

Send in the Clowns

So now John Rockwell is going to ruin Lincoln Center the way he ruined *The New York Times*. After all, if it hadn't been for Rockwell's tenure there in the '80s, we wouldn't expect the *Times* to ever say an intelligent word about new music, and we wouldn't be disappointed every week. And now that Rockwell is directing Lincoln Center's summer festival, we'll get used to the place being a mecca of exciting Downtown music, and then Rockwell undoubtedly will move on and leave another gaping void.

Because for Downtowners at least, Festival 96 was the most exciting musical event north of 20th Street in 10 years. (That's even without the damn Kronos Quartet, whose cancellation of Morton Feldman's six-hour string quartet after only two weeks of rehearsal was typical of their fuck-the-composer arrogance.) Prior to this—at Serious Fun!, Bang on a Can, the "American Eccentrics"—Uptown had always represented the American "experimental" tradition as crazy but hip, the token clown indulged at court. Finally, in works by Cage, Feldman, Lois V Vierk, and Machover, Lincoln Center has taken the American tradition as seriously as it deserves, capable of standing next to the century's best theater and dance.

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http://stravinsky.minsky.bach

Tod Machover
Brain Opera
Lincoln Center Festival '96

BY KYLE GANN

How many of you netheads had what it took, software-wise, to interact with Tod Machover's *Brain Opera* via the Internet? I'm not on a first-name basis with the World Wide Web—I still call it Mr. Web—so I relied on experts on both coasts to get downloaded with Netscape 3.0, Java, Sound Machine, and all the cyber stuff *Brain Opera* required. Finally, deep in the bowels of Lincoln Center, where 45 million bits per second flowed through the fastest Net line in New York and workers chalked up 15,000 hits a day, MIT undergrad Andrew Garcia gave me a speedier demonstration of how the thing worked. Even with that, all I could do was fiddle with the speed and harmony of some plinked melodies, bang a few noises, and pull down some Marvin Minsky soundbytes with skewed Bach in the background. "We're still in the Stone Age," a Machover associate told me, "and Tod admits that. Forty years from now they'll laugh at us." Hell, if you'd watched me spend two weeks trying to coax sound out of this sullen box I'm writing on, you'd be laughing right now.

For all its bits and hits, *Brain Opera* turned out to be about 50 Megs of content surrounded by several gigabytes of virtuoso packaging. The piece froze your mental screen with its flood of buzzwords: Interactive software! Artificial intelligence! Marvin Minsky! The Internet! A worldwide web of online performers! And the

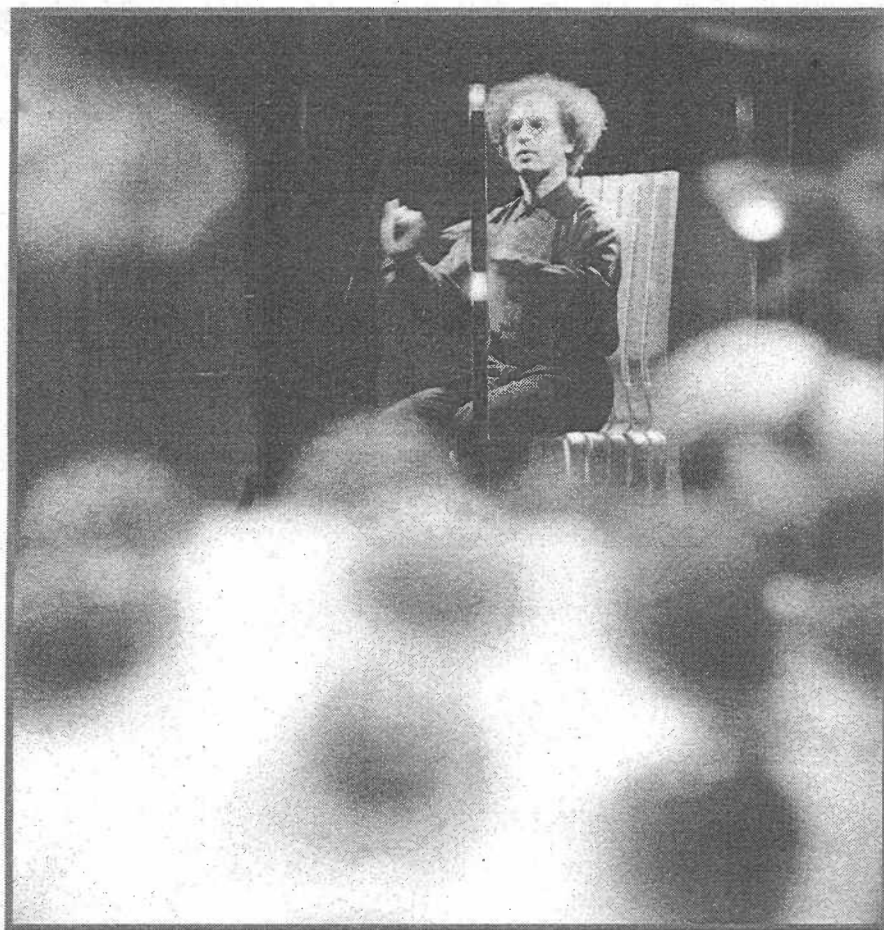
your hands toward four bud-shaped lightbulbs on stalks. Swinging at the right-hand bulbs triggered a preset sequence of electronic burbles from the right speaker, swinging at the left made

