

New York Times
June 18, 1979

Music: 53 Composers in 9-Day Festival

By JOHN ROCKWELL

THE KITCHEN'S nine-day, 53-composer festival called New Music, New York came to a close Saturday night. Despite flaws and variabilities of quality, it has been a remarkable affair. Above all, it's been an attestation of community on the part of a numerous, highly self-aware group of composers.

Those composers are based on what might be called post-Cagean music, work that challenges the academically oriented post-Serialism so prevalent elsewhere, and chooses instead a looser, simpler, more openly experimental approach.

Allied with this was a 10-day "Institute" sponsored by the Music Critics' Association, in which many of the ideas floating around in private conversations were brought into sharper focus. And there was a Kitchen-sponsored convention of the heads of the music programs at alternate performance spaces around the country, at which a national union of such people was organized.

Chief among the ideas that began to emerge in the course of all the music-making and conversation-making was that, just maybe, music is the dominant vanguard art form just now. These things happen in waves, the energy shifting periodically from one art to another: painting was dominant in the 50's and early 60's, dance challenged it later, and now music seems to be having its say.

The festival itself was open to complaints. Real rock and jazz that also happen to be experimental were under-represented.

In addition, there were probably too many composers, even if the sheer accumulation ultimately proved impressive. A greater selectivity as to number would have been helpful, as would have been more care in insuring representatives from the country as a whole. A limited budget and six composers

nightly tended to preclude long, repetitive-meditative pieces, and to focus attention unfairly on solo pieces and other works that trivialized some of the composers involved. Finally, the Kitchen is hardly an ideal space, especially in June.

That all said, this writer found himself warming to the festival as it progressed. Several of the composers on the opening-night benefit program were particularly misrepresented by the limitations of the format, and the first regular program, on June 9, was the weakest of the series. But then expectations started conforming to the inevitable highs, lows and middles that all such potpourris must bring. And the music started getting better, too.

To this taste, the "best" pieces were by Phill Niblock, Charles Dodge, David Behrman, Rhys Chatham, Frankie Mann and Laurie Anderson. Mr. Niblock did a piece for live bassoon, oboe and overlapping four-track tapes of the same instruments sustaining mournful drones. The result sounded like the inside of some cosmic organ.

Mr. Dodge's setting of Beckett's radio play "Cascando" suffered from a too-actorish actor, but the use of computer synthesis to create one of the spoken parts and the ambient music seemed wonderfully suited to Beckett's sensibility. Mr. Behrman blended humanism and electronics in a specially charming way; Mr. Chatham did a minimal-rock piece that really fused those tendencies superbly, and was evocatively accompanied by some slides by Robert Longo.

Miss Mann revealed an intuitively convincing sense of flow and shape in

her use of all manner of electronic musics, and Miss Anderson confirmed her status as about the most charismatic performance artist we have who uses sound extensively.

There were other notable pieces — far more, one realizes in retrospect, than on most new-music bills. Aside from striking efforts by Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros and Robert

Ashley on the opening night, there was work by Jon Deak, Connie Beckley, Jill Kroesen, David van Tieghem, Michael Byron, Petr Kotik, Barbara Benary and Don Cherry that seemed worthy of special mention.

Even some of the unsuccessful pieces had their place, particularly an effort by Alvin Lucier that failed almost entirely, unless its very intention was to show that failed experiments have a place in a festival of experimental music.

For the record, the composers heretofore unmentioned in the programs were Philip Glass, Steve Reich, A. Spencer Barefield, Karl Berger, Marc Grafe, Garrett List, Leo Smith, Peter Zummo, Charles Amirkhanyan, Scott Johnson, Philip Corner, Malcolm Goldstein, William Hellermann, Charlie Morrow, Joe Celli, Tom Johnson, Jeanne Lee, Larry Austin, Joel Chadabe, George Lewis, Laurie Spiegel, Tony Conrad, Jon Gibson, Annea Lockwood, Charlemagne Palestine, Ivan Tcherepnin, Jon Hassell, David Mahler, Gordori Mumma, Michael Nyman, Richard Teitelbaum, Blue Gené Tyranny, Peter Gordon, Jeffrey Lohn and Ned Sublette.