

Take the E Train

Tom Hamilton
479 Gallery
December 9 through 19

BY KYLE GANN

Art drives people to do strange things. Tom Hamilton's preparation for his *Off-Hour Wait Site* may have been a first, at least new-music-wise. Hamilton is an expert on the

wasn't trying to get anywhere, and wasn't being asked for handouts (no other musicians had arrived yet), I en-

joyed the feeling. But when I tried to imagine transferring this attention level to the actual subway, I couldn't make the jump.

Hamilton, as it turned out, was

hidden behind a curtain like the Wizard of Oz. He had put the music, with its start-and-stop time proportions, on two specially made CDs that were playing randomly on separate players, so that the two discs would never line up the same way twice. That surprised me, for the music was so smooth and homogeneous, even in terms of harmony, that I wouldn't have thought chance was involved. Tones from the two sound sources seemed to ping from the same harmonic series, either by euphonious happenstance or careful limitation of materials.

A frequent improviser, Hamilton also used his installation as a backdrop to performances, and I heard the first, by saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell and baritone Thomas Buckner, on the ninth. Buckner entered and echoed the electronic tones so quietly and gradually that I was aware of his burbling quite a while before I realized it wasn't part of the synthesizer mix. Mitchell, too, spun arabesques of soft tones that barely emerged from the digital hub-bub. Nice idea: the performance showed what two virtuosos could pull off in a tightly disciplined situation that didn't let their personalities show through, but it added little that you couldn't get from the installation itself. In fact, the human element almost detracted. The point was that the music made you wait, inexplicably, and the calming effect came from the fact that it was blind fate, not a person, holding you in place. And that's the only way to understand the subway, isn't it? Wouldn't you get furious if you thought humans actually run that thing? ❖



Tom Hamilton, subway-bound Wizard of Oz

JAMES HAMILTON

old analog synthesizers with names like Serge, Arp, Moog, all those bulky machines that dropped out of earshot in

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MUSIC

Or Maybe Not

Embazoned on a recent press release envelope:

Insanity Just May Be Alban Berg's Kammerkonzert!

Clearly this signals the day of a whole new ball game in classical music PR. Consider:

Incest Just May Be Richard Wagner's Die Walkure!

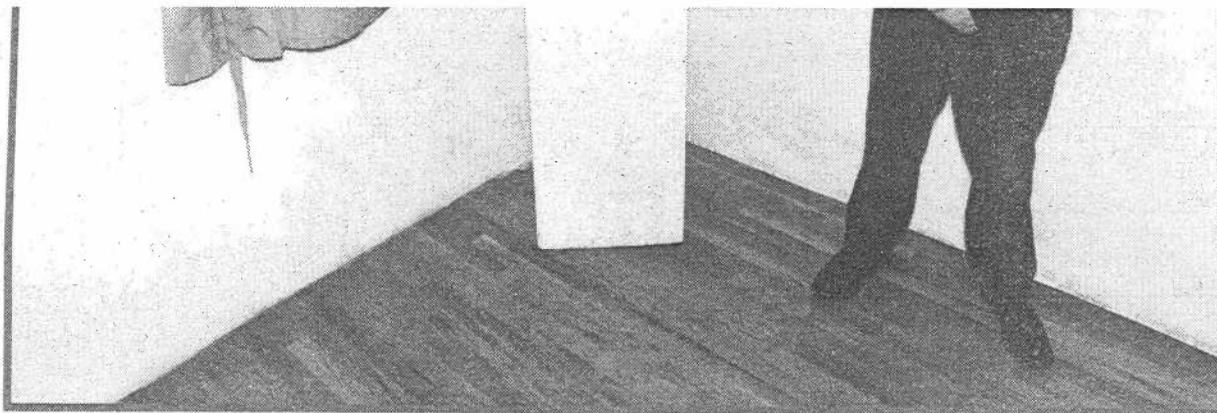
Statistical Probability Just May Be Iannis Xenakis's Pithe practa!

Suicidal Despair Just May Be Diamanda Galas's Plague Mass!

Stunned Incredulity Mixed With Deep Pessimism Just May Be Kyle Gann's Column! —K.G.

About Six

The revival was just about ideal. James Robinson directed with a shrewd balance between the characters' tragedy (philandering, incest, prostitution, a young boy drowning his sister and shooting himself) and the opera denizens' farce (egotist frustration, hypochondria, bitchery). Designer Allen Meyer's fancy proscenium set off



Tom Hamilton, subway-bound Wizard of Oz

JAMES HAMILTON

old analog synthesizers with names like Serge, Arp, Moog, all those bulky machines that dropped out of earshot in the '80s and are now hip again (though Hamilton never left them). He rode the E Train two full round trips from his apartment, from 50th Street to Jamaica Center, then down to the World Trade Center, and back to 50th. At each stop he got off and waited for the next train, jotting down how long he waited and how long it took to get to the next stop. He didn't record what he heard, as you're guessing. Instead, the trip and timings became, not only the inspiration, but the sound/silence structure of his sound sculpture *Off-Hour Wait Site*, deployed at 479 Gallery December 9 to 19. Hamilton used the city not as source material, but as metaphor.

