

Quartet 4 the Beginning of Time

BY KYLE GANN

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Jerome Kitzke performing *Teeth of Heaven*
photo: Keith Bedford

He's lived many years in Manhattan—part of the time in the same building where the Gershwin brothers once wrote musicals—but Jerome Kitzke is New York's voice of the Western wilderness. He even looks out of place, with his braided hair, beaded jewelry, and Native American friends who come in from the Dakotas and Arizona to work with him. And his music has qualities that no other New York music supplies: a homespun aura, a joyous theatricality, an odd blend of emotional innocence and musical sophistication. These have never been more in evidence than they were in *Teeth of Heaven*, the new work commissioned from him by the Elaine Kaufman Cultural Center and performed there November 10.

I was at first disappointed that Kitzke wouldn't be performing his own music, since his own style of playing the piano while chanting and shaking rattles is an inimitable part of his persona. Nevertheless, the work was played by longtime members of his Mad Coyote ensemble who have absorbed his lack of inhibition—an unusual instrumentation of piano, percussion, and four clarinetists playing seven clarinets ranging from alto to bass. Michael Lowenstern, JoAnn Sternberg, Alan R. Kay, and Andrew Lamy formed the quartet of clarinets, David Friedman played piano, and Barbara Merjan percussion.

First, Kitzke came out and read the Wasco Indian story on which *Teeth of Heaven* was based. It

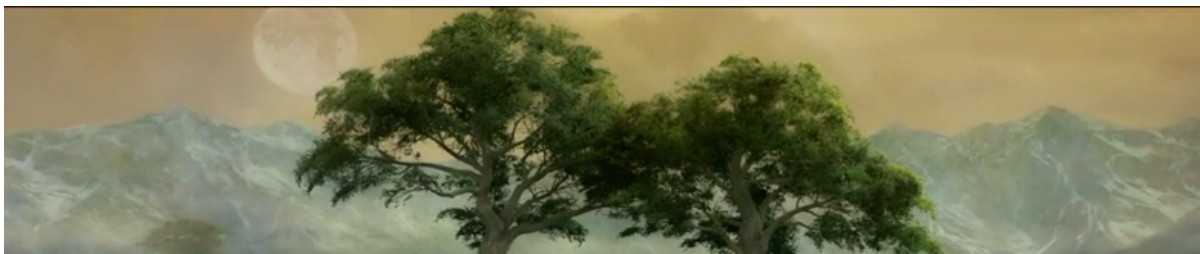
told about how Coyote asked five wolf brothers to tell him what they were looking at in the sky. After initial reluctance, they drew his attention to two grizzly bears in the heavens. Coyote offered to take the wolves up there, climbing up a ladder of arrows he shot into the sky. Once up, he found the picture of the bears and wolves sitting around a pleasant one and left them there to be what we now look at as the Big Dipper.

Not your average New York subject matter, and hardly your average New York new music. Terrifically athletic Merjan symbolized Coyote, banging out intricate rhythms on a big array of drums, and the clarinetists and piano were the five wolves. The clarinets raced through complex melodies in fast rhythmic unison, pausing only briefly for an occasional raucously improvised solo. The chromatically jazzy melodies, and their insouciance about jumping back and forth between tonality and atonality, reminded me of Bartók, while the imagistic sonorities brought little flashes of Messiaen.

But Kitzke, as one of his longtime collaborators mentioned in a post-concert panel discussion, writes not for the instrument, but for the whole person. Those clarinet-toting wolves would often stop to growl, whistle, laugh, sing chorales on syllables like "hula wana," and shout, in unison, lines from the story: "What do you see up there in the sky?" "Look what I did!" "They will tear you apart and eat you!" His sound is completely different, but Kitzke has inherited the ethos of Harry Partch more than any composer I know of. None of the microtonalists most explicitly following in Partch's footsteps come close to Kitzke in writing "corporeal" music—Partch's term for music in which the performer is present emotionally, personally, and physically as well as sonically.

This is not to say that *Teeth of Heaven* was a clear-cut narrative work; as Kitzke mentioned, he had no intention of writing another *Peter and the Wolf*. Merkin Hall featured *Teeth of Heaven* in its series for audiences of children, who reportedly received it very well. But the music did not so closely mickeymouse the Wasco myth that I could always tell what was going on. There were joyous passages, maniacal passages, funny passages, and once in a while a lyrical section, including one moving chorale included as a memento of September 11. The work's unity was in the music, not always in the myth, which stood in the background, however, as a welcome reminder to us New Yorkers that the world is a lot more ancient than the institutions we see around us every day.

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