



John Zorn: Structure's his game.

The Kitchen Improvises

By Tom Johnson

The Kitchen opened its music season with a new music director and a new point of view. The new music director is George Lewis, a composer and trombonist whose work has become fairly well-known around New York. The new point of view, assuming that these opening concerts are symptomatic, is to open the door to new forms of improvising and to provide an outlet for performers to present their own programs. In the past the Kitchen generally adhered to a one-composer format, and since classical avant-gardists rarely had this kind of outlet in the early '70s, it became a valuable forum. In fact, many fine minimalist works, requiring long spans of time and complete composer control, would never have evolved in New York if the Kitchen had not provided a place to present them. The other side of the coin is that this format tended to shut out new music involving improvising groups and works requiring virtuoso performers. To open the current season, however, the Kitchen offered concerts by an improvising octet, the

string bass virtuoso Bertram Turetzky, and the California pianist Rae Imamura.

Is it important for alternative spaces to broaden their scope in these ways? Is the one-composer format less vital or less necessary than before? Is new music itself shifting toward improvised forms and virtuoso forms?

What really interests me about such questions is that it is concert producers who provide the answers to them. Critics could write thousands of words about the differences between these formats, their strengths and weaknesses, and the effect they have on music itself. Say what you like about the power of the press, this sort of commentary doesn't mean very much; it's just someone's opinion. But when it is decided that previously neglected formats will open the season at a place like the Kitchen, that means a lot. It's not just someone's opinion but an actual fact, and everyone concerned must adjust to it.

The program organized by John Zorn on September 9 consisted of a full-evening

work called *Jai Alai*, performed by Zorn with Coby Batty, Polly Bradfield, Eugene Chadbourne, Wayne Horvitz, M.E. Miller, C.K. Noyes, and Bob Ostertag. The performers had a great deal of freedom in choosing what to play, and yet the evening seemed extremely controlled and unified, perhaps even static. The violin, the horns, and the vocal and percussion effects were amplified in such a way that they blended closely with the electric guitar and synthesizers. Everyone concentrated on sliding gestures, pitchless sounds, and coloristic effects, and everything seemed to be coming from one electric place. I can't remember a single point when the music fell into a steady beat, nor was there much concern for specific pitches, tonalities, harmonies, or melodic motifs. Perhaps the main thing that kept this music on such an even keel was the intellectual structure that Zorn overlaid on the improvising. By holding up cards and utilizing sound cues, he controlled the combinations of musicians that could play during particular sections. The instrumentation was always changing, and no particular group ever played together long enough to start cooking the way improvisations often do.

My ear grew a little tired of the sound colors as the evening went on, and I can't say I was enjoying the concert all that much at the time. In retrospect, however, I've been more appreciative of what I heard. These musicians have clearly worked together a lot and developed a very similar concept of playing. I'm impressed that they can put together such unified music within such a free context.

Tom Hamilton, who organized the September 8 concert, works with a sophisticated electronic rig. He didn't seem to have all that much hardware, but he patched it together in such a way that he could spin out a varied repertoire of sounds and textures. The pitches stayed in tune with one another, and they melded into attractive harmonies, embellished by the prerecorded organ-like lines he fed in

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from time to time. The structure was loose, and it was clear that Hamilton was improvising his way around the combinations he had at his disposal, but his opening solo held together all the same, and held my attention as well.

After a while J.D. Parran joined in on flute, and later clarinet. Parran's multiphonic effects, his circular breathing, and his occasional lyrical moments were all quite professional, but not outstanding, and they never seemed to have much to do with the tonality, the phrasing, or the energy shifts fed in by Hamilton on the synthesizing equipment. I had the feeling that Parran probably would have made his way through more or less the same technical vocabulary regardless of whom he was playing with. Come to think of it, Hamilton never seemed to go very far out of his way to pick up on what Parran was doing either.

I understand that these two musicians have been playing together for some years, and I expect that they are achieving more or less what they want. Rather than making pieces or coming together to confront specific tasks, they prefer to just play the way they play and make their own individual statements. There's nothing wrong with that, but I prefer the idea that an improvising group, or any musical group for that matter, should strive for something greater than the sum of its parts.

I haven't quite digested the Turetzky and Imamura events, which came after I had already written most of this. They, like the improvisation programs, have given me some things to think about, and I suspect that one reason I've been thinking about all these concerts is because they were held at the Kitchen, which has always been a kind of think place. The familiar space will probably continue to be like that in its tenth year of musical programming. And the thinking may be going in some new directions. ■