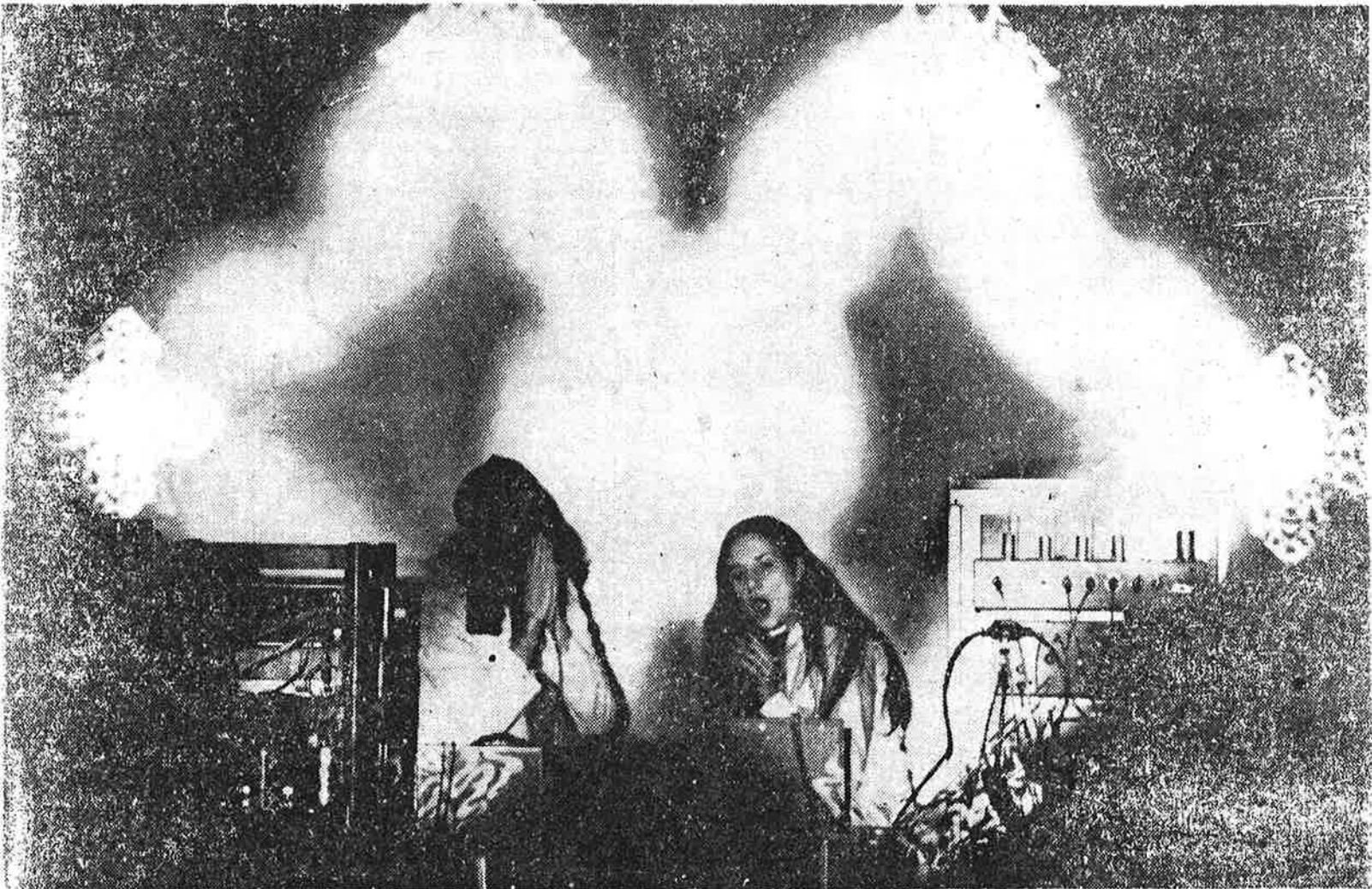


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ARTS AND LEISURE

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In Their 'Dream House', Music Becomes a Means of Meditation



Robert Adler

LaMonte Young, left, and Marian Zazeela with light projections and sine wave generators performing their Theatre of Eternal Music, which opens today at the Kitchen

