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From One End of the Keyboard to the Other

By BERNARD HOLLAND

When tonality went into its celebrated coma some 80 years ago, music became obsessed by procedure. With accepted rules of discourse discredited and with the last vestiges of a musical lingua franca divided into competing dialects, composers had to find new ways of making sense, the ways often taking precedence over the sense.

Composers are still looking. Called back to consciousness, tonality has sat up, blinked its eyes and gone out into the world again, but listeners are as confused as they ever were. This wrestling with new instruments, new methodologies, indeed, new ideas about what music really is, has induced creative exhaustion. One can only wonder how good Beethoven's music would have been had he been asked first to invent the piano, then 32 sonatas for it.

The first two events in a five-concert survey of piano music at the Kitchen showed the problems music has gotten itself into and offered a few indirect suggestions for a way

out. The series, called "The (R)evolutionary Keyboard," ends tomorrow night with music by David Weinstein and Shelley Hirsch.

On Wednesday, Anthony Davis punctuated his own compositions with homages to Theolonious Monk, a comparison not always to Mr. Davis's advantage. Mr. Davis has a number of distinct interests. One is the kind of jazz world Monk lived in, with its rich, extended chords and sophisticated rhythmic transformations. He intensifies modern jazz's treble solos with racing passage work and carries Monk's harmonic explorations a few steps farther.

"Wyang #4" showed Mr. Davis's internationalism. The bright, hollow chords were nice metaphors for the gamelan sound, and the use of Debussy's whole-tone language coaxed Asia a little nearer to the West. Mr. Davis's other bent is a cruel world of atonality: dry staccato writing with a harsh aggressiveness. All these approaches are potentially powerful means of expression, but one longed for some sign of reconciliation or

coherence among them.

Instead, Mr. Davis pursued separate interests separately; when bored with one, he moved abruptly to the next. The impression was of someone who speaks three languages fluently but cannot translate from one to the other. In "Whose Life?" at the end, the recycling of original ideas created forceful music. Elsewhere, Monk's relentless logic seemed an indictment of Mr. Davis's scattered ways.

On Thursday, the first of two evenings with Frederick Rzewski, the composer and pianist played his year-old Sonata, along with music by others. Mr. Rzewski, also, deals with unrelated shards of experience, from "Three Blind Mice" to "Taps." But here found objects are sublimated within a powerful organizational tension; they surface enough to be recognized, but then sink down and take their place as parts rather than fragments. Sometimes these thoughts are more interesting to the composer than to the listener. The slow move-

ment clings almost obsessively to its materials. Indeed, where Mr. Rzewski might relinquish ideas a little sooner, Mr. Davis gives up on them too easily.

Mr. Rzewski, a powerful performer using an amplified piano, also plays "Bread and Roses," in which Christian Wolff contemplates an old labor movement song with melodic variety and rhythmic sameness. Anthony Braxton's fierce virtuoso piece "Composition No. 139" was as bleak as its title. (Strange how history can so quickly turn defiant atonality like this into a period piece.) "Hammer Piano" by John King celebrated the piano as percussion instrument. Its trills and octaves transferred the idea of black and white from eye to ear.

In "My Magic Fingers," Eric Lyons's endearing exuberance made one forget every struggle recited above. The bass lines and rock-music drumming are on tape; the pianist offers descant-like commentary. Tuning between instrument and tape is slyly distorted. Humor and energy are everywhere. Music is made.