Voice of the New

By Kyle Gann

Thomas Buckner

It's established habit that new music composers play their own work, usually with a few talented musicians they've come to trust. Lately, however, some of those performers have dropped from the tree and begun concertizing on their own. In the past and next few months alone one can mention baritone Thomas Buckner (Robert Ashley's vocalist), soprano Dora Ohrenstein (from the Philip Glass Ensemble), flutist Barbara Held (who's worked with Ashley and Nils Vigeland's Bowery Ensemble), duo pianists Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann (who started with Steve Reich), and solo pianists Lois Svard (who's played William Duckworth's music) and Joseph Kubera (the Bowery and others). Uptowners are used to their own batch, but for downtowners, these performers who present multicomposer recitals are new toys. Perhaps it means that new music has arrived in some sense, that somebody cares about it besides those who write it.

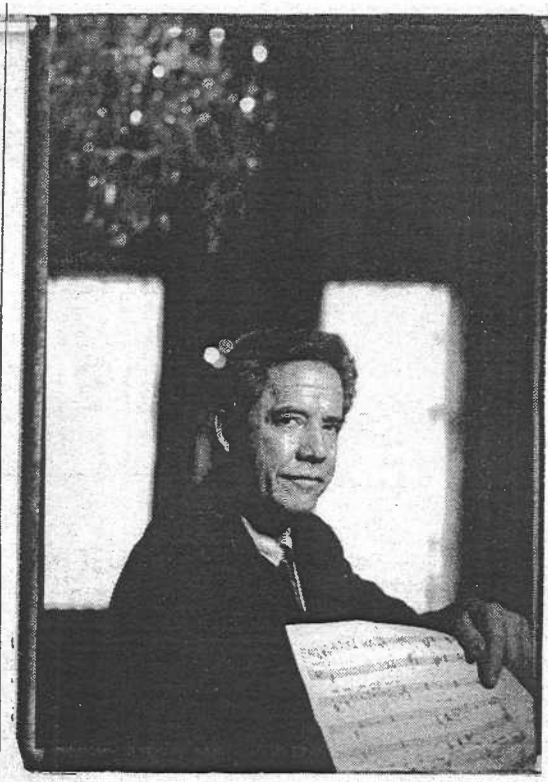
Buckner is one of the most innovative of them. He sang a tremendous variety of music in San Francisco (where he ran 1750 Arch Records) before becoming associated with Ashley in New York, and his May 21 recital at Merkin Hall was less a branching out than a return to diversity. His technical virtuosity was impressive, the stylistic virtuosity even more so: I can't remember a vocal recital with so many difficult works so different in idiom, several of them sui generis. Buckner's voice has a built-in bias. It tends more to the declamatory than to the lyric; it throbs with passion, yet the graceful way he rounds off words and phrases conveys inner calm. His is a conversational talent, better suited to vernacular prose than *Die Winterreise*'s weightless poetry. It almost demands that composers write for voice in a new way.

Perhaps Buckner's strongest and rarest skill is his ability to improvise smoothly around a text. His improv work in Ashley's recent operas is the closest 20th century analogue to what I conceive to be the *spirit* of early Baroque opera recitative, speech lightly filtered through melody. Buckner opened with the "Odalisque" section from Ashley's *Atalanta*, accompanied by Kubera on piano, "Blue" Gene Tyranny on synthesizer, and Michael Pugliese on percussion. Like all operatic excerpts, it suffered from loss of context: I missed the videos and interruptive electronic choruses. But this chamber version, underlined by Pugliese's soft timpani rolls (timpani in a chamber work!), compensated for complexity with impressionist languor, and showed off Buckner's elegant Italian diction.

John Gibson's *Rainforest/Brazil (He Was Not Disappointed)* was even more improvisatory. While Pugliese played with sandpaper, rattles, seed pods, and a rain stick, Buckner sang Charles Darwin's recorded first impressions of Brazil. Taped jungle sounds ran underneath, and Gibson's own wooden flute provided gentle discord; changeless music, with an evocatively humid climate. Gibson's music always seems thick with foliage. Tyranny directed Buckner more closely in a new version of his *Somewhere in Arizona, 1970*, a song with electronic background about exploring a downed alien spaceship—ostensibly a true story, received via hypnotic regression, from *UFO Dynamics* journal. Buckner echoed his own prerecorded voice in the kind of quick, static recitative he does brilliantly because he invented it:

"Well,
would you like to see some aliens?"
I said, "You
must be joking,"
and he said,
"That's fair to say, now get in the car."

Pieces not written for Buckner missed that perfect fit. Peter Gena's *Mother Jones*, an old unionist ballad set in the middle of a breathless, minimalist vocalise, was originally for soprano, and gave Buckner an athletic workout. Gena, dean of what he half-jokingly calls "the Chicago semiformalists," was my main teacher in grad school; he's a post-minimalist with a political/folk music bent, though his recent music has mellowed into ethereality. His earlier works are repetitive yet highly sectional, and contain thrilling moments where tightly wound patterns burst into melody. *Mother Jones*, from 1983, was no exception: its hammering C major exploded into gorgeously lush figurations for the folk tune accompaniment, which Kubera played with great feeling.



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His baritone is conversational.

The program's weightiest, most difficult piece was Annea Lockwood's *Night and Fog*, the singer accompanied by Pugliese on percussive piano and J. D. Parran on sax. On the surface the piece was couched in a gestural style from the '70s, but—typical for the woman who once burned amplified pianos and turned the Hudson River into a symphony—it wove nonmusical sounds into its rich tapestry. Pugliese tapped rocks, Buckner whistled softly, Parran worked up a noisy buzz, all three hummed, and a loud environmental tape swooshed behind the third movement's hectic 15/8 meter. The theatrics distracted, but when I closed my eyes the piece felt exactly like one of Lockwood's sensuous tape collages: incommensurate sounds floating in a limpid aural plane.

In this context, conventionality seemed odd. Nils Vigeland's *March, Hymn, and Waltz* set James Joyce (from *Chamber Music*) in a nicely done, unadulterated lieder style. Roscoe Mitchell threw me for a loop, strangling three innocent e. e. cummings poems in portentious, anguished diminished-seventh chords. I have loads of respect for Mitchell's improv work, but burying such tiny poems in this text-repetitive, post-Schumann style seemed an attempt to add to a dead tradition—or else I missed the motivation. Buckner's motivation was clear: he and Mitchell have done wonderful work together in the past, and he's allowing composers to contribute to a vocal repertoire who, until now, never had the chance. ■