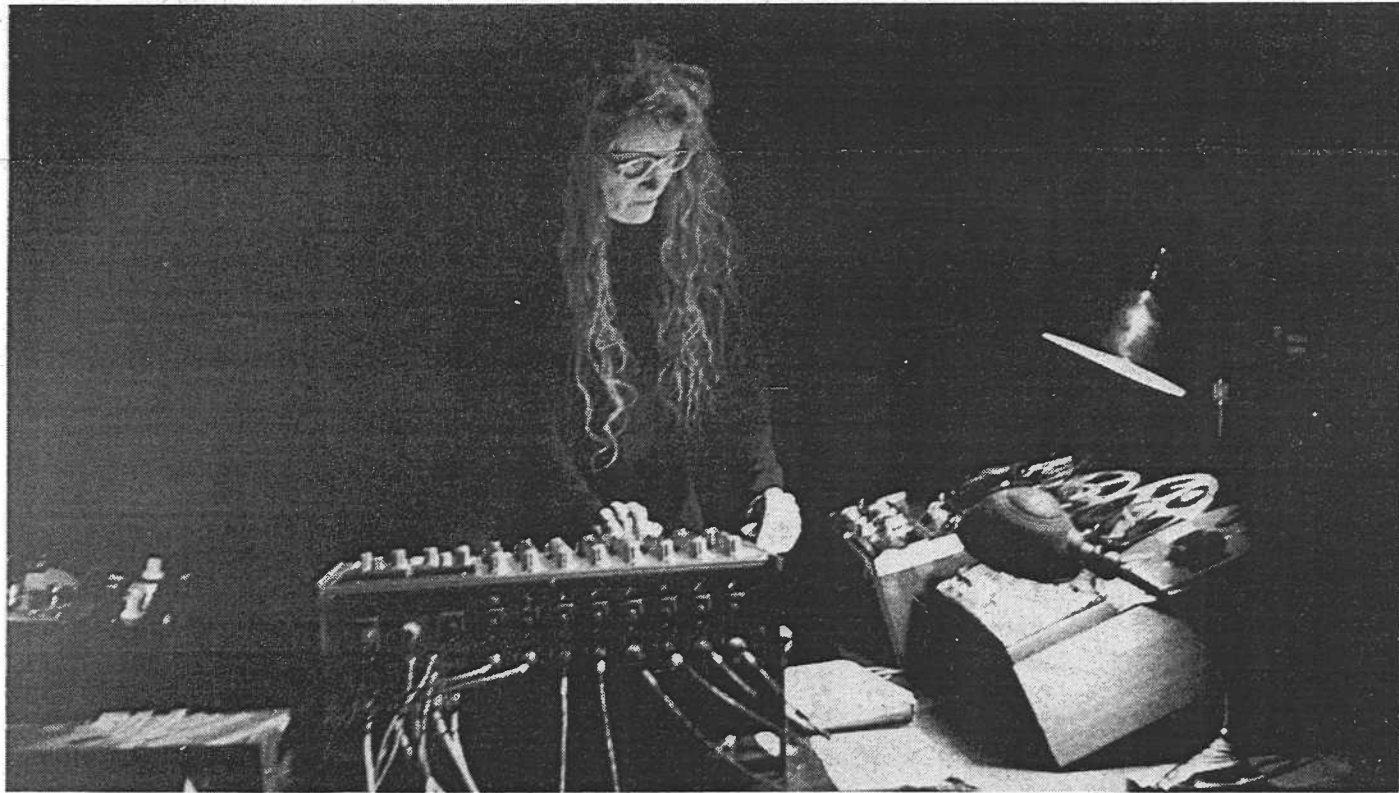


'Imaginary Landscapes'

# Shaking the Kitchen

BY KYLE GANN



A Maryanne Amacher experience

The Kitchen's *Imaginary Landscapes*, a consistently thrilling festival curated by Nicolas Collins, opened February 25 with a roar. The noise emerged from "Stain," an excerpt from Maryanne Amacher's sound-environment *The Music Rooms*. I hadn't previously heard Amacher's music, a condition for which certain friends treated me with bemused condescension. People don't merely hear Amacher's music; one has a *Maryanne*

a living, vibrating room that seemed angrily aware of our presence. The last third of the piece didn't add much to what had gone before, and I was disappointed that the drumming at the beginning never returned, nor did anything like it. (The program hinted that the reasons might have had to do with the fact that this was an excerpt.) But the richness of the sounds and the vivid spatiality of the wave patterns created an unfamiliar, architectural beauty.

