

Elodie Lauten, Annea Lockwood

The Rising Yin

BY KYLE GANN



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least threatening.

The establishment honors women who imitate male models, so Zwilich's music—a half-energetic rehash of Schuman, Stravinsky, and early Carter—gets a Pulitzer and we all go back to sleep. (If conservatives need a token, Nancy Van de Vate is older than Zwilich and has written far more striking music.) Male critics crow about the advances made by women composers, but they're 90 per cent illusory. Except for Laurie Anderson (whose music has its own high-tech macho) and Meredith Monk (who came in through the back door of dance, a "women's artform"),

ready to let music's yang recede.

I thought reflexively of R. I. P. Hayman's barely audible sleep-music that I reviewed here recently, but I also thought of Xenakis's conception of ancient Greek music. The vision of a prestructural Greek or Indoeuropean music runs like an underground stream in Western music, and the further "official" music gets from it, the more insistently certain composers are called by it. Trace the idea through Vincenzo Galileo, Monteverdi, Gluck, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche composed, remember), Partch's *Genesis of a Music*, and Xenakis's *Formalized Music*, and you can see what diverse shapes Greek music has taken in the modern mind. Nietzsche emphasized the social ritual, Partch the theatrical, but Xenakis captured the form that has taken root in America, that of a musical flow that contains no sense of forward direction: that is, in his term, *outside-time*.

You hear this outside-timeness as a sustained *tuning* in the microtonal drone pieces of Phill Niblock, the overtone structures of Glenn Branca (a curious blend of macho and receptivity), and the *Drift Studies* of LaMonte Young (with whom Lauten studied Indian music). In the same way, each of Lauten's pieces *was* its tuning. She's trying to capture, she told me afterward, the *anahatta*, the "unuttered sound" of Buddhism that she's heard in meditation, and she thinks the La Galleria performance was the closest she's gotten to reproducing it. Close or not, she enchantingly brought the Oriental roots of Western music to the surface.

Lauten has also expressed the *anahatta* in more structured ways. Her video opera *The Death of Don Juan* stems from the same meditation-sound experience, but layers it with a vague chorus, minimalist harpsichord patterns, and video images whose unforgettable starkness makes a neat counterpoint to the music's intentional blur. I heard the work at its world premier last April at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston and held off reviewing it because a New York performance was supposedly forthcoming. That failed to materialize, but a scaled-down version will be presented by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council at Federal

Let's take the gloves off. We all know what the *real* new music issue is. Schoenberg didn't invent the 12-tone system in order to preserve coherence in an increasingly chromatic context. Nah, he did it to prove that the Viennese had bigger schlongs than the sissy French neoclassicists. The succession of movements in 20th century music has less to do with the search for beauty than with the search for a more intimidating ideology, one that will cow thousands into worshipping the Great Name. Boulez and Stockhausen were bigger studs because they did it to rhythm and timbre—Arnie only did it to pitch. The '50s lived by a simple rule: he who writes the most incomprehensible music is best in the sack.

Glass and Reich saw that no one was going to outstud Babbitt at that game, so they flipped the rule: women can't resist accessibility, it's almost like rock and roll. Artrock blew away minimalism: it *was* rock. Now artrock's paled next to the ideology sweepstakes' latest entry, which parades each composer's "pedigree of influences." One codpiece is no longer enough. Real men mix rock with jazz, blues, '60s avant-garde, Ewe drumming, Gagaku, Zydeco, fractal geometry, gamelan, hip-hop, polkas, Fibonacci structures, film scores, and cartoon music, with stoic disregard for the violence done to such traditions. (After all, it's not *their* culture that's being raped.) The mere description of the enterprise explains why the music sounds like shit. Music made from ideology usually does.

The repetitiousness of this one-upmanship, which quickly produces ennui in the audience and eventually even in the critic, helps explain why most of the best new composers are women. I don't believe there's any such thing as a "female aesthetic"—art is art—but I do believe that music has yin and yang aspects, that there's such a thing as a healthy balance, and that more women than men achieve it these days. Twentieth-century music, especially rock (though not jazz), is heavy on yang, all bones and structure and verbal justification, not enough emphasis on

what the music actually *sounds* like or what image it's trying to capture. (I could be so impressed with Zorn's and Babbitt's structures if I felt they were *listening* to what they were doing, instead of imposing arbitrary forms on helpless materials. That's why Reich's first process pieces and the early post-Cage stuff were so exciting: for a few years composers started listening to their music again.)

