

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

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Underground Music Surfaces for a Nine-Day Festival

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Starting this coming Friday and continuing through June 16, there will be a music festival in New York that most music-lovers won't even be aware of. But it promises to be one of the most significant musical events of the season, a cry of self-assertion by a whole variety of underground musics.

The festival is called New Music, New York, and it will take place nightly at the Kitchen, New York's premier performance space for new music and video art, located at the corner of Wooster and Broome streets in SoHo.

The artists involved — there'll be roughly six per night — include leading figures on the experimental music scene of the city, the area and the country, with a few European composers represented, as well. They come mostly from the realm of "classical" avant-gardism, what might very loosely be called the post-Cageian school of American music. But there are also people from the loft jazz scene, the underground, "no-wave" New York rock scene, sound-related performance art and more.

A few of the many composers involved include Robert Ashley, Robert Fripp, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich (his ensemble but not the composer himself, who is in Europe), George Lewis, Don Cherry, Philip Corner, Phill Niblock, William Hellermann, Charles Dodge, Alvin Lucier, Larry Austin, Laurie Spiegel, Gordon Mumma, Jill Kroesen, David Behrman, Charlemagne Palestine and Laurie Anderson. There will also be a festival-related late-night presentation of no-wave bands at the Mudd Club on June 12.

In addition, there will be a Kitchen-sponsored, three-day conference of managers and administrators from

around the country associated with performance spaces like the Kitchen and music like this. And finally, beginning the day of the festival and extending one day past its close, there will be an "institute" on this music and related subjects sponsored by the Music Critics Association and consisting of talks, workshops and panel discussions, free and open to the public.

Just what all this means will presumably be a subject for rumination by the many critics coming from around the country and, one trusts, from the New York area. But a few preliminary thoughts might be in order.

First, the title "New Music, New York," is both catchy and thought-provoking, but part of the reason it provokes thought is that it can't — inevitably? — quite encompass all the ramifications of what this festival means.

"New music" suggests anything that is new, and more than any recent American festival that this writer knows of, New Music, New York is indeed broadly inclusive. But it is also exclusive, deliberately or otherwise. What's excluded is mostly what might be called "uptown" or "midtown" contemporary classical music. And it is just this music, rightly or wrongly, that is normally considered the *totality* of new music by most classical music critics.

In other words, this is the music of conservatory-trained classical composers who feel themselves direct descendants of the "Great Masters" of Western music. The leading figures on the New York scene of such music — Elliott Carter, Jacob Druckman, Charles Wuorinen, Milton Babbitt, et al., not to speak of the earlier generation of William Schuman, Peter Menin, Vincent Persichetti and the like — tend either to despise the lower Manhattanites or not to take them seriously in the first place.

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Their loss. One needn't get too polemical about this: There is a lot of fine music still coming out of the uptown new-music establishment, and one day, with the mellowing perspective of time, future music historians will be able to neatly categorize and relate stylistic camps that now seem desperately antithetical.

In the meantime, we're left with a nexus of new musicians who, for all their radically different stylistic perspectives, share something intangible yet somehow perceptible. And it will be the task of the festival and its ancillary conference and institute to help make that intangibility tangible.

The first links are sociological, relating to shared geography and sources of patronage. In New York, at least, these musicians tend to cluster with the painters, poets, dancers and video artists where the rents are cheap, in the manner of all Bohemian communities for the past 200 years. The result is that they share ideas with others in the community more easily than with practitioners of what is supposed to be their own art: in other words, composers in SoHo have been as much influenced by SoHo painters, dancers, etc. as by Elliott Carter.

There are those who argue that all money is corrupting, and to be sure vast sums have been wasted in recent years in the commissioning of dead new operas and symphonies. But the New York State Council on the Arts has been an incalculable help to the development of the New York new-music scene. Not that the city hasn't always been a center for new music, what with the heavy concentration here of the music business and press. But money helps, and the SoHo arts scene has been



Photographs by The New York Times, Robert Mapplethorpe, Alex Jeffrey, Michael O'Brien

Music by Meredith Monk and Philip Glass, left, Steve Reich, center, and Robert Ashley and Pauline Oliveros, right, will be heard in the "New Music, New York" festival beginning Friday at the Kitchen.

clever about getting hold of some of it. Furthermore, unlike their midtown counterparts, they've evolved (grudgingly, sometimes) a style that doesn't need a vast amount of money to survive. While uptown composers lament (legitimately) the absence of a full-scale symphony orchestra that has the skill and time to perform new orchestral works, the lower Manhattan composers either work with smaller forms or avail themselves of amplification to make lots of noise with a small number of players.

There are shared esthetics, too. A pervasive Orientalism can be discovered in SoHo new music, much of it attributable to John Cage's writings (more than his music, really), and much more sophisticated than the Chi-



noiserie of earlier generations of Western composers. Balanced with this meditative quiescence has been a renewed interest, especially in the past few years, in kinetic rhythmic energy — not only in the dancing structures of Mr. Glass and Mr. Reich but in the whole coming together of the classical avant-garde and the underground rock and jazz scenes in New York.

Of course, this is hardly just a New York phenomenon, and one thing the events of the next couple of weeks will help clarify is the nature of New York's role today in American new music.

A case can be made that much of the finest American music has been composed by rugged individualists, cut off by geographical or psychological isolation from the mainstream of American culture. On that theory, New York, with its bustling cosmopolitanism and its rewarding of immediate success, might seem inimical to the best of American creativity.

But SoHo has arisen as a place where the contradictory tendencies of isolationism and cosmopolitanism can meet.

The result has been, for those of us who have followed the scene over the past few seasons, a remarkably lively and potentially promising source of new music. Not all of it is "good" or lasting, of course; little of any new music lasts. But the scene itself is exciting, and already its finest creations have won a place among the best new music, anywhere. The Kitchen festival should not only be instructive for anyone who wishes to partake of it but also enjoyable in a way that the stereotypical midtown "new music concert" — all gray, dutiful and boring — rarely manages to be. ■