



Photos by Shigeo Anzai
The variety of sounds of contemporary experimental music were surveyed in *New Music, New York*, a festival presented at the Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance. Left: Richard Teitelbaum explored the colors of electronic sounds in his *Solo for Synthesizers*. Below: Don Cherry, known for his trumpet playing with saxophonist Ornette Coleman, signified the influence of the Third World on new music as he played an African hunter's guitar.

Very wide umbrella for 'New Music, New York'

By CHARLES WARD
Chronicle Staff

UPTOWN MUSIC. DOWNTOWN MUSIC. Perhaps even midtown music. These catchphrases might be peculiar to New York City's geography, but they signify an important, growing trend in the broadening of America's musical culture, as well as some real artistic tensions accompanying that growth.

Midmonth in June, The Kitchen (formally known as the Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance) presented *New Music, New York*, a nine-day festival celebrating a flourishing strain of contemporary American music that has been little known beyond its adherents and propagandists but nonetheless is carving out substantial support in the country's cultural melting pot.

Fifty-nine composers were presented during the festival, all sheltered under the very wide umbrella term "experimental music." *New Music, New York* was, in fact, a broad survey of the styles developed during the last decade both by artists collected in New York's SoHo district — the city's downtown, underground music scene — and by composers gathered in tight communities of sympathizers in other American cities. Concurrent with the festival were two related events.

An Institute on Contemporary Experimental Music, sponsored by the Music Critics Association, attracted critics from around the United States for ten days of intensive exposure to experimental music. Representing writing interests ranging from rock to jazz to traditionally defined classical music, fellows and auditors heard panel discussions and lectures on the history and techniques of experimental music; its interrelationships with classical traditions, jazz, rock, improvisation, Third World music, electronic music and other arts; the importance of the recording studio as a compositional tool; even the search for stardom by many of its composers.

Also, The Kitchen sponsored a three-day conference that brought together representatives of more than 50 new music presenters around the United States for the first major national conference of organizations devoted to sponsoring this music in their communities. These are groups ranging from contemporary arts museums to university experimental and electronic music programs (including the Intermedia Theater at North Texas State University and the Leading Edge Music Series presented by Texas Tech University's music department) and independent, incorporated non-profit groups that specialize in alternative arts.

The growth of experimental music nationally has been so great that five years ago such a conference would not have been possible, suggested Mary MacArthur, executive director of The Kitchen. At that time, many of the groups

that came to the conference either didn't exist or simply were struggling to find their own identity. Now, the individual groups and the movement are strong enough to seek a national alliance. What is this experimental music?

Arguments can rage over its definition, but, essentially, it's a music that is open to any influence. The philosophy is not so much anything goes, but rather that the composers will be accepted, even seek, creative stimulation by any kinds of sounds and all systems of thinking, whether Western-European, African, Indonesian, or Asian. The criterion is whether a particular sound can be harnessed and shaped into a meaningful musical composition. A quartet of string instruments makes fine music. Perhaps a quartet of carefully tuned drums, or wheel rims, or synthesizers, can make equally interesting music. The experimental composer is not put off by any unusual visual element or any seeming break with tradition. Often, he revels in it.

Experimental music does have its tradition, though. Most directly, the composers represented on the *New Music, New York* programs can be linked back to the pioneering work of John Cage who tore away the layers of Western-European traditions and surged into new areas of composition and thinking.

These new styles often have grown out of opposition to mainstream European music and its composers, such as the post-serialists represented by Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen; the generations of composers trained by the Parisian pedagogue Nadia Boulanger; the groups rooted in extensions of the myriad 19th-century compositional styles. These composers, who tend to be conservatory-trained, are the uptown crowd, and wrote John Rockwell of the *New York Times*, organizer of the MCA Institute, "the leading figures on the New York scene of such music . . . tend either to despise the lower Manhattanites or not to take them seriously in the first place. Their loss."

(Not that the experimentalists are completely removed from the covered walkways of academia. Many of the composers programmed on *New Music, New York* teach at universities, the major patrons of American composers today.)

New Music, New York was a celebration of this split and a historical retrospective of experimental music. In the mid-to-late 1960s, in New York, painters, sculptors, dancers, musicians and other artists gathered in SoHo (then a place of cheap rents, now a trendy neighborhood like Houston's

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New music

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Montrose). Ideas flowed freely between the disciplines with the first fruits coming in the visual arts. The Kitchen was established in 1971 in the kitchen of the old Broadway Central Hotel as a place for visual artists to present their works.

The Kitchen's music program was established by Rhys Chatham, the current music director, when he was only 19. (Now, the Kitchen is located up some creaky wooden stairs on the second floor of an old industrial building.) Then, the concerts were a free-for-all for composers who presented their music with minimal technical and promotional help from the Kitchen staff. Now an

incorporated institution, the Kitchen has so many composers wanting performances that the staff must pass artistic judgment with the basic criteria that composers must be ready for public performance.

In the early '70s, other public spaces and many private lofts in the old cast-iron facade SoHo buildings served as places

for performers to present their works. Fewer of these spaces are available now, posing a problem as the quantity of performers grows and as the existing places become more institutionalized.

Out of the SoHo scene has come a panorama of musical ideas ranging from the Velvet Underground (its guitarist John Cale was a violist classically trained in London who went to Tanglewood to study with Iannis Xenakis, drifted to New York and became part of the SoHo scene) to punk rock and New Wave rock to the minimalist music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Glass and Reich are the stars of the classical end of this spectrum and they are becoming recognized even in the uptown musical circles. Most notably, Glass presented his opera

the Metropolitan Opera and he is currently writing an opera on Mahatma Gandhi for the Netherlands Opera.

