

"Tea & Comprovisation"

Trap Sets

BY KYLE GANN

Tolstoy's pronouncement on families must be reversed in the case of music: every good composition succeeds in its own way, but all bad pieces are alike. Festivals always seem disappointing, because the good performances, being unique, stand out as exceptions, while the similarity of the worse ones sets a perceived tone. As with all good festivals, the music at the Knitting Factory's "Tea & Comprovisation" festival ranged from stellar to puerile. It was a casual and mixed atmosphere; some performers played in their Sunday best, others came in metaphorical shorts, let their hair down, and tried out riffs that might have embarrassed them under better funding conditions. It was not a context in which to draw hard or fine distinctions, nor even to sweat out in its entirety; the 11 sets I heard (June 26 and 27) were sufficiently exhausting for the mind and posterior (not identically located, thank you). But it inspired some thoughts about where we are in the history of improvisation.

Improvisation has so long been liberated from the eight-bar phrase and figured bass that it's time it asked itself, with Nietzsche, not what it is free from, but what it is free for. The revolution may not be over, but it is far enough along that initial strategies are no longer helpful. Improv, like the rest of us, must march unflinchingly into the postmodern world, if only to keep up with the finest practitioners. Predictably, the festival performances that stayed closer to either jazz (J. D. Parran and Vincent Chancey) or new music (the Downtown Ensemble)

were less problematic. Even today those traditions are so strong and so mutually oblique that working in between is like lining up iron filings between two magnets. Those more daring in genre tended to fall back on ideas that have served improvisation well in the past, but some of which are ready for retirement. These traps were illustrated as frequently by brilliant solution as by confusion, sometimes within the same set.

New sounds. There are none. Or, rather, it is no longer possible to perceive sounds as new in the present technological overload. It's time to quit searching and get choosy, to shift creative effort toward structure and expression. Once you've made three program changes on your Mirage, you've set up a framework within which its entire repertoire of sounds is already implied, and it's time to do something with them. Bill Horvitz gave a superb positive demonstration of the principle in some of the weekend's most delicate music. The discipline with which he pursued infinite gradations of one surflike sound on his electric guitar made a restful model for postminimal improv.

White noise. The moment white noise enters, even a good piece collapses toward anonymity. By white noise I mean also to include a dozen-odd metaphors for it, the most common one being the random flurry of notes within a small range, which usually glissandos up or down to create a

MUSIC

vague contour. This is improvisation's analog of the 19th century's chromatic scale passages, which snuck from place to place without committing to any harmonic or melodic content. The same goes for random key-clicking on wind instruments. It's time to drop these in favor of more discrete gestures, and to quit hiding behind a facile and illusory complexity.



LONA FOOTE

Bill Horvitz: an implied sound repertoire

Unplanned polyphony. "Comprovisation" would seem to connote "improvisation with," but a few duos understood it to mean "at the same time as." You play your stuff (someone must have said), I'll play mine, and together maybe they'll be interesting. The baldest examples were David Shea and Kiku Wada; the former held two microphones on his neck and made mouth sounds while the latter played fast notes on a guitar. What the lack of coordination telegraphs is that neither improv is tight enough on its own, and they're hoping to fill in each other's gaps. The practice is probably inspired by Cage, Cunningham, and the Sonic Arts Union, but those '60s artists always went to considerable trouble to set up a context, an emptiness, in which their work could coexist without competing. More exciting than such a framework, though, are in-sync performers who know how to manipulate togetherness. Saxophonist Tim Berne and cellist Hank Roberts gave an electrifying exhibition of how to begin together, diverge, and meet again with exquisite gradualness and searing lyricism.

Letting technology (the instrument) lead. In the '60s, exploiting the instru-

ment's nonintended sounds was a good strategy for escaping fixed musical habits, but it's time to restore the human side of the equation. Most jazzers know that, but synthesizers have shifted the focus of the problem. Having too many electronic toys onstage, as David Weinstein and David Watson did, is an irresistible trap. A surplus of possibilities is inimical to inspiration; why struggle to fly when you've got a hundred safety nets? Spontaneity only arises in a dialectical relation with discipline, a limitation to work against. This is art's primal truth, sublimated in composition, ubiquitously audible in improv. David Garland, Cinni Cole, and Ikue Mori had equally abundant equipment, but more limited (it included a Theremin), and the confines of their simple song forms allowed for a fetching ingenuousness.

Some will note that much of this applies not only to improvisation, but to music in general. Bad pieces result when musicians let themselves get away with something. Duchamp started it all with his ready-mades; he made it easy to make art. We needed that. That was a wonderful era. Now it's time for art to become difficult again. ■

◆ INDIES ◆ INDIES ◆ INDIES ◆

RELATIVITY/COMBAT

SHOWCASES NMS 8