

MUSIC

Fed Up

By Gregory Sandow

It goes with a music critic's territory, I guess, but sometimes I get fed up with music. On November 13 I was bitterly disappointed by the Orchestra of Our Time's concert performance of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, an opera so rarely staged I don't know when I'll hear it live again: Virgil Thomson's music is too conservative for contemporary music groups and Gertrude Stein's text is too advanced for opera companies. Friends I met as we came out of Carnegie Hall were livid; much of the glittering audience—drawn by the Orchestra's self-promotion and by the fuss over Thomson's 85th birthday—seemed muzzled, as if they hadn't had as much fun as they'd been told they would. A cellist in the pickup orchestra (despite its name, the Orchestra has no fixed personnel) was asked who was conducting and answered, "Nobody"; that did seem to be the problem. Joel Thome, the group's director, has an unclear, stodgy beat, and not much musical imagination. In three times the normal amount of orchestral rehearsal and God knows how many hours with soloists and chorus, he seemed to have gotten nothing done. The tricky, syncopated rhythm of "He asked for a distant magpie," repeated seven times, was never together, never right, and never wrong in the same way twice. None of the music had the artfully folksy verve it needs; the singers—in a work that badly needs interpretation and has no face value to be taken at—lacked a uniform point of view. Gertrude Stein's bewildering libretto seemed droll and tender as Clamma Dale sang it; Betty Allen mugged and grinned as if the whole thing was a marvelous joke. The chorus was thin sounding, and poorly blended; they would have sounded better with a better conductor. Hardly a word from soloists or chorus could be understood; since no texts were given out, nobody who didn't already know the piece could have had any idea of what it's about. Joel Thome should restrict himself to fund-raising, and leave the artistic direction of his concerts to someone else.

On November 14 I found myself at the Kitchen, listening to a program of Arnold Dreyblatt's music so short that most people thought the end was an intermission. I give Dreyblatt credit for his distinctive ensemble of three double basses, midget upright princess piano, portable pipe organ, and medieval hurdy-gurdy, all but the last built, rebuilt, or at least restrung to make the sounds he wants; for organizing his piece with uncompromising simplicity in blunt short sections; and for resisting any temptation to complicate the music's steady pulse. His point, after all, was to create a distinctive cloud of overtones, and rhythmic and structural complexity might have distracted from that. The sound itself is strikingly original: the overtones emerge in something like geological strata, from simple, steady thirds and fifths at the bottom to elusive pings on top, with percussive thwacks in between that with careful listening seem to change from timbres into melodies. But so what? This is hardly the first overtone piece I've heard; once their novelty wears off, the new-style overtones don't do very much, and in the end seem more like sound effects than music. It bothered me too that the attractively odd ensemble, the quaint medieval woodcut on Dreyblatt's poster, and the suggestive idea of calling the piece *Nodal Excitation* all promise something quirky that's not in the music; the various ingredients of Dreyblatt's art haven't yet quite jelled. I'm sure I'd have preferred Gerry Hemingway's Kitchen performance on November 12, which I couldn't get to but have



PAULA COURT

Arnold Dreyblatt: Oh, wow, listen!

sampled on Hemingway's new record, *Solo Works* (Auricle 111). In two pieces, at least, his own *Black Wind* and Earl Howard's *D.R. for Solo Percussion*, his unself-conscious but determined insistence on treating new things a drummer can do with a trap set as material for composition and not just sound effects (reminiscent of what George Lewis does with new ways to play the trombone) in the end makes even the sounds more interesting. After 15 years of experimental music, it's no longer enough to say "Oh, wow, listen!"