

Kettles is one of the softest pieces ever written. Five players tap changing, nonsynchronous pulses on five timpani, while two oscillator tones weave up and down to create beats that quietly rub against one another. The Temple University Percussion Ensemble played *Kettles* at New Music America as the first piece on an October afternoon program; every latecomer who tiptoed in, no matter how carefully he or she closed the door, drowned it out. If modern music, as Christian Wolff said, is that which is not interrupted by unintended sounds, *Kettles* was positively medieval. As the composer, Alvin Lucier, turned to leave, he spotted a colleague and grinned. "No more concerts," he sneered, dismissively waving his hand.

Lucier's music is experimental. The term is as problematic as it is unpopular. Cage argued early for its acceptance, defining *experimental music* as "an action the outcome of which is not foreseen." That's more vague than it used to seem. How often, and to what extent, can you foresee the outcome of an action? Could Beethoven predict what effect the sudden chorus in the last movement of a symphony would have? I believe there are

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composers, commercial and academic, who know in advance the implications of every note they write, but true creative composing is always experimental, because no one ever knows what resonance his or her honest insights will find. Yet Varèse rejected *experimental* on the grounds that his experiments were completed before the music was played (as is often true with Cage). Ashley, noting how easily terms take the place of thinking, said *experimental* made his skin creep. What makes *my* skin creep is the way some composers use *experimental* to justify walking into a stageful of equipment

Alvin Lucier The Risks of R & D

BY KYLE GANN

without much idea as to what they're going to do with it.

But Lucier's music is experimental in the strict, scientific sense of the word: "an operation carried out under controlled conditions in order to discover an unknown effect, test a hypothesis, or illustrate a known law." Lucier's done all three. In *I Am Sitting in a Room* he recorded his voice, then recorded the recording, then recorded *that* recording, and so on, to illustrate that every space has its own peculiar resonances, which are amplified in rerecording; each performance discovers properties of the space in which it happens. *Music on a Long Thin Wire* converted the air movements in a large hall into variations on a drone, using sound to make us aware of unseen aspects of our environment. Another installation used movable walls to demonstrate the effects of echoes. The three works, including *Kettles*, on Lucier's November 18 concert at the Alternative Museum all played with beats resulting from slight pitch differences, his major preoccupation of recent years.

The tension that makes Lucier's work indisputably art is between cognition and experience, between how dull his music might look on paper versus how wild and unpredictable it can be in performance. The piece that evinced that dissonance here was *In memoriam Jon Higgins* for clarinet and oscillator. This was a kind of solo version of his earlier orchestra piece *Crossings*; the oscillator climbed through the clarinet range at a logarithmically steady pace over 20 minutes, while Thomas Ridenour played long, soft tones that anticipated where it was going to



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Lucier: strictly experimental

pass. Of all the intersections of the two lines, no two made identical patterns—sometimes the beats between the conflicting frequencies started in slow, loud waves and got faster; sometimes they created staccato blips, sometimes buzzes, sometimes the disturbance was barely audible. In terms of physics the piece couldn't have been simpler or more linear, but perception twisted it into a mini-drama of expositions, climaxes, peripeteias, denouements.

Judging by appearance, the other two pieces at the Alternative Museum should

have had similar effects, but they didn't register. *Kettles'* subtleties at NMA were lost in the large space, but even in the Alternative Museum's intimacy the only audible result of the oscillators was to put a slight pitch curve at times on the drums' pleasantly ambient beating. Septet for Three Winds, Four Strings, and Pure Wave Oscillator, played by the New World Consort of Wesleyan University (where Lucier teaches), was plagued by uncertain intonation, and what beats there were within its myriad tones around middle C escaped my careful audition. The physical circumstances of such music are so delicate that the culprit could have been any number of things: a too-soft oscillator, miscalculated intonation, unfortunate acoustics, poor speaker placement, poor critic placement; in such a situation analysis becomes especially subjective.

That's the danger with experiments—they sometimes don't work. In Lucier's case the risk is worthwhile because the quality of attention it elicits is a pleasure even in failure. Like La Monte Young's just intonation, it draws the audience *into* the physical sound, engaging the right brain, though with even less intervening personality. Strain to hear the *actual* sounds, rather than just the ones you know are there, and you lose yourself in the experience. The effect of *In memoriam Jon Higgins* must be similar to the one that a good fugue produced in the 18th century, when audiences knew what was supposed to happen and were educated enough to join cognition with perception. TV, rock, and disillusionment with academic pretensions have taken their toll on fugal listening, and physics may be the 20th century's replacement for counterpoint. As in fugue and sonata-form, the specificity of intent is essential. Lucier's genius—and that's the right word—consists in that, though you don't know what's *going* to happen in his music, afterward you sure as hell know whether it happened or not. ■