



The odd appetite duo are expert players—almost too good, with that uptown flair.

*photo: Taylor Pope*

I haven't written much about composers of a generation younger than mine, and I feel bad about it. I've sometimes gone to their concerts without writing about them, because I've had trouble explaining them to myself in a Downtown context. I'm petrified of old-fogey-dom, and have sworn to remain, as Cage was, open-minded to the ever renewing, scandalous trends of youth. But I've got a problem. So many composers born in the late '60s/early '70s seem so, so . . . Uptown. In the 1960s Downtown had a generation of conceptualists, then the minimalists came, and the art rockers, the free improvisers, the postminimalists, the totalists, and now the latest generation of Downtowners are . . . Uptowners.

It may seem like a vague charge, but it's pretty specific. I mean their music is full of carefully notated complexity, and is devoted to maximum variety, rather than the sense of limitation and focus that have characterized most Downtown music since minimalism. It also cultivates an illusion of organicity, with constant ebbs and swells, so that the music never really settles into a groove, but always seems tentative, with a Schoenbergian wispiness about it. In short, it sounds like it's built on the music they learned in college, with no cognizance of the last 30 years of Downtown history.

One young group I've held out hopes for—because one of their administrators, Adam Silverman, writes just-intonation music I like—is the Minimum Security collective, which played Roulette



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collective. It's

an inspired strategy, economically feasible and designed to create new repertoires. This time Minimum Security wrote pieces for a duo called Odd Appetite, consisting of Ha-Yang Kim on cello and Nathan Davis on percussion. The latter are expert virtuoso players—almost too good, with that Uptown air that these polished gestures are ones they've flung off thousands of times before.

For instance, Daniel Almada's *Linde* for vibraphone and electronics was athletically virtuosic, crystallizing around ever changing sets of pitches. The computerized vibraphone samples that extended the instrument's virtual repertoire allowed one stunning effect: Once or twice a tremoloed note would slowly glissando between the keys, making it sound like Davis was doing a pitch-bend with a vibraphone whammy bar. Fantastic illusion, but a Downtowner would have built an entire piece around it and made it sing. Here it just came and went, another detail among thousands.

I had a better time with Dennis DeSantis's *Fodder*. Percussionist Davis started up an ostinato on wood blocks and cymbals, into which Kim's cello inserted notes little by little. The piece evolved with a postminimalist focus, starting over and over again from a recurring wood-block beat. It had personality, and didn't try to do everything at once. Ken Ueno's *Contemplation on Little Big Muff*, with all its wildly virtuosic gestures, kept closer to Eurocentric models, but still played off an attractive conceit. For much of the piece (not enough, to my Downtown ears) Kim limited her cello to only one pitch in different registers, around which Davis banged away in sporadic explosions. It says much for Ueno that I enjoyed the piece despite its being couched in an old-fashioned style that makes me squirm.

For a final homage, pianist Blair MacMillen joined the duo for a 1987 piece called *The Dream of Innocent III* by Lee Hyla, who gets a lot of Downtown play even though his admitted stylistic reference points are Elliott Carter and Stefan Wolpe, and he always sounds like just another complex Uptowner to me. His piece kept building up to something interesting and then dying away the moment it got there, bowing to the Uptown dogma that a decrescendo must immediately follow every crescendo. Typical of today's neo-Uptowners, his program notes paid lip service to rock and punk, but his music didn't.

These Minimum Security guys are expert, well-trained musicians, and I want to give them the benefit of the doubt. If this is the music young Downtowners are going to make, so be it: I'll adjust and learn. But I have some important questions for them. What Downtown music have they heard and what do they admire in it? Who influences them, aside from Xenakis, Berio, and the usual Euro-Uptown set? And what is their intention in bringing to Roulette the kind of tense, overwrought, climaxing, heavily notated music that previous generations of Downtowners came here to escape?



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