

Faster Than the Ear

By Kyle Gann

Mikel Rouse
Michael Gordon
Virgil Moorefield

Mikel Rouse's music is a luminous enigma. His Broken Consort quartet opened the final concert of the Kitchen's *Gruppen* (groups) series January 16, and I was struck again by a feeling of not being able to listen fast enough. Rouse's music is lushly melodic, yet nearly devoid of repetition. His themes apparently follow some permutational scheme, but they glide like continuous inspiration. The rhythm undulates so smoothly that you can't pin down the underlying process. With some exceptions, each piece keeps the same texture throughout, yet there are arresting shifts of color and rhythm. The surface is opaque, but the background is transparent.

Leading the Machine, with its enlivening arching seven-beat melody, its inner lines of dotted eighth-notes running in blithe disdain for the 4/4 meter, has long been my favorite Rouse piece, but *Copperhead* is replacing it. The latter work's angular lines, played by Dale Kleps on a MIDI-woodwind synthesizer, leap free from their accompaniment to give the feeling tight jazz has: no matter how carefully calculated the structure, the tunes splash as playfully as kids in a wading pool. *Soul Menu*, the only piece Rouse hadn't played publicly, took a mellow '70s-rock

riff and diffracted it through a prism until its rhythms abandoned the vernacular for a chirpy geometric pattern.

Broken Consort's rock look and feel may lead some listeners to false expectations. Bass player James Bergman is no more likely to jump up and toss in an exuberant cadenza than the oboist of the Boston Symphony; the music is too intricate for that. And it was a little odd to see a star drummer like Kim Plainfield tied to notation and delicate number patterns. Probably no other similar group in New York is so meticulously rehearsed, but Broken Consort don't wear their hard work on their sleeves. They sweat before, not during, the performance. It's perfect rock for the classical listener, an endlessly gyrating aural illusion with level upon level to focus on. Ironically, if Rouse didn't write for a rock group, his music would be less energetic, though it might be better understood.

I'd been waiting for someone to program Rouse against the Michael Gordon Philharmonic, for Gordon and Rouse have several rhythmic techniques in common; where Rouse blends his conflicting tempos into linear streams, though, Gordon grinds them against each other for a much bumpier, conflict-ridden music. Gordon's *Low Quartet* is a fairly old work (1986) and no longer representative, but he played it here with his Philharmonic (two guitars, electric keyboard, and bass clarinet). The piece isn't

named for Glass's "Low" Symphony or Bowie's *Low* album, but for the fact that it rarely ventures above middle C. It pitted growly melodies against themselves in different tempos, but its grit glitters better in the version for bass clarinets on Gordon's new *Big Noise From Nicaragua* CD (CRI, which I can't plug officially since I wrote the liner notes) than it did in this mixed group. There was, however, an electric moment when guitarist Mark Stewart accidentally shorted his cord against a chair leg, emitting a shower of sparks.

How Gordon intended his premiere work, *Yo Shakespeare*, to get the dead playwright's attention is a mystery, but it elaborated the composer's usual concerns: it snapped back and forth between different beats (quarter-notes and dotted eighths), writhed within a few harsh sonorities, and freed up its feverish energy long enough to drop into a rock beat. Sections in Gordon's pieces always go on too long, which seems less a flaw than a Cagan strategy; he's not interested in formal perception, but in shaking those incommensurate beats and dissonances in your face until you know what they are. But his pieces have very distinct personalities, and after a couple of repetitions *Yo Shakespeare* will be stuck in my head like the rest of his music. The Philharmonic also played *Esto House* by its saxophonist Evan Ziporyn, smoother than Gordon's music, more boisterous than Rouse's. Combining Ziporyn's two major career inter-



Rouse's music: melodic yet nearly devoid of repetition

ests, it was a tuneful kind of Balinese jazz, balancing reiterated modal melodies between a pair of tempos and over syncopated guitar patterns. The piece broke its steady rhythm for some luscious triple-stop violin and viola solos that reminded me of Stravinsky's *Apollo*.

In the final combo, Virgil Moorefield, drummer, sat between his four electric guitarists on one side and his two brass players and two saxophonists on the other. His music was very much a drummer's music, its melody and counterpoint spare and bland. Moorefield used the instruments as extensions of his drum rhythms, and those rhythms were unimaginative. Throughout 10 pieces, not once did a rhythmic dissonance summon the guts to

cross a barline: every syncopation scurried to its resolution by the next downbeat. A piece with modal saxes playing against their digitally delayed echo showed the composer's acquaintance with early Terry Riley, while the other pieces, repetitively patterned, suffocated in the ubiquitous influence of Steve Reich and King Crimson. These '70s clichés weren't cleverly deconstructed, but unconsciously imitated and badly remembered.

However, Moorefield's band cranked out its simplistic patterns with a slapdash bravado that brought whistles and cheers; Rouse's exquisite, unostentatious musicianship had been more coolly received. Many people go to concerts to see performers, surprisingly few to hear music. ■