

Stretch and Fold

By Kyle Gann

Diana Meckley
Guy Klucevsek

Diana Meckley's is the first *abstract* music I've been enthusiastic about in a long time. In the '50s and '60s, music based, like hers, on mathematical algorithms and strict procedures sounded fresher than the intuitive symphonies the post-American people were writing. But by the '80s, the pendulum had swung too far: worthwhile algorithms and formal structures were wrung dry, it seemed, while music that moved back toward intuition, emotiveness, and pictorialism offered something we sorely needed. So, reversing the position of my outspoken youth, I started cheerleading for the return to intuition. And now, here's Meckley, hitting homers out of algorithmic left (-brain) field. What to do?

Specifically, she's the first composer I've heard who has found a listenable use for the hip science of chaos theory, or dynamic systems theory. In academic circles, it's the latest high-tech replacement for another questionable idea, the 12-tone row. Meckley's music stems from the chaotic idea of strange attractors, designs impelled by random forces, but that nevertheless fall into rough symmetry; thus her *Strange Attractors* for string quartet and drums, which the Soldier Quartet premiered at Experimental Intermedia March 23. Meckley's concept is to fold and stretch musical materials, using sampler and live

instruments to turn noises into harmonies into melodies and vice versa—the first audible new metaphor that's surfaced downtown in many years (though perhaps it was implicit in Steve Reich's *Four Organs*). And in that respect a newer work, *The Evolving Artifact*, was even more impressive.

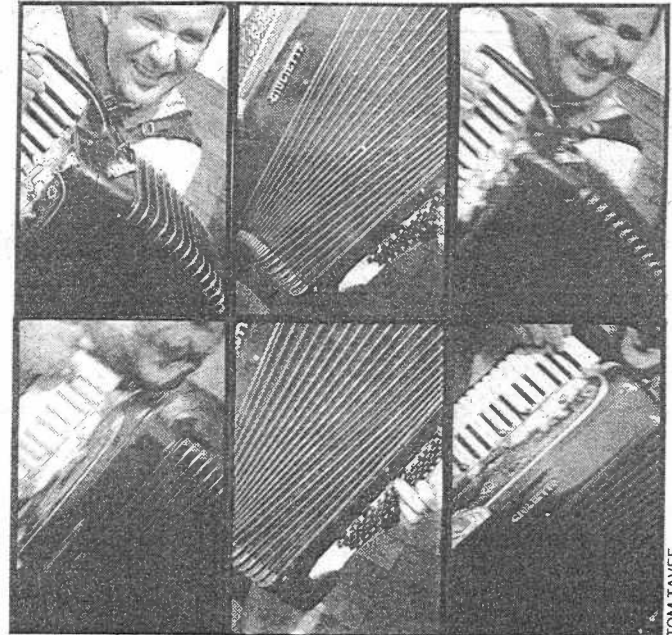
I don't know to what extent the theories determine Meckley's music, and as a listener I don't give a damn. Apparently, she hugs the concept and picks and chooses her numbers. More obvious is the way segments at offbeat intervals go out of phase with each other, and the way complex textures slowly thin out. In *The Evolving Artifact*, Ben Neill on trumpet and Rob Bethea on trombone earned their pay blaring Meckley's angular, major-seventh-studded melodic fragments. Smart creative touches abounded: the live blasts unraveled from garbled brass samples, so that Neill and Bethea were echoing (and blending with) the sampled version of themselves, rather than digital music's usual other way around. That smooth integration of the sampler made clear what *Attractors* had left cryptic. Elsewhere, Meckley punctuated their hectic lines with a stern, repeating boom. Instead of drawing out each disintegration at length like *Attractors*, the brass would outline a brief process, then jump to a related but contrasting one, finally returning to the opening in a well-defined circle.

In performance, *Attractors* seemed less taut than it had at its premiere 17 months earlier. Mark

Feldman replaced Soldier's Laura Seaton on violin, and maybe because he was chewing gum (remarkable if you consider how you hold a violin), maybe because they've gotten comfortable with the piece, it lacked the frantic edge it once had. Meckley's music is still rough. The repetitions can be redundant, the transitions have a stop-and-start jerkiness. But, in the three pieces I've heard, its personality is so strong—a grand, Stravinskian impassiveness with regal disregard for the usual continuity devices—that even its faults become just character traits, enhancing its originality. And it gives your brain something to do while you sit there, which a lot of music I've heard lately hasn't bothered to do.

Seconds later, a few rainy blocks away at Roulette, Guy Klucevsek played music that no Martian would have thought belonged to the same planet as Meckley's. The accordion is Klucevsek's instrument, theme and variations his form of choice, counterpoint his best of many talents. In *Citrus, My Love*, he played the melody while Mary Rowell—always virtuosic, here soaringly lyrical—played drones on the viola. Then they switched roles, finally moving to a sweet interplay of parallel sixths. Klucevsek writes the world's most abnormal "normal" music. Who else would write a cowboy song in 13/8 meter? His left hand played OOM-pah-pah, OOM-pah-pah, OOM-pah-pah, OOM-pah, OOM-pah, and at regular intervals he yelled "Yippie-ki-yo!" in pure deadpan.

Not all of Klucevsek's music feigns normalcy. *The Flying Pipe Organ of Xian* was based on a story about a Chinese village that,



TOM TAVEE

Klucsevsek: OOM-pah, OOM-pah, yippie-ki-yo!

despite famine and invasion, entertained themselves by tying wind-played whistles to the tails of pigeons. I'd heard the piece live with electronic delay, but this version used viola, cello (Erick Friedlander), and double bass (Jonathan Storck), which the accordion filled out into a texture lushier than any string quartet, almost orchestral. The group moved from clusters to slow glissandos, echoing upward, then downward, finally contracting and expanding at once, wheezing like the Godzilla of accordions. It was a better continuum piece than I'd heard come from Ligeti's contour-conscious, chord-ignoring aesthetic, because the harmonies, even though the glissandos slid through them rather quickly, were lucid and compelling.

No other composer on the scene

is so untouched by fashion. *"Viavy Rose" Variations* toyed with traditional polka syncopations, with a classically Polish accordion shiver on the final chord. Of three *Microids*, the first kept the right hand in 6/8 while the left bumped along in 5. The second, "Eleven Large Lobsters Loose in the Lobby," consisted of tapping keys and hitting the instrument, effects I usually roll my eyes at, but which here were natural, rhythmic, and charming. *Passage North*, for the *Pipe Organ* ensemble, was Schubertian in its calm melodies, including some clever inversion counterpoint that did not go unnoticed. Klucevsek's is the aesthetic I'd like to see music swing toward in the '90s, fresh, natural, unsystematic. And Meckley's exerting a strong, seductive pull in the opposite direction. ■

JOHN SCOFIELD JOHN SCOFIELD JOHN SCOFIELD

JOHN SCOFIELD

THE



Avery Fisher Hall