

Sewing Up Downtown

By Kyle Gann

Norman Yamada/Mark
Degliantoni

Jerry Hunt Memorial
Concert

One generation's heartbreak is the next generation's oyster. My elders polarized between minimalism and serialism, but composers my age have blithely fused the best qualities of each. Now, improvisation and postminimalism seem like incommensurable forces. But to Norman Yamada and Mark Degliantoni, two still younger composers who performed at Roulette March 26, both styles are just grist for the mill. Their music's steady pulses and reiterated phrases scoped out postminimal forms. They filled those forms, however, with incongruous noises in a fractured continuity drawn from Downtown improv. Just as Schoenberg looked at the raging Wagner-Brahms war and shrugged, "Ach, was ist der problem?" some kid was bound to sew Downtown back together sooner or later.

Degliantoni has defined himself, so far, as the sampler-loop guy. When he plays the keyboard, weird noises start to rotate, over which his performers spin their reiterative textures. In his *Mit Starcken Schlangen Streckt' Ich Dich* (which Schoenberg could doubtless have translated for you), percussionist Christine Bard developed Degliantoni's repeating noises into a wild

climax of metal, complete with the obligatory pan flying off the table in mid-frenzy. Degliantoni's discontinuity operated on a large, formal level, exploding into textural non sequiturs. His *As Above, So Below* began with vocalist Gisburg singing sweet, husky lines over a repetitive background of quasi-Balinese bonks. Midway through, it broke into a waltz with a German cabaret flavor. The halves didn't fit together, nor could you be sure which was above and which below, but each was charming.

Yamada's music was no less distinctive: modernist, reiterative pointillism with a beat, like Webern collaborating with Varese on a minimalist piece after listening to John Zorn. Yamada liked his discontinuity note-to-note, using an intermittent pulse to hold together isolated blips and twangs. *Year One* was divided into a rare and nicely contrasted two-movement form, the first driving resolutely through splinters of sound, the second wallowing in mellow plucked chords from Chris Wood's double bass. Some sections were free-rhythmed, others Yamada conducted with an inefficient Downtown panache that nevertheless did the job. The second of his *Three Plain Songs* (for soprano, accordion, mandolin, banjo, and guitar, a Webern-esque combination) opened with a 14-beat repeating pattern that slowed down and disintegrated, against all postminimal expectations. *Imagination Dead Imagine*, titled after Beckett, explored a genre ev-

ery generation rediscovers anew, the piece drawn from a single pitch and the chromatic tones next to it. The device (earlier used by Carter, Ligeti, and Scelsi) always sounds self-conscious, but Yamada's dynamic contrasts and Feldman-ish reiteration of short glissandos imbued it with a surprisingly original energy.

The music needed more sensitive, comfortable performances; despite some star players such as guitarist Marc Ribot and drummer James Pugliese, these had the desperate air of every note leaping into the plane as it started down the runway. (In time, of course, they'll master the Downtown tradition of meticulously elegant execution.) But the concert was a remarkably well-argued (and well-attended) official debut by two composers who each offered bracingly idiosyncratic sound images. There's a treacherous pitfall in combining elements from disparate styles, of ending up with the worst of two worlds. Yamada and Degliantoni are making a beeline to the best features of each.

I'd like to think that the 12 dozen or so people who squeezed into Experimental Intermedia March 19 for Jerry Hunt's memorial concert went to see his work rather than his former collaborator, the infinitely less interesting and inexplicably more popular Karen Finley. When Finley appeared, however, not live but on video (explaining that she hadn't been able to find a baby-sitter for the



Degliantoni & Yamada: looking toward the future

ALEX FORMAN

evening), a trickle out the door began. And yet not many performances, least of all Finley's expressionless reading of Hunt's letters, could have been as compelling as the images of Hunt we were watching on videotape.

In his last work, *Telephone Calls to the Dead*, performed by the electronic-video ensemble 77 Hz/REV 2, Hunt walked around his garden near Dallas in a silk robe, manically pointing out gopher holes and fire ant nests and explaining an outdoor toilet he invented ("It's only exploded once"). A video-music work combined a rich fabric of electronic burps and growls with skeleton dolls and the angelic symbols from the 16th-century magus John Dee who so fascinated Hunt. In one tape, Hunt, who in life was a phenomenally fast and inventive talker, launched into a stylized, non-stop tirade: "This is just complete nonsense, this is a fucking mess... I have no idea how I

came to do this in this kind of environment... Can you live on hate alone? I've managed to do it."

Hunt's outburst was too well-scripted to look like spontaneous anger, but he may have been kidding on the square. The piece added dimension to a fact I hadn't heard in New York, but that was reported in Dallas's alternative weekly, the *Observer*: that Hunt's death last November was a suicide—he inhaled carbon monoxide from a canister. (Thanks to my old friend Marcus McDaniel for alerting me.) Wasting away from emphysema and lung cancer, Hunt had left papers concerning his planned demise with statements like "My body has ceased to have any functional integrity." At Intermedia, as he faded from the video screen, he chillingly detailed his philosophy of death: "Don't go too soon, don't wait too long." He followed at least the latter advice. ■

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