

Alvin Curran / Gordon Monahan

Sound and Let Sound

BY KYLE GANN

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The layered coexistence of melody and real life is an Alvin Curran trademark: for example, a jazz soliloquy played over creaking noises or birdsongs. He shares the device with Henri Pousseur, Luc Ferrari, and the French/Italian branch of postserialist collage. But Europeans feel a compulsion to synthesize, to tie noise to music via a series of graded steps. Curran, though he lived in Italy until his return last year to New York, brings American common sense to the problem. His music doesn't synthesize, because it doesn't acknowledge a contradiction; it sounds and lets sound. As beautiful as art can be—and *should* be—his music seems to suggest, life goes on around it and need not be tuned out.

It's a Cagean premise, but a wider-than-Cagean sensibility, for Curran's aesthetic welcomes not only noise, but subjectivity, intentional prettiness, and even the unabashed resuscitation of old pop tunes. That aesthetic is soft-edged, receptive, hard to pin down (hence his delayed recognition here), and riddled with yin. In a 1980 orchestral work I heard, he had a section of players drop their instruments and croon a simple pentatonic melody: it seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

In Curran's February 11 American premier of *Electric Rags 1* ("Miss Behavin'") at the Kitchen's Winter Music festival, a computer was the sonic ocean he dropped pebbles into. He improvised at a Yamaha MIDI piano, while four synthesizers and a computer supervised by Christopher Dobrian stored what he played, screwed it around, spit it back, and added a few noises of their own. Curran played a note, the computer (his "ventriloquist's dummy," he said) shot back a word. More often, he'd hit a chord, the computer would play it back seconds later, and he'd run playful circles around the responses. Elsewhere, the computer would double Curran's bass line in pizzicato, turning

him into a one-man jazz duo and giving us a glimpse of his fantastic jazz chops.

Curran aims, his program notes said, for spontaneity without memory, and he began by fluttering his hands *above* the keyboard, hitting accidental notes, in an attempt to defuse his conditioned responses. Nevertheless, for those who have followed his too few and rare recordings and American performances, what followed was (as he lamented) very recognizably Alvin Curran. Most familiar was the way he played with incommensurate energy levels: dissonant minimalist patterns suddenly broke into "Red River Valley," a rousing rendition of "Makin'

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Whoopie" collapsed into a long electronic drone. The contrasts were simultaneous, too: voices murmured and grunted beneath a repeating tune, birds accompanied flurrying treble gestures.

Cosmopolitanism was an aspect Curran couldn't hide. The meticulous definition of every texture by range, touch, and dynamics implied a background of European serialism; yet his generosity with extra notes in a hesitant gloss on "I've Been Working on the Railroad" gave a nod to Ives's First Sonata. The quotations didn't stand out, for this odd play of contrasts made everything sound quoted. Instead, minimalist patterns, serialist gestures, cocktail-jazz licks, marvelously intricate tonal counterpoint, all turned into dream images, each undercutting the one before it: call him the Charles Ives of

electro-improv. Modulating its emotion in slow, undulating waves, *Electric Rags 1* was luminously calm even in frenetic passages. Fragile, too, for Curran loves to play with that just-about-to-end feeling.

Gordon Monahan, the younger, lesser-known pianist who had occupied the same stage the previous evening, reminds me of a Canadian Henry Cowell, seven decades late. His *This Piano Thing* applied to an amplified prepared piano—screws, bolts, rubber, and other materials affixed to the strings in the manner invented by Cage in 1938—the same kind of abstract, structural approach Monahan took to the naked piano a few years ago in *Piano Mechanics*. *Mechanics* was clever, making sounds you didn't think a piano could make; *Piano Thing* looked beyond cleverness to the poetry of noise.

The most refreshing thing about Monahan's music is a brash, unremitting austerity that no recent American music has had the chutzpah for. First, a steely clank on a repeated note grew into jingling chords pursued with a brutal, unyielding energy. A second section, oriental in atmosphere, corralled tiny glissandos (made by moving his fingers along the strings) into an engaging rhythmic jaunt. Lastly, Monahan improvised brittle tinkles on the highest keys, slowly descending into a whirlwind of noises punctuated by sharp accents and mild forearm clusters.

The primary interest, though, came not from what Monahan played, but from the wild side effects of the amplified bolts and screws. Above the actual attacks of felt on strings hovered a steel factory of



Curran: life goes on.

noises: ringing, buzzing, clinking, grating. 'Tbo, Monahan's too smart a musician to be satisfied with surface. The first movement's unremitting chords could have become dull, but he continually nuanced them with the sustain pedal, creating a counterpoint of afterings and half-rings that kept the audio going subtly in and out of focus. His string preparations aimed more at a monolithic sonority than at timbral variety, and you could cavil that they were less varied than Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* have led us to expect. But I was sorry when the piece ended so soon (23 minutes), and it made me itch to hear it again.

Monahan then performed his theatrical *Speaker Swinging*, in which he swings loudspeakers by chains to hear the Doppler effect; but since I reviewed it here some months ago, I sped off to where I was needed next. ■