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PHILADELPHIA—New music was without form and void until the Kitchen defined it in 1979 as a makeshift conglomerate of post-Cagean conceptualism, elec-tech tinkering, minimalism, disenfranchised jazz, appropriated world musics, etc. The annual festival that resulted, New Music America, offers the only ostensive definition new music has. The impression of community NMA presents, even if largely illusory, is as important to new musicians as to the public, and is made on a budget that astonishes European visitors. It's scandalous that NMA, arguably the nation's most significant serious music event, has to get its NEA support through the Inter-Arts program, because the Music program is in thrall to the orchestra lobbies.

The Kitchen has cast a long shadow over the festival. NMA has traditionally catered to the New York breed of composers who perform their own music, which is often inadvertently discouraged. Consequently, the festival has often inadvertently discouraged composers who neither perform nor direct their own ensembles (which describes most composers outside New York). This year's festival in Philadelphia (I heard about three-fourths of its 80-odd events) subtly affected a far-

New Music America '87

Quiet Heroics

BY KYLE GANN

idiom.

Actually, to be specific, Albert's *A Maze (With Grace)* was a decade-old meditation piece fashioned quite logically from the hymn embedded in its title; and Franceschini's *White Spirituals* were too sincere to have stemmed from minimalism, though their Copland treatment of shaped-note hymns was joyous and refreshing. But Epstein's *Chamber Music: Three Songs From Home*, tonal and rhythmically fresh, brought stunning elegance to the TMIRM style. The piece's smooth meter changes and seamless counterpoint transformed intimate poems by Toby Olson into straight-faced, Gertrude Steinish enigmas.

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threw a bagful of metal rods around the stage to revel in their vivid but thoroughly predictable sound, I remembered a teacher I had in 1975 who said my generation had missed the avant-garde's exciting period; 10 years earlier he had seen composers drop Ping-Pong balls on the audience. When a member of Philadelphia's Shamanistics group rattled a clamshell necklace on his bongos, or when Charles K. Noyes of Invite the Spirit popped bubble wrap on a snare drum, I thought it was 1969. I heard composers over 40 wonder aloud where these performers had been when they were doing the same stuff. It requires either inexperience or a short memory to call it new.

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extreme delicacy, virtuosity, and imagination. Velez makes the drum talk, and though his rhythmic structures are repetitive, he never repeats a nuance. He should be included on every festival, for the standard of pure musicianship he sets is a challenge every musician needs. But I was impressed, too, by the week's loudest and grossest work, *Industrial Strength* by Borbetomagus. Using two saxes, drum sets, and what sounded like a thousand loudspeakers, they created a blank, unremittably ugly wall of sound. I fled with the rest of the rats, but I admired the clarity of their antisocial minimalism.

NMA '87 yielded to some of the usual pressures. A few groups evinced new music's uneasy alliance with conventional jazz, even though the extra audience members jazz brings in usually react coldly to the rest of the fare. Academic music I find more difficult to justify, since the festival's original purpose was to provide an outlet for musicians denied access to Merkin Hall, Lincoln Center, Tanglewood, etc. Nevertheless, *Relâche* did its civic duty by programming local pros George Crumb and Richard Wernick, plus a piece by younger academic Melinda Wagner that sounded like the *Reader's Digest* version of Berg's *Three Pieces for Orchestra*. The audiences for

Consequently, the festival has often inadvertently discouraged composers who neither perform nor direct their own ensembles (which describes most composers outside New York). This year's festival in Philadelphia (I heard about three-fourths of its 80-odd events) subtly effected a far-reaching change in the ground rules, organized as it was by a performing group, Joseph Franklin's inimitable Relâche ensemble. Thus it was the first to acknowledge in theory that there are still interesting, advanced composers in America who notate their music to be performed by others.

No ensemble in America was better equipped to make that statement. Unlike groups such as Parnassus and Speculum Musicae, who take pride in being antiseptic transmitters of sacred scores, Relâche has its own distinctly recognizable ensemble personality. This is partly due to some exceptional members—the incredibly versatile soprano of Barbara Noska, Guy Klucevsek's sweetly nimble accordioning—but also to their thoughtful interpretive style, their ability to listen to one another rather than just follow a conductor. As a result, Relâche is to new music what Tennstedt or Abbado is to Mahler: one expects that Relâche's Cage, or Relâche's Oliveros, while completely authentic, will differ in intriguing ways from some other ensemble's Cage or Oliveros. I can recognize a Relâche recording blindfolded the way some people can the Philadelphia Orchestra, and I couldn't give them a higher compliment than that.

