

New Music Found Alive and Thriving at Kalvos and Damian's Ought One Festival

WE WILL, WE WILL NONPOP YOU

BY KYLE GANN



LOONS IN THE MONASTERY PERFORM AT OUGHT ONE.

MONTPELIER—Well, I've finally been to Woodstock. It was the Ought One festival in Montpelier, Vermont, billed as "the Woodstock of Nonpop," which, as you can imagine, compared to the original pop-music Woodstock about the way the lightning bug compares to lightning. I didn't get muddy, and no one took their clothes off that I knew about, but the enthusiasm about the music, if more quietly manifested, was nonetheless real. Ought One was the brainchild of Dennis Bathory-Kitsz and David Gunn, who, if you know your music circles, you'll recognize as the radio geniuses behind Kalvos and Damian, the most important Web site in new music, with an ASCAP award to attest to it (www.kalvos.org).

I went as an invited participant, so it would be unseemly for me to write a regular evaluative review. But among the composers who descended on the place were enough New Yorkers to give the gig local interest, and I can hardly resist commenting on an event that taught me more about new music in two days than my New York concertgoing has taught me in the last two years. Kalvos and Damian have a refreshing way of avoiding the big, mainstream names in new music (you won't find Reich or Corigliano at Kalvos.org) and finding instead hordes of interesting young and old composers you've never heard of. In Ought One they threw 120 composers at us in 48 hours, quantities sufficient to ensure the emergence of new trends. Local Vermonters were prominent, along with many New Yorkers and West Coasters, plus a sizable contingent from Cologne, both German and American expatriates.

For instance, the solo instrumental piece with interactive electronics was everywhere. This is not a new genre, but it has acquired a new, more listenable sophistication. It used to be that somebody would play a few notes and the computer would respond with random-sounding gestures. Now, in pieces like Manfred Stahnke's *Malaita*, played by pianist Jennifer Hymer, the piano incited its own similar orchestral accompaniment bouncing around the room; and in Bathory-Kitsz's *RatGeysers*, for an electronic marimba called a MalletKat,

Michael Manion's virtuoso plinking was translated into a myriad of glissandos. Even more prevalent were composers associated with the Bonk festival in Tampa, Florida—especially Bonk's hyperactive cofounder, Eric Lyons, whose Godzilla-like output devoured entire sections of Ought One. Uninhibitedly theatrical flutist Margaret Lancaster played works by many such composers, including Paul Reller and Rob Constable. Large swaths of Bonk music revealed an emerging collective style: long, meandering streams of consciousness with frequent pop music/pop culture references thrown in. The title alone of Reller's *In Praise of Buddy Hackett* conveys the tone.

Along with dozens of young composers I'd never heard, there were New Yorkers whose work seems little heard in the city these days. Notably, the collaborative *Chansons de Bilitis* by Eve Beglarian and Phil Kline had a mellow pop loveliness; keep an ear out for its eventual New York premiere. The piece that turned me to jelly, though, was *A cappella*, by John McGuire, recently resident in New York after decades in Cologne. With impassioned expressiveness, soprano Beth Griffith sang syncopated vowel sounds over a sparkling electronic background, medieval but vibrant in its contrapuntal austerity. It compelled the kind of ecstasy that Arvo Part's music only vaguely suggests.

A cappella, it turns out, has been played in New York, but had slipped beneath my radar. That's the value of a festival like this: to create an atmosphere in which you have no idea what you'll hear next, and to bring together such diverse elements that new connections take place. We no longer have any equivalent in New York. You certainly won't find that feeling in Fred Sherry's smugly homogenous Great Day in Uptown festival. Ten years ago you would have found it on Bang on a Can, before they stripped down to the same dozen composers every year and became the Let 'Em Eat Cake festival. The last couple of years I had come to conclude that new music was truly in a lull, and that nothing new was turning up. Funny that I had to leave New York for sleepy little Montpelier to learn how mistaken I was. ▣

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