When I wrote recently that there are

music's counterpart to the pianist- and violinist-virtuoso composers of the 19th century, more intent on showing what the medium could do than on interpreting the result. Both exploited a range of wonderfully rich, gritty sounds, though you couldn't always tell from listening what each piece's overall idea was. Traylor's most successful work was *Simple Degradation*, in which he rubbed a computer mouse on a guitarlike board to improvise twitterings, loopy brass notes, a keyboard chorale, and noises like vibrat-

Kitchen by David Seidel, and electronically accompanied by four others. Every string was tuned to a pitch microtonally close to E, and as Seidel strummed and tremoloed, the music waded in tiny glissandi like tall grass in a pond. The rhythm was fetching, like a slow, twangy gagaku, and the textures reminded me of Chatham's and Branca's multiple guitar pieces, only far more transparent and tactile. The process expanded until it was finally jumping between octaves, and ended sounding like an energetic threshing machine.

The scoring of *Pilot*, for three tap dancers, drummer, and electronic tape, looked on paper like someone's awful idea for a undergrad multimedia project, but Vierk integrated them into a perfectly natural form. To the opening electronic sounds, which evoked the thumping of mile-long rubber bands, dancers Anita Feldman, David Parker, and Rhonda Price added the whirl of their taps. James Pugliese scraped his drumsticks across the edges of cymbals, and within a few minutes all sounds melted into a pulsing crescendo so unified that one could no longer distinguish them. The dancers' symmetrical arrangements neatly reflected the effortless fusion of noises. Vierk's earlier pieces I'd heard were all written for groups of identical instruments, and that she could approximate the same effect with such disparate means pointed to a rare musical intelligence.

She was followed by the first American appearance of Clarence Barlow, an Indian-born, Cologne-based composer of impressive European reputation. (The first American performance of his music occurred in Chicago less than a year ago.) With characteristic audacity, his *Variationi e un Pianoforte Meccanico* pitted his computer's program against Beethoven's imagination, and drew variations on the arietta of the master's final sonata, Op. 111. Thomas Mann glorified this melody in *Doctor Faustus*, and said it was "destined to vicissitudes for which in its idyllic innocence it would not seem to be born." Mann didn't know the half of it. Barlow subjected the theme to computer processes and played it back on a piano equipped with an internal Pianocorder, the mechanized self-playing system developed by Moronta that Richard Tritel

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Due to the unusual acoustic needs of her work, Amacher hadn't performed in New York since 1984, so she attracted a sell-out, celebrity-laden crowd. Herded into the dark space, we were instructed to stand during the performance and move around. Lights were turned out, and two gigantic speakers bombarded us with a tape of primitive singing over a gripping drumbeat. In one corner stood Amacher, looking rather demonic as she hovered over three tape recorders and a mixer; in another a vaguely abstract slide shone on the wall, shadowed by milling listeners. The singing gave way to harmonically rich drones that crescendoed into collisions like the moans of belligerent blue whales, then to deafening complexes of high tones whose inharmonicity created the illusion of pitches not actually present.

Amacher's program notes playfully explain her music as a television drama of sounds, with character names like "Deep and Deepest Tone," "The Hardbeat Force," and "God's Big Noise." This set up the listener well, since one could hear in the beginnings of the interminable crescendo climaxes and conflicts in which they would eventually erupt. Because the music's volume shook the hall, I sat down to listen through my fundament, but became bored within seconds. Walking around restored my fascination, for the spatial distribution of sounds was so varied that a turn of the head dramatically changed intensities. We were parasites in

third of the piece didn't add much to what had gone before, and I was disappointed that the drumming at the beginning never returned, nor did anything like it. (The program hinted that the reasons might have had to do with the fact that this was an excerpt.) But the richness of the sounds and the vivid spatiality of the wave patterns created an unfamiliar, architectural beauty.

When I wrote recently that there are two downtowns, I oversimplified for effect. There's a third (though it's not primarily a New York phenomenon) that stems from John Cage's emphasis on listening to the physical aspects of sound. Among others, Alvin Lucier, David Tudor, and David Behrman took Cage's desiderata as a cue to search for new ways of producing sounds, and an army of younger composers has taken up the challenge. (Europe and the American academics had a different rationale for electronics: to more accurately reproduce serialist structures.) Collins studied with Lucier and worked with Tudor, and thus steered the festival toward this third and apparently richer vein, partially to provide relief from the minimalist and avant-rock traditions the Kitchen has promoted. The festival's moniker was less description than homage. *Imaginary Landscapes* was the Gertrude Stein-inspired title of a series of pieces Cage wrote between 1939 and 1952 that heralded the musical possibilities of electronic components.

