



LONA FOOTE

Linda Fisher and Joshua Fried: heads over heels

# Spring of Dissonance

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

How many enterprises search for a fountain of youth? In its fourth

Montreal's Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, and good old Relache from Philadelphia. And in a scene that settled into automatic pilot around '84, Boac reminds us every year that there are ways to make new music besides improvi-

Not! and Wolfe's *The Vermeer Room*. And, to make a point, Ligeti's Chamber Concerto (in an expertly poetic reading by the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne) offered a historical precedent. I'm not sure whether *Three Mecha-*

style, however, used sonorities as place markers in sonata form, replacements for the harmonic areas of tonal music. The New Dissonance people (hey, somebody's gotta come up with these terms so composers can disavow them)

ence), but it needed a kind of attention that concert performance couldn't provide; you had to relisten backwards to realize what had happened. *Critical Band* should have its own little shrine where pilgrims can listen to it in groups of two or three.

# SPRING OF DISSONANCE

By Kyle Gann

Bang on a Can

How many enterprises search for a fountain of youth? In its fourth marathon, May 13 at R.A.P.P. Arts Center, Bang on a Can—the '90s festival that picked up the thread New Music America long ago dropped—maintained its feeling of perpetual springtime. Boac wants to expand; it did so, and it will again. Next year's schedule promises an impressive series of string quartets from unlikely sources, including the Glenn Branca quartet that got canceled this year. Financial expansion eventually requires a board, aesthetic expansion an artistic advisory panel. Both will bring compromise, the kind faced by every successful venture at its moment of institutionalization. But for now, founders David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon are squeezing by with few enough cooks to keep the broth perfect.

Boac works because, instead of trying to placate seven audiences, it aims to build *one*. That means that a listener who liked any three of the pieces probably found all 25 worth sitting through. (Had New Music America stuck to that policy, it might have survived past next November's Montreal installment, which looks like the end.) The downside is, for the first time Boac's programming began to look slightly insular; for example, the founding trio seems to have a weakness for huge, athletic, solo percussion pieces. Still, the festival brings superb ensembles to New York, some of them for premiere performances: this year, Holland's Orkest De Volharding,

Montreal's Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, and good old Relache from Philadelphia. And in a scene that settled into automatic pilot around '84, Boac reminds us every year that there are ways to make new music besides improvisation and computers.

The eleven-hour marathon was scheduled to end at 1 a.m., but it dragged on to 1:02. Here's what stood out:

**The New Dissonance:** The core this year wasn't so much a group of pieces as a style, a constellation of strategies exhibited by so many of the best works that they began to blur together. Lacking a more accurate term, you might call it "dissonant minimalism," an idiom derived from minimalism but avoiding its sissy tonality and *duh-dee-duh-dee* rhythmic tick. This style is the obverse of the New Tonality. New tonalists retained minimalism's neutered tonality but rejected its going-nowhereness, while the Boac composers kept the static form and opted for more rough-hewn materials. (Disdain for other people's work is the fuel that keeps music history moving.) This "dissonating" of an accessible style parallels the move made in the '50s from Copland's populist music to the sterner idioms of William Schuman and Roger Sessions. For whatever reason, pretty music gets "toughened up" by the next generation.

Three works performed by the Orkest De Volharding—*Three Mechanisms* by Rob Zuidam, *Cookie Girl* by Maarten van Norden, and *Shoulder to Shoulder* by Liverpool native Steve Martand—fell into this pattern, as did Gordon's *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt*

*Not!* and Wolfe's *The Vermeer Room*. And, to make a point, Ligeti's Chamber Concerto (in an expertly poetic reading by the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne) offered a historical precedent. I'm not sure whether *Three Mechanisms* was the best example, or just the first. The Volharding Orchestra, conducted by Cees van Zeeland, is a flashy ensemble of saxes, brass, electric bass, and piano, and its powerfully exact performance gave the music a knock-out punch. Wheezing like a huge, discordant accordion, Zuidam's tense big-band sonorities bounced back and forth, regularly interrupted by brittle piano strokes.

Interruption was Gordon's strategy as well. Intrepid percussionist Michael Pugliese played the "Shalt not!" against the rest of the Michael Gordon Philharmonic's "shalt!" in the most driven performance I'd heard them give. Gordon, closer to rock than the other composers, looked for less variety within his static form than did Zuidam, but his sonic images are so boldly etched that his pieces always stick in the memory. Wolfe, writing for the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, splashed lush orchestral triads against percussion clangs and woodwind dissonances in receding waves, like a Mahler finale rewritten by Xenakis, or a sustained Sibelius climax without a theme.

