

Trading one gleaming black accordion for another, Guy Klucevsek sighed, "So many polkas, so little time." He and the Ain't Nothin' but a Polka Band—guitarist John King, cellist Tom Cora, drummer Bobby Previte, occasionally joined by singer David Garland—had just pumped out four ditties bearing a more or less vague resemblance to polka and had 25 more to go. This was *Polka From the Fringe*, a repertoire Klucevsek created by asking his composer friends to lower their brows and pay homage to that staple of the East European working class, the polka.

"What is a polka?" some of them asked, so Klucevsek made it easy and laid only two guidelines: each piece should last about three minutes, and each should be playable by both solo accordion and small band. The results as heard November 17 turned the Brooklyn Academy of Music into a beer hall. The only thing missing was the beer.

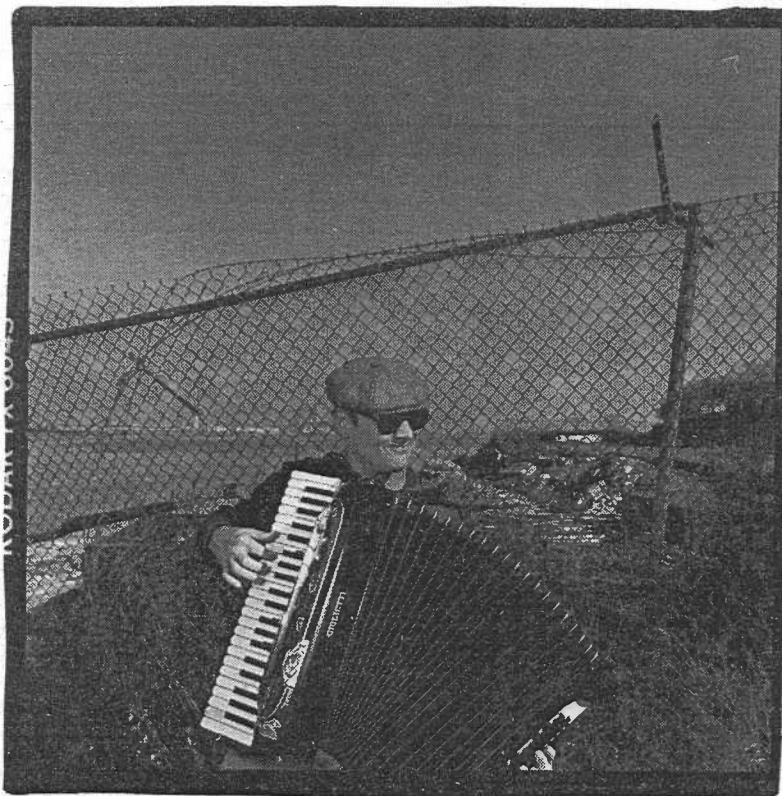
Fun was the intention, but what I heard was much more than fun. Like the early Baroque composers who wrote galliards and courantes after such dances had fallen into general disuse, Klucevsek abstracted the polka into a self-conscious art form, commissioning enough examples to invite a taxonomy. The composers fell into four types: snobs who refused to sacrifice their self-expression for so ignoble a genre; middle-class kids who didn't exactly know what a polka was, but wrote something that would do; those who succeeded in writing a serviceable polka; and pioneers who not only wrote a polka, but managed to write a polka *about* polka, and say something insightful in the process.

Fred Frith and Anthony Coleman dominated the last category. Frith's "Disinformation Polka" took an eerie little turn figure through a labyrinthine additive/subtractive process, oddly cross-rhythmed, but flexible enough to stomp to. It was hard to anticipate the beats on which Klucevsek, King, and Cora shouted "Hey!" but they always turned up in the right place. I likewise failed to calculate how Coleman's "Mejunarodni Nacin Polka" must have been notated, but the ensemble nodded their heads to one beat and played another, superimposing a real polka over an imaginary one. The two

Guy Klucevsek / Peter Gordon &
Kim Fitzgerald

Where's the Beer?