"A prime mover in the widespread current concern for static music with sustained qualities"

By TOM JOHNSON

THOSE who feel that the term "avant-garde" is still appropriate for works by Boulez or Carter or Schuller or Crumb are probably in for a rude awakening if they attend any of the performances by

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LaMonte Young and Marian Zazeela and their Theatre of Eternal Music this week. Not that the music these artists will present in their "Dream House" is particularly harsh or hard to take. In fact, it has almost no dissonance whatever. It does, however, pose several crucial esthetic questions. Does a piece of music have to have a beginning and ending? Are climaxes and mood changes in-

dispensable? Can music be a form of meditation?

The eight-day run of the Theatre of Eternal Music begins this afternoon at the Kitchen, 59 Wooster Street, a space in SoHo which has become the scene of much of New York's more adventurous musical activity. The artists consider their Dream House an environment, and it will be open to viewers and listeners every after-

noon, as well as for the five evening performances.

Visually, the main element will be Zazeela's slowly shifting light projections. Musically, the main feature of the performances will be Young's improvisatory singing, which glides smoothly around simple three- or four-note modes, without lyrics, while drone tones are sustained by a few other voices and instruments, as well as (Continued

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by electronic sine wave generators.

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The "eternal" nature of this Theatre of Eternal Music is only theoretical, of course, but the performances generally go on for quite a long time, and the listener does get the impression he is hearing only a segment of something endless. "In order for one to tune his own nervous system to vibrate harmoniously with the frequencies of the environment," Young and Zazeela state, "it is necessary to experience the frequencies for a long period of time. The structures in sound and light are composed of specific periodic frequency relationships which we feel can produce particularly meditative and exalted psychological states."

Of course, the degree of exaltation varies widely from listener to listener, depending to a great extent on whether one has a taste for the meditation principles and the Oriental influences which are the foundation of the Dream House. But no one can deny that this sustained music produces a strong hypnotic quality. Nor can there be any question of Young's basic credentials as a composer and his important role in recent artistic developments.

Young, now 38, was one of the major figures in the New York avant-garde of the early sixties, when happenings, intermedia, and concept art were evolving, and he has been the prime mover in the widespread current concern for static music with Oriental qualities. Directly or indirectly he has influenced a number of composers, such

as Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Phil Glass and Charlemagne Palestine, and it is likely that Karlheinz Stockhausen, Young's former teacher and present friend, may also have picked up a few things from him. The verbal notation of Stockhausen's "Aus dem sieben Tagen" and the vocal techniques of "Stimmung" are particularly reminiscent of things Young did earlier.

When I went to visit Young and Zazeela at their spacious modestly furnished loft on Church Street, near Chinatown, Young, wearing his customary long white robe, was seated cross-legged in one corner of the room, practicing a traditional Indian raga and accompanying himself on the tambura, the Indian drone instrument. This was not the style of singing he employs in his Dream House, but the difficult Kirana style, which both he and Zazeela have been studying intensively since 1970 under their guru, the master Indian singer Pandit Pran Nath.

On the walls of the loft were many of Zazeela's paintings and graphics. Some utilize quick calligraphic strokes. Others are painstakingly detailed. All reflect some Oriental influence. Four coiling strips of paper were suspended from the ceiling at one end of the loft, gently turning in the air currents and reflecting light patterns onto the ceiling. I later learned that these were models of similar objects which Zazeela will install in the Dream House at the Kitchen.

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Spread around in one area of the floor was an impressive array of electronic equipment, which could easily be worth \$10,000, though it is probably not a sign of affluence. From the variety of models and vintages one could see that the equipment was a gradual accumulation of components which had become necessary, and which probably represented many personal sacrifices.

Actually, both Young and Zazeela have been relatively successful in obtaining grant support for various projects, and Heiner Friedrich, a German gallery owner, has been instrumental in helping them to acquire small profits from limited editions of their books and recordings. They also obtain relatively high fees for their exhibitions and performances. But of course major engagements of the controversial Theatre of Eternal Music, such as the four-day stints in Rome and at the University of Illinois last year, are sometimes a long way apart, and with no source of income outside of their creative work, one gathers that next month's rent is not always a certainty.

