

Whiplash!

By Kyle Gann

Soldier String Quartet

Twelve-tone rock is a marriage made in hell, but Downtown insists on making it work. In rhythmic terms, tonality means a steady beat, and rock is the most rhythmically tonal of musics. Extremely regular rhythm sets up ironclad expectations, while an atonal pitch language continually negates them. Twelve-tone music found its most elegant expression when it exploded the beat, in the fragmented counterpoint of Webern and Dallapiccola and the vaporized textures of the European serialists. Boulez and Stockhausen objected to the rhythmic squareness of Schoenberg's late atonality as a language contradiction, and a backbeat locks that squareness in. It's like a couple in which the man rigidly obeys all rules while the woman floats in and out of alternate realities. I suppose they exist.

But why try? To become a whole person, or, from another viewpoint, to become all things to all people. And because Jimi Hendrix was a physical saint, Milton Babbitt an intellectual one, and we can't accept the suspicion that it's impossible to be both at once. Society has reduced composing to a choice between two categories, elitist egghead or mass-media panderer, and neither is attractive. We don't want one repertoire for the mind and another for the body. The music that makes us tap our feet also ought to impress

us with its structural originality. That's hard to do, but Laura Seaton's String Quartet #1, played by the Soldier String Quartet at Merkin Hall December 3, offered a disarming solution. A movement fittingly entitled "Goodbye 20th Century" began in a square-rhythmed, Schoenbergian atonal style. After a few measures, drummer Kevin Norton jumped in and added a rock beat. Q.E.D.

Gosh, is it that easy? Yes and no. Seaton, the SSQ's first violinist, has a good ear for rich textures, propulsive momentum, and string writing. Moment-to-moment, her quartet sounded confident, but I felt a little jerked around, having to modify my listening assumptions without warning. I use the term 12-tone loosely; I have no idea whether she applied an actual tone row, but the atonal first movement gave way to a squeaky, more ethnic-sounding tonal bit based on an exotic ostinato. The New York-inspired final movement, "Street Games," felt like a Manhattan summer day: a gentle calypso beat repeatedly interrupted by jagged, fortissimo runs. The third movement shattered even the work's timbral frame with a prerecorded choir that swelled out of nowhere, singing an allegedly political text I couldn't make out. It was memorable music, but not the kind in which the opening ideas were developed throughout. You couldn't just tune in and hold on; the piece blasted its way out of its own context, and you had to jump out and

reconnoiter.

David Soldier, Seaton's fellow violinist in the Soldier Quartet, writes similarly eclectic stuff, and his String Quartet #2 preceded hers on the program. Subtitled *Bambaataa Variations*, it was written for four electric string instruments built by Ken Butler. I didn't get to write about Butler's September gig at CBGB Gallery, but he's a crazy instrument builder who can get virtuoso riffs from anything: he played a violin made from a golf club, an umbrella, a gadget that was part tennis racket and part trombone, and even his amplified head. Visually pretty, the space-age junk-quartet he crafted for the Soldier used a T-square as the cello body, saw blades for the sides, and had various protrusions that could be plinked as well as the strings.

Metallic and amplified, Soldier's quartet didn't need drums to rock; he set the beat with marcato strokes on his electric violin. A grab bag of techniques followed. The second movement, "X-Linked Planet," crescendoed like one of Bartók's "night music" pieces through a bluesy melody passed around pizzicato. In "Nine-Hundred Grandmothers," Soldier plucked his instrument like a gamelan while the others played jazz solos. Next he turned his violin guitarlike and banged a buzzy rock tune. The final movement, "Afrika Variations," sent a viola melody through a series of harmonic variations highly classical in their symmetry, and into a coda of Beethovenesque chords. Aesthetic whiplash came between movements, not phrases.

That attempt to weave contrasting idioms into a linear fabric goes back to Henry Cowell, whose



They crack the 12-tone rock nut.

TOM CARAVAGLIA/SOLDIER STRING QUARTET

United Quartet of 1936 was a movement-by-movement catalog of world-music styles; in fact, Soldier's naive experimentalism brought Cowell to mind more than once. Cowell took heat for his style-mixing, but today his quartet sounds irreproachably homogenous. Will future decades similarly smooth out Soldier's and Seaton's culture wanderings? What's odd was that, despite the jazz-style solos and rock rhythms, their melodies kept reminding me of Bartók and Schoenberg. Using pop music as a springboard, they seemed determined to leap into the 21st century from the 1940s, without touching intervening classical idioms. That's true of a broad segment of Downtown music, the side that embraced the vernacular but cherished complexity, and never welcomed such post-Cage styles as minimalism, conceptualism, and microtonality.

There are other routes out of the "Jimi Babbitt" dilemma. Stockhausen in the '60s, Miles Davis in the '70s, and John Zorn in the '80s layered diverse music fragments in collage. Michael Rouse has fused a rock beat with atonal tunes by abstracting the trap set rhythms via the same numerical processes that govern the tone rows. Interestingly, the opposite combination—discontinuous, atonal rhythm with tonal pitches—has hardly been tried, aside from some protominimalist works of the '60s by Harold Budd and Terry Jennings. Rock isn't the only physically compelling music, nor does a continuous recycling of all 12 pitches make music more "intellectual," current propaganda notwithstanding. But 12-tone rock is a nut irresistibly hard to crack, and I haven't heard anyone succeed better at it than Seaton and Soldier. ■



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