

John Zorn: This New Yorker's *Cat o' Nine Tails*, which premiered November 26 at Lincoln Center, attacked the string quartet's traditional gentility with an ugly *grunch* on the first note. This was an obsessively disunified collage that changed texture every few beats, following a Schoenbergian adagio with explosive scale runs, whispered harmonics, fanfares, and vocal barking. The piece ticked off a shopping list of style: a brief waltz, a moment of bluegrass, three beats of jazz, a quick tango. Yet there were enough textural references between moments to create an impression not of nihilism, but of four distinct movements played on top of and intercut with each other. It's the type of structure Elliott Carter's aimed at occasionally, but Zorn drew the idea forcefully enough that you could hear it, not just take the program notes' word for it.

More than some of his earlier works, *Cat o' Nine Tails* took into account how people actually listened and was composed not only for but *through* the medium. Aside from its brilliantly asymmetrical writing, though, it was impressive not for any alleged "postmodern" originality, but for the way it tied several modernist strands into an indissoluble knot. The quotation collage stemmed, after all, from serialism; less stuffy serialists quickly understood that the style's maximum-variation technique was more supple when applied to swaths of music rather than individual notes.

Though not (audibly) based on preexisting music, *Cat o' Nine Tails* wasn't too different in effect from the postserial collages of the '60s—B. A. Zimmermann's *Roi Ubu* music; Stockhausen's *Hymnen* and *Kurzwellen*; Berio's *Sinfonia* and *Laborintus II*, Pousseur's *Votre Faust* (which would have been hailed as the first postmodern opera had he only written it 20 years later), or even Cathy Berberian's *Stripsody* (which anticipated Zorn's interest in cartoon sounds). But most of those pieces are held together by either a system (Stockhausen) or some central programmatic idea (in *Votre Faust's* case, the history of music). Zorn, like Cage in *Variations IV* and *V*, has negated all centripetal force, any inkling of organic unity. And yet, even in *Variations IV* the textural consistency hints at

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Like Veal, Only Chewier

BY KYLE GANN



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tango hid the debt well. The recital was just enough to whet the appetite, and perhaps the most exciting part was the sight of 60 Yankees crammed into the Strand bar, straining their ears over the clatter of dishes and next-door dance music to grab some hint of what creativity now means south of the Rio Grande.

Joan LaBarbara, with the New World Symphony and Dennis Russell Davies, premiered *Threnody for the Americas* by Miami's own Orlando Garcia, as subdued and lushly orchestrated as Boulez on Valium. Appropriately, this year's big commercial name was Brazilian Naná Vasconcelos. Backed by his exotic percussion/synthesizer quartet, he accompanied a *berimbau* solo with humorously cognate mouth sounds, crooned in 7/8 meter, and set the two halves of the audience singing cross-rhythms against each other. "In Brazil," he explained, "music is part of life." Good motto for the festival to keep in mind, though I believe Cage said something similar.

Minimalism Revived and Revisited: Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (scheduled for performance here next summer) wove spoken phrases by friends and Holocaust survivors into a score for live string quartet (Kronos) and three taped string quartets, a mix that worked surprisingly well. Within a pulsating momentum reminiscent of his *Music for 18 Musicians*, the music shifted tempo occasionally, evoking the loneliness and landscapes of a long train ride as nostalgically as Honegger's *Pacific 231* once did modernistically. The Kronos' job was to pick (notated) melodies out of the spoken phrases (funny how tuneful "1941" sounded) and blend their music into the texture. (Reich invented the device, of course, in *Come Out*, and Scott Johnson has since used it in *John Somebody*.) The result charmed the ear, tugged gently on the heartstrings, and received the longest standing ovation for a new work I remember seeing. If only Reich taught at some advantageous northeastern university, he'd have the next Pulitzer nailed down.

A cooler reaction greeted Tony Conrad's *Early Minimalism: March 1965* (a new work; the date's just part of the title). From behind a curtain, five string players, Conrad included, played chords

like Cage in variations IV and V, has negated all centripetal force, any inkling of organic unity. And yet, even in *Variations IV*, the textural consistency hints at a method; the energy of Zorn's quartet, changing unpredictably and in spurts, substitutes for Cage's inhuman process, an omnipotent human consciousness, creating sonority anew at each moment.

That's why, unless Zorn was aiming at something very different from what I heard, the shopping-list impression is the piece's one weakness: it insinuates an underlying program to an almost centerless work. Otherwise, *Cat o' Nine Tails* is a 1960 Stockhausen wet dream: a Romantic illusion of pure freedom, a modernist triumph of note-after-note inspiration. Will *Cat o' Nine Tails* someday sound as mannered as *Kurzwellen* does now? We'll see. Can Zorn sustain that freedom without ultimately falling back on system, linearity, structural models? That question has dogged modernism since Stravinsky retreated from *Le Sacre* to write *Pulcinella*.

