

# In Performance

## MUSIC REVIEW

### *Symphonies That Rumble and Buzz*

By JON PARELES

At the Kitchen on Wednesday night, Glenn Branca conducted the world premiere of his Symphony No. 8 ("The Mystery") with a clenched fist. The posture was right for the music, a continuous, evolving gale created by eight electric guitars, bass and drums. The two-movement symphony and its companion work, Symphony No. 10 ("The Mystery Part 2"), which will be performed at the Kitchen through Sunday, filled the room with tingling, blaring, buzzing, rumbling, crackling overtones and a mixture of coiled tension and annunciatory zeal.

Mr. Branca is a godfather of alternative rock. His early-1980's works for massed, retuned guitars, lingering over structures as elemental as a sustained E major chord, revealed new possibilities for guitar ensembles. Members of Sonic Youth performed with Mr. Branca, and the first Sonic Youth recordings, which meshed punk-rock songs with Branca-like tremolo guitars, appeared on Mr. Branca's Neutral Records. Through Sonic Youth, innumerable other bands discovered the unpredictable beauties of electric-

guitar overtones.

Mr. Branca uses tunings that resonate more richly than the more familiar well-tempered scale. Both consonances and dissonances create phantom tones that can sound like chimes or chainsaws, orchestras or wrecking yards. Rockers use the effects within songs, but Mr. Branca prefers larger structures without words; he performed his first symphony in 1981.

The two new symphonies are symmetrical; each has two movements of about 15 minutes each. (Symphony No. 9 was written for orchestra and chorus.) Although scored for only a dozen performers, including sound engineer and conductor, the music's timbre is orchestral, and so are its ambitions.

Mr. Branca uses some Minimalist techniques: simple gestures, basic harmonies, repetition, unvarying dynamics. Yet his music is filled with a heady late Romanticism. He conjures titanic sounds, and he shapes them for drama, not meditation. Like the symphonies of Sibelius and Bruckner, Mr. Branca's works writhe with unresolved angst and dissolve into rapture. A decade ago his compositions contemplated the

overtones within unchanging chords; his newer music is dense with incident.

In Symphony No. 8, the first movement, "The Passion," uses rising and falling scales, crossing and overlapping, making their way amid a gargantuan buzz. The second, "Spiritual Anarchy," substitutes a keyboard for one guitar, changes to a syncopated drumbeat and piles up clusters and chords that sound both airborne and bristling, with hornlike sustained fanfares and a triumphal final chord.

Symphony No. 10, which was conducted by Miriam McDonough, is more dissonant and more gripping. It begins with "The Final Problem," foreboding and discordant; chords ascend only to be dragged back down. And it ends with "The Horror": a feedback introduction, a drumbeat reminiscent of Gene Krupa in "Sing, Sing, Sing" and an atmosphere thick with quivering overtones and dive-bombing guitars from all directions. Mr. Branca has long known how to create visceral thrills. With his 10th symphony, he has made those thrills tell an edgy, concentrated, white-knuckled story.