Even so, Collins's landscape divided cleanly into halves, two complementary attitudes toward technology: one side looked for the equipment itself to produce a musical vision, the other used technology secondarily to realize pre-envisioned expressive ends. Significantly (since I'm still coming off my recent yin/yang article about women composers), that split followed sex lines: the men dazzled with their techno-toys, the women subordinated technology to what Morton Feldman used to call "the image," that yin aspect of a piece that comes to the composer before a note is written or a noise made. The only real exception was "Blue" Gene Tyranny, a highly intuitive performer from a jazz background.

Mark Trayle and Ron Kuivila, for example (February 26), were electronic mu-

century, more intent on showing what the medium could do than on interpreting the result. Both exploited a range of wonderfully rich, gritty sounds, though you couldn't always tell from listening what each piece's overall idea was. Trayle's most successful work was *Simple Degradation*, in which he rubbed a computer mouse on a guitarlike board to improvise twitterings, loopy brass notes, a keyboard chorale, and noises like vibrating fork handles hit against a table. Elsewhere, Trayle was dogged by programming problems, which offered (and

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someone on this festival had to do it) a valuable lesson: computer music is just as subject to foul-ups as electronic music was in the cut-and-splice days.

My favorite moment here was Kuivila's "Canon Y," part of a larger work with the felicitous title *Loose Canons*; an homage to Conlon Nancarrow, it chased major triads over a several-octave range with increasing speed, and for once whimsy delightfully broke away from the equipment. Kuivila's *The Linear Predictive Zoo* took its "libretto" from a personality disorder test of true/false statements: "No one seems to understand me," "My sex life is satisfactory," "My soul sometimes leaves my body." Video artist Larry Johnson floated these conclusions past us on monitors, as Kuivila broke down the sounds of the words into the same component diffraction that the test was intended to do for the personality. A great idea, but it remained a little abstract, and without Kuivila's explanation I might not have caught the connection. The concept was overshadowed by the harsh, loud, raspiness of the modified voice sounds, which indeed gave the impression of a zoo.

In Lois Vierk's music, by contrast, the image is always sharp and clear. Twenty seconds of listening is sufficient to tell whether a piece has a strong image or not, and if it does, it will work no matter what direction the composer takes. *Pilot* and *Go Guitars*, performed February 27, exuded confidence from the outset. *Go Guitars* (go means five in Japanese), is for live electric guitar, played at the

the arietta of the master's final sonata, Op. 111. Thomas Mann glorified this melody in *Doctor Faustus*, and said it was "destined to vicissitudes for which in its idyllic innocence it would not seem to be born." Mann didn't know the half of it. Barlow subjected the theme to computer processes and played it back on a piano equipped with an internal Pianocorder, the mechanized self-playing system developed by Marantz that Richard Teitelbaum had used a few weeks ago at Paula Cooper Gallery.

Like Barlow's earlier piano monument, the Turkish-titled *Çogluotobüsişletmesi* (on Wergo, almost unavailable in America; I found mine at Bleecker Bob's), *Variationi* flowed systematically between tonality and atonality, metrical and ametrical rhythm. It was a serious work, but visually hilarious. Barlow played the theme on the keyboard as Beethoven had written it. After a while, an invisible hand added extra notes, as though Ludwig's ghost were butting in. Gradually the piano became so active that Barlow had to stand up and let it run on its own.

At first the added figurations were quite in 19th century style, but dissonant notes started to predominate, while rhythms turned more and more askew. An interesting formal feature was that the texture thinned out, rather than accumulated, in the middle of the piece and built up again; the piece's center was as sparse, fragmented, and harmonically abstract as a Thelonious Monk solo. Slowly, though, the music returned to tonality and held a classically German tremolo on the dominant. Barlow resumed playing, and man and instrument ended together. (I began to suspect Barlow's humor was intentional when I noticed that his long list of teachers included no one I had ever heard of: Albright Bover, Charles D'Oniva, Everhard Finkenwart, through Wolfgang-Xaver Ytzentoter. I finally realized he was going through the alphabet.)

Regrettably, David Tudor's concert with sculptor Jackie Monnier, which closed the festival's first week, collided with concerts by the Arditti Quartet and pianist Marianne Schroeder. I've become good at being in two places at once, but even my most dissociated out-of-body experience has not yet managed three. ■