Constant in this throbbing environment has been the refusal to observe any boundaries of art. MCA institute fellows heard, for example, a disco mix of Glass' *North Star* and saw a video tape by a composer who works as much in video as he does in sound sources. Chatham has programmed evenings of "art" music at the Mudd Club, the hippest spot of the downtown popular music scene.

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Charles Dodge's *Cascando* was a superbly crafted example of computer-derived music. Starting with the recording of an actor reading the Samuel Beckett radio play, Dodge manipulated that sound to produce a distorted voice that answered and mimicked the text and then altered it more to produce an unrecognizable background noise.

Jazz-based trombonist George Lewis performed a finely honed improvisation against a simpler improvisation by a small micro-computer he carries around in a suitcase. Don Cherry, known earlier for his work with saxophonist Ornette Coleman, played an exciting set on the Duzon Goni (an African hunter's guitar) that showed clearly the stylistic dependences of many of the festival's American works.

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had heard most of them before on the West Coast — but the new ways in which they were being used.

The opening program, the most interesting of the festival, was a benefit that featured the stars of the movement. Reich was represented by members of his ensemble, four percussionists who played Part I of *Drumming* (1971, an important work of the movement that grew from his experiences studying with a master drummer of Ghana. The four drummers tossed the piece off at such a speed that many of the nuances were thrown away. Glass played his *Dance No. 4*, a work in progress that raised more questions than it answered. It showed that he is moving more and more towards a western aesthetic of teasing with the musical emotions through a piece and that he has not solved the problem of bridging Western and non-Western ideas.

Pauline Oliveros, a native of Houston now teaching in California, presented *The Tuning Meditation*, a piece in which the audience became the performer. Members were instructed to select a note, hold it for a while, then tune to a note held nearby. The haze of sound, which emerged only after truck roared and rumbled by outside, giving audience members a chance to sneak in a tone, was for-

geous. Meredith Monk, a dancer who now spends an equal amount of time singing her original mix of vocal styles ranging from chanting to Balkan singing to operatic styles. Best

represented SoHo's revival of the composer-as-performer tradition with her music that sounded at once both simple and yet compellingly complex in its vocalisms.

Finally, the first night concluded with Robert Ashley's *The Wolfman* of 1964. A historical work that ushered a new era of electronic shock in classical composition, the piece is predicated on distortions caused by feedback and based on an electronically derived score. As the composer roared into the microphone, half the audience fled and the other half formed the funny sight of people intent on listening while sticking their fingers in their ears.

In the remaining programs, the mix of ideas was fascinating, though certain "theme nights" were evident — jazz, rock, computer and electronics.

Some of the ideas that worked for me, included: Phill Niblock's superimposition of *Four Arthurs* for bassoon with *Two Octaves and a Fifth* for oboe. Two performers circled in the room holding single notes against taped versions of equally long notes. The tiny discrepancies between live and recorded sound became a focal point of the work shown

with the spatial relationship between an instrumental playing in your ear and the taped sound several feet away. The resonance of the sound was justrous.

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sounds produced by a computer by alternating the proximity of his hands to two antennae: one controlled the speed that the notes went by, the other changed the timbre of the sound from that resembling a clarinet to an electric woodwind chorus.

Michael Nymann's *Five Orchestral Pieces Opus Three* took isolated ideas from Webern's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, Op. 10, and turned them into a cynical, sardonic comment on commercial and popular ideas. Richard Teitelbaum performed an improvised solo for synthesizers, attractive for its timbral effects, lacking in stronger melodic, rhythmic ideas.

Chatham's *Guitar Trio* set over a rock rhythm of strumming guitars and highhat cymbal, explored the subtle effects of overtones obtained when guitars are strummed at various frets and not over the body of the instruments. William Hellermann played *Squeek* for "virtuosos swivel-desk chair" — a

rock piece" during which he sat, in full tails of concert dress, in his chair and squeaked away artistically.

Finally, several pieces pointed up the fact that tolerant musicians can sometimes allow the sloppiest of ideas to pass for art.

Alvin Lucier's work-in-progress for amplified piano consisted of a couple of dozen single tones played in succession on a piano, each sounded only after the previous one had died away. Ivan Tcherepnin's *Two Pieces for Piano* included *Fetes*, a triple fugue for piano based on the tune of *Happy Birthday*; it was the kind of piece written for advanced counterpoint classes in college and then immediately thrown away as academic tripe.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny's *The White Night Riot* was a taped collage of sounds from the San Francisco riots in May that included a minimum amount of

musical manipulation; it was a political statement that belonged in a political convention, not a musical festival. Charlemagne Palestine's *Unfiled for Solo Voice* (1979) was an artistic indulgence: He didn't feel like doing what he had set out to do, so he didn't and told us so. Finally, Charlie Morrow's *Dream Song/Vision Chant* was the ultimate in self-oriented music. We watched while he banged a small gong held upright and charmed with his eyes closed. He then informed us of his vision as the psychoanalytical couch was transferred to the concert space.

The festival, because it presented music being written and performed now, had the kind of mixed results that have always been the characteristic of any era's contemporary music. But experimental music is here. It's the cutting edge of musical creation in many ways, its impact is being felt, and its best compositions are a delight to hear.