

40<sup>TH</sup>

**L** would never have believed, in 1986, when I took this job following an out-of-the-blue phone call from then music editor Doug Simmons, that I'd still be here nine years later. In Manhattan, rockers and jazzers had pushed aside the new music I loved, and I expected to find much of the scene uncongenial. But by 1990 the pendulum had swung. As a new generation began to form ensembles and curate festivals, I found that, far from out of place, I was typical to the point of banality, and more at home than I've ever been elsewhere. Last month a colleague referred to me as one of the old guard, and as the *Voice* and I turn 40 within a month of each other, I'm feeling positively avuncular. I promise myself that when the pendulum swings again I won't become a crotchety curmudgeon. Remind me. —K.G.

# Singing in Tongues

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BY KYLE GANN



Hearing things: Fried's epiphanic *Work-In-Progress*

**S**ome composers astonish musicians by brilliantly defining new compositional problems. Others zap the audience with displays of raw emotion. For a composer to do both at the same time is a rare epiphany, a sign that he or she has received

ny, often in abrupt succession. While I laughed and squirmed with everyone else, underneath I kept thinking what a varied list of formal inspirations Fried had sparked from his bizarre performance setup.

I've mentioned Fried's *Travelogue* here before, a work in which a singer listens through headphones to a tape he or she has never heard, and then has to vocally replicate all sounds heard as immediately as possible. The babble that results from someone imitating English words without time to think is a wild effect, and the composition has a good joke where the singer has to mouth "Surfin' USA" without knowing where it will end. *Travelogue* seemed like a good one-idea piece that I didn't see how Fried could build on. But he has. The new work—announced as *Voice Crossing* and then officially renamed *Work-In-Progress*, just to keep us critics on our toes, I guess—subjects six singers to the process, an expansion which, as Fried proved, multiplies the possibili-

ties exponentially. In addition, the tape gave them directions as to where to look, how to move their arms, and so on. The singers I heard—Paula Cole, Mary Christopher, Gretchen Krich, Randolph Curtis Rand, Lawrence Rawlins, and Susan Thompson—were fluently expressive, and, due to the surprise-dependent nature of the piece, can never perform it again.

It's an amazingly original ploy: you put on tape the piece you want to create, calculating how it will be filtered through the split-second reactions of your mimicking performers. What never occurred to me with *Travelogue* was how the tape could function as an unseen conductor, a determiner of complex rhythms. Conlon Nancarrow talks about creating a video conductor to get live performers to play different tempos at once, and some composers have made musicians follow click tracks, but most such methods render a performance somewhat mechanical. In this instance, though, since all the performers' reactions had to be as spontaneous as possible, Fried could play with time- and tempo-structuring with no loss of passion.

The first movement was an 8/9 tempo canon in which two singers babbled at different speeds, one eventually

catching up with the other. In another canon, people started and stopped jabbering in exact unison though mutually unaware of each other. This would have been a cute enough trick in abstract instrumental music, but since the performers were speaking, dancing, and waving their arms, they seemed driven by some weirdly synchronized glossolalia. When they all stopped babbling at once, the effect was as sudden as the cool minimalist cadence of Philip Glass, but even more electric because the singers hadn't known themselves that they were going to stop.

In *Work-In-Progress* Fried has borrowed an element of suspense from top-shelf Hitchcock: we know something the people we're watching don't. We don't know what they'll do next, and neither do they, but we know how the actions and vocalizations of the different singers relate to each other. The music achieves the feel of the craziest improvisation, and yet Fried has set up the ultimate composer-as-dictator strategy, ruling out any intentional performer contribution whatever. You could score this music out, train six extremely uninhibited singers to rehearse it, and they might reach the same energy level. But it would never look as scary, and the audience wouldn't be in on the fun. ♦

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