a dozen-odd diagrams, details the ways in which union of opposites and the two-directionality of time are deducible from a simple rising note-sequence. The theories have found their way into his recent music in grandiose terms: "To describe the cosmos, I've written a 1000-part canon, *Cosmos I*. You couldn't paint the cosmos, but you can describe it in music. No one has ever attempted a piece of such magnitude: Mahler wrote a symphony for a thousand players, but it didn't have a thousand different parts. *Cosmos I* takes nine hours to perform—not that it will ever be played, but it was something I wanted to do, to describe what the cosmos is like. In my 1000-voice canon," he adds with a nod toward poor Johann Sebastian, "you won't find one mistake."

Unfortunately, NMA can't bring us that phenomenon, but it will provide a number of Moondog's less ambitious efforts. For the opening night extravaganza at the BAM Opera House, Hardin will take part in a performance of his *First Session*, written in 1953. Then, November 16 at BAM's Majestic Theater, Tania Leon will conduct the Brooklyn Philharmonic in a program Hardin calls "The