KYLE GANN
Cyber-Angel Plays Pianos
-as the Platitudes Fly

The Poetry of Technology

Computerized Butterflies

The lighter side of Morton Subotnick's Imagination is filled with hummingbirds and butterflies. Indeed, the composer prefers to write anything I love as much as his MIDI-controlled ensemble: The Key to Songs, but the little piece to his newest disc, and the Butterflies Bop to Sing (New World), a 1998 composition, is a close second. Both works flow from Subotnick's love for Max Ernst's surrealistic novel: The Hundred Beautiful Women (La Femme 100 Têtes), which also inspired a huge 1993 piano piece by George Antheil. In The Butterflies...the Amernet String Quartet plays propulsive tonal melodies which are modified by the computer, as keyboardist James Tocco plays prickly syncytiums. Though tonal, the music is tense, skirting hairpin turns in a repeated-note idiom that keeps you on your ear's edge, and the quartet gets computer-modified until it sounds like layers and layers of quartets. I wish I knew more about the techniques involved, but I like Subotnick best in this foruscriticallymodeled.

The disc's "flipside," again based on Ernst, is All My Hummingbirds Have Allia, playing the California Institute of Technology. Soprano Joan La Barbara, tenor Alvin Lucier have pretty much continued making fairly meditative music focused on sound and various processes for producing it. Their music does not lack cosmic implications, but those are generally left to be read in by the listener. Subotnick, however, has greater ambitions. He's gone in the direction of theater, and wants to make explicit the big, metaphysical statements about the Oneness of Reality that these hippie-named-sexagenarians inherited from the '60s. And so we get first Joan's Room (1986), a single-ribbon opera about the Holocaust, and now Intimate Immensity, a computer-driven meditation in which humans use technology to transcend the limitations of time and space. Like many of Subotnick's works (Four Butterflies, based on the trivariate symmetry of a butterfly's body; Return, based on the cyclic arrival of Halley's Comet), this new piece sprang from a basic metaphor: a list opening up into a hand, first seen on a giant video screen. On opposite sides of the stage sat soprano Joan La Barbara and baritone Thomas Buckner on raised platforms, starting into computers. Their dialogue, written by Subotnick with quotations from Gaston Bachelard, Kafka, and others, constituted an array of flow abstract generalizations. "I am aware of a transforming immensity within me," La Barbara declared. "Immensity is the movement of emotionless man." Counterterror after awhile, "We can alter the blind direction of the senseless forces that surround us." The lessons of the machine are objectivity and neutrality; "immensity is within ourselves—raft. And so on.

Wow—like cosmic, dark—but that's an awful flat connotational surface for the audience to get a foothold on. Artists like Samuel Beckett in Molloy and Thornton Wilder in Our Town (not to list the examples that spring to mind) made grand unification statements by conjuring up the minute statements of daily existence. But Subotnick's strategy is just the opposite, as clear on an unimaginably grand generalities. And the results were, well, mundane. Impersonal. It would be easier to identify with CEOs at Philip Morris (coos—one of the sponsors) than with these distracted, passive characters. Interestingly, Intimate Immensity relied on textual paradigms that go back to Max Apple and Todd, alternating this, noncontrapuntal textures with occasional dancelike passages of swirling obois that act as a sustained climax. Here the oboists consisted of LaBarbara chipping in with her own part, and Buckner crooning light, linear lines, techniques that suited each singer perfectly.

The singers were also called upon to perform, in alternation with Western, the quick "chaka-chaka" syllables of the Balinese Monkey Chant, the effect was surprisingly integrated even though it contrasted oddly with the work's impersonal tone. One of the most successful features of the production was the laser-disc video by Woody and Steve Vanlina, images of whirling globes and infinitely receding hallways that offered precisely the detailed, tactile, earthy quality that was missing in the work. Technically masterful, occasionally stark, often musically engaging, but theatrically misguided, Intimate Immensity is a rather low-climax for a Lincoln Center Festival that looks to have nearly billed out of the new music business after a stellar summer last year. Coming after the wildly overpriced flop of Tod Machover's Brain Opera last month, it suggests that Lincoln Center should stop counting on more high-tech toys to bring audiences in at that magical quality. People don't appreciate machines.

A few elucidating lines got arbitrarily cut from my article on Virgil Thomson. I supply them here, beginning with a quote from a memo to Thomson by his editor Geoffrey Parsons: "Incidentally, I'd use the word 'amateurish' in your column again, I shall scream. I haven't the finest idea of what you mean by the word, and I don't believe you have." Even critics as great as Thomson are made, not born.

Bert is a thing that he assumes every man knows who are.