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MUSIC

The Diverse Musical Agendas of Didkovsky, Woolf, and Grant Coexist

SAME WORLD, DIFFERENT TRIPS

BY KYLE GANN



TAP AND LISTEN TO KATHLEEN SUPOVE.

Patrick Grant has moved his concert curating from Egizio's Project in Soho to Haim Chanin Fine Arts Gallery in lower midtown. His October 3 concert brought together three composers superficially similar in technology but very disparate in personality. All three—Nick Didkovsky, Randall Woolf, and Grant himself—use electronic keyboard technology, and all three have minimalism in their backgrounds. But it was remarkable how three members of the same generation could be so similar in those respects and be so utterly dissimilar in temperament and in their ultimate musical interests.

Didkovsky seems to like to bounce his music off something hard, and watch it land someplace beyond his control. I've been most familiar with his music for his jazz/rock/classical/avant-garde/stochastic/algorithmic/punk/noise/fusion band Doctor Nerve (I'm sure I've left something out), which is written via computer and then polished up to be performable at high energy levels. Lately, though, I've been hearing him in more improvisatory, soloistic contexts. In *Machinecore* he beat, strummed, and tapped on a horizontal electric guitar wired to a computer that transformed its sounds into insect- and bird-like timbres. Making the guitar "talk" with his hand, he got into a steady noise beat like a distant muezzin, and ended up with a repeating melody.

I'm used to Didkovsky's music being clearer than this, and his second piece, *Morphing Piano Duo*, with pianist Kathleen Supove, was closer to home. Didkovsky surprised me by describing the work's process—the computer recording Supove's gestures and spitting them back with variations—in terms of a dialectic along a scale between imitation and independence, with "infinite shades of ambiguity" in between; surprised me because the phraseology was so reminiscent of the way European post-serial composers described their music in the 1970s. *Machinecore* did, in fact, remind me of Xenakis's electronic pieces like *Orient-Occident*. *Morphing Piano Duo* was, if still wandering, easier to follow, the computer diffracting Supove's frenetic hammerings through a distorting lens.

Randall Woolf: same techno-world, same pianist, entirely different intent. Unlike Didkovsky, Woolf never strikes me as being very interested in sound; he wants to tell the audience a story, and will use whatever style of music is at hand to serve his purpose. In this case the

style is minimalism, and a number of repetitive or continuous textures, changing direction suddenly, underpinned the text of his *Sutra Sutra*, with computerized timbres, drones, and drumbeats inspired by Persian music. Supove intoned the text dramatically, a comparison of Sufi mysticism and the physics of string theory by Valeria Vasilevski: "In the beginning everything was vibration. You don't believe me? Tap and listen."

I liked the timbral richness of the music and the keyboard arabesques that Supove wove around it, but I think I would have preferred the text as program notes rather than read aloud, since it seemed more explanatory than poetic, what with its references to Einstein and quantum physics, and contrasts between the "voluptuous, curvy world of space dominated by gravity" and the "uncertain world of particles." "We divide life, but in reality life is one," we were assured as a computerized soprano blended with Supove's playing. But the music might have made the point just as well unaccompanied by the sermon.

Patrick Grant: same digital keyboards, entirely different desire for the development of a controlled musical syntax. Grant came off as the evening's Erik Satie, his pretensions considerably lower than the others and his entertainment value a little higher. He played four keyboard pieces based on clever repeating patterns, basically minimalist but with surprising contrasts between slow and fast tempos and whimsical changes of direction. Occasionally a piece sounded like Philip Glass or Terry Riley, especially the opening organ-like *Quasi Passacaglia for the Quai Branly*. But my reaction to Glass's repetitions is often a pensive desire to hear those meditative arpeggios in pure tuning, and Grant played a synthesizer tuned to pure just intonation, so I finally got my wish. The keyboard was sometimes tuned so that Grant's hands played the same register in different octaves, for some distinctive gamelan-like effects—which perhaps only occurs to me because much of Grant's music is for Indonesian gamelan.

I lived through an era in musical academia, in the 1970s and '80s, in which deviation from a certain philosophy of composing was punished with expulsion and excommunication. And I couldn't help but be struck by how easily these three totally different philosophies of music occupied one stage. It might be interesting to have the differences more acknowledged. But how refreshingly downtown not to have any one of them privileged. ▣