

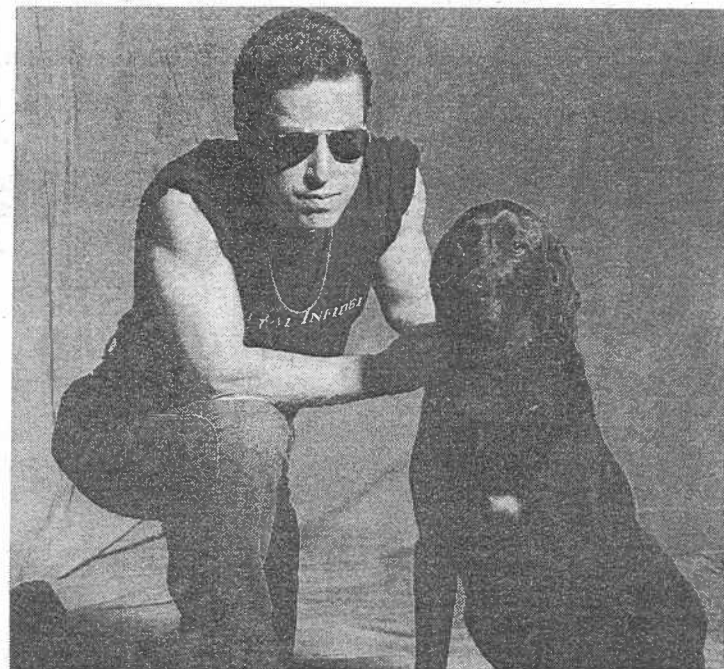
# Woofs of Passion

By Kyle Gann

## Dogs of Desire

In this topsy-turvy, most unpredictable of years, the music world seems to be shifting, grinding, and lurching into a new alignment. The tectonic plates rumble loudest at Lincoln Center: this is, after all, the year the New York Philharmonic took risks and Bang on a Can didn't. And now, almost more as climax to the "American Eccentrics" festival than as afterthought, a new ensemble distilled from the Albany Symphony made its Downtown debut at the Kitchen June 10 under the aggressive moniker "Dogs of Desire: multimedia orchestra of the future," uninhibitedly led by David Alan Miller in a Harley-Davidson vest, sleeveless Who T-shirt, and combat boots. Is new music suddenly hip again? Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.

A canine theme made spotty appearances. The program opened with Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" in an arrangement by Richard Adams, and its first notes drew more than one set of battle lines. To begin with, the lyrics were rewritten to feminist criteria: "Oh, oh Jimmy when you write those things/ About love and sex it just makes me cringe... / Keep on foolin' and maybe some day/ Lorena Bobbitt's gonna come your way./ What you want's a woman who'll hold your hand,/ What you really need are lyrics for your rock and roll band." Thus rendered, the tune was a vehicle for the



Top dog: conductor David Alan Miller and friend

LYNN FINLEY/ALBANY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

charmingly understated and, when necessary, gutsy Lisa Bielawa, the soprano accustomed to inhabiting in-between musical spaces.

More musically pertinent, it turned out that Led Zeppelin, when played by violins and woodwinds, sounds postminimal. What minimalism, postminimalism, and totalism share with rock are its clean-edged, almost nuanceless melodic lines, never fuzzed or tapered by swells or diminuendos. Free jazz, serialism, and neo-romanticism, on the other hand, have in common a rounded-off, ephemeral sense of melodic curve, a tendency to climax before disap-

pearing into nothingness. Classical players are reluctant to wean themselves from the curved phrase, and that Dogs of Desire grasped that distinction at once boded well for their entry into the scene.

The group was, in fact, more remarkable for its style and energy than for the material it had commissioned. The best piece among those of the younger, Downtown-style composers was Todd Levin's Two Songs, which had its vocalists (Bielawa and the more extroverted but complementary Shannon Anderson) crooning continuously in parallel thirds and fifths. Levin has a tremendous talent for

ividly rhythmic postminimal textures that don't parade their structural tricks, but so far the technique seems tied to his electric guitar ensemble. Not seeming to quite know what to do with all these instruments, he invested his rhythmic energy in the frail tone of a synthesizer, keeping the mass of strings and winds oddly subdued.

At least Levin's sound was his own. Michael Torke has made a hefty career parasitizing the debris of minimalism and diluting it for classical listeners too timid to handle the hard stuff. His *Bone* regurgitated drones from Steve Reich's *Octet*, separating them with passages of fake medieval counterpoint. The middle movement of Deniz Ince's *Tale of Tails* slipped even more self-effacingly into pure Glassian arpeggios, colored by the half-step shifts Glass has used in every work from *Einstein* to *The Voyage*. Her first and third movements, matched bookends, ran off the reiteration of syncopated motives, ultimately without much direction. Still, after decades of young artists aping the atonalists, minimalist imitators are a sufficiently refreshing change.

Anthony Braxton, revered and not yet 50, came off as an old master. His *Composition 175* took place in front of a video of a haunted castle, opening with recorded thunder and ending with birds. In between, Bielawa and Anderson, with cutely choreographed delivery, slid seamlessly from haunted-castle clichés into an opaque, number-filled symbolic language reminiscent of Braxton's own impenetrable aesthetic treatises: a nicely turned self-parody. Though it was the evening's only example of the free jazz/serialist

aesthetic, the piece's forest of angular lines benefited from the Dogs' clean, vigorous barking. Songs from Neil B. Rolnick's opera-in-progress *Heat: The Rise and Fall of Isabella Rico* took the group into salsa over film noir-ish video images. Odd meters enlivened the pop texture, and the most painful song—"Chase her down the alley at night,/ set up by her lover./ Chase her down like a dog in the night,/ this is how they kill her."—was accompanied by a sentimental, childlike violin solo, to chilling effect.

Whether salsa aficionados would have found Rolnick's appropriations authentic, I can't say. It took no expert, though, to note that Miller's grinning vocal rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Fire" (arrangement by Andrew Bishop) proved for all eternity that uptight, middle-class white boys can't, can't, can't impersonate Hendrix. Q.E.D. If this gig accomplished no more than to discourage all future such attempts, it will have been invaluable for that alone. Still, the concert was one of those rare, where-angels-fear-to-tread projects whose very failures were enlightening. Savvy and naive, slick and raw, Dogs of Desire provided the kind of creatively problem-ridden music making from which great art eventually blossoms. Let us have more of it.

Dary John Mizelle studied with a brilliant teacher named Kenneth Gaburo, who died a little over a year ago; Gaburo does not own David Tudor, as a typo in one of my recent columns implied. And, since Conlon Nancarrow's birthday isn't until October 27, he is 81, not 82 as my column of two weeks ago was altered to read. ■

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disappear fear