The analogy with Schuman and Sessions is seriously meant. The rhythmically intricate articulation of a dissonant batch of notes was a favorite trick of the American symphonic style from Copland's Piano Variations on, a way of sustaining a pitch area without lapsing into the 12-tone school's vague, wandering melodies. That

style, however, used sonorities as place markers in sonata form, replacements for the harmonic areas of tonal music. The New Dissonance people (hey, somebody's gotta come up with these terms so composers can disavow them) didn't leap from one sonority to another, but let each piece simmer in its own juices until fried. Wolfe, Gordon, Zuidam, and Martand each wrenched variety from a circumscribed universe, narrowing our focus to rhythmic nuances of a splashy surface. Only van Norden miscalculated, interrupting abstract jazz patterns for a long, ineptly jazz-derivative, not audibly related piano solo in a piece he ingenuously described as "the Dutch *Rhapsody in Blue*."

**James Tenney:** This "composers' cult figure," as Gordon correctly introduced him, was represented by *Critical Band*, a piece so minimal that any minimalist piece next to it would sound like the soundtrack to *Star Wars*. At 10:03 Philadelphia's Relache ensemble played an A. For over two minutes you thought they were tuning up, then microtones started bending, and a high third harmonic became audible. At 10:09 John Dulik played pitches a half step apart on his synthesizer, and by 10:11 the notes had spread out to a misty third. Somehow, at 10:17, a chord of the dominant seventh *blossomed*—that's the only word for it. At 10:19 the chord began fading, and by 10:21 it was gone.

Relache has devotedly nurtured *Critical Band*, and played it with an exquisite air of meditation, like the slow-motion unfolding of a flower. The piece was well received (like everything played for this rabidly enthusiastic lay audi-

ence), but it needed a kind of attention that concert performance couldn't provide; you had to relisten backwards to realize what had happened. *Critical Band* should have its own little shrine where pilgrims can listen to it in groups of two or three.

**Paul Lansky:** Computer speech synthesis and minimalism are distant worlds, and in bridging them Lansky has come up with his own weird, funny, engaging shtick. Like Philip Glass music mumbled by gnomes, *Idle Chatter* was a bouncy jumble of phonemes, a chorus of happy campers held together by a swelling and ebbing background of contented sighs. The only unadorned tape piece, it was a welcome misfit.

**Linda Fisher:** Wearing whimsical hats, Fisher and Joshua Fried drummed on the upturned heels of Fried's electrified shoes (not the ones he was wearing), releasing a Pandora's box of Warner Bros. cartoon quotes. Example: "Don't listen to him, folks, he's crazy!" Fisher's *Big Mouth* always draws laughs, but rehearing it in this acoustically generous context made you realize it's dead serious on a more interesting level. The calm little electronic motives that issued from speakers behind the slapstick pair (Fisher calls them "vones") symbolized some large, more objective consciousness threatening to break through, and reminded you that the piece is a dark joke about the opacity of neurosis.

**Martin Bresnack, et al.:** Every day it becomes more difficult to swing a cat by the tail in New York without hitting a student of Yale

Continued on next page



# Met Murders COS?

By Leighton Kerner

The Metropolitan Opera is abandoning its Central Opera Service wing, probably to die. COS is the country's largest bank of musical information that makes the existence of about 400 companies a little less impossible.

Founded in 1954 by American opera's most redoubtable Lady Bountiful, Eleanor Belmont, COS was mandated to give nuts-and-bolts data to American troupes of all sizes. No dilettante in such benefaction, Belmont had inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera Guild to keep the company afloat during the Depression. Her later inspiration, COS, was therefore no mere whim, and it still isn't. In other words, the abandoning of COS is seen by outraged observers as an insult to the very heroine who once saved the Met's hide.

COS members number about 2000, including institutions, individuals, and about 400 companies. In its publications, the service informs its network about operas premiered abroad that might have potential in America. It reports on access to scores, published or otherwise. It tells where and how to rent scenery and costumes. The service informs singers, technicians, and administrators about auditions and job openings. It gives marketing pointers to needy companies—as if there are any other kind. The list of services is almost endless, and certainly crucial.

