

Slowing the Connections

By Kyle Gann

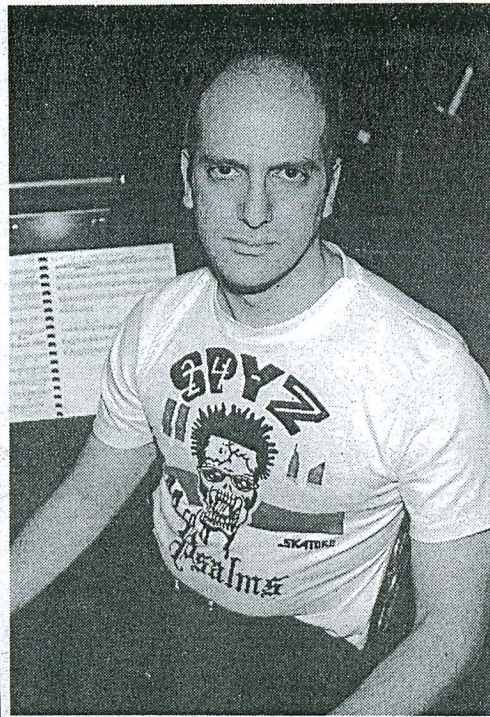
MUSIC/text Festival

Back when I wrote about new music from Cage-forsaken, between-the-scenes Chicago, the Kitchen seemed like a Disneyland for the sonically inquisitive. During a concert-hopping visit here in 1981 the Kitchen was inactive that week, but I stood in it anyway, just to soak up historic vibes. But somewhere between that fantasy and my arrival at the *Voice*, the Kitchen slid from being music's Holy of Holies to being its House of Horrors. As I quietly rescued myself from yet another pianist's feckless musings there a few weeks ago, it occurred to me that, in four years, I've walked out on more Kitchen concerts from desperate boredom than those of all other New York spaces combined. The programming, once innovative and outrageous, now more often tends to gimmicks.

Problem is, the Kitchen—once music-programmed by the likes of Rhys Chatham, George Lewis, Garrett List—no longer has a curator from the new music scene, someone who knows the field, knows music, and recognizes the original. Occasionally the place hires guest curators for festivals, and, though hit-and-run curating doesn't build up a context, those

are the only times the place rises to its former glory. Nicolas Collins's *Imaginary Landscapes* series three years ago was one such moment. Another was the early-February MUSIC/text Festival, organized by one of New York's most savvy young composer/performers, Ben Neill. Several works on the festival, including Brenda Hutchinson's, I've reviewed lately in other auspices, and I missed the Petr Kotik/Paul de Marinis evening. Otherwise, here are some highlights:

The week opened with a piece that seemed all text, no music—unless, like me, you've come to find Robert Ashley's soothing drawl melodic. Surging into sforzandos like the Baptist preachers of my childhood, Ashley read the "Max" monologue from his opera *Atalanta*, outwardly a story about a ball-bearing manufacturer. Embedded in the text was Ashley's theory of how music and language work, roughly as follows: Our brains are all connected. Words are throat noises we've learned to use to modulate the connections, to slow our brains down so that the connections don't overheat. "Who could speak," Ashley pleaded, "if every word had meaning?" We set aside certain words, curse words, that seem to have meaning, and their meaning slows down the connections even more. Music, too, is "words slowed



David Soldier: no axes to grind

down." Fastness is the devil, and slowed-downness—found in music, swearing, and prayer—is salvation.

That thesis, urged in a nonlinear form I can't duplicate here, hung over the week like a half-fulfilled promise. Certainly Linda Fisher's words fit. Her *Margaret in Bali*, the only new piece she presented, slowed us down long enough to see connections between the privacy-invasion of Western anthropologists and that of sex police who monitor deviant behavior. On the surface it was the story of Margaret Mead's 1939 trip to Bali, in which a homosexual friend of hers was arrested, later to die in jail. When Fisher sang, "Do you do it with a

woman, do you do it with a man?" you couldn't tell who was asking the question, anthropologist or policeman. Why they were asking was suspiciously ambiguous in either case. And Fisher's synthesized gamelan and sampled Balinese flute, surrounding the interrogations in disarming innocence, made this her most potent political statement yet.

Elsewhere, words faded into the woodwork. Seven improvisations by Catherine Jauniaux and Ikue Mori substituted sonic pictures for sense. Mori's delay units bounced Jauniaux's meows, tongue clicks, hums, and

squeals, plus her own drum machines, around the room. The basic formula was a generic Slavic/Asian melody over a surreal, bopping noise accompaniment, but the best pieces gelled into evocative, filmic images. John King's *Permanent Revolution*, performed by his Electric World Ensemble and the South African vocal quartet Ingoma, mixed texts in the Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho languages between instrumental pieces. Amazingly versatile, King switched between noise-distorted art rock, souped-up pop, folksy guitar, minimalist ostinato, and hectic improv. When called upon, Ingoma sang charming patterns, and of Electric World's three drummers, David Moss in partic-

ular added hilarious abandon.

The overriding impression of King's piece, though, was a condescension I feel sure wasn't intended. The Americans jammed and hopped around to their hearts' delight, while the Africans, like living tape loops, waited meekly, counted beats, and sang repeated phrases on cue. Given that we have a mandate to paste these cultures together, surely there's a more equitable way.

The ultimate test of Ashley's hypothesis was the conventional marriage of music and words in the fest's final climax. David Soldier's *Apotheosis of John Brown* was an honest-to-god oratorio, based on *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, for narrator, vocal quartet, solo violin (Laura Seaton), and string orchestra with harpsichord continuo. The neoclassic style ranged from mild Bartók to Vivaldi to 19th century American, with here and there a touch of folk fiddling drawn from the composer's work with his Soldier String Quartet. Yet, as outwardly conservative as the piece was, the vocal textures—splitting of text between voices, heterophony, imitation of crowd sounds—showed a refreshing freedom from cliché. Robbie McCauley was a compelling narrator, and the vocal quartet (Sally Munro, Heidi Merritt, Paul Gallagher, and Bruce Detrick) was fantastic, arguing spiritedly above spare, repetitive accompaniments. In best Kitchen tradition, the piece showed how a downtowner with no axes to grind nor teachers to impress could spark new life from an old form. It also slowed us down long enough to meditate on what John Brown's life really meant. That was a connection. ■

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