

The Tao of Acoustics

By Kyle Gann

Alvin Lucier

MIDDLETOWN—Alvin Lucier is a soft-spoken man with a famous stutter that formed the basis of some important conceptualist works from the '60s. He writes quiet music, some of it more minimal than any minimalist ever dreamed of, so abstract in its fanatical focus on the nature of sound that a lay listener might wonder whether anything is happening at all. Yet he possesses enough artistic mass that for five days, October 18 through 22, a festival of his music drew the New York new music scene's center of gravity to this squeaky-clean, autumn-leaved Connecticut college town. (As I happened to drive through Danbury on Charles Ives's 120th birthday, I stopped at the Ives house to see if anyone was celebrating. No one had remembered.) The fest's theme was collaborations. Lucier had based a vocal piece on a poem written for him by John Ashbery, a duet on a drawing by Sol LeWitt, and written a work for saxophone and 12 strings for soloist Anthony Braxton (currently teaching with Lucier at Wesleyan). The collaborators were all there to pay homage.

Attending the final two and a half days, I didn't get as many riveting, top-shelf, Lucierian sonic experiences as I had hoped (it looked as if some of the best concerts happened earlier in the week), but I did discover facets I hadn't heard before. The prize was a film:

George Manupelli's *Ride, Doctor Chicago, Ride*. In this 1970 experimental (one could say amateurish) film and three others using the same characters, Lucier starred as "Doctor" Alvin Chicago, a loquacious, Groucho Marx-ish quack who never lets reality interfere with his egomaniacally demented vision. Photographer Mary Ashley costarred as Chicago's passively assenting cohort, and dancer Steve Paxton as a silent, Christlike "nature boy." Set in a rocky desert, the film is little more than a string of Chicago's improvised monologues which Lucier, stutter and all, spun off with an energy I wouldn't have credited if I hadn't seen it. The action fell flat when he was offscreen, except for an extended cameo by Pauline Oliveros as an accordion-wielding, spitting, backwoods cowboy wife. This alarming cinematographic skeleton in new music's closet was worth the drive by itself.

Almost as surprising were works from the '50s, for Lucier started out as a New England neoclassicist in the Irving Fine/Quincy Porter mold. The 1954 *Partita* he conducted with the New World Consort skewed Baroque ritornellos with Stravinskian rhythmic eccentricities, while an *Arioso and Allegro* from 1955 (beautifully played by pianist Sarah Meneely-Kyder) was pastoral in an early-Wolpe vein, with a Coplandian climax; it deserves to become a minor classic of American keyboard repertoire. As a Brandeis neoclassicist, Lucier might have settled into respect-

able obscurity. But while his fellow neoclassicist Elliott Carter heard Stockhausen and Boulez at Darmstadt and went academic, Lucier heard David Tudor there (in '61) and turned 180 degrees in the opposite direction. The impressive proficiency these early works revealed showed how astonishing his renunciation of conventional musicality was.

Post-1960 pieces suddenly bubbled with avant-garde concerns. *Action Music* of 1962 hilariously parodied the latest piano techniques, but with tongue only half in cheek. Fluxus-like before the fact, it required pianist Neely Bruce to pantomime violent tremolos and forearm clusters without making a sound, lower the piano bench until his chin hit the keys, and at one point play on the keyboard with both knees at once, a conundrum to which Bruce found an elegant solution.

If Cage's music flows from Zen and La Monte Young's from yoga, Lucier's mature pieces represent the Tao of physics. For me, his most characteristic and important works are those in which intersecting glissandos and stationary tones create accelerating acoustic beats. Such pieces imply and demand a special listening mode, but unlike most radically unconventional music they seduce you into it rather than making you figure it out. If you listen to either the notes played by the performers or the sweeping sine tones that cross them, you miss the music entirely: it happens, rather, in the atmosphere of the hall and inside your



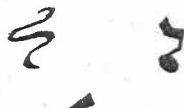
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Alvin Lucier: subtly changing our perception of the world

ears. Focus on these wowing beats, which emanate from no specific location, and you lose touch with time and space. It happened best in *Wind Shadows* with Swiss trombonist Roland Dahinden, and hardly at all in *Six Geometries* with the Wesleyan Chamber Choir, who couldn't manage the treacherously difficult pure unisons the effect requires.

As monomaniacal as Lucier's reuse of certain tricks seems at times, he can also surprise you with his continuing flexibility. The piece for Braxton, *Sierpinski Lines*, returned to conventional notation, with Braxton's sax drawing torturous mathematical angles as the New World Consort trailed him in parallel clusters. Though intriguing, the premiere suffered from lackluster ensemble because a method of keeping the sax and strings in unison hadn't

been fully worked out. Of course Lucier also played *I Am Sitting in a Room*, the work in which he records a tape of his voice over and over again until nothing can be heard except the room's multiply reinforced resonant frequencies. (Called "Alvin's *Bohème*" by friends, this and Nancarrow's "Canon X" are the two easiest new music pieces to impress undergrads with.) The last sentence of *I Am Sitting's* text has always struck me as the most significant: "I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have." On the surface, Lucier's post-1970 works only demonstrate physical facts. Underneath, however, they all enact some subtle change on the world—or at least on the listener's perception of it. ■



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