cadences of notes flying. You can alter the harmonies and scales at will, and you quickly learn to be very subtle to get well-differentiated textures. Likewise, the interactive software David Behrman's been working with for many years picks out specific pitches played by instrumentalists, responding to some with changes of texture and

Ricercar from Bach's *Musical Offering*—a piece whose intellectual aura makes it the musical analogue to $E = mc^2$ —was often lovely, with a flowingly subverted tonality reminiscent of Berio's *Sinfonia*. Machover has tremendous compositional chops, and the reason his interactive music holds your attention at all is that he's developed some workable melodic algorithms that always sound fresh, neither random nor perceptibly repetitive.

Even here, though, there were times when the student performers, playing electronic sensors, seemed to be pulling something over on us. They directed the counterpoint by moving their hands in rhythm, but occasionally they wouldn't move and a note would play anyway, making you wonder to what extent they were really in control. The opera was interrupted midway by a prerecorded video commercial for itself in "Rockin' the Baroque" style: "Braaaaaay—Nop'ra! Braaaaaay Nop'ra! Bra-a-a-a-a-a-ay Nah-ah-ah PRAAH!" At such moments it's really ambiguous whether Machover has an endearingly cornball innocent streak, or he's cynically condescending to a presumed audience of morons. "Anyone can make music," he enthused in the program, and it's a powerful idea; but the elitist IRCAM background he comes from is hardly conducive to a Cagean respect for the average listener.

The whole picture might have looked better not dwarfed by the frame of its gargantuan hype. An electronic composer friend went through the interactive instruments in about 10 minutes, and was stopped dead by the posted mile-long list of corporate sponsors and equipment donors: IBM, AT&T, MCI, Sonv, Microsoft. *Wired*.



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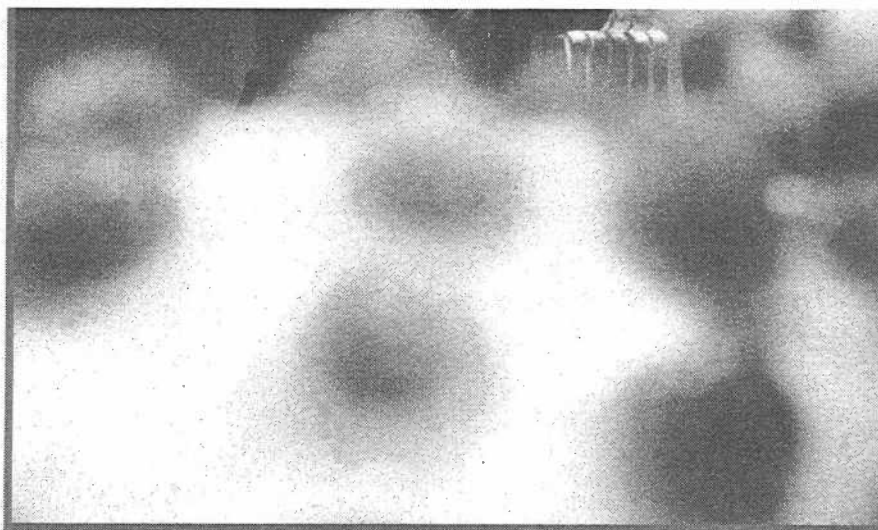
It helps when Downtowners do the interpreting. The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center played Feldman's music precisely but stiffly, closer to the score than to its spirit. A far more exquisitely Feldmanesque performance came from the Essential Music Orchestra and conductor John Kennedy, in whose hands the thick textures of *For Samuel Beckett* shimmered, plinked, and paused in crystalline gorgeousness. For me, though, the high point of the two weeks was Aki Takahashi's devoutly still rendering of Feldman's *Triadic Memories* and especially *Piano*.

