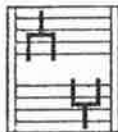


The Kitchen Center

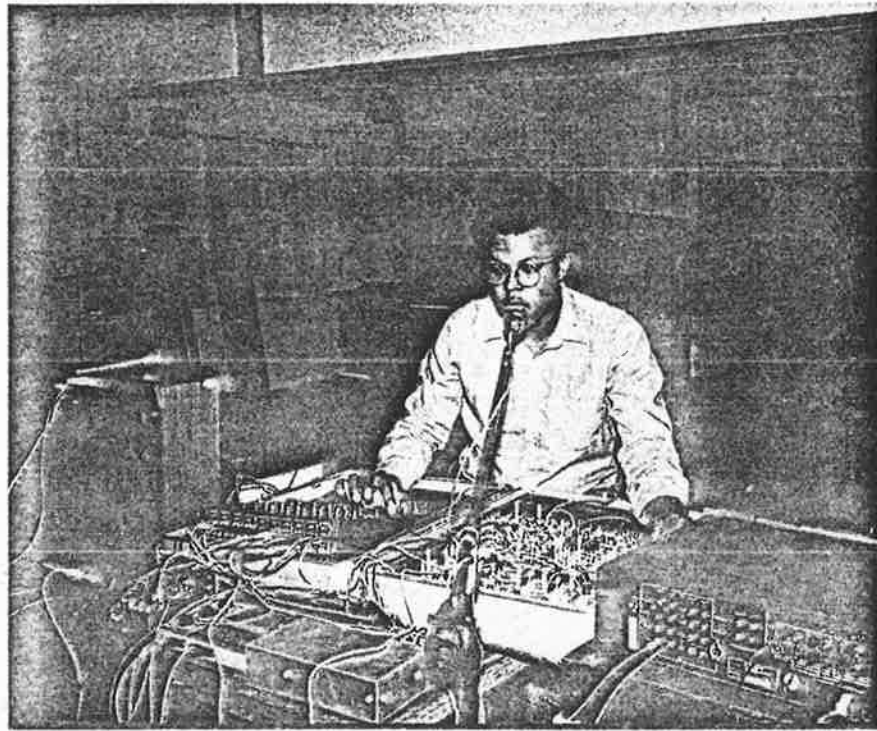
The new season jettisons old categories

Joan La Barbara



The opening concerts of The Kitchen Center's 1980-81 season reflected the attitude of its new music director, George Lewis, who questions our dependence on "labels," those convenient handles by which we categorize and form groups of often dissimilar individuals. Music, he feels, should be "presented freely without predisposition." Lewis is determined to introduce new voices to the SoHo experience and to showcase a greater number of composers who have others play their music—an idea that seems suddenly new after the late '70's blossoming of virtuoso performer/composers. The season, still in flux, shows promise.

The duo concert featuring electronic music environment by Tom Hamilton with instrumental improvisations by J.D. Parran, which opened the season last September 8, was a gradually unfolding event. Four speakers were placed around the audience. What seemed at first like subtle rumbling of traffic emerged as electronic tape sound which grew gently louder, making its presence clear. The beginning sounds were soft, like gentle fragrances of plants whose scents become more apparent



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Lewis: avoiding musical labelling

as the sun warms them. The environment developed with the slow introduction of each line of the four-track tape (created from a series of loops of varying length) and manipulated live by Hamilton, controlling certain parameters (speed, duration, tessitura, and synchronization with the instrumentalist).

Live electronics

“Live electronics” means different things to different people. There are some who consider manipulating the dynamics of a tape to be performing live electronics; others consider live performance to be the playing of commercial synthesizers, while still others build electronic modules which control instrumental sound in real time or which can be manipulated by repatching or knob-turning during performance to create new aural results.

