

**M**usically speaking, The Revolution is about 35 years old now, older than most of the people who crammed into the New York Studio School April 2 and 3 to hear the Bowery Ensemble and Composer's Forum commemorate it. The Studio School auditorium, small and dingy as it was, as disastrously as its roof leaked during a quiet Feldman piece, lent an air of clandestine, underground excitement to a John Cage/Morton Feldman/Earle Brown/Christian Wolff reunion. It was as though even after 30-odd years we were listening to something we weren't supposed to hear. The Revolution, God knows, is far from over.

Nils Vigeland and the Bowery Ensemble made an odd and interesting statement through their choice of pieces. Each composer was honored by one or two early works and one recent work, ranging from 1950 to 1985 and including nothing between '53 and '77. By ignoring 24 years of development, the Ensemble downplayed periods of artistic crisis and presented only stages of youthful self-confidence and (save for Wolff) serene old age. The series could have been named "Revolution Then and Now," with Now sounding conspicuously like Then. The bland flatness of '85 Cage strangely resembled '52 Wolff; Brown seems to have played with the same idea for three decades now, and only Feldman's music had come to be something more than it originally was.

There's a widespread hallucination regarding Cage that his ideas are more important and influential than his music, as if the label on a bottle of Dom Perignon is tastier than the wine. All art, as Arthur C. Danto has eloquently pointed out, stands in need of a theoretical context for its comprehension, and one of Cage's achievements has been to provide perhaps the most articulate foundation for his work of any composer in history. Labels inform perception, but one reads them only if the product intrigues. No one who has heard *Etudes Australes* or the Piano Concerto can doubt that Cage has a distinct and very lively (his favorite word) musical personality. But for those who fell in love with the sound of his music (as I did at 15), I doubt that his

## Bowery Ensemble/Christian Wolff

# Revolution Now

BY KYLE GANN

minimalism fundamentally questioned the nature of chamber music; we went through the motions, but the expected content was stoutly denied.

For *Piano I* of 1952 stood at the beginning of Wolff's concern with musical (and ultimately personal) relationships. Vigeland gave a classic demonstration of the negative musical space Wolff helped invent; with unerring instinct he brought out the piece's essence, dryly emphasizing cutoffs, silences, simultaneities. Flutist Rachel Rudich, trombonist Leonard Krech, Vigeland, and Pugliese all per-

that struggled like some distant, half-awake organism. The music sounded held back, allowed to emerge only in tantalizing, sensuous bits. At the end, a surprising unison melody in flute and violin appeared, recalling Feldman's similar concession in *Rothko Chapel*. As ever, Brown is the slick one, the most European, and I've never heard anything of his more voluptuous than this. His *Folio* (1953) set for flute, trombone, piano, and percussion, was pre-*Available Forms*, conceptual rather than mobile. It sounded like early serial music, with the de-

utter stillness required. *Piano Piece* (1952) was a string of evenly spaced single notes, and a quietly virtuosic display of Feldman's impeccable feel for the supporting and negating qualities of different intervals. *Extensions 3* added rhythms, simultaneities, and repetitions to that simple schema and multiplied its beauties exponentially. Tiny figures repeated softly as if afraid of not having been heard, and every repetition counted to just the right number—even the 16 quintuple octaves. By 1952, Feldman's habit of including a few loud chords in each piece was already established.

Music of The Revolution is theoretically impervious to extraneous noise, but theory failed with Feldman's *Spring of Chosroes* (1977) for violin and piano. Durations in this dry, delicate work are calculated to the inspired number of split seconds, and the presence of a natural metronome in the hall (rain dripping on a plastic ceiling covering) was depressingly intrusive. I had to go home and listen to Zukofsky's recording of the piece to remind myself how subtly unexpected its gentle rhythms are. It was a shame, for Vigeland and Zeavin gave a crisp, careful performance, the latter's delicate tone perfectly appropriate. Feldman has the most finely tuned ear of any American. He may be the greatest composer living.

