

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

Board of
Directors

Robert Ashley
Paula Cooper
Suzanne Delehanty
Philip Glass
Barbara London
Mary MacArthur
Barbara Pine
Carlota Schoolman
Robert Stearns
John Stewart
Caroline Thorne
Paul Walter

HALEAKALA, INC.
59 WOOSTER
NEW YORK,
NEW YORK
10012
(212) 925-3615

The Player's Not the Thing

By Gregory Sandow

At traditional recitals, the performer gets more attention than the music; the pieces are usually familiar, and people care most about what the performer will do with them. An exceptional recitalist is one who turns the spotlight back on the music. But recital programs of new music are different: two programs at the Kitchen in mid-September showed that a listener's interest can go either way.

Rae Imamura at first drew my attention to the music, but this wasn't a very good sign. Imamura, a pianist from the Bay Area, isn't an outstandingly strong player. Her touch is hard, her control of dynamics sometimes seems unsure, and the "fast and rugged" (as it says in the score) second movement of Lou Harrison's Third Piano Sonata lay almost beyond the limits of her technique. Her main strength is her serious, almost solemn concentration, which gives her the air of being intent on the music without a thought for herself. Unfortunately, except for the Harrison sonata and *Second Woodstock Fragment*, a sturdy new work by George Lewis, the pieces she played weren't very interesting. The sonata is an early work, and has only intermittently the playful, reserved, and otherworldly air of Harrison's mature music, but it's full of vitality (despite some conventional stretches) and of course was instructive to hear, as early works of master composers usually are. Lewis's piece used harmonies and textures that sounded like serial music of the 1950s, but it also had doggedly repeated jagged fragments, and lush, quasi-romantic, sometimes even triadic harmonies that serial composers tend to shun. If composers had advisory boards instead of muses, Lewis's, for this piece, might have been Stockhausen, Berg, and an awakened, angry Crumb.

The other pieces all sounded conventional. Gerald Oshita's *II Zen 7B* at least started pleasantly, in a style that might be called post-Morton Feldman: soft, isolated single notes, chords, and arpeggios, but often consonant and even ripely sensual instead of dissonant. (Is it a trend to use tonal harmony in contexts that formerly would have been thought to require a more astringent sound?) But then came a loud, turbulent middle section. Imamura was in fact improvising it, guided by a not especially suggestive graphic design in the score; she deserves credit for creating a real musical texture instead of noise, but the contrast—and even more the idea of returning to the quiet sounds of the opening at the end—added nothing new to a too-obvious formal structure. Imamura had to improvise in the remaining two works as well: in John Bischoff's *Audio Wave* by intervening to alter a computer's random choices, and in Jacques Bekaert's *The Ghost of Madison* by building what was in effect her own piece from a score that consisted of an unstructured array of single notes and chords. She

did her job neatly, and even made the end of the computer piece nicely humorous, but I'd heard the materials of both works too many times before; so my attention finally turned back toward her. I began to wonder about her seriousness. Is she dedicated to the actual music she plays, or only to the *idea* of new music? Dedication to the cause is for fund-raisers and publicists; if performers play music on principle instead of because they actually like it then concert-going turns into a duty and the general public is right to stay away.

Bertram Turetzky, by contrast, began his concert by drawing my attention to himself, but not, thank God, because he flaunts his ego: he did it because he's such a *mensch*. In his commentary, he talked straight, from his own experience, and always with feeling, referring to things he'd learned instead of things he'd achieved. And his playing just floored me; I'd known of him because he's such a famous exponent of new techniques on the double bass, but I'd never heard him in concert and had no idea that, by any standard and in any music, he's one of the best instrumental players alive. I don't remember many special techniques in his recital, except a pizzicato tremolo that made the bass sound like a grandfather mandolin (and seemed so idiomatic that it was hard to believe Turetzky had thought it impossible when it was first suggested to him). Mostly, I remember his ordinary pizzicato, much more liquid and resonant than I'd ever heard from a bass, his perfect control of bowing and harmonics, his seemingly infallible intonation (I got so used to it that I forgot how often most bassists play out of tune), and above all his intent, alive way of listening to everything he plays (much rarer than it should be). His finest moment may have been his encore, "Yesterday" (yes, the Beatles tune): he did it pizzicato, pianissimo, and with strummed chords accompanying the melody, as if the bass was as easy to play as a guitar. The song came across in an unforgettable, intimate voice, like cocktail piano at its wee-hours best.

All this glory may have distracted me from most of the music; at first I thought that only two works had really caught my ear, Kenneth Gaburo's *Inside* and Tom Johnson's *Failing*. *Failing* is one of Johnson's self-referential pieces: the player reads a text that tells us how hard the music is. The kicker is that having to read the text makes the music even harder to play, and so the work's title inevitably becomes a description of the performer's experience (which the words don't fail to point out). When I heard Jon Deak play it some years ago, he began quietly, letting the ferocious challenge the piece presents come as a slowly dawning surprise; Turetzky started in high gear, showing his anxiety from the start (perhaps because he

Continued on page 105