

Michel Waisvisz/Ellen Fullman

Sleight of Hands

BY KYLE GANN

It seemed serendipitous that Michel Waisvisz and Ellen Fullman came to New York in the same week. Both gave beautiful demonstrations of genuinely hand-crafted music, and suggested that fingers are still an instrumentalist's most sensitive tools, new technology notwithstanding. The technology that Waisvisz showed off was astonishing, while Fullman reaffirmed the potential of low-tech equipment.

Michel Waisvisz, born in the Netherlands in 1949, has a number of formidable achievements to his credit, including one of the first music theater pieces for robots, *De Slungles*—a landmark in the composers' eternal quest to make performers obsolete. His April 25 performance at the Kitchen, disarmingly entitled *Touch Monkeys*, was no less amazing. Premiered in Paris at IRCAM, the piece involved two glove-like contraptions wired to Waisvisz's waist, and thence to a computer. The gloves were sound-controlling devices; every movement he made, the flick of a finger, the tilt of a wrist, the sudden bending of an arm, made corresponding changes in the onslaught of sound issuing from the six loudspeakers behind him. It was a science fiction fantasy come to life. His audience, composed largely of New York's most high-tech musicians, stared slackjawed for 45 minutes.

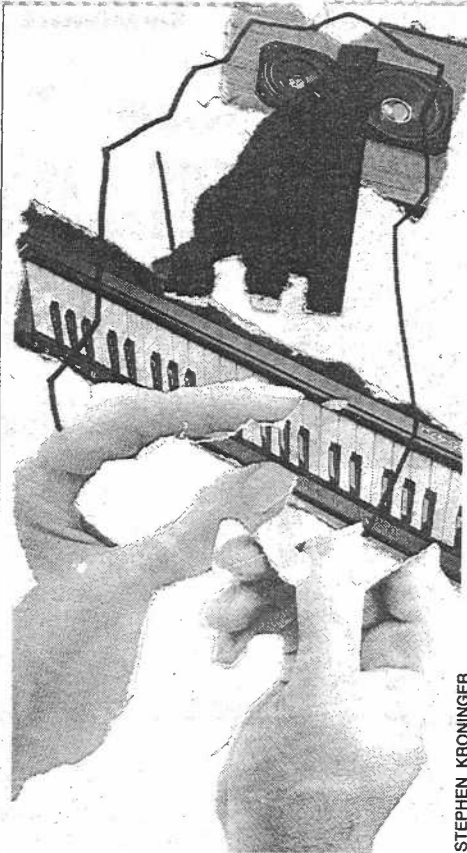
I had heard some of Waisvisz's music on the recent anthology *New Computer Music* (Wergo import), but his work simply cannot be captured on record. *Touch Monkeys* was as much theater and dance as music, and it made for riveting perfor-

mance art. Divorced from the spectacle, his music sounds like much of the better electronic music to come out of Europe in the last 20 years; smoother and timbrally more sophisticated, certainly, and with a pleasant tendency toward body rhythms that resulted from the manner of its production. What excited the imagination was the seamless unison of movement and music, of man and technology. Sound director Mauritz Rubenstein turned the machine on, and a low minor seventh drone broke the silence. Waisvisz waved his wrist, and the sound warped. He jerked his arm, and bullet-like whooshes shot across the room. At the pressure of a finger, an inexorable drumbeat began. He brought his hands together to create pianissimos, and spread them like Samson when he wanted a deafening roar. What conductor wouldn't give his left arm to be able to mold music with such tactile fluidity?

Such a premise could have led to gimmickry, but it didn't at all. The intelligence with which Waisvisz shaped his three-movement symphony was evident

MUSIC

both sonically and theatrically. Straining against unseen obstacles, he wrestled his way through the space as if through a Beckett play, and put his musical ideas through subtle and satisfying developments. By prearranged programming, he could change not only his repertoire of timbres, but the relationships between physical and sonic motion; deciphering



STEPHEN KRONINGER

the changing nature of that algorithm was part of the intellectual challenge. Many of the sounds were pretty: a jungle of plucked strings, foghorns, tinklings lent humor to the work's title. Others were more threatening, if still exquisitely defined. Though often meditative, *Touch Monkeys* was gutsy, never shallowly conceived. Its careful contouring made it clear that Waisvisz is no one-idea composer. He is a major artist on his way up, producing some of the most exciting and intriguing new music I've heard in months.

If her technology was less astounding, Ellen Fullman's April 23 performance at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation

had its own delights. The visual effect was as unusual as Waisvisz's: Fullman played with rosin-covered fingers on a set of 50-foot bronze wires stretched the full length of Phill Niblock's loft. She and her partner Santiago Villareal walked slowly back and forth, playing changing chords in just intonation. If it sounds static, it wasn't; the continuous and unpredictable filter sweep of harmonics provided plenty of texture. Her tonalities were in minor keys, yet transcendently calm, producing a beautifully meditative atmosphere. Dissonant tones would suddenly jut out then recede, and as soon as you tried to identify the overtones present they'd already changed. In the second part of her performance, Carl Stone provided additional variety by putting the sounds through digital delays and other processing.

You could lose yourself in that maze of harmony for hours, but the real pleasure was not timbral, but rhythmic. Feldman has gotten us used to long durations, Oliveros and many after her have exploited the rhythm of breathing, but Fullman's music was unique in its expansion of pulse to multi-minute values. I timed her once; she took 54 seconds to walk the upbeat, paused, made the "nnnrraouuu" of her hands changing direction, then 41 seconds for the downbeat. There was a similarity here, of course, to Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, but while Lucier made audible a natural phenomenon, this rhythmic aspect, together with the fluctuations in each chord, gave Fullman's music a reassuringly human feel, perhaps more related to the walking meditation of Zen.

It can hardly be said often enough that a technology is only justified as the expression of an aesthetic desire. Both of these concerts passed that test; neither Waisvisz's sound/body theater nor Fullman's walking rhythms could have been achieved by any simpler means. What's more, they both possessed the virtue of making technology seem very, very human. ■

THIS FRIDAY!

TOWER RECORDS | VIDEO
TOWER