Relâche's no-holds-barred repertoire ranges from meditation music to electronics to complexly notated scores, enabling them to program the festival without geographic or stylistic bias. Given their druthers, though, they tend to gravitate toward composers involved in a project I call *TMIRM*—Turning Minimalism Into Real Music. Most of the music that didn't sound dated fell into this category. The works Relâche played by Paul Epstein, William Duckworth, Romulus Franceschini, Tina Davidson (all Pennsylvanians), Virginian Thomas Albert, and New York's Daniel Goode, were charming examples of a new tonality molded into a supple, well-defined

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Duckworth and Goode both demonstrated how the clarity of *TMIRM* (come on, weren't you sick of that ugly word *postminimal*?) allowed for a sharper pointed message than does the diffuse, violent music that is usually considered political. Duckworth's *Music in the Combat Zone* infused antiwar texts written/selected by Mindy Weinreb with a disarming, cabaret immediacy that might not have survived without Noska's irresistible theatricalism. Goode proceeded more by metaphor than statement, and interrupted his own Wind Symphony, an intense *Le Sacre* of repeated motives, with a small, discordant band that emerged down the aisles. Some groups used heavy amplification to make disturbing statements, but Goode outdid them with this flat fascist metaphor and signs that bore the chilling message, "All is not well."

If Relâche diluted the festival's traditional New York bias, they compensated by packing it with New York improvisers. This category, mysteriously fascinated by casual randomness, accounted for much boring, self-indulgent music, and after the first three the remaining such became redundant. Most of it was what I call *adjective music*—music that has lots of qualities, but doesn't do anything or go anywhere. In this section (one player says to another) I'll play something lyrical and you play something spiky; next, I'll be intense, you be loud and discontinuous. "Development" means crescendo, either of volume or activity. Eastern instruments have largely replaced the '60s electronic sounds and the '70s extended instrumental techniques. The other change is that, instead of the composer-as-performer, we now more often have the performer-as-composer. Clarinetist Ned Rothenberg and cellist Tom Cora (separately) did some incredible playing, but I ended up wishing they had commissioned someone to write pieces for them.

Much of this territory had been explored long ago when the forward

thought it was 1969. I heard composers over 40 wonder aloud where these performers had been when they were doing the same stuff. It requires either inexperience or a short memory to call it new.

If these improvisers thought they were working within Cage's "let sounds be themselves" philosophy, they missed the point. Cage's music involves a massive effort (as anyone who's sat and thrown coins to realize one of his indeterminate pieces can tell you) to bypass what the

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mind comes up with out of its own habits, to produce something livelier and more unexpected than is possible in spur-of-the-moment improv. Unless you're working within some sort of discipline, such as a harmonic framework, Roscoe Mitchell's number systems, or Zev's deep meditations, all improvisation dredges up is egos, and some of the improvisers had boring egos.

A few performers raised themselves above these criticisms. NY's Anthony Coleman has been guilty in the past, but in *Ethnic Slurs/Critical Lists* he approximated a serial rigor that transcended the genre by light years. Writing for four keyboards (here an inspired combination of piano, accordion, synthesizer, and marimba), Coleman presented forceful textures and discrete pitch structures that would suddenly retreat into atmospheric stasis. Uptown sounds with downtown urgency, it was the festival's most challenging music, and some of the most rewarding. The ROVA Saxophone Quartet, too, did their usual genre-defying miracles in *The Questioned Answer*, a carefully honed improv structure whose lucidity equaled its virtuosity. The moment when the music paused for Jon Raskin to play a fateful quotation from Ives's *The Unanswered Question* was my candidate for most magical moment of the week; memorable moments were a luxury few of these groups could afford.

The festival climaxed quietly when Glen Velez and Layne Redmond, playing nothing but small frame drums, performed two ethnic-sounding impromptu

Tanglewood, etc. Nevertheless, Relâche did its civic duty by programming local pros George Crumb and Richard Wernick, plus a piece by younger academic Melinda Wagner that sounded like the *Reader's Digest* version of Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra. The audiences for these works cheered lustily and left at intermission, and Wernick later conceded that Crumb is the country's most oft-performed composer.

Far more profitable were the offbeat, uncategorizable acts that NMA always brings out of the woodwork. David Mahler's baseball piece combined the national anthem with "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" to hilarious effect, as trombonist Stuart Dempster made his way around a diamond. NY performance artist Linda Montano played "Casio portraits" by channeling people's vibes; mine, at least, was uncannily insightful. Further perspective was provided by music from America's heroic, ultramodern period. Marc Andre Hamelin performed a moving, monumental Ives "*Concord*" *Sonata*, Guy Klucevsek gave Henry Cowell's accordion concerto a dashing world premiere; and outside the festival auspices, the Philadelphia Orchestra played Lou Harrison's Third Symphony (which I missed), while the American Music Theater Festival presented a problematic, but vividly vernacular staging of Harry Partch's late opera *Revelation at the Courthouse Park*.

The festival's triumphs shrank in proximity to such giants, but I think it's a mistake to read too much into the comparison. The best performances I heard—Epstein, Velez, Duckworth, Coleman, ROVA—were impressive for the realism of their modest ambitions, a quieter kind of heroism. The challenge now is not to blast through barriers (they're all down), but to draw meaning from confusion. Not dynamite, but tweezers are needed. NMA isn't a spingboard for the next Reich, Glass, Partch, or Ives, but a yardstick that allows us to yearly measure how far new music has shifted. The festival is exasperating, exciting, revealing, and boring, but the first year it doesn't happen American music will have lost something essential to its self-identity.