She wasn't the only one devoutly still. Near-capacity crowds at the Society for Ethical Culture sat in utter reverence for 90 minutes at a time for Feldman's pianissimo gestures, with hardly a walkout, and with standing ovations afterward. Such respect suggests a new perception of Downtown music, and a new mass audience ready to understand the grandeur and depth it occasionally achieves. —K.G.

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Yet, what you found inside *Brain Opera*, both virtually and at Lincoln Center, was more Disney than Carl Sagan, and a kind of poor man's Disney at that. First of all, the Juilliard Theater's cramped, low-ceilinged space was not the glorious venue that it looked on the late-night news, and gave the whole event the air of a corporate product demonstration. All together, Machover's audience-friendly instruments—the Rhythm Tree, the Gesture Wall, the Singing Forest—emitted a joyful melee of noise, an electronic party. The possibilities of each gizmo, though, turned out to be more circumscribed than the racket suggested. At the Gesture Wall, you moved



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another emerge from the left. The high bulb caused high-pitched sounds, the low one low. You didn't have to be a member of Mensa to figure this out.

Likewise, I could control the visuals in the Harmonic Driving, a kind of video game in which you steered through chutes and tunnels, but despite following the instructions, I couldn't make the resulting music more consonant or dissonant. At the Speaking Trees, you put on headphones, and a little movie of computer scientist Minsky came on to ask you questions, some of which preemptively apologized for the music: "Do you expect to like a piece of music the first time you hear it?" And the Rhythm Trees—well, you'd hit the rubber knobs to make noises, and theoretically your rhythms will end up as controllers in some future performance of *Brain Opera*, but the assurance was a little too theoretical to be satisfying.

If this was news to the weekend tourist trade, it was fairly primitive next to the interactive technology I encounter on my usual beat. In Laurie Spiegel's Music Mouse, for example, which has been around since the mid '80s, a slight movement of the mouse draws melodies in a variety of musical idioms, while a quick jerk sends cas-

dynamics, and not to others. You could argue that Behrman's software is made for musicians, Spiegel's takes time to learn to use well, and that the purpose of *Brain Opera* was to initiate lots of nonmusicians into interactivity in a few minutes. Yet one tourist who sat next to me expressed disappointment that he couldn't discern any effect his movements were having on some of Machover's instruments.

In fact, a friend bet me that if I liked *Brain Opera*, I'd love Sony Wonder, the interactive technology exhibit for kids at the Sony building at 55th and Madison. Never one to skimp on research, I went over there, edited animal sounds at a mock recording studio, and ran metal marbles through mazes via a high-tech robot arm. Sure enough, Sony Wonder wasn't as musically avant-garde as *Brain Opera*, but it gave you a more definite sense of power over the materials you played with.

It's not that *Brain Opera* was a disaster, just that its fun was quickly digested. You had to be a scrooge not to enjoy it, just as you had to be Amish to find the technological results impressive. The best part by far was the live performance you heard after playing with the instruments. The collage of sampled quotations framed by the

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But if Lincoln Center had programmed Behrman or Spiegel, armed only with their complex circuits and sensitive artistry, the event would have drawn a few dozen listeners instead of hundreds a day. A kind of genius was needed here in which Machover far surpasses his colleagues: a genius for packaging, for figuring out what kind of image will spark the public interest regardless of actual content. The piece was a lesson in marketing that the new-music scene needs as much as it resents.

The truth is, though, we are still in the Stone Age, and Machover didn't have time to develop his audience gimmicks to the level of sophistication his concert music achieves. Given another five years' development, *Brain Opera* might have gelled into something subtle and powerful. But we were in too much of a hurry to reach the future to wait for the substance to catch up. ❖

The Brain Opera Web page is accessible at <http://brainop.media.mit.edu>.