

'Imaginary Landscapes'

Toys Are Not Us

BY KYLE GANN

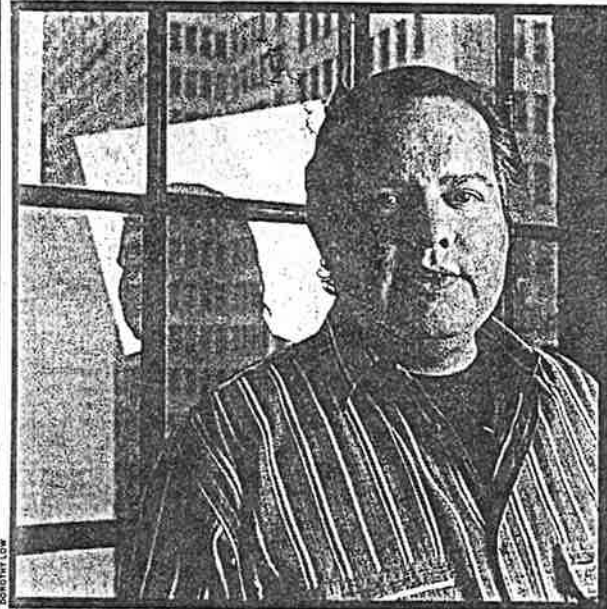
The Kitchen opened the second week of its *Imaginary Landscapes* festival March 3 by being transformed into Shelley Hirsch's apartment, with couch, Tiffany lamp, and kitchen table. In this comfortable setting Hirsch performed a stunning, if uneven, series of theater pieces to the electronic accompaniment of David Weinstein. Earlier Hirsch performances I'd heard had featured ecstatic, stream-of-consciousness singing; here she switched to a Joycean monologue that showed her talents to even better advantage. Over Weinstein's oompahs, she rambled through a story about eggs, peas, sardines, and two uncles in L.A., chasing one tangent after another, and bursting into song in midphrase exactly with the music. Assuming a generically Mediterranean persona, she pleaded in nonsense syllables as if they were passionately meaningful. In a closing monologue she broke into multiple personalities, changing accents phrase by phrase. When she shrieked lithe glissandi into the echoes of a digital delay, she was as psychologically naked as Diamanda Galas, more haunting than Joan LaBarbara.

Hirsch is at her best when she seems out of control, a channeler possessed by unseen forces. Although you're aware of how exquisitely rehearsed her performances must be, they issue as spontaneously as if she were dumping the contents of her unconscious on us, and that tension provides the spark. Still, at times I was bored. A c&w song about cooking (she brandished a cleaver) required wit, something her talent for surreal self-exposure doesn't quite lend itself to. The flow of the separate events lagged in the middle, and didn't exert the grip on the audience it could have. A number of performance artists, as their ambitions have grown, have hired directors, and I think Hirsch has reached the point at which she would benefit from one. When her wild, beautiful energy hits its mark, it devastates.

Alvin Lucier's music, included by curator Nicolas Collins in homage to the not-all-that-distant roots of electronic activity, was the opposite pole of Hirsch's in every respect, though not without its own seductive theatrical aspects. I've long considered Lucier a necessary corollary to John Cage. The latter's adaptation of Husserl's phenomenological formula, "To the sounds themselves," requires, in Cage's music, a contract between composer and listener, a willingness to focus. In Lucier's demonstrations of acoustic phenomena, the contract becomes an irresistible invitation. There are many ways to listen to Cage, many threads one can follow through LaMonte Young's justly tuned melodies, but miss the interference patterns in Lucier's—as sometimes happens in performance—and you've missed the music entirely. But that pinpoint focus teaches one to listen in a way that Cage's music only wishes it could.

With the 1968 classic *Vespers*, Lucier replayed history for those who missed it. Like large, wingless bats, Chris Schiff, Dan Wolf, James Hedges, and Mladen Milicevic came slowly into the dark space waving echo-locators called Sondols (from *sonar* and *blolphin*). These flashlight-like devices bounced bright clicks off the Kitchen's walls, and the distance the echo traveled gave each click a more or less rounded resonance. The length of the echoes varied ever so slightly with each slow turn of the Sondol, and as each player moved he made an extremely subtle sound-analogue of the space's shape.

Almost as subtle was *Bird and Person Dying* of 1975 (one of my favorite titles;



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heterodyning means to create beats between electronic frequencies). At a glacial pace that brought the conceptual music theater of the '60s back to life, Lucier moved around the room carrying an electronic bird that emitted a pleasant *trrrrrrrchpchpchp* over and over. As he changed position relative to several large speakers, the feedback produced by the system shifted in intensity and pitch, while the sound of the bird itself appeared to jump sporadically around the room. The more recent *Fideliotrio*, written for the Fidelio Piano Trio, transferred Lucier's idea of playing out-of-tune with oscillators to acoustic performance. On viola and cello, Lois Martin and Harry Clark glissed carefully past an F (I believe) repeated by Sandra Schuldmann on piano. Martin and Clark did a marvelous job of sustaining intonation, but the acoustics were not grateful to the work, and I only heard the intended beats twice. A nice irony here—the one non-electronic piece in the festival was the one that didn't work.