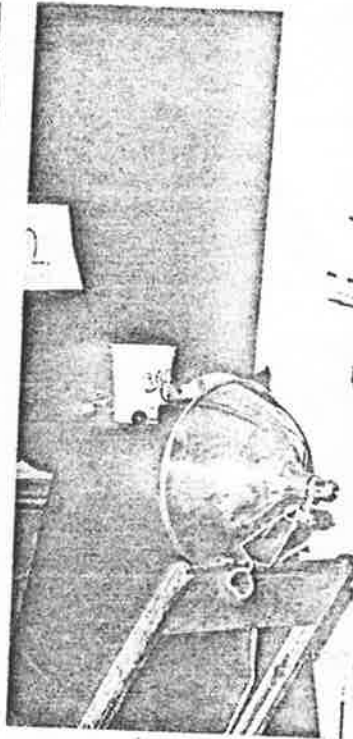
The raw simplicity of Hamilton's live manipulation of pre-recorded tapes and pre-patched modules seemed almost refreshing. The electronic sounds were pure, unnoisy, and relatively calming. J.D. Parran

began his interactive improvisation on flute, playing fluid lines against the electronic counterpoint. His aggressive flute technique contrasted nicely with his laid-back, unaggressive manner of performance; he is a musician whose facility and ability need not be proved by histrionics.

The amplification of the electronic sound was done so tastefully that it never covered the acoustic flute. Traffic sounds from the street blended into the overall ambience without disturbing or inhibiting. One had the sense that Parran was waiting for the environment to become more spacious; where there are no holes one cannot play except to violate the peace, and this was a performer who did not violate peacefulness. Each entrance, first on flute, then on clarinet, was signaled by organlike noodling from the tape. Parran's choice often was to enter on soft beats with single tones, disturbing the air only slightly, tiptoeing in rather than blasting his way through. He moved between multiphonics and pure tones with ease and grace, proving himself to be both a sensitive and



Hamilton: raw simplicity



Zorn: intensity to the point of saturation



Paula Court

an adventurous performer. The evening was pleasant though not *avant garde*.

Raucousness, controlled

The program the next night was in sharp contrast. Billed as "Jai-Alai" (an opera), it presented John Zorn and company in a raucous, highly amplified, Zappa-esque performance, sounding like free jazz but carefully controlled, cued, and scored. The set was an intentional mess; different areas were designated by a collection of objects: balloons attached to microphone stands; slide projectors on metal milk carriers; small wooden packing crates; glasses, pots, megaphones, music stands—all arranged in an organized chaos.

The pre-performance stance was loose, the performers hard to distinguish from audience members. Entrances onto the set were studiously casual and off-hand. Zorn began by blowing up a balloon. The others did similar tasks, blowing into paper bags, giving stage directions, tuning or clearing fuzz out of amplifiers. The first determined sound was brash,

loud, and wailing. Screeches on a clarinet mouthpiece, scratches and scrapes on an amplified violin, growls and squeals from inside the piano all contributed to an abrasive cacophony that lasted for an hour before intermission without letting up for a moment. Such intensity can be exhilarating, but I reached a saturation point at intermission and, like many others, left.

Before leaving, however, I noted a number of interesting elements. Slides on the walls behind the players were being "played" by two projection artists, using their hands to allow parts or all of a particular slide to come into focus, creating flashes and fuzzes and altogether making the visuals move in various ways. Some of the slides were of dancers, others of parts buildings, plants, a man's bare legs in women's red high-heeled shoes, stone steps contrasting with mosaic tiles and wood floors.

Polly Bradfield performed some fascinating tricks on amplified violin, holding a chopstick against the fingerboard and snapping it so that the vibration was amplified, tapping the

stick end-up (not sideways) against the body of the violin (rather like some Basque musicians I saw a number of years ago who let clavé-like sticks fall rhythmically on pieces of resonant wood, mostly guiding the sticks rather than holding them). And, there were lots of unusual noises made from unorthodox items; one fellow played his shirt (rubbing one hand against his shoulder in rhythmic patterns close to a microphone) while another sang into and through floodlight reflectors.

While it was definitely fast-moving and intense, and while one could surmise that catching the cardboard-printed letter cues or the single, percussive audio cues was like hitting the ball so that an opponent could not return it, I couldn't fathom the connection with opera as I understand the word. There seem to be a number of works being called operas these days that fall far short of that elevated classification.

All in all it was an exciting and varied start to a new season at The Kitchen, with great promise for surprising events to come. **MA**