

While not exactly a language, music often behaves like one. In particular, when packed with verbs and nouns it is sturdier and more exciting than when it settles for adjectives and adverbs. Two recent improvisation concerts drew the distinction. October 20 at the Knitting Factory, Jin Hi Kim on komungo (a six-string Korean zither) and Elliott Sharp on guitar gave a series of improvs that seemed adjectival and adverbial, and though they made for nice listening, they lacked punch. Kim and Sharp developed each piece by playing more loudly, created codas by playing more softly. Kim drew on the komungo's drone-melody potential, and, as usual, Sharp made ringing, static, gamelan-like textures by tapping on open strings, ostensibly tuned, I suppose, to a pattern of harmonics intended to make such haphazard patterns interesting per se.

It was pleasant. The twanging guitar and komungo blended well, and Kim's

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drone grounded Sharp's more wide-ranging cadenzas. But rarely did I get a sense that Kim and Sharp were trying to achieve any particular effect, and I began to suspect that they had defined their premises so dimly that whatever they did could be considered a success. What would it take, I asked myself, for this improvisation to fail? It occurred to me that if Kim held a drone on G while Sharp suddenly broke into "Goodbye, Old Paint" in F#, then *that* would sound silly enough to constitute a failure. Still, it would have been more imaginative than anything that did happen.

In one improv, Kim beat variations of a six-beat pattern on an hourglass-shaped oriental drum while Sharp wailed short riffs off of a single soprano sax tone. If he was responding to her syncopation, he gave no audible sign of it, nor was his

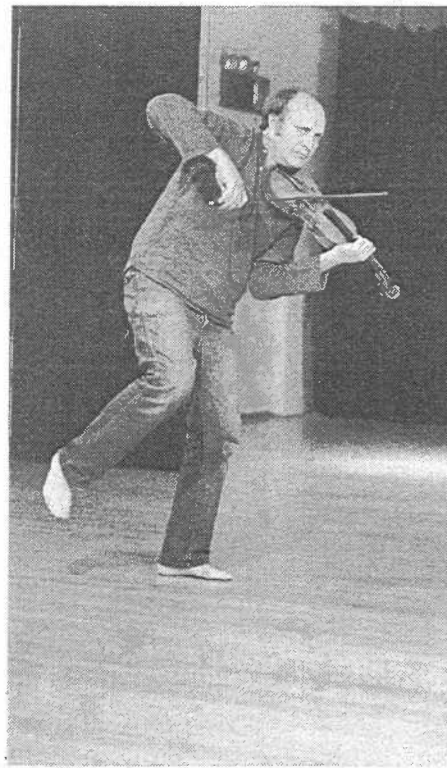
# Jin Hi Kim & Elliott Sharp/ Malcolm Goldstein When Memory Fails

BY KYLE GANN

rhythm definite enough to suggest that he was deliberately playing against her pulse. Whatever interaction they intended, whatever detail they might have worked out in advance, the audience wasn't privy to. Later Sharp, in a string-tapping solo, kept the continuity with one hand while slapping at settings on his sound equipment with the other; the ill-choreographed gesture seemed not spontaneous, just clumsy.

Perhaps Sharp and Kim didn't feel comfortable enough with each other to try anything daring. But the set seemed typical of a downtown improvisation style that aims for little more than a gooey consistency, cautiously avoiding any process or idea clear enough to be critically vulnerable. The performers, it's assumed, will impress the audience by catching ideas in midflight, by showing sensitivity to each other's inspiration. Sharp and Kim sailed no notable ideas, demonstrated little sensitivity beyond matching dynamics, and hardly hinted at what they were *trying* to do. If you're going to create atmosphere with just adjectives, they'd better be well-chosen, not imprecise, all-purpose ones. Jazz bravely commits itself to nouns (themes) and verbs (variation), but "free" improv too often plays it safe.

Most of us prefer performers who take risks. Dancer Simone Forti and violinist Malcolm Goldstein took several two nights later at the Ethnic Folk Arts Center's "Ear to the Ground" Festival, co-sponsored by Roulette and Movement



DONA ANN McADAMS

Goldstein fiddling: filthy with verbs

Research, Inc. Though light on nouns, Goldstein's fiddling was filthy with verbs, a reminder that he came of age in the '70s, the decade that redefined music as process and activity. Barefoot and quiet, he spiccatoed, whizzed, bounced, and buzzed his way through the range of the

instrument while following Forti, ignoring her, goading her, and mirroring her. Forti matched the apparent casualness and hesitation of Goldstein's gestures, but beneath that ease she defied gravity by balancing on any part of her body she chose: shoulder, small of back, butt. What looked like thoughtless joie de vivre required, on close examination, incredible control.

The source of the violin improv's trenchant unity took time to figure out. Accidental though his playing seemed, Goldstein kept returning to a few pentatonic pitches with each sweep across the instrument; in the midst of confusion, he traced (verb) a dotted line (noun) of melody, like a pond slowly appearing in a dense forest. He could have evoked his Vermont woods through "atmosphere," but instead he did so by metaphoric process, with far more incisive results. I could tell what he was trying to do, I could hear when he did it and when he backed off from it, and I knew how easily the piece could have fallen apart had the balance between randomness and control been, for either performer, less than perfect. This was genuine, audible virtuosity, not obscure and given-the-benefit-of-the-doubt. What's sad is that the New York experimentalists of Goldstein's generation used to stand in the minimalists' shadow, and now they're drowned out by the hype surrounding the East Village school. They deserve their own major-league attention.

Since I didn't take detailed notes during either performance (sometimes I just listen), days later I can hardly remember enough events or overall qualities from the Kim/Sharp performance well enough to describe it. On the other hand, Goldstein's verb-energized playing, despite its equal abstractness, even though it sounded superficially like a thousand other avant-garde solos, etched a vivid aural image. There are other criteria by which we judge music, of course, but isn't memorability one of the most telling? ■

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