

Painting the Devil

By Kyle Gann

Diamanda Galas

How Important is music?

Those of us committed to art's independence from social demands—through training, habit, and critical premise—have a vested interest in avoiding the question. Most music I discuss in this column isn't important to very many people. Luckily, the editors and I have implicitly agreed on Kantian terms to cloister this column for the discussion of a useless, autonomous art. In my playground, the more unimportant music is, the more important it really is, or vice versa.

Why pay attention to unpopular music? Because, as Adorno said, the freer art is from commercial pressure, the more accurately it can mirror and criticize society. I still get a thrill when a piece opens up a new cranny in the conceptualization of form. But that thrill is probably less intense than it was for the first audiences of Bartók or Varèse. Why? Because so many thousands of new formal ideas have appeared in this century. Few of them have been subsequently well developed, and without development the social critique grows superficial. Incremental increases in new musical perception are unavoidably more subtle now than they were 50 years ago, and the smaller they get, the fewer people perceive or care. Form has become the whole point, and other aspects of music

have withered.

That's why it's tempting to believe that music can only achieve an impact now from interaction with social issues. The few obviously important musicians I review, Laurie Anderson and Diamanda Galas chief among them, are vital more for social than musical reasons. Anderson has so much given up autonomy as a goal that she's nearly given up music as well. It's more important to her now that she change people's minds than that her performances hold together organically, and few people seem disappointed that she's not doing more songs.

Galas takes a different path. Her *Vena Cava* (at the Kitchen March 4, 6, and 8; I attended February 19 and 23) shows us a collective image of rantings from the final dementia of AIDS. "I wake up," she begins the piece, whose title refers to veins that carry blood to the heart, "and I see the face of the Devil. And I ask him, 'What time is it?'" The devil never answers, and within minutes lucidity ceases. The damning social indictments couched in seething song of Galas's *Plague Mass* have no counterpart here. Like a hospital room, *Vena Cava* aestheticizes horror against a background of banality. Subliminally, the TV plays "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," while beneath the disorienting flashing of lights in darkness Diamanda shrieks, wails, reiterates platitudes obsessively, and at one point breaks into heavily reverberated and impressively

virtuosic Mozart. (She could be a scorching operatic soprano were she content to waste her talent on anything so impotent.)

I keep expecting to forget that Galas began her career working with European serialists such as Globokar and Xenakis, but her every performance manages to remind me. *Vena Cava*, especially, hardly differs in sound, though it differs extremely in intent, from the erotic monodramas of Sylvano Bussotti. The details of Galas's portrait of the dying ring chillingly true, but strung across a rambling, 65-minute structure they cease to portray, and become a private formal language. Over time, the manic repetitions of number sequences and phrases drawn from a horrible reality ("Are you friendly? Are you friendly?") become predictable devices of musical continuity. The initial shock overwhelms me for 15 minutes, after which I start asking, "Why this now? How do those syllables relate to the ones she shrieked a minute ago?" Galas's inchoate gestures, echoing those that originated in Europe's war terror, have been neutralized into mere language signs by decades of modernism, and even her artistry can't totally reverse the process.

Vena Cava brought to mind Brenda Hutchinson, who uses recordings made in an insane asylum. (Why are the socially important composers all women? Think about it.) If Galas is a painter, Hutchinson is a photographer.



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Shrieking and walling in a private formal language

Galas gives us a portrait of the condemned, but Hutchinson provides the actual stories, in their own halting inflections, of humans society has cast aside. There's no question that Galas's work has more impact for its energy alone. But Hutchinson's quiet work shocks me into sympathy for the insane, while *Vena Cava* fills me with wonder at Galas's astonishing control of vocal power.

It may be that Galas's greater visceral effect will make *Vena Cava* and its association with AIDS's torturous disintegration stick in my mind longer, the way a painting's immediacy outlasts a photograph's. But the work brought my usual response to Galas's music: admiration for her courage, honesty, and talent, mixed with unease at her work's overly aesthetic digestibility. By coding her response to AIDS within the private language of an

autonomous artwork, Galas has strapped herself into a paradox: the more her music succeeds artistically, the more it fails socially, and vice versa.

What do people hear in music? According to Rose Rosengard Subotnik, they don't hear structure (unless trained to, like me), and neither, perhaps, do they hear the real need of Hutchinson's inmates in any way that would stir them to action. What they hear, Subotnik says, is "the sensuous manifestation of particular cultural values." Beyond questions of success or failure, Galas captures in sound the remaining values of the despairing, the dying, the outcast, and the despised. *Vena Cava* doesn't criticize society, as *Plague Mass* did; it paints in vivid strokes something we don't want to see, and leaves us to criticize ourselves. That makes Diamanda Galas very, very important. ■

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