

Teitelbaum &amp; Monahan

# Waiting for the Piano

BY KYLE GANN

As late as Bernard Shaw's crackling days (the 1890s), people wondered, "Is the piano a musical instrument?" The question, which arose from doubts about its mechanical operation and fixed tuning, exasperated Shaw. He felt that even a mere "yes" was a gross understatement, and as usual was right. More than an instrument, the piano is a symbol of the culture, high and low, of two continents. Artists incline toward mysticism before it, and it's been the preferred vehicle of composers who have eschewed the mainstream: Satie, Ives, Rudhyar, Sorabji, Wyschnegradsky, Nancarrow, Jencks, Muhal Abrams, La Monte Young. The last-named fed the piano hay, George Maciunas put a cat inside it, the Italian pianist Cardini covered it with leaves, and Cage precipitated a scandal merely by closing and opening it. The piano's oppressive legacy has sometimes inspired violence: Annea Lockwood set one on fire, and every year MIT students ritually push a spinet off a dorm roof.

Such resistance notwithstanding, Richard Teitelbaum and Gordon Monahan, in their January 19 concert at Paula Cooper Gallery, reminded us that the piano is in no danger of weakening its hold on the cultural imagination. Teitelbaum, a pioneer in electronic music and free improvisation, was a cofounder of Musica Elettronica Viva, the Rome electronic group that did jazz-tinged improv in the '60s, long before the genre became a staple in New York. (Teitelbaum, Frederick Rzewski, Alvin Curran, Steve Lacy, Anthony Braxton, and Garrett List recently celebrated MEV's 20th anniversary in It-

aly with what must have been an incredible reunion concert.) Teitelbaum now lives in Woodstock, and his subsequent solo work exploits computers to beef up the piano's potential.

Under the auspices of the S.E.M. Ensemble, Teitelbaum performed *Golemic*s (part of a series called *Golem Studies*), drawing on the Jewish Golem legend about an artificial being. In the gallery the piano stood dramatically alone, its keyboard covered by the black box of a Marantz Pianocorder, the focal point of a periphery marked by Teitelbaum, flutist Petr Kotik, and trombonist George Lewis. At first Teitelbaum sent drones and faint melodies from various electronic sources (Prophet, DX-7, electronically enhanced zither) into the piano's sounding board, as if to wake it up; the strings resonated with these sounds and seemed to produce them. Kotik began to play a simple string of marcato notes. The piano, its keys struck by the Pianocorder's 80-odd pegs, echoed in transposed counterpoint. Finally, George Lewis improvised, first with long low tones, then moving toward glissandi, noises, and livelier gestures. The computer, which had been storing the material fed into it by the performers, started spewing it back. The piano's response, in a dissonant, quartal-harmony reminiscent of Copland's middle, *Variations* period, culminated in a cadenza of considerable wit.

Several composers, including Salvatore Martirano and those in San Francisco's the Hub, have applied similar artificial intelligence to digital keyboards. Compared to Martirano's works, *Golemic*s' computer transformations worked more



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Monahan: exquisitely indistinct

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quickly and clearly, and were easier to trace. But the liveness of the piano, the sensation of the physical action producing the sounds, gave *Golemic*s a sharp kick that purely digital music ultimately can't deliver. In addition, the centering of attention on a performerless acoustic instrument made for bizarre theater. As the piano cadenza's final plinks grew sparser and sparser, the improvisers, unsure whether the piece was actually over, looked like a trio of confused vagrants waiting for Godot, or at least for the end of Lucky's speech.

If Teitelbaum went to extreme lengths to artificially recreate a natural pianism, Canadian-born New York resident Gordon Monahan did exactly the opposite, and made the unaltered piano sound like anything but. Monahan's *Piano Mechanics* was a catalogue of effects, a genre that harks back to Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and Tom Johnson's exhaustive chord catalogues (the latter recently published and available from Two-Eighteen Press). With an energy that approached

the demonic, Monahan strummed the piano strings, allowing the pedals to filter out tones one at a time; he banged loud sonorities and pedaled to capture the after-ring; repeated one note loud and fast until its overtones caught the attention; and finally attacked the keyboard with palms and forearms in a frenzy as violent and controlled as that of Stockhausen's *Klavierstück X*. Each section had a frank title like

"Abrupt Stops," or "Melody Concealed by a Tremolo," and the whole gave the impression of emotionless sound sculpture, a Vareseian idea pushed to maximum abstraction.

*Golemic*s benefitted from its eerie visual presence, but I appreciated *Piano Mechanics* better with my eyes closed. Watching, some of the sound production looked trivial, like George Crumb's eternally embarrassing piano aerobics. Without visuals, though, it was easy to forget what instrument you were hearing, and when Monahan suddenly dampened the strings with his fingers a little at a time, the unpredictable, attackless overtones had an exquisite indistinctness that a studio full of digital equipment would have been hard put to copy. The eye conditions the ear's expectations as much as the nose does the tongue's, and it's interesting that *Piano Mechanics* is just as impressive on the record (available from the composer, PO Box 1205, Station F, Toronto, Ontario M4Y2V8).

The concert needed to draw no moral. For all tremendous effects that the DX-7 and Kurzweil have had on the way we make music, the piano will still be pushed off roofs in the 21st century. ■