

Whom Bomb?

By Kyle Gann

Jerome Kitzke
Brooklyn Philharmonic

We squeezed into the Cornelia Street Cafe's basement-level sardine tin October 1 to hear Jerome Kitzke's Mad Coyote ensemble. To open, Wendy Chambers plopped down at a toy piano to play Kitzke's *The Animist Child*. Cute, demure little instrument, the toy piano, right? Suddenly, Chambers began yelling "Cha-chi-ba-gee-ba!" and slapping the top of the piano with the palms of her hands. In between slaps, she'd hit clusters on the keys, black versus white in rhythmic alternation, or for a change, she'd rip up and down in arpeggios. Her aboriginal energy wrung sonic potentials from that poor little box that its maker had never dreamed of.

This kind of exuberant surprise comes frequently in Kitzke's music. Kitzke himself is an impressive pianist of joyous idiosyncrasies, frequently playing with his right hand while shaking a rattle with his left and chanting American Indian-style. In *Mad Coyote Madly Sings*, he and Wendy Luck shouted an Allen Ginsberg poem ("Whom bomb? We bomb you!") as a Gulf War protest, while the instruments raced through syncopated unison rhythms. In *The Rest Is Shadow*, the group played background to a 1927 Christmas Eve speech by the president of Johnson's Wax (delivered with deadpan nobility by Robert McFarland) about the importance

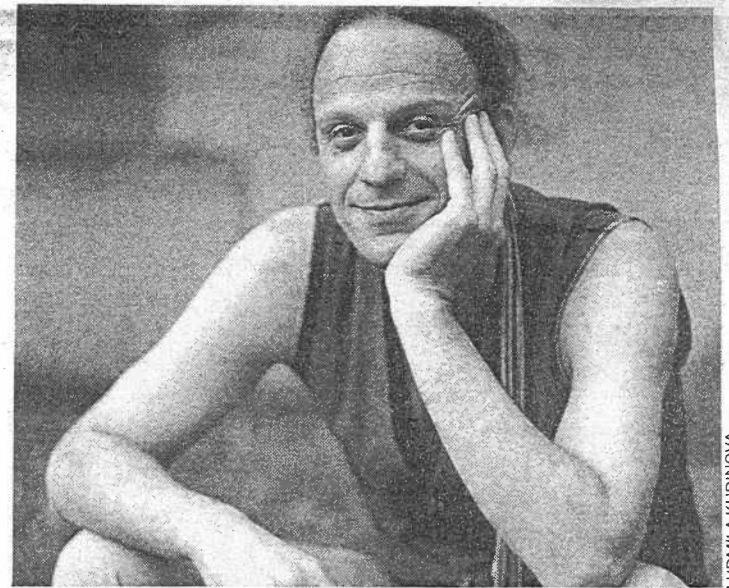
of creating goodwill in the customer, ironic in this context yet oddly touching. And Mad Coyote's slow, thoughtful improvisations were harmonically well-planned with lots of breathing room, so that the players listened to each other and the collective sense unfolded gradually. Good improv should sound composed, and good composition should sound improvised. With its untamed yet focused energy, Mad Coyote succeeded in both directions.

Too bad someone couldn't have brought that same wild energy to the Brooklyn Philharmonic under Dennis Russell Davies's baton at BAM October 14: but it can never happen. The medium is the message, and never more so than when the medium's an orchestra. It offers two options: you can reconfigure 19th-century European sonorities, or you can write music that sounds unidiomatic, and thus bad. That's why Philip Glass walked away with the concert in his hip pocket. Since his Second Symphony made no effort to be original, it was the only piece that worked. Glass's earlier essay into the genre, the *Low* Symphony, benefited from themes borrowed from David Bowie's *Low* album, which Glass imaginatively reenvisioned. With such themes replaced here by little more than ambiguous harmonies and repeated-note syncopations, the Second Symphony rolled up and down scales in ponderous waves, reminiscent of such tiresome British impressionists as Sir Arnold Bax. And yet its snail-paced transi-

tions, the essence of Howard Hanson-esque clarity, earned enthusiastic cheers at the end.

Similarly but more omnivorously, John Zorn's *For Your Eyes Only* preserved sonic integrity by reconfiguring orchestrations previously worked out by others. The piece superimposed dozens of quotes from orchestral and pop favorites to prove, as though someone had cast doubt on the assertion, that one can depict with an orchestra the effect of zapping through TV channels with the remote control. Over 15 minutes, five of the non sequiturs were clever enough to elicit laughs, thus matching the success rate of a decent sitcom. (Meanwhile, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence took the concert as an opportunity to issue a formal protest against Zorn's ongoing use of images of maimed, tortured, and naked Asian women in his concerts and CDs. According to a statement signed by the Alternative Museum and the World Music Institute, among others, Zorn canceled several West Coast performances this year due to widespread criticism of such acts as issuing a CD with a photo of a dismembered Chinese woman and the claim "This music is dedicated to this act of violence.")

The piece I admired most and enjoyed least was the Piano Concerto by Chen Yi, brilliantly played (and with a flashily choreographed closing flourish) by Margaret Leng Tan. (One wonders how Ms. Chen felt about sharing a concert with Zorn.) Its mercurial thread of melody in the piano was punctuated by arabesques in the winds over coloristic string textures, a Brahmsian emotional flow ornamented with rigorous serialist



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Jerome Kitzke: a composer of exuberant surprises

asymmetry and dotted with Asian touches in the metallic percussion. Superbly crafted in its details, it was also, like all such academic works, hopelessly incompetent in communicating its overall design. Appreciating what I did required brushing up a listening mode I abandoned years ago, in which, out of thousands of bits of information presented by the composer, you try to guess which ones might be significant. In a panel discussion following the concert, Chen had a pipa virtuoso play the Chinese folk melodies on which the concerto was allegedly based. As far as the listener could tell, "Old MacDonald" and Beethoven's Ninth would have sounded equally relevant.

If the European orchestra had continued to evolve, as it did for two centuries, perhaps it would still be viable. One might then have written for an orchestra with

22 trombones, or with its winds all drawn from the clarinet family. But union economics (no offense, I love my union) have frozen the makeup of the thing in its late-Romantic state, its choirs of families arranged like a giant organ with percussive sound effects. It is astonishing that so much talent, hard work, and good intentions could conspire to make an evening as brainless as this, a grand, empty shell of a concert in which the most enthusiastic reception was awarded, *deservedly*, to the piece that made almost no demands on the audience's musicality. It's not because there isn't plenty of exciting compositional thought flying around, but because of the virtual impossibility (as much institutional as compositional) of applying such thought to that stolid, 19th-century, European beast, the symphony orchestra. For the toy piano, there is still hope. ■