

Rock Happens

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Then things *really* got weird.

photo: Cary Conover

Music moves through repetition. Through music repetition moves. Repetition moves music through. Through repetition moves music. It's easier in notes than in words, but permutation is one of the ways in which time-based art can create variety within stasis, tickling the senses while maintaining a sense of centeredness. It was a technique favored not by the earliest minimalists but some who came just after: Tom Johnson, Jon Gibson, Barbara Benary. And now that we're going back over early minimalism with a magnifying glass, resuscitating all those marvelous pieces by Tony Conrad, Charlemagne Palestine, and even the late Julius Eastman (who, unbelievably, has a three-CD set out on New World this month, after fans had despaired that his music was lost), it's high time we turned a close ear to Benary, whose music was given a retrospective November 9 at Greenwich House.

I first came across Benary's name in 1974 as violinist on the old Chatham Square recording of Philip Glass's *Music With Changing Parts*, a disc that changed my life. Since then, only a handful of public events have brought her back to my attention. I'm not sure when I learned she was a composer, but I associated her with pleasant music of note permutations—music with all the intricacy and charm of, and as little ambition as, a homemade quilt. The great thing about this joint concert by the Downtown Ensemble and Gamelan Son of Lion was that it paid homage to that early phase of her music but then showed surprising directions she's gone in since. (Benary, whose name means "Son of Lion," was a founding member of the eponymous group.)

The early piece was *Sun on Snow* in 1985, admittedly in five good-sized movements. Its basis was a 25-word poem in five-word lines that could be read left to right or top to bottom. For instance, the first lines were either:

sun on white snow shine

burn dark frost to tears

or

sun burn where we seek

on dark roads go the . . .

The music similarly swung both ways. Phyllis Clark sang the words, then the tune spread to marimba, concertina, electric guitar, clarinet, and soprano sax, then the music jumped between instruments in hocket, and a final movement sported soulful solos within a major scale while Clark sang again on a single pitch. Benary has long blurred the cleanness of her minimalism with a little improvisation, and that happened nicely here.

The next piece, *Downtown Steel* in 1993, sounded at first like more of the same, but something happened. Bill Ruyle tapped out a pretty *moto perpetuo* of note permutations on the glockenspiel, but there was an ominous wind quartet sitting silently in front—Jon Gibson on sax, Dan Goode on clarinet, Peter Zummo on trombone, Marcus Rojas on tuba—and when they blasted out in unison, the piece burst into big-band machismo. Program notes credited the influence of Steely Dan, and the piece appropriated rock materials but not a rock ambience. There was nothing passionate or driving about the loud backbeat passages, but rather a Zen-like impersonality, as though these recurring fortissimo impacts of brass and percussion were natural phenomena for which no one could be blamed. Rock happens.

Then things *really* got weird. The last piece, *Aural Shoehorning*, was a commission specifically for Indonesian gamelan and Western classical instruments, which, of course, use quite different tunings. The piece spun off a melody that sounded ear-bendingly bizarre played in both tunings at once; then the gamelan took over for a while, and periodically Joseph Kubera's piano would float in from backstage with his own surreally sedate version. The piece wound up into a sustained thunder of gong chords that you'd have to hear to believe came from mild-mannered Benary. Luckily, the impetus for this concert was that intrepid New World Records is putting these pieces out on disc in coming months. Good thing, because Benary's an original minimalist turned offbeat major composer, and the world needs to catch up.



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