If the Bowery Ensemble's authentic readings elicited déjà vu, the following night's Christian Wolff retrospective concert at The Clocktower looked forward to a brave new world. First, Elliott Sharp had the audacity to arrange Wolff's *Wobly Music* for jazz quartet. It worked. The transposition from the avant-garde into a popular form of expression was utterly convincing, and seemed entirely in line with Wolff's proletarian aesthetic. Too, purism aside, Sharp's deep voice in rhythmic unison with Wayne Horvitz's electric piano chords made an unforgettable impression.

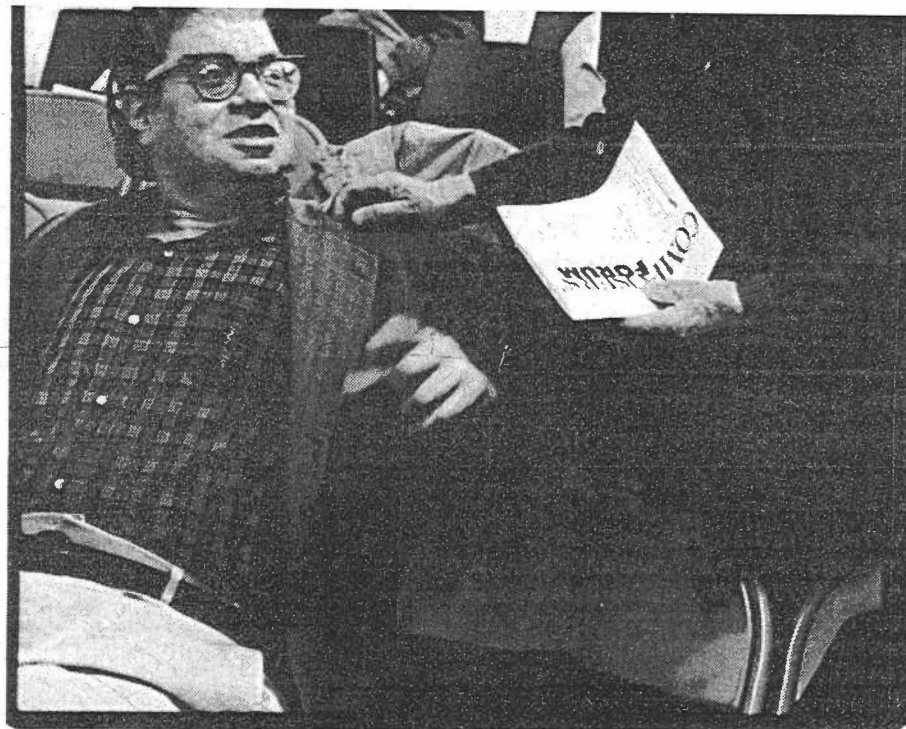
Equally creative, John Zorn, Bill Friesell, and David Weinstein spared no effort in a timbrally fascinating (if deafening) realization of Wolff's *For 1, 2, or 3 People* (1964). How many times have we heard Wolff's conceptual pieces unimaginatively realized in the tired, dinky sounds of the classical chamber ensemble? This was refreshingly different;



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Admittedly, Cage's recent output is often a couple of steps ahead of my comprehension. The Six Melodies for violin and piano of 1950 (played by Carol Zeavin with Vigeland) are charming, the only pieces that remind one that Cage was first drawn to music by a fondness for Edvard Grieg. But I was a little nonplussed by *Music for 4* and *Music for 5* (two versions of the same 1985 piece). Mellow and sustained, the work didn't make Cage's usual rigorous instrumental demands, and sounded flabby. Despite Michael Pugliese's percussion effects made with paper cups, hubcaps, and a Jack Daniels bottle, it wouldn't have sounded like Cage had it not been for baritone Tom Buckner's uninhibited vocal sounds. My faith in the old man's undiminished ability to astonish was restored a few nights later in Chicago, where Peter Gena's InterArts Ensemble played *Hymnkus*, an even more recent Cage work. *Hymnkus* (hymn + haikus; Relache premiered it in Philadelphia April 4) is a restfully Thoreauvian sonic pond, its gorgeous, minimalist surface disturbed only by the occasional triangle piping or clarinet squeal. His books will undoubtedly endure, but first and foremost Cage is a great composer.