Morton Feldman: Codirectors Mary Luft and Joseph Celli dedicated NMA '88 in memoriam Morton Feldman, that least 20th century of 20th century composers. Fewer Feldman works materialized than were ambitiously planned, nor were all judiciously treated, but even pieces by other composers (see below) suggested that Feldman's soft-spoken aesthetic carries a worldwide influence disproportionate to his reputation in American musical institutions.

On December 4, the Kronos Quartet gratified and disappointed us by zipping off Feldman's six-hour String Quartet II in four hours, four minutes (a record!). Unlike the other ensembles he wrote for, the string quartet was for Feldman more

a unitary than a polyphonic instrument, and S.Q. II (from 1983) relies on vast chains of repeated motifs, mostly drawn from permutations of consecutive half-steps or perfect fourths. In between are more prosaic passages of nonrepetitive harmony, plus a little question-and-answer figure that reappears every 25 minutes or so; Feldman's delicate structuring of multihour works necessitates an entire new terminology. S.Q. II was a stunningly revolving, undulating work, and Kronos maintained a superhuman unity, like Siamese quadruplets connected at the spinal cord. But the performance felt too fast from the outset; the quiet chords and their afterattacks chugged along with a beat, in opposition to every premise of Feldman's sensibility. Granted, this is the sternest endurance test in the literature, but I felt cheated.

A crystalline reading of *Why Patterns* for flute, piano, and glockenspiel by, respectively, Eberhard Blum, Nils Vigeland, and Jan Williams painted an aural color-field with a brighter, less immobile energy than I had once heard with the composer at the piano. By the time they got to the five-hour *For Philip Guston* December 10, I had left. But the Kronos treatment of another Feldman work was hotly discussed all week. In the festival's opening concert December 2, Michael Tilson Thomas conducted Kronos and the New World Symphony in Feldman's *String Quartet and Orchestra*. For more than half an hour both groups established a meditative atmosphere; then, rather than let that Thoreavian mood sink in during intermission, the Kronos shot it to hell (orchestra still onstage) with their obligatory version of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Only a group more intent on superstardom than on the meaning of

the music could have been so insensitive.

Latin American Music: For years organizers have pushed to make the third word in NMA inclusive of both continents. Miami, with its 48 per cent Spanish-speaking population, seemed the opportune place to open borders. Europe funds Latin musicians to go study there, while America, paranoid lest some cultural interchange might take place, hampers access; as a result, South American music is often a 15-year-delayed echo of Euro-

MUSIC

pean trends, with little relation to American models. Pieces by older musicians confirmed that stereotype, but an intense recital by one-man-piano-repertoire-machine Yvar Mikhashoff suggested that the last 15 years have seen changes in aesthetic allegiance.

The remarkable thing was that works from locales ranging from Tierra del Fuego to Brownsville evinced such consistency of style and method, and that the operative influences seemed to be Feldman and Frederic Rzewski. Repeated notes, as a means for centering a piece without creating tonal expectations, were ubiquitous: fast, they suggested Rzewski's glosses on Chilean political songs, slow, they sounded like Feldman. From Argentina, Mariano Etkin's *Arenas*, full of soft, reiterated clusters, was a Feldman homage, while *Piano Piano* by Uruguay's Carlos da Silveira dotted an austere silence with loud Rzewski riffs. Mario Lavista and Arturo Salinas (both Mexican) played Feldmanlike with the extremes of the piano range. Puerto Rico's William Ortiz had actually studied with the mas-

rad's *Early Minimalism: March 1965* (a new work; the date's just part of the title). From behind a curtain, five string players, Conrad included, played chords fashioned from the third, seventh, 11th and 17th harmonics of a low D, amplified to an almost uncomfortable level. A light from behind projected players' shadows like a quintet of ghosts. The audience didn't take kindly to the high-decibel stasis, but the title and Conrad's printed credentials (he worked with La Monte Young and John Cale in the early '60s) should have reminded them that he was one of the unsung heroes whose chutzpah made new music possible at all. We need some raw, brash statement like this in each festival to remind us that, like a pearl, new music grew from an irritation. "Accessibility" was the 1973 afterthought of minimalism's PR department.

Alligator steak: In terms of local audience involvement this was probably the most successful festival since Chicago '82, and the fundraising and publicity expertise Luft and Celli demonstrated speak well for the idea of letting someone run it more than once (they had also directed Hartford in '84). Frustrations derived from the city's logistics particularly the fact that several venues were too small to handle the expected crowds. New York has its cultural advantages over Miami, but when you're down there in December under clear, calm, 68 degree skies, they don't spring to mind. I was in a great mood as soon as I left each concert, and that may not say anything about the festival. Feast on turtle chowder, cracked conch, and alligator steal ("tastes like veal only chewier," the waitress said, and of course she was right) and you hear music a little differently. The effect of reptile meat on the critical faculty remains to be studied. ■