

Jackson Mac Low: Text Sound Pieces

BY TOM JOHNSON

When composers began to realize that they could make music from any sounds, they moved quickly into sound effects, electronic effects, new vocal techniques, and new instrumental sounds, but for the most part, they avoided one of the most obvious possibilities, word sounds. A few striking pieces of music have dealt with spoken sounds, of which the best known are probably Steve Reich's "Come Out," made from a tape loop of a Martin Luther King statement, and Robert Ashley's "She Was a Visitor," a choral work. A group of poets and musicians in Fylkingen, Sweden have achieved some prominence, at least in Europe, for their work with word sounds, and quite a few people have been exploring these possibilities in the Bay Area, where they often term the genre "text sound pieces."

But few artists have really focused their efforts on making music from spoken words, and text sound pieces continue to account for only a tiny

*'Could it be that the sounds
of a person's name do connote
something about the person?'*



Mac Low: making words music

segment of the new music picture as a whole. It is a fascinating segment, however, and I have the feeling that poets and musicians are doing more

and better word pieces of this sort every year.

In New York, Jackson Mac Low has probably done more work of this sort than anyone else. Mac Low is a poet by training, and many of his early works were intended to be read silently in published form, but he soon began to concentrate on sound and performance, and now, at 52, his work is so involved with sound that it really has as much to do with music as with poetry.

In the past, whenever I ran across Mac Low's work, usually at an Avant-Garde Festival, I had a hard time appreciating what he was doing. It seemed to me that, while he might be significant as a poet, he

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wasn't very successful in dealing with sound. His amplification and recording techniques were sometimes faulty, he had no magnetism as a performer, and he didn't seem to know much about rhythm or pitch or musical form. But after hearing the six substantial pieces—which he presented in a three-hour concert at the Kitchen on April 16, I changed my mind abruptly. In this context, with good equipment, most of the sound coming out of the loudspeakers was quite clean. His modest performing style seemed refreshing. And I began to understand that, if I focused on verbal content, the musical criteria didn't matter very much.

"A Word Event for Carlota Schoolman, on her Name" is an improvisatory piece in which two videotaped Mac Lows and one live Mac Low deliver words and sounds derived from the name "Carlota Schoolman." This restriction is more limiting than one might expect, but it leaves room for words and phrases like "a tan man, a new school, a lamb, blam, sun, a new clock, not a clock, a new sun, soon," onomatopoeia like "tataka, taratoo, moo, oolala" and a few vowel sounds which can be drawn out into melodic shapes. These melodies are not very interesting in traditional musical terms, but if one hears them simply as vowel sounds which, like all the other sounds, are derived from "Carlota Schoolman," they take on another kind of significance.

"A Threnody for Sylvia Plath" is a tape collage of the voices of five different poets reading heavy statements about the late poet. Here the musical interest has to do with the unpredictable shifts between dense sections, and silence.

"Counterpoint for Candy Cohen" is all made from a recording of one short statement, which Mac Low spliced into a tape loop and dubbed onto 32 different sound tracks. "The Black Tarantula Crossword Gathas" is a quadraphonic recording of Mac Low reading phrases taken from the poet Kathy Acker. And in "Heavens" and "Simultaneous Numbered Asymmetries," presented by six performers who played instruments as well as reading fragments of text which Mac Low had assembled, the musical score is the words themselves. The musicians play the notes C, D, E, F, etc. whenever those letters appear in the text. This system works surprisingly well. The notes A and E are the most common, of course, but the other pitches crop up fairly often too, and there are provisions within Mac Low's decoding system which allow for occasional sharps and flats as well.

In general, Mac Low's work has many similarities to that of John Cage, who no doubt influenced him at an early stage in his career. Like Cage, he attempts to divorce his own ego from the creative process by relying on chance procedures, and he treats his material in an abstract way, with little regard for normal syntax or meaning. A word in the hands of Mac Low is subject to the same fate as a note in the hands of Cage. It may be run through computer, scrambled unintelligibly,

And in the process, it becomes something else equally valid. □