Though Cage was the ringleader, Christian Wolff, a precocious teenager in 1951, was the brains of the outfit. The Ensemble chose three works from an interesting and little-remembered early period, the time of Wolff's introduction to the world through the German journal *Die Reihe* and *Musical Quarterly*. The Duo for Violins, played by Tina Pelikan and Laura Seaton, made meditative counterpoint within the span of a whole step. The Trio I (1951) for flute, trumpet, and cello used three pitches, more widely spaced (though an insecure trumpeter added a few not intended). The incipient



Morton Feldman and John Cage: Still clandestine, still underground

formed as brilliantly in the 1985 *Bowery Preludes* Wolff wrote for them, instrumental motets in a terrifyingly complex hocket technique. Wolff's long-standing emphasis on mutual performer responses has led to a music where everything depends on listening and cooperation. Much of his recent style derives from the speech rhythm of political texts, but when writing sans voice, his happy inspirations seem to come from outer space.

Earle Brown has always struck me as the standout in this crowd; the other three are ascetics, he is the epicure. The score for his 1985 *Tracer*, for flute, clarinets, strings, and tape, looked like many he's made since *Available Forms* of 1962: clusters of staves overlaid with the same old big blue numbers. But if his mobile conception of form hasn't budged in 25 years, he has at least honed it to an impressive edge. Conducting with fluid hand motions, Brown molded tentative sonic shapes over dirty electronic sounds lightful difference that nothing was demanded of the listener. Again, Pugliese rattled and popped plastic bags with wonderful '50s nonchalance, drawing the eve-

ning's only giggles from this extremely appreciative audience.

I was blown away by Feldman at his most disarming. Cage is the soul, Brown the fingers, but Feldman is the heart and ears of The Revolution. He has never, in his words, "taken up the ruler," but accomplishes through listening and intuition what others achieve mechanically. While music has become subject to left-

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brain controls, Feldman has remained the prophet of the right brain. Although he once described himself as "the master of nonfunctional harmony," I've often thought his most important contribution has been, paradoxically, the differentiation of qualitative shadings of rhythm. The Ensemble demonstrated three of his numerous rhythmic ideas.

Feldman's music would be played more often if it were often played this well. Most people plunk out his sustained pianissimos as though embarrassed by the inactivity, but Vigeland understood the

electric piano chords made an unforgettable impression.

Equally creative, John Zorn, Bill Frisell, and David Weinstein spared no effort in a timbrally fascinating (if deafening) realization of Wolff's *For 1, 2, or 3 People* (1964). How many times have we heard Wolff's conceptual pieces unimaginatively realized in the tired, dinky sounds of the classical chamber ensemble? This was refreshingly different; Weinstein reprogrammed his Mirage Synthesizer every few chords, Frisell fiddled with his electric guitar settings, and Zorn frantically exchanged sax reeds in between notes—sometimes for only theatrical effect. Susan Stenger and Peter Zummo put equal effort into *Edges*, using extended flute techniques and a half-dozen trombone mutes in a performance that illuminated the work's title.

There's a fine line between a casual performance attitude (to which Wolff's music conduces) and seeming to not give a damn, and only Arthur Russell stepped over it. He sang some *Wolff Songs* from '73-74, accompanying himself on cello in a lethargic deadpan that somehow suits his own music, but which rendered Wolff's all-important political text unintelligible. William Schimmel's premiere (on accordion) of Wolff's *Black Song Organ Preludes*, however, was quite opposite, a spirited rendition of vignettes written in a lively, quasi-street style sprinkled with insouciant dissonances. The majority of these players came together for vibrantly complex performances of *Pairs* (1968) and *Exercises* (1973-4); Wolff himself, looking amused and abashed by the attention, joined in the latter, whose joyously unsynchronized melodies seemed to sum up his delightful oeuvre.

Not only was this an overdue retrospective for a more than deserving composer, but these landmark performances pose a challenge to future interpreters of conceptual and indeterminate music. They merit documentation, as I hope some enterprising record company will note. So earnest a tribute, coming as it did from a young generation of New York composers who all have their own aesthetic agendas, was heartwarmingly impressive. There needs no better indicator of what significance The Revolution will have for musicians of the 21st century. ■

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