

David Tudor's Homemade Pulsers

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By Tom Johnson

In case you've never read my reviews of electronic music before, I strongly believe that the best work is almost always done by people who design their own circuitry for their own purposes. Another example of first-rate, homemade electronic music is *Pulsers* by the electronics wizard and former piano virtuoso David Tudor. Unfortunately, the only way I can see of doing critical justice to the piece is by describing it accurately, and that isn't going to be easy, but let me try.

Pulsers is mostly about rhythm. Tudor has assembled a variety of homemade electronic components that create their own rhythmic patterns. One goes chugga chug chugga chug, another goes rrrrrrsplat rrrrrrsplat, another goes ticka tacka ticka tacka ticka tacka tacka, another goes chunka plunk chunka chunka plunk chunka plunk-chunka chunka plunk, and so on. For his January 7 performance, he had six discreet channels working, so at times quite a few patterns were churning away at once. With the touch of a dial any one of them might speed up, slow down, shift its accent, fade in, or fade out. Some of the patterns seemed to be going through rather complicated changes without the aid of manual adjustments. For almost an hour the patterns shifted continually, and the changes happened so quickly that it was often not possible to keep track of everything. The piece could be considered minimal in that its basic materials are relatively restricted, but it is certainly not the kind of repetitious slow motion that one usually associates with the term "minimalism."

Pulsers is also about sound. It seems to me that most electronic music attempts in some way to be attractive, but Tudor hasn't worried about that. During much of *Pulsers* the loudspeakers seem to be trying to clear their throats. They sputter and snap, and just do what the circuitry tells them to do. When Tudor built his system he apparently didn't waste much time worrying about tuning, filtering, decorating, adjusting attacks, and such things. He just allowed the circuits to do their raucous things without that sort of encumbrance. At the same time, many of the sounds are unique, simply because the rhythm-producing circuitry itself is so sophisticated, and because of the very lack of coloristic futzing and decorating. I like the integrity of this approach, which reminds me a bit of some of the equally sophisticated homemade electronic music of Gordon Mumma.

Pulsers also has a theatrical side. I always enjoy watching live electronic music being made, even when the equipment is unfamiliar, and even when I can't see the specific switching and dialing movements of the operators. The machinery itself has a strong presence, and since the chances for error or malfunction are at least as great as in concerts of instrumental music, there is always a performance tension. Tudor was especially interesting to watch. His tableful of equipment must have included at least 15 or 20 separate little components, all of which seemed to require more or less constant attention. A twist

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here, a twist there, a pause to check some connection, an adjustment somewhere else, a delicate fade-in movement, another adjustment, and so on. At least one hand was always on the move, and when he made an adjustment, one could immediately hear what he had done. He remained extremely cool, slouching and smoking most of the time, but a virtuosity came through all the same.

Somewhere around the middle of the performance an additional element appeared. This was a tape recording of Takehisa Kosugi playing his electronic violin. I'm not sure how Kosugi's electronic violin works, but in this context it sounded a little like a theremin, a little like whale calls, and something like a wolf turned loose in a gymnasium. Its tone slid all over the electronic rhythms, and its more expressive, more soloistic personality added a unique perspective to the basic *Pulsers* music. I learned later that Tudor had hoped that Kosugi would be able to play his electronic violin live with the performance, which seemed like an excellent idea to me. In fact, that is probably about the only way in which Tudor might improve on what he already has.

Coincidentally, I happened to rehearse one of Tudor's earlier electronic successes, *Rainforest*, a few days later in the televised performance of the Merce Cunningham company. This work, created in the late '60s for the Cunningham dance of the same title, involves no conventional loudspeakers. Instead, electronic signals are fed into barrels, pieces of metal, water sprinklers, and other objects, each of which responds with its own distinct resonance. Like *Pulsers*, is it an ingenious system that really works. Unlike *Pulsers*, the emphasis is more on sound colors than on rhythms. I was pleased to discover that the color comes through even on a small TV set.

Several younger composers who work with Tudor shared his three-night stand at the Kitchen: Linda Fisher, John Driscoll, Phil Edelstein, and Bill Viola. Of the works I heard, I particularly liked Driscoll's *Listening Out Loud*, which involves two musical-saw players, and a nifty bit of circuitry that responds sympathetically to the wails of the saws. The performance was shorter and the situation was simpler than in the Tudor piece, but the music was engrossing all the same. Again the sounds were unique, the performance element was strong, and the electronic set-up had that nice homemade feeling. □