BY KYLE GANN



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the Native (I heard it November 5) was a slick package, not exactly with substance, but tied up with enough tricks to make a solid evening's entertainment. The Hardy title suggested the two collaborators' attempt to return to their roots, and the piece divided geographically into four acts: "Ireland," "Poland," "Dorset, England," and "The Southwest and Beyond." Soprano Catherine Fiasca, with a gorgeously innocent voice and earnest face (the latter often projected onscreen in odd angles and heroic proportions), sang the chapter titles of the novel, and provided the whole with its slight but sufficient dramatic continuity.

Gordon isn't afraid to write naive music, and he writes it well; that's almost compliment enough. From his opening two-note saxophone pattern to the spine-tingling "Great Gate of Kiev"-like finale, *The Return* kept up a jaunty Kurt Weillish vein, well-orchestrated and tuneful. The mood was interrupted only once, by a Polish episode in which a somber drone that sounded like slowed-down lion's roars accompanied images of Hebrew stone inscriptions and *Solidarnosc* posters. Among the tricks up Gordon's bulging sleeves were some brilliant soloists, including cowboy-hatted guitarist Ned Sublette, who added hilariously deadpan asides to a c&w song about Hardy's life.

Gordon made dazzling use of his resources, from Mustafa Ahmed's infectious drumming to Steve Elson's lightning-quick clarinet licks, to Ronald Robboy's wry cello glissandi, to Kenny Kosek's expert fiddling. At least one of the real stars wasn't even present. Bill T. Jones and the late Arnie Zane danced beautifully on film, making vigorous, masculine work movements in a picturesque Irish countryside. Later, Jones danced hectically while Fitzgerald's video wizardry turned his poses into wallpaper patterns. Between such images ran Fitzgerald's mercurial drawings, changing color faster than the eye could follow.

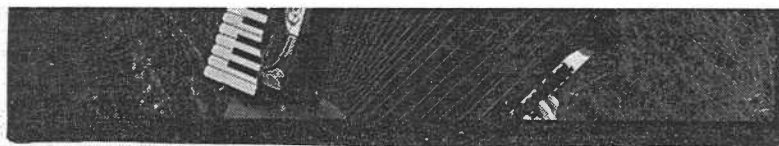
Gordon waited until the penultimate number to unleash the World's Greatest Piano Player, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, who had looked all along like a backstage cannon bound to go off sooner or later. When finally discharged, his mammoth cadenza nearly outweighed the rest of the opera. Pounding out alternating fifths, he

figure through a labyrinthine additive/subtractive process, oddly cross-rhythmed, but flexible enough to stomp to. It was hard to anticipate the beats on which Klucevsek, King, and Cora shouted "Hey!" but they always turned up in the right place. I likewise failed to calculate how Coleman's "Mejunarodni Nacin Polka" must have been notated, but the ensemble nodded their heads to one beat and played another, superimposing a real polka over an imaginary one. The two beats jerked together on the last chord, and Klucevsek aptly compared the effect to rehearsing on a truck driving down a highway under repair.

Previte's "The Nova Scotia Polka" had a more tenuous hold on the genre, but was brilliant nonetheless. Bitonal and birhythmic, wandering through folk fiddling tunes and "Barbara Allen" marimba quotes, the piece was full of surprises; the opening repeated chords turned out to be offbeats once the real beat came in. (Did Previte lift the idea from the finale of Haydn's Symphony No. 80, or is he just a natural classic?) The conceptually weirdest tune came from the only European, Guy de Bievre, who deconstructed a polka called "Dancing Fingers" by playing all the Ds first, then all the C#, etc., a morse code melody in classic polka rhythm.

Some of the more authentic polkas cried out to be danced, not listened to, especially Steve Elson's "From Here to Paternity Polka," Carl Finch's "Prairie Dogs (Polka)," and the sudden rhythm changes of Klucevsek's "The Grass, It Is Blue." Minimalist polkas were surprisingly rare, which may say more about the company Klucevsek keeps than about the music scene. Mary Jane Leach's "Guy de Polka" brooded on a half-step over a drone, and Daniel Goode's "Diet Polka" alternated between chords with trainlike momentum and some handsome violin and cello parts. Peter Zummo's melodies were danceably simple, though over them Klucevsek was directed to shout non sequiturs like "Polkathon!" "Polkamatic!" and "Polka vegetable platter!"

