

Suspended in Time



ROBIN HOLLAND

Joe to the world: Robert Een (center) and his ensemble

By Kyle Gann

Glen Velez
Robert Een
Eleanor Hovda
Dary John Mizelle

Time stands still in Glen Velez's music. When I left the February 3 concert of his Handance ensemble, two hours had passed in what seemed like 20 minutes. The rhythmic patterns the group cycled through on their frame drums felt not like repetitions but like a shimmering musical image suspended in time. Gradually that image evolved, adding and subtracting beats, and psychological time started to creep forward. The audience was rapt, absolutely still except for those dancing in place

at the back. I hadn't heard Velez live in a couple of years, and had no idea his current audience can barely squeeze into the cavernous expanse of Washington Square Church. For so large a crowd, he wisely stayed away from the pyrotechnically polyrhythmic solos whose intricacy requires intimate listening. Instead, guest artist Wayne Hankin played bagpipe and shawms (two at once!) in droning duets with lithe violinist Eva Atsalis over quick five- and seven-beat patterns that, thumped out on differently pitched drums, sounded like a laid-back, Southwestern version of *The Rite of Spring*. Velez even got a mournful, shofarlike wail by drawing a wetted finger across a drumhead.

As lavishly virtuosic as his playing is, I have to ask myself why Velez enchants such a large, faithful following when so many other equally inventive, equally rhythmically expert new musicians can't command much public attention. The only reason I can come up with is that Velez's music is not merely personal: centuries of Middle Eastern drumming tradition speak through his fingers, even if in a new accent all his own. His music is to minimalism what a rich, hand-sewn Persian tapestry is to a detailed but machine-made fabric, rougher, more human, and enlivened by more nuances than any machine or notation could capture. Perhaps when Charles Ives has been dead several centuries, American classical music will speak with as much authority.

I abandoned Velez in midswing to hear Robert Een's Big Joe ensemble at Fez. It was a smooth segue. Een, a cellist and vocalist, is known for his expert duet singing with Meredith Monk, an identifier that will soon grow unnecessary as his own music gains recognition. Big Joe repeats melodies rather than rhythmic patterns, in textures as simple and joyous as Monk's but jazzier and more conventionally structured. In pieces like *The Buddha Boat*, *Copenhagen Bike Lane*, and *It's Not a Night for Love*, Een bowed tempo-shifting ostinatos and glissandos, eliciting from his cello the playful contours of speech. Carter Burwell and Anne DeMarinis played accordions, Steve Elson improvised on reeds, and fantastic

percussionist Hearn Gadbois enlivened Een's off-centered rhythms with athletic patterns on dumbek. The music was lite enough stuff to wow Fez's dinner-and-drinks crowd, and I suspect Een saves his heavier repertoire for concert use. In any case, Big Joe's roller coaster of postminimal-jazz energy could engage any audience.

The more ambitious February 9 concert of Eleanor Hovda and Dary John Mizelle at Merkin Hall grew tedious as a whole despite the success of its parts. For one thing, Hovda's materials are so similar from work to work that her pieces have a bigger impact one at a time than, as here, six in a row. She evinces a deep affection for the quiet sounds that lie below the surface of most music making: breaths, whistles, overtones, resonances. Her largest work of the evening, *Leaning Into and Away*, for 10 instruments conducted by Jeannine Wagar, explored a series of unusual timbral images, including flutter-tongued flute over sustained trills, harmonic arpeggios in all four stringed instruments at once, and a long tonal passage (quotation?) in muted strings with mallet percussion tremolos joining in. Likewise, *Song in High Grasses* exploited some amazingly birdlike throat sounds from soprano Charlotte Regni over flute and cello harmonics and bowed piano strings.

Such works could have been dynamite had we not just heard many of the same timbral tricks used to lesser effect in smaller pieces for oboe, electric bass, and piano. Hovda, who has credits as a dancer, composes in a dancelike manner, scattering gestures with graceful intuition. Some of those gestures, especially the atonal

woodwind flurries, never transcend the level of sound effects; others, like the sustained bass tones, become meditative. Her music never seems wrenched from some deep place in the psyche, but it is always tasteful, inventive, and—in single doses—surprising.

If Hovda's music seems to emerge from the whoosh of breathing, Mizelle's could be the hyperamplification of an enormous wood block. He may be the primary American heir to Stockhausen's aesthetic, evinced as a fanatical discipline that enables him to achieve tremendous variety while using only a tiny fraction of the possibilities at hand. For instance, his *Transformations* and *Metamorphoses*, two companion works played without pause by the University of Michigan Percussion Ensemble directed by Michael Udow, deployed 12 percussionists for over half an hour to actually create very little noise, yet never became predictable. With student enthusiasm the players gestured silently, pantomimed love, laughter, and sorrow, and tapped out strange wooden textures on blocks, drums, and marimbas. Such a combination of obsessive compositional rigor and whimsical theatricality is typical of Midwestern music and the '60s *Source*-magazine world that Mizelle came from, but always seems out of context in New York, as it is militantly neither Uptown nor Down.

After all this, Mizelle's 40-minute Violin Fantasy, demanding as it did an incredible choreographic tour de force from spandex-clad violinist Mia Wu, came as a total circuit overload. My synapses should be back to normal next week. ■

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