I hear a better yin-yang balance in the musics of Meredith Monk, Elodie Lauten, Annea Lockwood, Linda Fisher, Wendy Chambers, Joyce Lightbody, Lois Vierk, Shelley Hirsch, Beth Anderson, Ruth Anderson, Laurie Anderson, Charmian Tashjian, Laurie Spiegel, Eliane Radigue, Barbara Benary, Maggi Payne, and of course—the Mother of Us All—Pauline Oliveros. Out of that balance comes individuality, since the artist focuses on her materials and on the moment, not on how to top what so-and-so's doing. The classic example is Lockwood's *Tiger Balm*, a smooth tape collage that begins with a slow growling produced by unimaginable means—it turns out to be an amplified cat's purr. The person who made that wasn't self-absorbed, but paying attention. When I try to list American males under 50 whose music is equally individual, I get stuck after a half-dozen names. Works of art are children; they have to be formed, but they also have to be listened to. They come into the world with their own demands, seeking responsiveness from their creator. Most men are too busy playing power games to respond.

Some women are too. Shulamit Ran, Melinda Wagner, and Susan Blaustein write music as tiresome as any man's. I have a press release that refers to Ellen Zwilich as "America's greatest woman composer," just as nonchalantly as if Oliveros and Monk were chopped liver. *Time* (in a confused piece by Michael Walsh urging orchestras to play more contemporary music, starting with Dvorak's *Wood Dove*) recently ran her picture next to one of Mozart. Had Zwilich ever composed a piece worth writing home about, I wouldn't smell a conspiracy. In this context, it seems, *greatest* means

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women with strong musical personalities are as squelched and neglected as ever. Those power games work.

Down off the soapbox. One of my favorite new composers is Elodie Lauten, who performed her new music for trine at La Mama La Galleria February 13. The trine, her invention, is a small, triangular harp, named for the astrological aspect connoting ease and wholeness. Softly singing, accompanied by taped trine and cellist Arthur Russell, Lauten played four pieces, distinguished only by their tunings and methods of playing: in two she

MUSIC

strummed the instruments with her fingers, in the others she tapped raga-like melodies with a glass rod. The music was a delicate continuum of heard and half-heard sounds, so subtle that I wasn't sure at first whether a tape was playing or she was hitting strings accidentally. Russell, whose ultra-low-key presence made a perfect match, droned on delicate single notes, and Lauten sang so quietly that I couldn't tell when she began or ended.

I've written before about the indistinctness of Lauten's music, and I think there's a smart motivation behind it. The perception of musical form is primarily a function of the nonverbal right brain (here's the point academic music stumbles over), but Western music has moved more and more parameters into the domain of left-brain logic. A number of recent composers have developed strategies to bypass the left brain's omnivorous analytic process: Ashley's information overload confuses it, Feldman's irrational harmonies force a refocus on timbre, Lucier's acoustic phenomena draw the mind into the physicality of sound. Similarly, Lauten's hazy melodic patterns are never quite decipherable, and once the left brain quits straining to define what's going on, the right is seduced by her feathery strumming. It can be tiring music if you depend on sounds articulating themselves into form, and at La Galleria a couple of people left. Not everyone's

neat counterpoint to the music's intentional blur. I heard the work at its world premier last April at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston and held off reviewing it because a New York performance was supposedly forthcoming. That failed to materialize, but a scaled-down version will be presented by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council at Federal Hall at noon on March 22. Though still in progress and waiting to be premiered as fully orchestrated, it's a compelling and cohesive major work.

Like Monk and Oliveros, Annea Lockwood, who performed February 17 at the Alternative Museum, has evolved a highly individual musical ontology, though its recalcitrance to theoretical explication has kept her less well-known than the other two. (Jerry Hunt gave an amazing performance the same night, but he's a male and I'm on a theme.) Lockwood's first piece, *Soundstreamer*, began with Tom Varner and Jim Pugh playing breathing patterns on French horn and trombone, and then underlaid them with a tape of infectious vocal ostinati; ingratiating, if formally enigmatic.

Spirit Catcher was the greater pleasure. In *Delta Run* a few years ago, Lockwood played a tape of an unsentimental monologue by a dying painter. Here, she had four people sit with objects they had lived with most of their lives, that had become part of their identities: "spirit catchers." Each talked about the meaning of his or her object, and as they murmured simultaneously, Lockwood sat at a mixer, raising and lowering levels and sending their voices to speakers around the room. Wendy Chambers explained why she had never thrown away Charlie George, her teddy bear, and Eva Karczag remembered problematic childhood relationships; Jerry Hunt and Elizabeth Wood were less audible. Like *Delta Run*, *Spirit Catcher* led me to reflect on similar aspects of my own life, but its value wasn't merely conceptual. The fluctuating counterpoint of voices made a pleasantly ambient sonic environment, as soothing as the seashore. Music is so lovely when composers are tapped into, not their precious egos, but something infinitely larger. ■