

Spin It Around

By Kyle Gann

New music in the public's hands

TACOMA—Not only have I heard the future of music, I've performed it. It's at the Tacoma Art Museum through February 27, an installation called *PHFFFT-ARRRRGH* by Seattle's genius composer-engineer Trimpin. Four sets of 12 tubes ending in organ pipes hang from the ceiling. Accordion reeds bleep through cylinders and tuba bells, one splatting like a snare drum, another rumbling like tuned thunder. A wheel mounted with duck calls spins slowly overhead, powered by a silent fan. Other duck calls honk through bass clarinet bells, also spinning. Air is the only sound source. The tones are uniformly pure, reedy, attackless. Though they shoot from all directions, you can't pinpoint them in space; they seem to be inside your head. Nothing is amplified.

At the center of the room, wired to a hidden computer, are two knobs anyone can turn. One sends sounds rippling around the room, the other modulates the tones to different keys. You can activate this colossal hurdy-gurdy yourself, or you can press a button and Trimpin's computer will treat you to preprogrammed sequences in which massive chords moan, squeaks spin, and tone complexes echo from one side of the hall to the other with a 20-millisecond delay. *PHFFFT-ARRRRGH* is

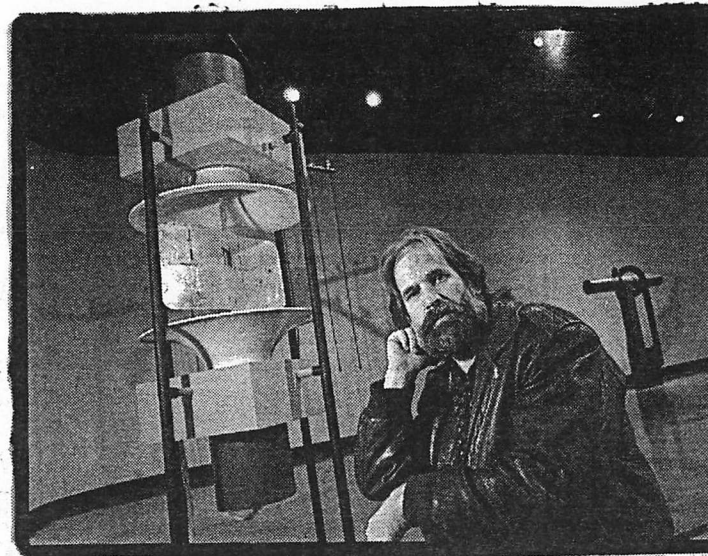
coming to Lincoln Center May 17, but, typically, it will be scaled down for a smaller room where its spatial effects will be less astounding. New York's too crowded to fit the best new music in.

I had come to Seattle for a project called Music in Motion, spearheaded by Joseph Franklin of Philadelphia's Relache Ensemble. I can't review it because I was one of the composers involved, but suffice it to say that it's an attempt to get audiences involved in the creation of new music from the ground up, not just hearing the finished product as a fait accompli. For example, January 28 at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle postminimalist Janice Giteck presented fragments of a work in progress, then asked for audience comments. The crowd was composer-heavy (Seattle may have more recognized composers *per capita* than any city in the country: Alan Hovhaness, Stuart Dempster, David Mahler, Jarrad Powell, William O. Smith), but several "real people" made some interesting points, in some cases with considerable heat. I asked myself, What would happen if we tried this Downtown? My guess is, the composer's buddies would show up, smile sweetly, and shout, "Nice piece!"

We in New York are sheltered from the hurdles new music faces out in the world. Hey, we give concerts, our friends fill the seats, what's the problem? All we know is, the NEA's slitting our throats because the rest of the country

hates our guts. Out in Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia, new music groups put tremendous work into outreach because they *have* to establish contact with strangers. We don't. Organizations out there can't afford to present work without closely scrutinizing its impact, nor abandon audiences to a passive position. Funding's been slashed, and the arts are in national disrepute. Seattle's premier new music presenting organization, Soundwork Northwest, just ceased operations, which for New York would be like Roulette, the Kitchen, and Experimental Intermedia all going under at once.

Why so much resentment against artists? All stupid right-wing rhetoric aside for a moment, maybe because, in terms of that basic instinct for artistic self-expression that every human has to satisfy at some level or another, artists are the haves, and everyone else is have-nots. The creativity and aliveness that *ought* to permeate the life of every McDonald's fry cook and Arthur Andersen accountant are ruthlessly stamped out by the structures we live under. At Mobil Oil, my dad got in trouble for putting his name plate on the unorthodox side of his desk. Last year I visited my best friend from high school; he used to write piano music, I'd perform it. Now he spat anti-NEA vitriol as eloquently as William F. Buckley, while I wanted to crawl under the table. What he finally admitted, though, was that he envied artists for living out the dream he once had, while he played it safe and became a computer analyst. That admission may say more about the arts in America than all Donald Wildmon's followers could.



SAUL BROMBERG/SANDRA HOOVER

Trimpin's *PHFFFT-ARRRRGH* is too big for New York.

If only one segment of society were allowed to have sex, would they become popular by flaunting it? That's pretty much the position artists are in vis-à-vis creativity. The solution, of course, isn't to squelch the only group enjoying fulfillment, but to spread it around. That's why, outside New York, the old we-give-concerts-you-sit-and-listen format is losing fans. No one wants to watch artists do what's denied to themselves, nor, because it's been denied so long, do they know how to appreciate it anyway. In the grant panels I've been on lately, art for art's sake is a discredited corpse. Artistic quality is a low priority, for unheard masterpieces are a dime a dozen. Funders want to see residencies, artists working with non-artists, spreading around their expertise, their technology, their creativity, educating the young, expressing communal needs rather than individual ones.

Non-artists—so present institutional thinking has started to run—hate artists *because* this is an art-starved society, and artists are hoarding it all. We've got to divide some loaves and fishes.

Twirling the knobs at the Tacoma Art Museum, I fell into an asymmetrical pattern of honks and whistles that so mesmerized me I couldn't stop. Oblivious, I kept up the motions for maybe five minutes. Trimpin had put a complex sonic experience in my hands, and I was shaping it for myself in some way that resonated more deeply than I could fathom. As I reluctantly left off, I wondered: Had I just become the archetypal audience member of the 21st century? The revolution in the way "serious" or classical music involves, confronts, and seduces its listeners has begun. New York, with its massive institutional inertia and captive audience of fellow artists, is out of the loop. ■

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