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SOUND: THE PHONOGRAPH

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By TIM PAGE

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THERE is no minimizing the importance the phonograph has had on 20th-century music, and the idea of devoting an evening to "His Master Voice: The Art of the Record Player" was a good one. But Wednesday evening's presentation at the Kitchen, produced by Tim Carr, was pretty disappointing affair.

Using the phonograph to compose music is not a new idea; in fact, it is a concept that has occupied several important musical minds. Darius Milhaud was tampering with phonograph speeds by 1922. Ottorino Respighi used recorded bird sounds in his "Pines of Rome" in 1924. Varèse and Antheil worked the record player into their music, and so did John Cage in one of his wittiest and most attractive early pieces, "Credo Us." In recent years it has become common practice for pop groups to create albums entirely in the studio. The visionary pianist Glenn Gould heralded recordings as the art form of the future, and he created several sonic documentaries for disk.

At the Kitchen, one found the usual virtues of a SoHo loft performance: a pleasing informality - beer sold by the ticket - and a willingness experiment with offbeat material. Unfortunately, the standard downtown faults were also in abundance: an obsession with concept at the expense of execution, a willful primitivism, a fixation with yesterday's pop culture, monumental self-indulgence and an overwhelming decibel level.

The stage was covered with several turntables; video machines gave an aerial view of the proceedings. Five of the nine performers were pop music disk jockeys, brought to the Kitchen from various nightclubs. As a result, there were several lengthy demonstrations of the not-terribly interesting art of segueing from one given rhythm track to another. The most interesting of these was provided by a gentleman, known only as "Whiz Kid," who proved a virtuoso of the turntable and endowed his performance with elegance and wit.

Roger Trilling's offering combined a recitation of Adelaide Proctor's "Lost Chord" with disco records by Donna Summer, experimental rock from the Velvet Underground and what sounded like distorted bagpipes.

All in all, however, the Kitchen's presentation seemed more concerned with current pop fashion than a serious investigation of the recording process and its inestimable contribution to contemporary music.