Gordon Monahan is among the younger generation of sound-source composers, though unlike the Lucier/fudor followers, he's less interested in components than in conceptual aspects of sound. In his *Speaker Swinging*, Sanford Kwinter, Bruce Mau, and Cathy Quinn stood on elevated platforms and swung three speakers in horizontal circles of about a dozen feet in radius. Monahan, in the middle, successively played thin tones, breathy sounds, and clicks through the speakers, whose motion resulted in a variety of Doppler shifts, the slides in pitch that occur when a sounding object moves past you. Given such a bare phenomenon, one listens for the unobvious, and here it was rhythmic: the revolutions created an engaging pulse of two nearly equal beats, and slight differences in the rate of revolution among the three performers made for a subtle phase-shifting that was fun to listen for.

It was a simple idea, but underneath Monahan's innocent veneer lies a shrewd showman. After the tones had played for a while, the house went dark; suddenly,

bright lights on the speakers illuminated the space with a pulsating, rotating glare. Then, when staccato crackling noises replaced the steady tones, the lights began to flicker in rhythm, turning the room into an audiovisual popcorn machine. The succession of effects was sensational, but

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never distracted attention from the physical phenomena. I move we concede that Monahan has written the definitive Doppler piece. It's time for all the clarinet-twirlers and trombone-swingers to renew their subscriptions to *Scientific American* and look for the next fad.

March 5 seemed like Rural Night, a respite from the rest of the festival's urban sensibility. To put it oxymoronically, French-born Laetitia deCompiegne was sort of the Shelley Hirsch of California. In *What Happened?* deCompiegne read a narrative from Melody Sumner's *The Time Is Now*, an opaque, nonchalant account of marriages, divorces, and children ("I told him if he saw other women I'd kill him. He did. So I shot him"). Her synthesizer abstracted the narrative still further into rough-textured speech rhythms, while similarly rough fragments of human silhouettes shone on the wall. *Pie Jesu* combined taped materials—an excerpt from the Fauré Requiem, a folk song sung by an old woman, a child's song—with deCompiegne's own mournful, violinlike melody and noisy, crescendoing drones. The chiaroscuro slides were now of either wolves or dogs, and the ambiguity made a metaphor for the music's atmosphere. DeCompiegne's mellow, nature-oriented sounds and leisurely, loose-knit forms evoked a typically Bay Area ambience (I thought of Ingram Marshall's music), while her mysterious, impenetrable calm seemed thoroughly Gallic.

I was regrettably unable to attend the March 6 performance of Voice Crack, the Swiss duo who extract a thick web of industrial noise from dozens of cheap electronic components. But for me the

festival concluded on a note that couldn't have been topped anyway. In heroic tones, Tom Buckner sang *Somewhere in Arizona 1970*, a minicantata by "Blue" Gene Tyranny with a text adapted from a UFO magazine. The protagonist related how a friend took him to explore a spacecraft that had fallen in the Arizona desert. The description of the inert bodies of dead, three-and-a-half-foot-tall aliens ("tear-shaped were their eyes") was eerily touching, and as riveting as a good ghost story. Next, Tyranny took themes from *Somewhere* and gave the most inspired keyboard performance I've heard in my entire life. In an improvisation called *The Intermediary* he played a grand piano and a little Ensoniq synthesizer, both of which were fed into a delay unit to echo about a dozen seconds later. The resulting canon, starting out with just a major triad colored by the flatted sixth below, rolled cascades of notes out of a few simple phrases. Every line added a new twist to the last, and each time you assumed his invention had exhausted itself he'd break into a new perspective.

Earlier in the week, Weinstein had demonstrated (in the context of some good music, admittedly) standard New York keyboard improv technique: put your fingers flat on the keys and wiggle them. But there was nothing random about *Intermediary*. Every line was spontaneous, yet every note in every dashing arpeggio rang as though God-given. Tyranny kept his two-part texture spare at the beginning, and increased over a 20-minute period in a perfectly gauged crescendo until one would have sworn four pianos were playing. Merging head, heart, and hands into a totally human expression, he captured the sense of profound lightness you find in Woody Allen's best films. Afterward a friend reminded me that Robert Ashley calls Tyranny the world's greatest pianist, and we tried to figure out why that opinion hasn't gained common currency.

Of more momentary note, though, was that Tyranny provided *Imaginary Landscapes* with a moral. By drawing the most music from the least technology, he gave the festival a statement of the principle that guides the best electronic music: It ain't how many toys you got that counts, it's what you do with them. Amen.

To give extra credit to the festival's curator, Nicolas Collins wowed a Chicago audience March 12 with some toys of his own. Playing alone and with local musicians at Randolph Street Gallery, he performed a variety of works with a digital sampling signal-processing system made from a trombone with built-in speaker and circuit board. The improvisations with hastily trained locals were predictably chaotic, but the solo works were impressive. Taking samples from a Peruvian brass band, he transformed by ages a raspy buzz into a joyously disjunct march. He played a duet with Perry Vinson on "backwards guitar" (sounds played into the pickup and resonating the strings, instead of the other way around), which mingled a baby's soft cries into a restless drone. There's so much discipline built into Collins's system he's free to soar with his imagination, and the tastefulness of his sound-manipulation lifts each piece above mere technical interest.

Beginnings and endings reveal much about a composer's attitude toward his music, and I like the way Collins ends. There's never a climax, rarely a fading off; when he's done what he can think of to do with his material, he clicks off abruptly, always about 30 seconds before one would be tempted to think, "This should end soon." His music is elegant and well-conceived, as was his festival. ■