

# A rare chance to hear Branca symphonies

By Robert Hicks

Glenn Branca is just back from Europe where he finished recording his "Symphony No. 9 (L'Eve Future)," with the Polish National Radio Orchestra, including a 10-piece chorus, for Phillip Glass's Point Music/Phillips label. Heretofore, Branca's compositions for orchestra, his symphonic works for his 10-piece guitar ensemble, choral pieces and collaborations with various film and performance artists as well as dance and theater companies have gone unrecorded in the United States, except for Symphonies 1 & 3.

Now at age 46, as he prepares for the American premieres of his Symphonies No. 8 & 10 at The Kitchen from Nov. 16-20, Branca has several forthcoming CDs. Atavistic will release Symphonies 8 & 10 soon and has issued "Symphony No. 6 (Devil Choirs at the Gates of Heaven)," "The World Upside Down (Music for Ballet in 7 Movements)," "Symphony No. 3 (Gloria)," and "Symphony No. 2 (The Peak of the Sacred). Forthcoming releases include "Symphony No. 5 (Describing Planes of an Expanding Hypersphere)" and the "Symphony CD Boxset," which includes limited editions of Symphonies Nos. 4 & 7).

Branca's works have a unique emotive power, especially as his pieces develop different moods over periods of long duration. In part, Branca's distinctive sound arises from his use of ten guitars and a unique application of the whole harmonic series. For those familiar with the microtonal works of Harry Partch and Lamonte Young, American pioneers who took parts of the



Villager photo by James Welling

## Glenn Branca

harmonic series and developed their own systems, Branca's originality can be described by way of contrast. Whereas Partch and Young might be said to take a series of numbers and create a closed system to their own liking, according to Branca, he uses all the numbers within a series to explore infinite possibilities.

Branca's five performances at The Kitchen with his ten-guitar ensemble mark their return to New York for the first time since 1989's Bang On a Can Festival.

Branca's also in search of a producer for his

opera, "The Tower," which he wrote 18 months ago with a libretto by Matthew Maguire, commissioned by the New York theater group Creation Co., with a grant from Meet The Composer.

In 1980, Branca formed his first ten-piece guitar ensemble, *The Ascension*, which featured Lee Renaldo and Thurston Moore (now of Sonic Youth) as well as Page Hamilton (now of Helmet). Their debut recording won accolades in both the rock and classical New York Times top ten lists in 1982. Renaldo and Moore worked with Branca through *Symphony No. 4*, then departed to join Sonic Youth.

As a model for *The Ascension*, Branca had written "Instrumental for Six Guitars" which premiered in New York at Max's Easter Festival in 1978, with a group that consisted largely of performance artists who had worked with Branca on his theater pieces. Theater was Branca's first love (he has a degree in Theater Arts from Emerson College in Boston). His first original play, "Scratching the Surface (a farce) was staged in London in 1973, and when he arrived in New York in 1976, Branca wanted to continue his *Bastard Theater Group* from his days in Boston.

His work was non-narrative, very abstract, lacking characters, and increasingly involved with music. At first, actors (non-musicians) would play instruments, then Branca began deliberately to write music for theater. In conjunction with these activities, he formed an experimental rock band, *Theoretical Girls*, with guitar, bass, keyboards and drums. Next came his rock band *The Static*, which later collaborated with the

Japanese butoh dancers Eiko and Koma.

Enthralled by the white noise, blindfolds worn over their eyes and distortion-filled head phones used by *The Static*, Eiko and Koma joined the group in 1979 at the Performing Garage in a piece that applied these same principles to their dance movements.

As a youth, Branca listened first to Broadway show tunes and the jazz of Herbie Mann, Gabor Szabo, Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis. Orchestral music interested him too while working at a record store in Boston, and soon, he was listening to Mahler, Scriabin, Messiaen, Pendereski, Steve Reich and Phillip Glass.

Over the past seven or eight years, Branca's orchestral works have been performed by the Graz Festival Orchestra in Austria, The Hett Music Theater Orchestra in Amsterdam, The Orchestra of St. Luke's at New York's Town Hall, The Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra, The North Dutch Philharmonic Orchestra, The Minnesota Opera Orchestra, The London Sinfonietta and The New York Chamber Sinfonia.

His work for film and dance have been performed by The Alvin Ailey Dance Company, performance artist Eric Bogosian, filmmaker Peter Greenaway, The San Francisco, Eugene, Joffrey and Denver ballets, The Wooster Group, Netherlands Dance Theater, The Philadelphia Dance Company and Laura Dean Dancers.

*Glenn Branca, American premiere of Symphonies No. 8 & 10, at The Kitchen. 512 W. 19th St.; Nov. 16-20, 8 P.M. \$18. 255-5793.*