Almost endless, that is, for the

time being. That time may be up at the close of September. That's when COS loses not only its operating space in the offices of the Met Guild at 1865 Broadway but also its identity as a constituent of the Metropolitan Opera. (That's also when the Guild is scheduled to move to Lincoln Center's new building at Amsterdam Avenue and 65th Street, which is set to house Lincoln Center administrative offices, the School of American Ballet, resident Juilliard students, rehearsal rooms, and so on.) Sources say that COS executive director Maria F. Rich, concerned about not having been given a timetable for the move, recently asked the Met's general manager, Hugh Southern, what was going on. He told her COS wouldn't be moving with the Guild. Southern also told her that the Met would no longer make up the difference between COS income (including membership dues) and the service's expenses, a difference estimated by some at \$60,000 and by others at something approaching \$100,000 a year. This outlay for COS's survival subsidy is put into perspective when one realizes that the Met's annual budget hovers around \$90 million.

Southern responded to questions by telephone from Prague. He acknowledged that COS would no longer be under the Met's umbrella and said that its activities were being duplicated by OPERA America, a federation of company managers. He also paid tribute to

COS's years of "evangelical service to opera across the country."

Martha Perry, an OPERA America spokeswoman in Washington, and Rich in New York both said there was some duplication, particularly regarding information about renting scenery and costumes and about auditions and job openings. Both emphasized that COS only dealt with musical matters, such as the availability and whereabouts of scores. Rich pointed out COS's exclusive and voluminous data on, for example, operas that have been performed successfully in Europe and are ripe for a U.S. premiere.

One irony among several in this situation is that Southern, an Englishman whose earlier American career included the birth of the Theater Development Fund, has solid non-elitist credentials. But he has mitigated the divorce only with an offer to help find a new space for COS.

Rich acknowledged that offer. But skepticism about such things is rampant these days. With the National Endowment for the Arts itself teetering on the edge of extinction, and the whole arts-funding scene becoming a desert of fear and tightfisted righteousness, what hope is there for anything like COS? Let those hundreds of little opera companies acquire a little old American resourcefulness and sew those costumes at home. And those many operas that revel in sex and violence better come clean or there'll be Helms to pay. Then, too, COS may snuggle up in a corner of the New York Public Library and become just a dusty enclave.

Or, in the worst case, COS may soon join the homeless. ■

## Gann

Continued from last page

professor Bresnick; for that alone one needs to keep an ear on him. His Piano Trio, elegantly read by the Monticello Trio, took its spare melodic lines from string technique, and they sounded striking on the piano. It was the fest's most classical entry, even Romantic, but written sincerely and with consummate clarity. Bresnick's students don't imitate him, but Lang caught the clarity in his *Orpheus Over and Under*, a bitter-sweet flurry of repeated notes played by the festival's dynamite (and underused) piano duo Double Edge. Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann spun mournful circles within a small range, then broke into Alvin Curran-like tremolos. I can't decide how I feel about the three chords that finally broke the mood.

**Mary Ellen Childs:** She wins the prize this year. In her *Click*, Jody Brieske, Peter O'Gorman, and Cynthia Stevens stood clicking claves (wood blocks) together. Then, with acrobatic timing, they started reaching across to click *each other's* wood blocks, over their heads, behind their backs, alternating in incredibly ornate choreography, meeting in midair, going exactly where the patterns led you to expect they wouldn't, a new sight gag every 10 seconds. A piece to watch rather than listen to, it was a newly born classic, like Steve Reich's *Clapping Music* only a thousand times more virtuosic. Myself, I can't whistle, but afterward everybody who could, did.

**What feels best** about Bang on a Can may be that it's free of '80s music's cynicism. That decade

seemed to assume that Western culture was kaput, that there was nothing more original to say. The music reduced bits of older music to generic style examples, recombined them in pastiche, paraded its politically correct influences, invoked past jazz greats, picked up once again the raveled threads of '60s improv, and quoted—now intentionally, now unconsciously—the gestures of '60s conceptualism, as though there were nothing left for us poor, self-conscious Westerners to do but parasitize history and the Third World. The message I got from "postmodernism" was, creativity is at least out of fashion, perhaps no longer possible.

In contrast, Bang on a Can celebrated the pendulum's energizing forward swing. Each festival has felt like a successive step in the creation of a new world. Colleagues from different continents coincidentally found the same solutions, doubtless to avoid them as cliché next year. In introducing their works, the composers didn't talk about whom they were trying to imitate (their "influences"), but about personal inspirations, ranging from the Northern Lights (Eleanor Hovda) to the Orpheus myth (Lang) to motherhood (Jalalu Kalvert Nelson). That a moment here and there brought to mind music you'd heard before didn't matter; deliberately trying to avoid sounding like something else is a form of plagiarism, of being overly conscious of other people's music while composing. It's naïve to think that, after these hundreds of years, you can come up with something new to say. Many of the fest's best offerings were naïve. The audience cheered them. ■

Columbia Records Presents

A MONTH OF MONDAYS