Someone's in The Kitchen—With Music

by Tom Johnson

One night a soprano crawls out from under a piano to sing a contemporary song. Another night a Rhythm is laying on a bed of television sets playing her instrument while the audience mills around. Another night a chorus of 20 people, including the director, is playing her instrument while voices. Another night a cellist is lying on the floor playing her instrument while images of the musicians are created on television screens. If you haven't heard any concerts like these lately, it is only because you haven't been attending The Kitchen, which is where they take place.

The Kitchen was started just a year ago by a small group of artists. With the help of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, the organizers rented a large room in the Mercers Arts Center at 240 Mercer Street and converted it into a space which was originally a restaurant. For this occasion the place was named The Kitchen, in a way, is what The Kitchen is.

The prime movers were Woody and Steina Vasulka who, after working in films and music in Czechoslovakia, had been seduced by the artistic possibilities of videotape and wanted to set up a space where artists could create and present their work. The organizers invited some composers and performers to come and see how their work could be performed. They were impressed by what they saw and decided to present it themselves.

One of the most gratifying results of the Kitchen's activities is the opportunity it has provided for composers seeking performance and to present effectively in concerts of contemporary music. But all I could pick up were some occasions of startling sound. But last year I heard about the possibility of performing to focus on, it was difficult to draw audiences into their music.

As concert organizers go, Chatham is remarkably open-minded. He recognizes that the audience has to be common to have a few concerts, to get to know the space, to find out what works and what doesn't. But Chatham is unwilling to close his doors to this type of thing. "It is important to have a place where musical explorations can be heard," he explains, "regardless of how unconventional or controversial they may be. Of course, that doesn't mean the music will be to everyone's taste. We have to keep the space open to new ideas and activities going on in several directions simultaneously.

This flexibility is seldom available to composers, because concert halls generally have proscriptions stages. But the opportunity to manipulate the performance space is proved to be an important aspect of electronic music. It has been particularly useful for composers, found out long ago that, with the right performance space to focus on, it was difficult to draw audiences into their music.

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