

# The Rhythms of Power

By Kyle Gann

## Performers' Workshop Ensemble

New York may be the center of the musical universe, but there is an entire world of new music for which we hardly exist. I know a successful political composer who won't bother to concertize here. Unless you're a big enough name to play BAM or Lincoln Center, he points out, your music will only be heard by fellow composers; and if you're not doing the kind of highbrow, easily classified work favored by the current *Times* regime, you have a better chance at sympathetic press in Cincinnati or Fort Worth. Similarly, in 1989 at a festival in Germany, I ran across an exciting group from Urbana, Illinois, called the Performers' Workshop Ensemble, and tried to cajole them into coming to New York. Why? they asked, and the only reason I could offer was that New York doesn't have any counterpart to what they're doing, and could use some fresh ideas. March 19 at Experimental Intermedia, they finally appeared.

New York composers concentrate on their art and their careers, but those active in mall-culture America have incentives to focus on reception, how their work relates to their immediate audience and how it and they might change each other. The honing effect of running up against a neutral or even hostile crowd month after month, plus the intensity of work-



Full of beans: Fay and Glassman in *Coffee Cup Duet*

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ing together for 17 years, have given PWE a bracing edge. Though the group's members graduated from the University of Illinois and are protégés of university composer Herbert Brün, they have no affiliation. They spend their summers teaching classes in creativity, helping young people apply artistic thinking to all kinds of situations. Their music takes Midwestern conceptualism as its starting point, subjecting text, movement, and anything else at hand to processes of musical composition. There are many ways to make complex ideas accessible, and PWE's strategy is to let the complexity run rampant, but draw it at every point from the materials of daily life.

For example, Lisa Fay's *Coffee Cup Duet* began as a restaurant scene and ended as an athletic

percussion duo with silverware, cups, and chairs. In *Table Table* by Ben Blanchard and Matt Rappaport, Joe Futrelle and Danielle Chynoweth repeated phrases over and over in rhythmic patterns passed trickily back and forth. Playful at first, the piece turned covertly sinister as the phrases morphed from "cigarettes and gum" to "cigarette syndrome" to "Tourette's syndrome," and finally to talk of homicide. Susan Parenti explores the rhythms of the self-effacing speech patterns women use to disempower themselves. In her *Exercise 4 for Hand Right Left and Deserted Mouth*, percussionist Sam Markewich closely shadowed and interrupted her speech on wood blocks and bells. The sentence "It's (not) possible to (compose at night after) work(ing) all day at some (lousy) job" got transformed as her

censoring hand, covering her mouth, squelched the words in parentheses.

To reach lay audiences, PWE isn't afraid to risk a clarity that musicians, who grasp the ideas involved more quickly, scoff at as unsophisticated. Parenti's *Every Ten Seconds* had members of the ensemble crying, "Every 15 seconds, someone thinks of himself as a victim!" "Every eight seconds, someone is tortured!" "Every 120 seconds, a joke is made in the classroom about homosexuals!" Each of these pronouncements instigated a repeated action, like banging a hammer or dropping a book, whose tempo of recurrence was proportional to the stated time period. Finally Mark Enslin, raising a mallet to strike a gong, yelled, "Not once in 26 years does someone have an idea that will benefit all of mankind!"—but as we waited, the gong blow never came. "Cheap shot," a musician said to me afterward, but I thought the piece drew intriguing connections between multitempo structures and social cycles without being at all simpleminded.

Other works achieved dazzling sophistication in nonmusical ways. In *Triangle*, Fay and the amazingly chameleonic Jeff Glassman jumped in midword, as though someone were switching TV channels, among three pairs of personas: a couple of withered old cleaning employees, an actor and director, and a whiny tobacco exec and his bored, abusive wife.

The effect was merely surreal at first, but as coincidences between the plots multiplied, I began to suspect (though I can't swear) that the performers were intercutting between scenes locatable on a single stage: a couple of theater janitors, the actors rehearsing a play, and the play itself. The piece then became an anatomy of power relationships as the two struggled for dominance in their changing personas. And although PWE's players are primarily trained as composers, I've seen a lot of theater fail to reach this virtuoso level of characterization.

Somewhat regrettably, PWE devoted the evening's second half to a dated and dubious classic, *Maledetto* of 1967-69 by the late Kenneth Gaburo. As Enslin recited a fanatically detailed lecture on the history of the screw, six other speakers kept up a surreal running dialogue on connotations of the word *screw*, savoring the obscene ones with innocent '60s glee. Gaburo was a valued teacher and an electronic pioneer, but *Maledetto*, clever at best and at no point profound, crystallized a historical moment when composers were blithely doing theater with little conception of its inherent requirements. If the work left a legacy, it's that PWE has abundantly learned from its mistakes. In Germany, I heard them give cabaret-style concerts in which the various pieces worked together to culminate in provocative political insights. This little taste of their music in New York only whetted my appetite. Perhaps the problem is that they don't belong on the new-music circuit at all. But where, if you're making experimental music for people who aren't tuned into the arts, do you perform in New York?

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