Slice 'N' Dice

BY KYLE GANN

Info-overload music, but no free-for-all

photo: Drew Tillman

If I could play you the CD I'm listening to right now, I'd tell you it was by the latest 22-year-old sampling hotshot, some kid who dropped out of college because he was having too much fun subverting his laptop audio software. And you'd believe me. But I'd be pulling your leg. Then, if I could have the real composer walk in, you'd be astonished to see that Noah Creshevsky is no baggy-jeaned club DJ, but a quiet and reclusive retired Brooklyn College professor. Because there is nothing sedate or self-important about the crazy *Alice in Wonderland* sonic mayhem that Creshevsky has been gleefully creating for the last 30 years, even back when he had to use reel-to-reel tape to do it, when touch-key sampling was hardly even a futuristic dream.

The CD's apt title is *Hyperrealism* (Mutable Music), and in brief liner notes Creshevsky explains the philosophy of his own personal ism. On one hand, he creates virtual "superperformers" by using the sounds of traditional instruments pushed past the capacities of human performance. (An early disc on Centaur was called *Man and Superman.*) He also, like many others these days, likes to incorporate the sounds of everyday life as musical materials, and he insists on these sounds being "natural," recognizable, even included for their cultural resonance. Other sampler composers do as much: Charles Amirkhanian paints luxurious sonic landscapes from environmental sounds; Carl Stone reconfigures recorded sounds in pop rhythms. But Creshevsky slices his sounds into thin strips and ripples through arpeggios on them like a virtuoso pianist of the absurd, and the results are truly disorienting.

Canto di Malavita, for instance, weaves a melody from sitar glissandos, lightning-fast piano scales, a rocker's drum lick, a string orchestra pizzicato, and sometimes the middle third of a quick note from an opera singer. And that's the problem with even trying to describe this music: Many of these slices of sound zip by too fast to cross the threshold of recognition. I *think* that's Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in there, but it's difficult to tell from just a dozen milliseconds. The old game of "Name that piece in one note or less" takes on new meaning as Creshevsky whips between different cultures several times within a beat. It's as though Conlon Nancarrow had had, not just the keys of a player piano, but a huge, multicultural jukebox with split-second control.

Perhaps you've already picked up the one clue to Creshevsky's age: His sonic references do tend to veer more toward classical than pop. *Ossi di morte* sounds like someone dropped and shattered an opera, then glued the tiny shards back together in a completely wrong order, complete with audience coughs—or perhaps they're dying soprano gasps? Two pieces involve Downtown baritone Thomas Buckner, who a couple of times is allowed to finish an entire unsliced phrase. It sharpens the sense of absurdity, in fact, that there is always a strong melodic element present, or rather meta-melodic. This is info-overload music, but not *chaotic*, not a sonic free-for-all. Each piece limits itself to a certain group of sound worlds, building a distinct atmosphere from incongruously mixed elements that blur together from sheer speed of alternation.

That's not to diminish the extreme perceptual challenge Creshevsky poses. The jumble of mouth sounds, guitar licks, and interrupted Tchaikovsky phrases, the abrupt intercutting, and the meta-organization into musically meaningful beats and measures result in a layered cognitive dissonance in which the familiar, the absurd, the jarring, and the melodic jostle for dominance. You can recognize these pieces, you can delight in them, but I can't imagine any amount of exposure ever getting me used to them.

Mutable Music is at mutablemusic.com, 109 West 27th Street, seventh floor, New York, NY 10001.