

Musical 'Risks' Taken in Stride

By ROBERT PALMER

Tom Johnson's "Risks for Unrehearsed Performers," presented at the Kitchen on Saturday night, was a risky enterprise indeed. The four performers—Richard Stoltzman on clarinet, David Reck on the Indian veena, Lukas Foss on piano and Emily Derr singing soprano—had no idea what they would be asked to do until they opened the white boxes that were sitting in the middle of the performing space. Had they known, one wonders whether they would all have taken the risk.

Mr. Stoltzman found that his box contained a tray of slides, which were projected on a screen. The slides asked him to play a 14-note motif again and again, and to invest more creativity, feeling, and technique in each successive performance. (There were a few more specific musical instructions

as well.) He acquitted himself admirably.

Mr. Reck was given an audio tape, which first asked him to imitate a series of increasingly more complex piano figures on the veena. He did so as well as he could, which was not very well by the last few figures. Then the tape asked him to improvise on an ostinato figure, gradually adding ornaments and complexity "until you are playing at the very peak of your technical and musical capabilities." This was more in his line of work, and he did it very well.

Miss Derr was to read 15 cards, very gradually and subtly changing from her speaking voice to a singing voice, and then to find melodies that were more and more personal and difficult to define.

She turned in the most assured performance of the evening. Mr. Foss was asked to improvise the same sort of cadenza over and over, making it more and more musical, and he lost patience well before his series of slides was over. The audience hissed him when he asked the projectionist to skip through some of the slides.

Finally, the four performers were instructed to make group music using a restricted number of pitches. Mr. Reck's veena was too soft to be heard clearly, but otherwise the final Risk came off remarkably well, with Mr. Foss providing restrained accompaniment to a sensitive, gauzy interplay of clarinet and voice.

... have been technically the
... a long series of index cards the
... Johnson had typed and,
... gradually change from her speaking
... The audience was not to be able to
... instant of change. The adventure, thanks
... to the soprano's ear for pitch, weight,
... a searchlight into those problematic,
... defined areas between speaking and singing that
... as important with the appearance of *Pierrot
... and Wozzeck*. Since many of today's younger
... composers are interested in fresh uses of the voice, the
... problem is still worth illuminating. Miss Derr tried it with
... low crooning; melismatic, pseudo-Flamenco chest tones;
... and bright, chirpy head-tones, mostly on the speak-sing
... fence. But the instructions repeated and repeated: Do
... better. Be more personal. Produce something really hard
... to define. Johnson might as well have said, "You're going
... out there an opera singer, and you're coming back a
... miracle woman."

I won't go into Reck's trouble in imitating on his veena the increasingly more complicated modal tune given him via tape from a piano. He may not be a great instrumentalist, but his book, *Music of the Whole Earth*, has earned him the whole earth's respect. And he persevered to the end of his risk. That's more than I can say for Foss, who almost pooped the party. I thought he of all people would be the life of it. Besides being a great pianist, he's a remarkable composer (*Time Cycle* is close to a modern classic) and a valuable conductor less afraid than almost anybody else to explore new music. But he lacked the patience required of him by Johnson the other night.

... a short cadenza that begins on a low
... register, erupts into a flurry of
... melts away into a lovely, soft sonority."
... instruction. Fine. Foss tossed off a beauty.
... Such flair. Such witty brevity. Such a
... tone triad at the end. Next instruction (I don't
... exactly): Think for a moment about how it could be
... made better. Next instruction: A word-for-word repeat of
... the first — "Now improvise a cadenza," etcetera. On and
... on and on it went. Think about it. Do it. Think about it. Do
... it. Foss smiled. He tried again. Thought. Tried again. One
... cadenza — was this the beginning of his resistance —
... quoted a stretch of the dazzling one from Bach's Fifth
... Brandenburg Concerto. Several of his efforts began with
... what seemed to be an imitation of the low, accelerating
... clarinet trill that begins *Rhapsody in Blue*. Finally, Foss
... gave up. He waved away slide after slide, and although
... (like all the risk-takers) he was explicitly permitted to do
... this, it seemed a cop-out. Asked by another slide how he
... would do it differently in the future, he said he wouldn't do
... it at all.

Yet Johnson had the last word after all, because Foss joined the three other unrehearsed performers in a quartet on E-flat, then adding B-flat, C, and D-flat in succession. Reck's playing was lovely. Soprano and clarinet murmured together in a shared reverie. Foss supported them quietly, modestly, and amiably.

Yet the lesson wasn't that music conquers all. Nor was it merely a minimalist's parody of maximalist tradition. It wasn't even entirely that it takes a lot of damned hard work to prime your music-making up to a quality that makes it worth the public's time and money. There was something else. The instructions had acted as the impetus for a lot of physical and mental, call it musical, energy. That energy seemed to feed back into the repeated instructions. The words themselves, as perceived by the audience, as well as by the musicians, became something to attend to, respect, possibly fear. Eventually, each repeated *Now now now improvise improvise improvise cadenza cadenza cadenza* became an insistent, loud, heavy drop in a water-torture. Words had become a music of oppression. The results might be beautiful, but the method was painful. We're told that Heifetz would practice until his fingers bled and then keep practicing. Johnson's evening of torture, grimaces, laughs, and a little beauty reminded me of that.