Soon Young finished the raga, and we began to talk. The discussion ranged from speculations about whether Debussy really was influenced by Javanese gamelan music, to Young's theories about ancient Indian music being the source of Western music, to his spiritual motivation for wanting to learn the Kirana style, to his acquaintance with the Japanese gagaku ensemble when he was an undergraduate at U.C.L.A., to the strong reaction he had when he first heard Indian music via an Ali Akbar Khan recording, and finally to the Trio for Strings, which he composed in 1958.

This 50-minute work, written just before he began graduate work in music at the Berkeley campus, is one of the first things he wrote

which reflects the static qualities of Oriental music. According to Young, it is also the piece which convinced the composition teachers at Berkeley that the young composer was crazy. That may seem a bit strange, considering that it is a fairly strict serial work, but it is easier to understand if one considers that the piece goes on for almost five minutes before the fourth note is presented.

After a time, Zazeela spread a white tablecloth down on the carpet, and we all sat cross-legged for a tasty vegetarian lunch with bread and cheese, yogurt, salad and olives. There were also some soaked almonds, which are supposed to be good for the throats of Indian singers, and some hot peppers, which I decided to avoid.

The conversation now turned to Webern. Like so many composers, Young spoke of the Webern Symphony with particular affection. But while most compos-

ers are impressed with the logic of the piece, Young spoke primarily of the static quality which Webern achieved here by keeping specific notes in specific octaves.

Eventually I decided to broach a touchy topic, having to do with the rather severe religious posture which the work of Young and Zazeela now takes. Why, for example, should people be required to remove their shoes and sit on the floor when they go into the Dream House?

The answer was a little hard to make out, because Young and Zazeela both talked at once, as they frequently do. But the main points seemed to be that the artists simply feel they can perform better if the atmosphere is somewhat reverent, and that people who don't like to take off their shoes and sit respectfully on the floor are not likely to enjoy the concerts anyway.

I considered pointing out that mixing politics with art

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Must music have a beginning and an end? Or is it a segment of eternity?

is sometimes irritating, and that mixing religion with art has some of the same problems. But this was understandably a sensitive area, and I decided not to press the point. It is really a peripheral matter in any case.

Later Young put on a couple of tapes which he wanted me to hear, and I was glad he did, as both represented aspects of his earlier work which were completely new to me. The first tape, recorded in 1963, contained jazz improvisations, featuring Young on soprano saxophone, an instrument he was soon to abandon. The rhythm was quite free, the music was modal, and the agile saxophone playing was extremely impressive.

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The other tape, from about the same time, contained a series of experiments Young had conducted with unusual carefully calculated piano tunings. It seemed to me that Young had not taken this particular project much beyond the experimental

stage, though the "out-of-tune" harmonies were fascinating, and they revealed the depth of the composer's still active interest in frequencies and tuning problems.

A somewhat better known segment of Young's earlier work consists of the many little scores he wrote around 1960, which contain no musical notes but simply offer a few sentences of prose instructions. One of these instructs the performer to attempt to coax a grand piano to drink from a bucket of water and eat a bale of hay. When Jim Burton, himself a composer with a strong theatrical flair, interpreted the piece in a concert at Hunter College last fall, his fine pantomiming made the piano really look like a horse. Apparently the piano was not hungry, as it never managed to consume any of the hay, but the audience was delighted with the scene just the same.

Another of Young's prose scores involves amplifying the sound of a small fire. An-

other instructs the performers to turn a butterfly loose in the performing space. Most of these pieces can actually be performed, though some appeal more to the imagination. A few are among the most interesting works of their kind.

Many people seem to regard Young simply as a compulsive artist who has spent most of his life listening to long sustained tones in search of some kind of eternal music. But when one considers the variety of his output, it is clear that he is much more complex than that. I like the way he has always moved on to new challenges, his goals of self-improvement always taking precedence over his desires for recognition.

Now he is singing, and singing quite a bit better than he could a year ago. I suspect that before long he will master this art, as he has already mastered several others. And then it won't surprise me if he goes right on to something else.