A blur of pings and hums told you where the gallery was as soon as you got off the elevator. As you walked in, the gentle racket diffracted into sine tones, sustained burbles like bubbling water, little arpeggios of consonant harmonies, soft grinding noises. Standing and listening felt oddly like taking the subway. Some noises were irritating, more were calming, but most of all they kept you waiting. Certain noise complexes led from one place to another, others sat still and marked time. When they changed, it was for no apparent reason: just time to move. And since I

Of the several expert school-opera productions that hit New York over the last few weeks, the most valuable was Manhattan School of Music's revival of Hugo Weisgall's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It confirmed the enthusiastic memory of those of us who applauded its 1959 New York City Opera world premiere. Admittedly we were a minority, as were the favorable reviewers at the time, but we never stopped hoping the company would take it up again. Lyric Opera of Chicago's apprentice wing successfully performed and recorded the piece in 1990, but New York didn't hear it again until this month at Manhattan. At the matinee I attended, Donald Hassard, City Opera's music administrator (who seemed to appreciate the work and its revival), told me Christopher Keene, City Opera's late general director, considered *Six Characters* over the years but felt that a new production added to Weisgall's recent company hit, *Esther*, plus the composer's work-in-progress, *The Wall*, based on John Hersey's novel and commissioned by City Opera, might be overload. My respect for

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Six Characters in Search of an Author

Manhattan School of Music
December 10

BY LEIGHTON
KERNER

Keene's memory stopped me from asking if City Opera really needed to stage four or five Puccinis each year.

At any rate, Manhattan's production reminded us of what we had been missing for 36 years. The libretto by the late Irish playwright Denis Johnston neatly relocates to an opera rehearsal Pirandello's drama about six ghostly members of a fictitious, hate-filled family invading a play rehearsal because their author abandoned their story and they need to have someone resolve their fates. Johnston's text and Weisgall's music don't leave room for all of Pirandello's layers of reality-versus-illusion, life-versus-art philosophizing, which is fascinating in itself but impractical because singing a drama takes so much longer than speaking it. Instead, the opera gives you the basic plot—full and hectic enough as it is—and seasons it with inside operatic jokes. A rehearsal pianist answers a mezzo's remark that he must have noticed the mistakes she's

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trying to correct with the retort: "They don't pay me to listen." The director's line, "Opera cannot live by *Faust* alone," is sung with impertinent anachronism to the opening phrase of the *Carmen* flower song. Weisgall also makes not always parodistic references to the musical styles and methods that have touched his career: Hebraic and Christian chant, serialism, European folk idioms, and his own, wide-ranging vocabulary of healthy, neoromantic lyricism.

Foremost is the music's power to chill a theater, as it does with the first entrance and last exit of the six characters: We first see them way at the back of the stage in a soft green light, but the orchestra announces them in loud staccato octaves that grow into a thunderous roll on the timpani. Their exit begins pianissimo; the brasses suddenly explode, then die off, and the final bars of flutes, trumpets, and string bass fade into silence as an offstage chorus fades with them on an atonal setting from the Requiem Mass's "Lacrimosa." The characters could carry nothing more desolate with them into oblivion. ❖

Diamanda Galas's Plague Mass!

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The revival was just about ideal. James Robinson directed with a shrewd balance between the characters' tragedy (philandering, incest, prostitution, a young boy drowning his sister and shooting himself) and the opera denizens' farce (egotism, frustration, hypochondria, bitchery). Designer Allen Moyer's fancy proscenium set off the starkness of the auditorium's backstage housing, and Mimi Jordan Sherin's virtuosic lighting contributed at least half the show's theatricality.

Conductor David Gilbert was again a tower of strength for MSM. From the large, flawless cast I only have space to single out soprano Theodora Fried as the rebellious, prostituted stepdaughter. Following up her vividness last year at MSM as Ned Rorem's Miss Julie, she unerringly zeroed in on the role's anguish, spiteful humor, and pathos. Her voice was thrilling, she moved as tellingly as a dancer, and her face told the whole, mazelike story. Watch her career blossom.

Madeline Bender had a lot of sassy and stratospheric fun as Lili Klein, the coloratura soprano, a spectacular role sung in 1959 by a young lady named Beverly Sills. Philip Torre, Sheila Joy, David Blackburn, Kent Smith, Lara Nie, and Heather Sarris were also rightly conspicuous among the solid ensemble. Weisgall and Johnston's opera should never again be a ghost. —L.K.