MUSIC

Space Challengers

By Kyle Gann

Trimpin

Tod Machover

No one present at the Kitchen's preconcert talk April 17 missed the inspired contrast between the two featured composers, Tod Machover and Trimpin. Machover is the brightest and rising star of MIT's computer music studio. Trimpin is a Seattle inventor who works on a salmon-fishing boat when he runs out of money (which may be more fun than teaching at MIT, who knows?). Machover has access to the latest technology and a team of software consultants. Trimpin makes his mechanized instruments from junk parts and stores his calculations in a tattered notebook. It was like seeing, say, Elliott Carter and Harry Partch onstage together 40 years ago. It was Uptown next to Downtown, the American university opposed to American experimentalism, music as collective science versus music as a lonely art. It was an allegorical *tableau vivant* of American music itself.

But both composers are geniuses at drawing music from machines, and the concert that followed (actually, I heard it on the 16th) was about space and how music inhabits it. Trimpin's big, square Contraption IPP 71512 symmetrized the performerless grand piano it stood on, neutralizing the keyboard's usual high-low orientation. A MIDI-computerized box of red-felted pins played

Machover at the hypercello: music as collective science

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the keys, rippling them back and forth in accelerating waves that were sometimes silent, only for visual effect. As Trimpin scanned a computer screen and pushed buttons, the Contraption squeaked metal bars across the strings and tapped shimmering minor chords on them with rods, like a chorus of balalaikas. The best effect was a series of wheels encircled with rubber loops that "bowed" the piano, creating ghostly, attackless chromatic glissandos that would have thrilled Henry Cowell.

If Conlon Nancarrow is the Beethoven of the mechanized piano, Trimpin is its Debussy, abjuring logic to extend a coloristic continuum ranging from tonality to noise. The music was a frank collage (without even its own title beyond the machine's name) drawn from the capacities of the instrument. As padded plates damped the strings, the piano plinked a muffled mosaic of Bach and Mozart quotes, giving way at last to crashing and rippling chords of parallel fifths. Meanwhile, Trimpin's assistant Troy Swanson ran live video from the back of the piano, showing us detail and further spatializing the performance. It helps Trimpin's career that his work is so visual; art departments and museums are a lot more open-minded than music departments and concert halls.

Machover's *Begin Again Again . . .*, the climax of his half of the concert, pulled space into a different dimension. As he played a computerized hypercello—FM radio transmitter in the bow, electronic sensors along the fingerboard, pressure-sensitive device fitted to his hand, among other paraphernalia—three computers transformed the cello's information into a rich accompaniment. This was the first live-computer-interaction piece I've ever heard that didn't leave you wondering what the computer's thought process was. Machover would flurry in high harmonics, the computer would blur that flurry into a texture. If the cello played a melody, it would later reappear in the sound mix. At one dramatic point, the notes the cello played issued from the computer as a harpsichord. Without being Mickey Mouse, yet refreshingly unlike the usual repertoire of computer-improv shoulder-shruggers, the process was always intelligible. But the most magical effect, applied with tasteful discretion, was that every now and then the electronic tones would relocate, float up audibly from Machover's cello, and hover angelically in two speakers on the ceiling.

The computer logic was easier to follow than Machover's frenzied melodic form, for while Trimpin's ruminations exhaled from the construction of the piano itself, Machover's music was indebted to more traditions than one piece could satisfy. Stylistically, the works Machover played—not only *Begin Again* but *Flora* and the brief theme song from his video-opera *Valis*—were tightly stretched among three poles: a romantic, lyrical sensibility; a rock sense of drama; and a serialist

habit of incessant irregularity. Every climax was underlined by the entrance of a rock bass, not in a steady beat, but lurching forward in uneven spasms. It was mesmerizing to hear the computer shoot the cello line across the room and diffract it into a dozen colors, but more despite the music's inner conflicts than because of them.

Trimpin also did Nancarrow aficionados a favor by playing, via computer, three (of 68) player piano rolls found in Nancarrow's studio that had never before been heard publicly. These were collagelike too, bits jumbled together from Nancarrow's recorded Studies for Player Piano. (Like snapshots, the rolls capture private, playful moments: one merely has the word HELLO punched diagonally.) The first roll set Western-lilting pentatonic melodies in canon, eventually underlined by an ostinato from Nancarrow's Study No. 2 (circa 1950), and climaxing in gentle arpeggios unlike anything in his official output. Yet in the middle was a canon on the opening theme from his Third String Quartet, not written until 1987. The second roll accompanied the jazz-duet melody from Study No. 41 (1970s) with early-period triads and ostinatos. This mix of late melodies with early methods suggests either that Nancarrow borrowed ostinatos from early works for his late-period experiments (if the rolls are relatively recent), or, more likely, that when he wanted melodies for late structuralist canons, he stole them from pieces that he considered failures. This name-that-tune game for Nancarrow fans sheds light on a lifetime of working habits that the old codger himself claims not to remember.∎