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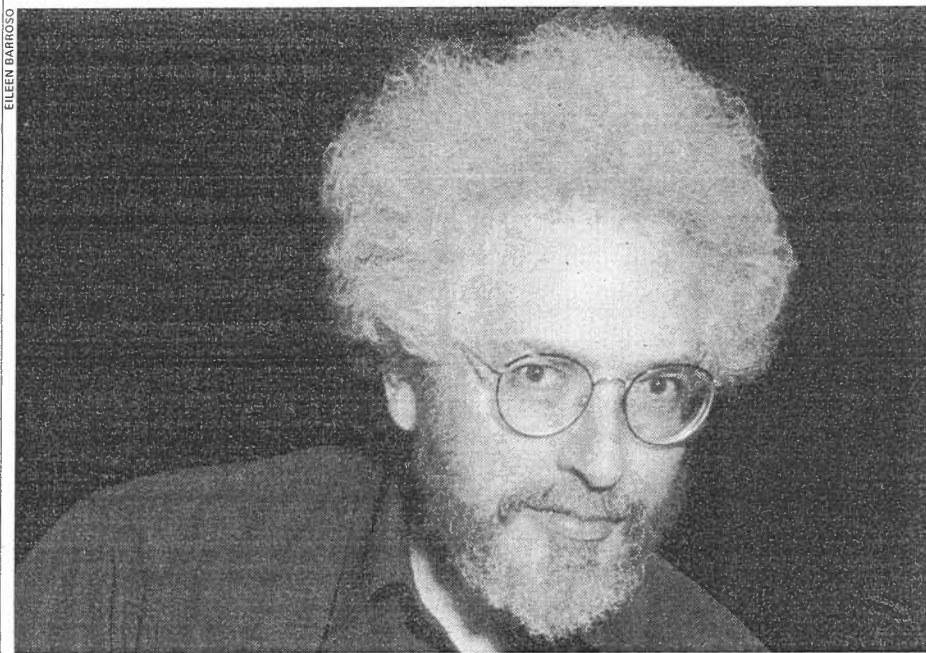
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Jonathan Kramer Mixes Musical Styles That Don't Belong Together

SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED

BY KYLE GANN



KRAMER CUTS A WIDE SWATH THROUGH 20TH-CENTURY MUSICAL ISMS.

Aw, forget Philip Glass's 65th birthday; you can hear his music anytime. More significant is that one of our leading musical thinkers is turning 60 later this year before he's received much fanfare at all. Jonathan Kramer, the Columbia University music department's house liberal, has been better known as a theorist, partly because in the years in which ultra-conservative Mario Davidovsky dominated that institution, Kramer's wide-ranging music was just considered too, too . . . outré, or something. And during those years, Kramer produced some of the late 20th century's most thought-provoking musical writings, notably a tome on his theory of time perception titled *The Time of Music*. A committed but down-to-earth postmodernist, Kramer drove home the idea that there are different ways to create musical time from the one Europe weaned us on.

Meanwhile, however, as a composer, Kramer has also cut a wide swath through quite a few 20th-century musical isms, like a lawn mower too fast and wide to stay confined to one yard. His ability to conceptualize new types of music along theoretical lines and without regard to style, yet still achieve an attractive musical surface, makes him something of an East Coast James Tenney. And this Monday, April 1, an entire program of his music played by the Moebius Ensemble at Columbia's Miller Theatre promises to air several facets of a complex personality.

Trained as an Uptown atonalist, Kramer took an early interest in minimalism, but could never resist tossing a steady stream of monkey wrenches into minimalism's gears. An early piano work called *Music for Piano Number 5* (1979-80), for example, kind of bops along with a mellow, Terry Riley-ish energy, but if you look at the score you'll find it's in 11/16 meter with a lot of tricky rhythmic complexity. And the piece is so long, digressive, and formally intricate that you'd never notice, without being told, that it only uses only six pitches. (Kramer quit mentioning that fact in the program notes and found that critics quit complaining about how "limited" the piece sounded.) Monday's program offers one of the most ambitious works in Kramer's early pitch-limitation style, *Moving Music* (1975-76) for 12 clarinets: With its continuous drone, the work sounds minimalist moment by moment, but is tremendously varied in texture and

strategy over its Mahlerian 35 minutes.

That's the key to Kramer's unusual profile as a composer: He has a flair for combining characteristics and techniques that don't stylistically belong together. Too omnivorous to remain in the postminimalist camp, he broke out in 1993 with *Notta Sonata*, a wild romp for two pianos and percussion, and a companion piece to Bartók's sonata for that same instrumentation. *Notta Sonata* was a self-consciously postmodern collage, but not the kind of Rochbergian collage that mixes Mozart and Mahler with 12-tone techniques, nor the kind of Downtown collage that intersperses jazz and folk-fiddling with noise. Instead, it was a tour of imaginary worlds: Wagnerian horn calls tapped out by mallet percussion, fragmented serialist gestures that are nevertheless tonal, melodies interrupted only to abruptly pick up where they left off a few measures later.

On Monday this postmodern vein will be extended by a new work, *Surreality Check* for piano trio. The piece promises to go beyond *Notta Sonata* in its clash of familiar musical objects, applying to sounds the techniques that Magritte and Dalí did to images. Central to Kramer's postmodernism is an attempt at a fractured consciousness, a denial of modernism's assumption that subjectivity is a unified, centralized phenomenon. And so Kramer's musical images crash into and interrupt each other, but are so imaginatively drawn that lucid connections remain easy to make. The program will also include *Imbrication*, an homage to Kramer's teacher Andrew Imbrie, and *Fanfare*, a parody of a radio interview between a composer and an announcer.

In the wake of the minimalists, there is pressure these days for a composer to develop a trademark style that will make his music recognizable and thereby marketable. Kramer's rampant stylistic infidelities fly in the face of this pressure, yet his collision of incompatibles is itself a kind of trademark—a rather abstract one that most audience members may not notice at once, and one therefore capable of stretching our perceptions. It also makes him the only self-styled postmodernist around whose music doesn't devolve into pastiche. Let's celebrate his 60th birthday now and by his 70th have a much better idea of what his extraordinary music's all about. □