Some composers couldn't handle the thought that someone might actually dance to their music (Phillip Johnston's



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"Pontius Pilate Polka" was in 7/8 meter, just in case) and opted for either surrealism or dodecaphony. Aaron Kernis's "Phantom Polka" tried both, sticking his bizarre chromatic phrases together and ending with a shriek from the back of the hall. Guest performer Nicolas Collins made a neat visual illusion in his "Devil From Milwaukee" by whirling Klucevsek's sound around the room via computer-connected trombone. As usual, Seattle composer David Mahler provided a startlingly conceptual pun. In his "The Twenty-Second Street Accordion Band," Klucevsek, King, and Cora pretended to play accordions over a tape of a real band. When the second verse came, the trio threw down their accordions and played file folders; for the third they played folding maps, then Kleenex boxes (throwing tissues around), then the fronts of their shirts, then finally threw off their shirts and ended in their underwear.

BAM's Lepercq Space was too staid a place for such slapstick, and I missed the riotous atmosphere Klucevsek had conjured up in Philadelphia's Revival Club last year at New Music America, performing the solo versions of the same pieces. Still, though soft-spoken offstage, he's an absorbing performer, and amazingly versatile; he switched from shouting rocker to clown to working-class polka jobber to high-brow 12-tone executant with no unease or self-consciousness. Calming, mock-arrogant, with a self-deprecating Peter Schickele delivery, he works his audience as smoothly as Lawrence Welk, whether begging the audience to keep clapping until he's through setting up, or sermonizing from (allegedly) Charles Mingus: "The white man developed the polka."

But more than just a cute vehicle for his talent and stage presence, Klucevsek's project is a social experiment that rolls new music over to show us the under-

side—which, as it turns out, is cleaner than the surface. When was the last time you heard 29 pieces of contemporary music in a row and didn't wonder *once* what the composer had in mind? Some of these people had never written better pieces, or at least better focused pieces, than their polkas. Christian Marclay's "Ping Pong Polka" did so between accordion and a taped record collage, and the

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instrumental echoes a ritornello that allowed the piece to—not make sense, because music doesn't have to—but hang together well enough to say something interesting.

Like C. F. Peters's *Waltz Project*, William Schimmel's *Tango Project*, and *The Noble Snare* (solo snare-drum pieces commissioned by Stuart Smith that Gagego presented October 3), *Polka From the Fringe* maintained a higher average quality of work than one might expect. What it says is that our composers are badly in need of collective models, paradigms around which ideas can crystallize. The "free self-expression" we so cherish is a mixed blessing, while the value of limitations is terribly underestimated. Let composers' imaginations run wild and they'll drown in an miasma of personal gimmicks, but impose so simple a challenge as polka or waltz, and creativity blossoms like the desert after a light rain. Klucevsek is not only an activist for contemporary accordion music, he's a social force promoting better music.

Overall, BAM's current marketing formula, showcasing downtown male musicians who bring with them a guaranteed Manhattan audience, yielded better fruit this year than it has in the past. Peter Gordon and Kim Fitzgerald's video/music affair *The Return of*

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This, I'm convinced, is what it was like to hear Mozart improvise during his concert, or perhaps to hear Ives extemporise on "Emerson" from the *Concord Sonata*. My fantasy BAM gig is three hours, Tyranny, and a piano. Anthony Coleman may be as creative, Previte has something of the same innate musicality, but most of this town's free improvisers are foothills to Tyranny's Matterhorn.

As for Gordon, he's grown impressively since his art-rock days, when he used to waver between austerity and self-indulgence. Always a natural talent, now he's got facility and discipline up the wazoo, to the point that they're almost in the way; he's written smooth music in so many styles that I itch to hear the real Gordon. *The Return* contained not a lick out of place, never sounded insincere, but it seemed at times to conceal a passion it would have preferred to express. My above comments notwithstanding, *here's* a musician who needs to relearn to let go, who could stand to express himself more nakedly, and I hope to be there when he does. ■