

William Ortiz

Scoring the Street

BY KYLE GANN

White bourgeois classical musician types have become acutely aware of what is lost when an ethnic or folk music is squeezed into the straitjacket of European notation. Reluctantly, we have learned to recognize the cultural insult implicit in, for example, Charles Wakefield Cadman's romanticized, sanitized American Indian songs ("From the Land of the Sky-Blue Water" being the most infamous). Never again, we promise. However, I don't believe in undervaluing Euroculture in the haste to expiate our collective guilt, and I don't think we need to deny the worth of notation.

It strikes me that I could write a hip review damning William Ortiz's June 10 concert at the Alternative Museum for more than its uneven performances. Ortiz, a New York Puerto Rican who got his Ph.D. at SUNY at Buffalo, writes carefully notated compositions based on the street music of his Nuyorican neighborhood. I could talk about how much tamer his work is than the music he's paying homage to, how the notation merely caricatures the sophisticated nuances that a hot Latin band would give the same material, and a lot of musicians for whom traditional music is sacred turf would yell "Right on!" But I didn't feel that way. I was struck more by what Ortiz's notation added to his sources, and by the possibilities that sprang from the two musics (both his own, after all) that he was bringing together.

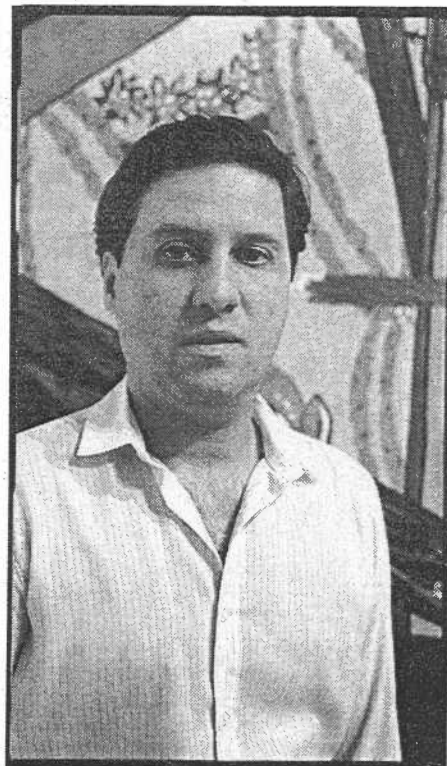
Using percussion (claves, cowbell, and a variety of drums), electric guitar, flute, and recitation, Ortiz's music was simple

yet tonally sophisticated, suggestive of a Caribbean Hanns Eisler. *Ghetto* was a rap-medley of texts by Nuyorican poets, Ortiz's energetic reading encircled by the trills and flutters of Barbara Held's flute, underlaid by the swells of James Pugliese's percussion, and abandoned by Jeffrey Schanzer's inaudible electric guitar. Ortiz's primary textural device, a lively Morse-code background of repeated notes, was most effective in the *Street Music*, where the alto flute, trombone, and vibraphone pushed the idea to an obsessive minimalism. Yet, like a benevolent sprite, the ghost of Ortiz's teacher Morton Feldman hovered over each score, imparting sonorous touches, particularly the pitches neutralized by chromatic adjacencies in another register that one finds in the scores of virtually any Feldman student. Such music looked back to a repertoire of Latin-influenced music written in the '30s by William Russell, Henry Cowell, and Latin Americans such as Carlos Chavez, but the genre still sounds fresh, possibly because its performance today is neglected outside of a few German percussion ensembles.

Admittedly, my favorite piece, *Subway* (for trombone), exhibited the least eth-

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nicity, possibly because the further that source is from the surface, the more mysterious its freeing influence becomes. This jauntily syncopated number in march time (which Leonard Krech blundered through as though sight-reading) kept teetering on the edge of atonality,



FRANCISCO GONZALEZ

Ortiz

only to somersault back into cheery F major every time. But the piece that gave Ortiz's method the Q.E.D. was the aptly titled *Urbanizacion*, a percussion free-for-all that a Latin drummer might have improvised on the spot. Its interplay of dotted rhythms exhibited a far better structural sense than even an expert jazzier could have realized extempore, while some Feldman-y pings and clicks floated away from the main texture to make thoughtful side comments. Given such exquisiteness, the problem is then shifted to the performer, who must overcome the notation for an impression of spontaneity. Anthony Miranda did exactly that, with an abandon that drew the same whistles and "wow"s as a fiery jazz solo. The third world met the first and

had a blast!

The dilemma of whether, why, and how much to attempt the nuances of a traditional music in notation is one that a cross-cultural composer will always have thrown at him, either out of genuine aesthetic misgiving or mere ethnic territoriality. It was admittedly odd, in *Street Music*, to hear the ensemble shout in unison, "Get off the wall, get off your ass/The mighty Buccaneers are a comin' a pass." Santa Fe composer Peter Garland, who has wrestled with it vis-à-vis American Indian music, has arrived at a hands-off attitude, feeling that the music is not his to appropriate. The issue is more sensitive when the composer isn't from the same culture as the music he's Westernizing, but I've heard music by young Navajo musicians that used tamburas and East Indian drones with no apparent unease.

Notating music undeniably robs it of nuances, but it also slows down the mind enough to suggest layers of complexity inaccessible to an improviser. That's almost a definition of composing: add six such layers and you get Schubert, 50 and you get Boulez. Look at the first draft of *Finnegans Wake* and you'll see the process caught halfway. In Ortiz's case, there were places where the music was a little thin in content, where he could have used a couple of more layers. But that was a refreshing change from most contemporary music, which is too often portentously fat with layers that smother each other. The intricacy lost in Ortiz's translation of his Puerto Rican sources he restored on another level, resulting in a music that was direct, urgent, free of academic pretensions, and yet never simple-minded.

Correction: In my review of an April 12 La Galleria concert I mismatched, lacking printed notes, the names and instruments of two musicians. C. Bryan Rulon plays the synthesizer, Matthew Sullivan the oboe. ■

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