

**A** luminous group of cognoscenti crowded Roulette October 15 to hear Diana Meckley's new work for the Soldier String Quartet, as though they expected something important. They got it. Meckley is associate director of PASS, New York's public access recording studio, and she was ending a three-year hiatus in her performing career. *Strange Attractors* began with a jaunty burst of hocketing counterpoint from the quartet, too dense to hear into. Gradually, the lines subsided, rests increased in frequency, and the thicket splintered into the repeating diatonic phrases it had been composed of all along. That process recurred with different melodies, viola echoing cello and the violins each other, each wave hitting the ear and dispersing just before the next arrived. The Soldier Quartet's energy was gutsy and well-focused; at first violinists Laura Seaton and Dave Soldier bounced around a six-note pattern, later the music circled around an 11-beat isorhythm that took awhile to pin down. In most sections, James Lo sharpened the patterns on drums. Cymbals, in a refreshing departure from downtown habit, were omitted.

In between and overlapping with the string passages, Meckley played back previously sampled sections of the quartet material modified into muffled noises. These extended the quartet's rhythms, then Lo would grab cues and start off again, sometimes in a different but apparently related tempo. Meckley's program notes (extraordinarily lucid) spoke of stretching and folding material, playing "a melody... as a linear sequence of notes or squeezed into a single second of sound." Unfolding was a precise but hardly adequate metaphor for how *Strange Attractors* sounded. The melodies were cheerfully tonal but angular, as if the result of some mechanical process. Only one comparison piece came to mind, and that was an unlikely one: Lejaren Hiller's 1957 *Illiad Suite* for string quar-

Diana Meckley / Eric Mandat /  
David Myers / Gen Ken Montgomery

## Run That By Me Again

BY KYLE GANN

ter, the first music written by computer. When, all too soon, the sampled noises faded to a halt, I wanted to shout, "Keep playing till I figure this out!"

*Strange Attractors* begged for repeated hearings. It was exhilarating to hear such simple processes fly around and not be able to catch one. You kept trying to

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listen backward, since what you were hearing *now* explained what you heard a moment ago, even though it hadn't finished becoming clear yet; and as soon as it did the piece plunged into something else. There's no musical effect I enjoy more than a complexity that makes you suspect an underlying consistency, a process that hides the simple formulas it's based on even as it hints at their existence. Ockeghem's *Missa Prolationem*, Gibbons's *Lord Salisbury Pavane*, Beethoven's Opus 110 Sonata, Monk's "Off Minor" solo, and Boulez's *Rituel* all punch that button. So did *Strange Attractors*.

Meckley was preceded by clarinetist Eric Mandat from Carbondale, Illinois (who, in fairness, probably drew his own share of the cognoscenti). With suave physicality, Mandat played his own works: *The Jungle* varied jazz licks cumulatively, *Music Box* used pitched key taps (they rang like little bells) to create an effect of two voices at once, and one



Meckley: hiding the formulas

JENNIFER KOTTER

movement of *Tri-Colored Capers* was whistled across the instrument sans mouthpiece, with the silken smoothness of an Indian flute. His bag of timbre tricks seemed bottomless, and each device was tastefully applied, few repeated. He fell a little into the trap that most performer/composers since Thalberg have fallen into: letting the musical content be overly guided by what works well on the instrument. But he riveted the attention through three of four pieces, no small feat for the solo wind medium.

The previous evening in the same dear

old space, David Myers and Gen Ken Montgomery played with electronic toys. Myers hovered around a black box covered with knobs and wired to two cassette players. Moving little besides fingertips, he controlled interference and feedback circuits producing an ocean of sirenlike glissandi, heavily reverbed buzzes, and other noises. Next, Montgomery unleashed noise pulsations on a Korg synthesizer, amplified a toy mechanical dinosaur, and hooked up his electric razor so we could listen to him shave at about 110 db. After intermission, Myers and Montgomery joined forces; the latter made screeches on an amplified violin by tightening the pins, rubbing the strings with a rubber band, and twitching the bow on the strings, every tiny jerk a reverberant blast. Myers modified the result, adding delays, filter sweeps, and other tricks that a better techno-wiz than myself could identify.

These old, predigital noises and manipulations had lost their avant-garde bite by 1975, and can now seem as quaint as an almost extinct rural craft. But when handled well (grounded in Zen philosophy by David Tudor, for instance), their bark still sounds refreshingly honest. The machines spew forth waveforms so easily that success is largely proportional to how hand-sculpted the noises are. Myers transformed them continually, so that by the time each noise had arrived it was already on its way to becoming something else; though loud, his solo was oddly restful, since the physical energy expended was so low relative to the volume and activity level. When overamplified and made up of ugly sounds produced by obvious means and repeated at length via simple gadgetry, as in the final collaboration, the result is deadly tedious. Amplification to the threshold of pain, especially for an audience consisting (as this seemed to) of fellow musicians and critics—people who need their high-frequency perception professionally—is a type of egotism I'll never understand. ■

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