

Rip! Woof! Bang! (Ouch!)

By Kyle Gann
S.E.M. Ensemble

At the end of the S.E.M. Ensemble's second annual Fluxus retrospective, the capacity crowd rose in a frenzy. The audience members threw paper wads, wrapped each other with brown paper, and ripped newspapers to ribbons (including a *Voice*; I searched in vain for a shred of my last column). This climax, the last of 17 concepts pulled off on us March 14 at Brooklyn's Willow Place Auditorium, was *Paper Piece* by Ben Patterson, one of the Fluxus movement's craziest progenitors. And the mayhem was incited by Petr Kotik's new S.E.M. orchestra, made up partly of young, Juilliard-trained, yet amiably uninhibited musicians.

Fluxus gained self-awareness as a movement in 1962 in performances at Yoko Ono's loft. By 1975—many smashed violins, amplified fires, and released butterflies later—it had ceased to be an active concert-giving concern, but it survives as an impish secret society whose members are known but whose purposes remain obscure. By adamant choice, it survives without manifesto, definition, or articulated philosophy. S.E.M. director Petr Kotik has

started presenting retrospectives in order to polish up Fluxus's historical importance as a post-Cage, barrier-breaking force, but the group resists joining the Mount Rushmore of 20th century movements. When Kotik began planning a program for the concert, he was told that it was inauthentic for Fluxus to print a program, or even to decide on or rehearse events before the day of a performance.

Downtown music has inherited its insouciance, but what made Fluxus a splash of cold water on a sweltering day is that the movement had no pretensions. So much new music pretends to be art and isn't, that to hear a concert of work that *doesn't* pretend to be art, and yet often serendipitously is, is an unexpected holiday. Some of the "pieces" on this program weren't pieces; Larry Miller's *Remote Music*, in which he lowered a plaster hand via rope to play one note (which it fumbled) on the piano, was just a joke. But in the best events, what you thought was a joke gradually revealed itself as cleverness, then insight, then beauty, often to the composer's surprise. In that joyful atmosphere, when the S.E.M. members began ripping paper, the audience immediately joined in (and no audience is so impervious

to participation as New York's).

The only way to define Fluxus is to describe its events, which are often exhausted in the description. In *A Dozen for Carmen*, Patterson played a recording of Bizet's *Carmen* as the S.E.M. orchestra members slinked in one at a time, each carrying a red rose. One by one they dropped the roses into a blender half full of water. When the last rose was added, Patterson turned on the blender, poured the liquidated roses into a glass, viewed it skeptically a minute, and downed it in a gulp as the music ended.

In *Wall Piece for Orchestra II* by Yoko Ono, the orchestra assembled themselves with their

backs to the wall. At a signal from conductor Kotik, they banged the wall, in unison, with the backs of their heads. Under one second, *Wall Piece* is the briefest large ensemble work I know of. Next briefest is Robert Watts's *Trace for Orchestra*, in which the orchestra set their music on fire. Joe Jones's *Dog Symphony* brought six canines to the stage, whereupon a few ensemble members blew dog whistles to incite them to bark or howl. Four of the dogs only stared at the audience, and the soloists, a soprano terrier and a baritone mutt, had already been barking anyway. Just as entertaining as if it had come off as planned, the piece proved that, in



PETER MOORE

Ben Patterson pauses to drink the roses.

Fluxus, failure versus success is a moot distinction.

Deflating expectations is a frequent Fluxus *modus operandi*. The S.E.M. orchestra conscientiously tuned their instruments to play Yoshi Wada's *Lip Vibrator for Orchestra*, then put them down and blew fart noises through cardboard tubes. The funniest 30 seconds, though, was Mieko Shiomi's *Music for Orchestra and Disappearing Face*. The S.E.M. orchestra stood looking at us with their instruments. At Kotik's signal, they broke into maniacal grins that then faded away, anti-Cheshire Cat style, leaving only the original blank-faced orchestra. It was a comment on the pervasive boredom one sees on the faces of orchestral players everywhere.

And Alison Knowles's "Onion Skin" achieved the unexpected, haphazard poetry that characterizes the best of Fluxus. Knowles and an assistant pressed bits of crumbled onion skin between two pieces of Saran Wrap. She then slid the result across some music paper, while pianist Joseph Kubera interpreted the fragments as notes. You waited for the punch line, but the onion skins looked like brown leaves, and Kubera's tone clusters were delicately autumnal. (Fluxus is capable of stunning audio documents. One of my favorite and rarest discs is *Klavierduett*, a Block-Gramavision recording of Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys layering radios over Chopin's funeral march and Gershwin's "Summertime" in a memorial piano duo for George Maciunas.) One thing Fluxus demonstrates is that once pretensions are kicked out the door, beauty often slips in the window. ■

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