

Virtuosi di CD

By Kyle Gann

Impossible Music
William Duckworth
Mary Jane Leach
S.E.M. Ensemble

Cutest, coolest, and smartest new technology use I've heard lately was Impossible Music's February 26 concert at the Alternative Museum. Five guys—David Weinstein, Nicolas Collins, David Shea, Ted Greenwald, Tim Spelios—sat around playing those cracker-thin Sony CD players, their outputs mixed and effect-warped by extra gizmos. Composers have gotten their rocks off overlaying radios and record players for 35 years now, but Impossible Music had a fresh idea. Instead of redoing *Hymnen* for the '90s, they picked a few sparsely textured discs that somehow went together, then looped, fast-forwarded, and rewound bits of them to weave the same lines over and over in new contrapuntal shapes. Because they took the CD player seriously as an instrument, they drew from it structures that had been built in all along, but that had never been noticed.

The most arresting piece was the first, the group-composed *Simulcatastrophy*. Five discs played at once, but collage wasn't the point. A guitar riffed, a Middle Eastern singer twanged, a few piano notes came and went, while drums beat a soft tempo that no one else was following. It was an impossible ensemble that Cowell, Cage, or Nancarrow might have

envisioned: performers separated by oceans, no two beats in sync. In a Collins work, Shea and Spelios frustrated the forward motion of Beethoven's *Serenade*, Op. 25, continually stopping its harmonies one 32nd note short of a resolution. Though Beethovenian, it also sounded hilariously like Terry Riley's *In C*, and Collins titled it *In CD*. Solo pieces clipping between different noises were randomized and not as lively. *Salvador Dali's Digital Cinema*, though, sectional and repetitive, thickly juxtaposed jazz, a virtuoso trumpet, and guitar chords with various noises in a surreal symphony. Disco is dead, but disc music is a big new can of worms.

If 1991 was Opera Year, 1992 must be the Year of Choral Music, because it's suddenly everywhere. They're generally disjunct worlds, choral and new music, for choral music that sounds good (I've lost my stomach for eerie vocal noises) demands conservatism; or rather, chorus was the progressive medium for so many centuries that what it does well has been thoroughly explored.

William Duckworth's music is simple and sincere enough that you might mistake it for conservative, except for its expansively postminimal forms. *Southern Harmony*, performed by the Gregg Smith Singers and Bucknell University's Rooke Chapel Choir at Merkin Hall February 20, never strayed far from its models in rural shaped-note hymnody. Within such limits, though, its 20 songs

achieved a variety like that of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, no two alike. "Solemn Thought" put isolated syllables through Gesualdo-like chromaticism, "Sardina" warned that "the night of Death is near" with sustained dissonances, "War Department" repeated itself in rollicking 6/8 meter. Makeup of the chorus changed with each tune, and the choral blend was best when the Rooke Chapel Choir joined in. There's little context for comparing *Southern Harmony* to other recent choir music, but it's certainly the most ambitious and exciting late-20th century choral work I know of; also one of the most immediately endearing pieces of new music, as became apparent in prolonged applause for the composer.

A mystic, Duckworth keeps his music's processes hidden. Mary Jane Leach, whose choral works were sung at Experimental Intermedia February 28, created tex-

tures remarkably similar to Duckworth's, but more predictably minimalist; once her processes begin, they are rarely sidetracked. Her four pieces put Virginia Davidson's New York Treble Singers through difficult and exposed passages, to which they responded with intermittently thrilling sonorities. *Green Mountain Madrigal* and *Mountain Echoes* took pitches from Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Ariana*, to make a slow-moving continuum in the first case, and to pass single notes from voice to voice in the other. *Ariel's Song* evolved through four-note patterns like an octet of Dora Ohrensteins (Phil Glass's soprano). Prettiest of all—and these were Leach's best works I've heard—*Bruckstuck* took the cream of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony, its haunting harmonic resolutions, and repeated them with swells of emotion.

Some of the smoothest choral



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Leach: rarely sidetracked

singing came in Petr Kotik's *Explorations in the Geometry of Thinking*, which the S.E.M. Ensemble performed March 7 at their new Willow Place auditorium. For almost four hours, the group turned texts by R. Buckminster Fuller into a secular liturgy, vibrantly droned in parallel fifths. Three drummers entered intermittently with a dry bop-bop of overlaid patterns, and surprising unisons between the flute, trumpet, basset horn (!), and trombones underlined the text in gold leaf. Soloists—notably sparkling soprano Michele Eaton, profound bass Albert de Ruiter, and countertenor William Lyon Lee—broke off from the group to chant related Fullerian comments. The choral text was Fuller's "Numerology" from *Synergetics*, a salutary sermon on the short-sightedness of the Euramerican scientific mind-set. Amen.

It's difficult to explain in non-musical terms what makes Kotik's music so compelling. Despite the Gregorian-chant feel, his chromaticism is startling. The sameness lulls you, but bizarre tonal twists and disconcerting rhythmic groupings bring you up short without rippling the surface. In his recent music, available on the new Ear-Rational CD *Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble*, those changes happen more quickly; *Solos and Incidental Harmonies* for flute, brass, and tambourine leaves behind Kotik's Cagean past for something bouncily melodic and scintillating, if weirdly personal. *Explorations* (also excerpted on the new disc) represents Kotik's more austere '70s style, but at length it drove home how much better off we'd be if people had taken Fuller seriously. ■

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