

John Kennedy, percussionist, walked onstage March 9 carrying two large rocks and began to hit them together at a deliberate tempo, the sharp tick echoing off the walls of Greenwich House Auditorium. With near-imperceptible gradualness he slowed the pulse, and the noise envelope changed; as the distance between ticks increased, you heard more of the rounding off of each echo, and you became aware of tempo's influence on timbre. This was *Stones*, opener for a concert of percussion/conceptual music by Charles Wood, cofounder with Kennedy of the performance group Essential Music.

Next, in Wood's *Red Grass Appearing*, seven people inhaled and exhaled through rough whistles in random ensembles: duets, trios, and so on. The raspy, slowly dying tones moaned like the wind in some godforsaken geological formation. *Nine Fires* was started by the whistling of tea kettles set on hot plates. Once they began boiling, Wood struck a drum while Kennedy and Jo Ann Wood turned wheels on which metal pendants tinkled, and waiting with the performers for those watched pots to boil was comical. (Similarly, Richard Teitelbaum's computer improv sometimes leaves his performers wondering when the piece will end.) If unpretentious, these were also austere conceptual pieces, and one had to be in the right mood to indulge the unadorned, unshaped grain of some unusual timbres.

A larger work entitled *Land's Shadow*, *Visible World*, however, begged no such tolerance. In a roaring continuum that changed texture every couple of minutes, the ensemble turned huge cylinders filled with rocks, scraped coffee cans across glass tables, rotated wheels whose spikes clicked like playing cards on bicycle wheels, and rattled the metal pendants. Use of variously sized cylinders and wheels imparted detail to the aural surface, and Wood's clean form was open enough to let the sounds be themselves,

Charles Wood / Rhys Chatham

The Roar of All Things

BY KYLE GANN

yet varied enough to rivet an audience's attention. Too bad Cage was at a concert of his vocal music two blocks away, for he might have appreciated Wood's Thoreau-inspired, earthy aesthetic.

Devoid of conventional instruments, Wood's performance picked up ultra-modern percussion music where Cage had dropped it after 1942, and achieved effects similar to Xenakis's *musique concrète* (especially *Bohór I*), or perhaps the chaotic tape collages of the painter Jean

MUSIC

Dubuffet. Perhaps its most refreshing feature, though, was that it carved its thundering noise-landscape without amplification, for the presence of those thousands of rocks grinding together shot a vibrant energy through the room that no electric guitar could have duplicated. "Is there some fundamental vibration in the universe to which all other sounds proportionally relate," asked Wood in the program notes, "or do all things in our world vibrate together creating instead a fundamental roar, the roar of all things simultaneously heard?" He hardly needed pose the question, the piece answered it so vividly.

Rhys Chatham gave the opposite answer March 16-19 (I went the 17th) in *Echo Solo* and *Zephyr Chorus*, his accompaniments to two beautiful dances by Robert Kovich's ensemble, performed at St. Mark's Church. Chatham comes out of the La Monte Young school, which



Wood & Kennedy: timbre via tempo

reduces sound to a fundamental vibration, and *Echo Solo* was, in its way, as unusually textured as *Land's Shadow*. Scored for Chatham reading over taped piano that sometimes drowned him out, *Echo Solo* initially used a cool, pointillist keyboard idiom that sounded like slowed-down highlights from the Boulez Second Sonata. Chatham's text, adapted from "various sources," set stories within the context of an imaginary chess game, and included a wryly self-referential argument about recent art, with ideas drawn from

Hal Foster's *Recodings*:

"Art is becoming an arena not of dialectic dialogue, but of vested interests. . . . Many artists today . . . either produce images and sounds which are easy to consume, or indulge in stylistic references, often in such a way that the package is entertained precisely as publicity." The not-always-audible argument went on to remark on the irony of the fact that art of the '60s, which repressed any stylistic or historical reference, is now the object of stylistic reference in '80s art, a comment that applies as much to the Neo-Expressionism of so much downtown music as to visual art.

In a way, the irony was doubly nested, since *Echo Solo* itself referred to a kind of generic serial idiom (what used to be called the "international style"). But gradually the scattered gestures came into focus around a tonal center, a single set of harmonics; a few minutes more, and one noticed that the harmonics were often echoed by out-of-tune versions of themselves. (I later learned that Chatham was working with two sets of pitches, related by a frequency ratio of 63 to 64.) That transformation changed one's perception of what the music was about, because twice its materials turned out to be other than what one casually assumed they were. In that respect the music placed the text in a brilliantly ambiguous light, as though the music was trying to escape the parasitic artistic tendencies summed up in Chatham's complaint.

Zephyr Chorus returned to a style Chatham's long been associated with, a recorded backbeat over which he played a jaunty, repetitive trumpet tune. He's not the first composer to combine serialism and just intonation; Ben Johnston has serialized overtones in his Sixth Quartet, *Diversions*, and other works, and Young's early justly tuned pieces were 12-tone. But *Echo Solo* pulled off a conceptual/metamorphic process unlike any I'd ever heard.

STEPHANIE CHERNIKOVER



GOETHE HOUSE NEW YORK
COMPOSERS' FORUM,
THE KITCHEN &

The National Orchestral Association presents

FOUR WORLD
PREMIERES

WORKS BY
Christopher James, Brian Fennelly,
Martin Herman & Todd Levin
David Shifrin, clarinet

CONCERT
Tuesday April 18th at 8 pm

LP's • TAPES • C.D.'s • VIDEO
LUNCH FOR
Avant/Progressive
Art/New Music
25 Prince St.

CONCERTS