

## New Music From Brazil

## Sticking It

BY KYLE GANN

The new music crisis, our moral dilemma over whether accessibility or autonomy is the greater good, doesn't seem to afflict the nations on the periphery of the European/American mainstream. Canadian music, as the Contemporary Music Ensemble of Quebec redemonstrated last month in Philadelphia, is in vigorous health, forging ahead in a messianic idiom whose naïveté is outweighed by its confidence. The same is true of the Brazilian music performed recently in New York by the Grupo PIAP of São Paulo, whose repertoire gave the impression that South America's composers are approaching the vitality of her authors. Whether these countries haven't caught up with us yet or whether they are geographically immune to the crisis brought on by our fragmentation and self-consciousness is something I haven't figured out yet.

John Boudler formed the Percussion

## MUSIC

Group of the Planalto Institute of Arts at the University of São Paulo (Grupo PIAP). I used to hear Boudler, a one-man percussive volcano, perform solo and with ad hoc groups in Chicago, and his ensemble is stamped in his image: all 11 of its mallet-wielding members exhibit the same inexhaustible energy, the same virtuosic abandon. On marimba and xylophone their glittery technique is subtler than the ear can follow, and even their wind chime player draws poetry from the instrument. New York was fortunate

enough to hear them twice, in a November 4 panorama of Brazilian music, composed and traditional, at Brooklyn College. The previous evening at Paula Cooper Gallery, where he was joined by Elliott Sharp and Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble, felt like a homecoming, for Boudler is a former S.E.M. member.

The traditional fare—pop melodies for multiple marimbas, Latin jazz, folk antiphony with the one-stringed berimbau for ostinato, several minutes of loud, hot samba—was especially valuable for it clued one in on how close Brazilian composers remain to their ethnic sources, yet how innocently they diverge in favor of their classical purposes. The 1987 *Codex Troano* of Robert Victorio (cellist in the Rio de Janeiro orchestra), its movements depicting the sun, moon, and "The Grand Temple of the Gods," was as colorful as the folk music, but its sophistication lay in another direction: every few moments its clocklike pulse erupted into poly-rhythms of mallets and drums, like Boulezian serialism turned to the service of a contagious beat.

33 *Samra Zabobra* by Carlos Stasi, a Grupo PIAP member and Boudler's fellow teacher, was a delightful rhythmic study for raspy *reco-recos* (serrated bamboo cylinders). Couched in their unearthly sound, *Zabobra's* cross-rhythms were simple, yet eluded analysis even on second hearing (the work was played at both concerts). Jazz musician Hermeto Pascoal contributed *Music for Pans*, a rowdy street piece for whistles, cowbells, and rocks shaken inside cooking pans that would have felt at home at many downtown concerts. Perhaps the tightest piece



John Boudler (left) and Petr Kotik

was Miguel Coelho's *Ritmos*, a bristly array of percussive textures spun off of a 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 rhythm, with a thrilling, timpani-instigated coda. Like the Canadian works, these pieces betrayed their naïveté through formal weaknesses; Stasi's middle section, for example, lapsed into a lethargic catalogue of weird sounds. But all four were so self-assured in expression, so vivid in timbre (and performance), that one would be hard put to locate many American percussion works that wouldn't pale beside them.

S.E.M.'s concert managed the impossible, fusing S.E.M.'s Cagean sensibility

with Grupo PIAP's aggressiveness. Elliott Sharp built the bridge, integrating the percussion into a work that sounded entirely his own. Like much of Sharp's music, *Roundwound* was marked by his personal timbral surface, a simple electric guitar melody in harmonics riding the upper edge of the complex percussive noise, though in this case the latter was ethnically rhythmic. He broke this texture with a solo cadenza of string-scraping and -slapping, generic sounds that contrasted oddly with the rest of *Roundwound's* clean delineation.

Channeled violence focused *Snare Drum for Camus* by oboist Joseph Celli, a piece whose reputation had long preceded this New York premiere. Boudler and three of his drummers first beat the rim of a single snare drum, moving gradually to its head with virtuosic speed and power. The various emerging patterns created an old-style, perceptual minimalism full of uncontrollable variations, the kind that *Piano Phase* seemed destined to lead to before the minimalists discovered prettiness.

Petr Kotik's *Wilsie Bridge* certainly wasn't pretty, though it derived from the interval of the perfect fifth. Kotik is one of the few figures who has absorbed Cage's aesthetic without misinterpreting it. Unlike Cage's his music is linear, but like Cage's its wandering lines connote freedom rather than irresponsibility. Typically, *Wilsie Bridge* reminded me of superexpanded Gregorian chant, despite the presence of 10 percussionists playing elaborate Latinate rhythms. The fifths (played by flutes, trumpets, violin, and DX-7) combined and clashed with untroubled randomness, creating lush seventh chords and sharp dissonances. Boudler's drummers made a labyrinthine replacement for the monk who taps his foot to keep the choir in time. Kotik's straight-faced Zen spans ancient and new, Eastern and Western music, and deserves a larger role in new music outside of his own group. ■

"Let us sing the song of life."

Antonio Carlos Jobim

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