

Wearing the Pants

By Kyle Gann

Trousers
Kronos Quartet

Way back when I was a freelancer for three Chicago newspapers, I used to run across the work of a performance artist named Elise Kermani. (Actually, at the time she went by her maiden name, Schaaf.) I once gave some sort of nominal year-end award to a piece of hers called *Mandala* that, if I recall correctly, involved several people sitting in a circle, oohing and hitting metal bowls. Chicago performance artists used to perform self-indulgent "ritual" pieces every seven minutes on the average (perhaps they still do); but hers was distinctly different, executed with élan and nicely thought out in theatrical terms. A decade later, she's moved to New York, and when I heard that she had formed a trio with Elaine Kaplinsky, known heretofore for playing synthesizer with David First's ensemble, and Christine Bard, one of the more thoughtful drummers on the Downtown improv scene, I suspected something interesting was cooking.

It is. The trio, called Trousers, has started gigging around town, and I first caught them at La Mama's La Galleria February 18. The pieces they played, they said, were group-composed and still in progress, though thanks to the talents involved they were ripe for public consumption, at least at a space as intimate as La Galleria. While carefully planned, each work

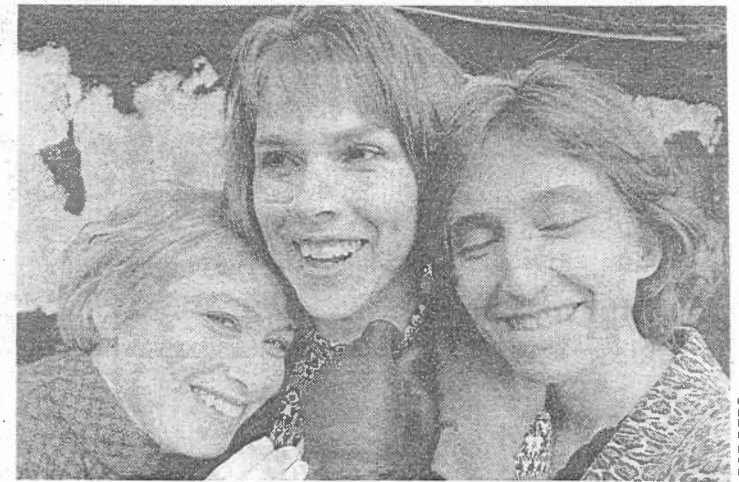
maintained the rough-hewn feel of improvisation, capturing to some extent the best of two worlds. Bard started off with aggressive but sharply calculated trap set textures, to which Kaplinsky added dissonant piano patterns culminating in clusters. As the din subsided a bit, Kermani's suave soprano appeared above, ethereally floating on a few notes. In another work, Kermani sang in near unison with a prerecorded tape of herself, on a text filled with permutations of words in the phrase "Her headache passes before she lies down." In *Bells*, Bard began with a quick five-beat pattern on cowbells, in which the other two soon joined her in close, vaguely African-inspired parallel.

The group could go somewhere. Bard's drumming employs brain and body equally, avoiding Downtown's usual macho, hit-everything virtuosity in favor of finely-tuned, piece-specific textures. Kaplinsky sometimes just runs her hands around the keyboard, but more often sculpts well-crafted iterative contours. And Kermani, possessor of a riveting voice and stage presence, is capable of a fetchingly vulnerable persona though she's actually quite theatrically uninhibited. She keeps her reverb and delay effects simple, relying wisely on the power of word images and evocative inflections. Keep an ear out for Trousers. Along with the composer Eve Beglarian and pianist Kathleen Supove's new Twisted Tutu duo, they're a welcome sign that wom-

en are banding together to retake the new music scene after the recession knocked them out a few years ago.

Requirements of one of my other careers prevented me from attending the most important New York premiere in a long time. But I got a tape, so I'm going to review it anyway. La Monte Young's *Chronos Kristalla* ("Time Crystals"), played February 11 at BAM, sort of got lost in the hoopla around the Kronos Quartet's residency there as just another commission, but it's a one-of-a-kind, evening-length work. It contains only eight pitches, all played as harmonics. (Hey, count your blessings: Young's *Second Dream* for eight trumpets has only four.) Allowing each player only one pitch per string, the piece extends a peculiarly American tradition of oddly uncharacteristic string quartets. The genre includes Cage's quartet of 1950 and the quartet discovered in the 1940s with a dubious attribution to Benjamin Franklin, each of which severely limits what pitches can be played on each string. (The pseudo-Franklin quartet is for all open strings on unconventionally tuned instruments; likewise, Conlon Nancarrow's Third Quartet contains a movement entirely in harmonics.)

If you were present at BAM and familiar with Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*, you may have recognized a tune about nine minutes into *Chronos Kristalla*, for it's all



In the pocket: the members of Trousers

based on the *W.T.P.*'s Magic Chord and Theme of the Magic Chord, whose 15 notes it stretches out to over a minute. String harmonics are nearly as pure as sine tones and difficult to sustain evenly (though Kronos did a good, clear job), and the shimmering effect is something like listening to people rub their wettened fingers around the rims of wine glasses. Over 95 minutes you hear all of Young's selected permutations of those eight pitches musically categorized in the score by titles such as "The Cadence of Paradise," and "The Antecedent of the Theme Unaccompanied over a recurring F pedal with the First Half of the Consequent in its Own Two-Part Harmony Leading into a Four-Part Harmony Cloud." No matter how radically he extends them beyond the limits of human hearing, Young has never entirely relinquished the harmony and counterpoint rules of his early training.

If you're not burdened by a European sense that music has to

scurry around to express something, *Chronos Kristalla* is a gorgeous, even emotional work because its chord is sad and beautifully tuned. The melodic permutations operate on a clearly audible level, and bittersweet "clouds"—that is, sustained chords of several of the pitches at once, sometimes bitingly dissonant—provide an agalogy to the complex finger-rustling tone walls of the *W.T.P.* The Kronos's performance had deepened and grown in discipline since the recording I had heard from their performance at the University of Iowa (and, saints be praised, they didn't follow it with their "Purple Haze" encore). They had premiered *Chronos Kristalla* in Montreal at the 1990 New Music America, and it's a dispiriting comment that this, Young's second-best masterpiece next to the *W.T.P.* and virtually the most radical work in the quartet literature, took over four years to come to New York. Hope you were there. ■

BOB BERG

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