

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 cellist is lying on a bed of television sets playing her instrument while the audience mills around. Another night a chorus of 20 people is wandering around the room making strange gurgling sounds with their voices. Another night musicians are creating loud repetitive electronic sounds while images of the musicians are fused with abstract patterns 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 Mercer Arts Center at 240 Mercer Street in the Village, and equipped it with videotape machines, tape recorders, television monitors, loudspeakers, a piano and other equipment.

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 center in New York where they and others could explore the many ways of creating visual images electronically. Dimitri Devyatkin acted as coordinator for the video events, and Rhys Chatham became the music director, all of them donating their time. When their first season ended nine months later, The Kitchen had become clearly established as the center of video experimentation in New York and the most active showcase for new music in the area.

The music series last year included some 40 concerts. Judging from the ones I attended, these events varied drastically both in style and quality. But that is to be expected in view of the way The Kitchen functions. It is not a group of performers who specialize in new music, such as The Contemporary Chamber Ensemble or Specu-Musicae. Nor is it an administrative body which promotes concerts according to published policies, such as Composers Forum at Hell Library or the Gallery of Music in Our Time. Essentially, The Kitchen is

simply a space where composers can organize their own concerts. As such, it is not a very good outlet for composers seeking performances of string quartets or song cycles. But it is ideal for composers of electronic music, composers who perform their own music, and composers who, for various reasons, want to control the way in which their music will be staged.

The man who schedules the concerts, Rhys Chatham, is a 23-year-old composer who studied electronic music with Morton Subotnick at N.Y.U. a few years ago. He is not the ambitious go-getter type that you might expect to be organizing concerts. When you talk to him, you can see from his long bushy hair, his youthful face and his exceedingly gentle manner that he operates on another wavelength.

"When we started The Kitchen," he explains, "it was on a very small scale. As the main musical activity, I set up a series of Monday night concerts with a few composers I knew, most of whom were using electronic mediums which are difficult to present effectively in conventional concert halls. But before long, people started to find out about us, and composers of all kinds began to contact me about doing concerts. Besides continuing the Monday night series, we had to schedule many concerts on other nights in order to make room for all the things we wanted to present. I guess composers liked the flexible room and the general experimental atmosphere and the fact that we let them have complete artistic control over everything — audience seating arrangements, lighting, length of concerts, everything."

The room is a large open space which was originally a hotel kitchen. It is only about 30 feet wide, but it seats 150 comfortably, and its exposed brick walls create lively acoustics which enhance most types of music. Like La Mama, the Cubiculo and other theaters of this type, there is no permanent stage, and all the chairs are movable. So it can be easily transformed from a theater in the round to a frontal proscenium-type arrangement or to an open gallery space with activities going on in several directions simultaneously.

This flexibility is seldom available to composers, be-

cause concert halls generally have proscenium stages. But the opportunity to manipulate the performance space has proved to be an important stimulus to composers. It has been particularly useful for electronic composers, who found out long ago that, without a live performer to focus on, it was difficult to draw audiences into their music.

As concert organizers go, Chatham is remarkably open-minded. Most of his own compositions are long electronic pieces that deal with tiny variations in sound. But last year he scheduled almost every other kind of electronic music going, as well as semi-theatrical concerts, concerts involving dancers, groups that play homemade instruments, experimental jazz groups, and avant-garde improvising ensembles.

One of the most gratifying concerts I heard was an evening of improvisation by Frederic Rzewski, Gordon Mumma, Garrett List and Gregory Reeve. After about an hour of very free, sensitive improvising, they passed out tin whistles, allowing the audience to join in. The idea may sound silly, but it turned out to be one of the most successful attempts at audience participation I have witnessed.

Probably the strangest event of the season was the program of Mary Anne Amacher. For this occasion the small audience was seated on a carpet in the middle of the room, and a meditative atmosphere was established with soft lighting and incense. Then we were handed a program which explained that Miss Amacher's music was being played in Boston, and we were asked to try to hear it without the aid of any normal communications system. According to Chatham, three people claimed to have heard the music. But all I could pick up was some occasional shuffling in the hallway, and I left that night feeling quite resentful about the whole affair.

But Chatham is unwilling to close his doors to this type of thing. "It is important to have a place where new ideas can be presented," he explains, "regardless of how unconventional or controversial they may be. Of course, that doesn't mean that we don't have any standards. We've had to turn down a number of composers when we didn't feel they

were ready to do public concerts yet. And in concerts which involve traditional instruments, we have to see to it that all the performers will be of professional caliber. And, of course, there is not much point in our doing performances of Webern, Varèse, or even Stockhausen, because those things are programmed frequently by groups that specialize in that area."

With an extension of its grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, The Kitchen has paid its rent for another season, replaced some of its borrowed electronic equipment with its own possessions, and even



Alix Jeffry

Rhys Chatham

"A place where new ideas can be presented"

established a small advertising budget. Someone donated a dimmer board which will be a significant improvement over the makeshift lighting equipment used last year, and will make dance and theatrical events more viable.

The Kitchen began its new season with a three-week-long Women's Video Festival, which ended last week, and the concerts will begin tomorrow night. I asked Chatham what would be on the opening program, and he did

his best to describe the pieces. "There will be a pure electronic piece by Laurie Spiegel, and a tape piece by Jim Burton which incorporates some dialogue. Then there will be two short theater pieces by Mike Levenson. One he performs in a gorilla mask, and the other is a snare drum solo with socio-political overtones. Judith Sherman is doing a piece for voice and tape, with a text of her own. And Garrett List is presenting a piece for several amplified instruments."

The season will continue in a long stream of weekly showcases, each devoted to the work of a single composer. Burton and List will both present programs of their own, along with Charlie Morrow, Sergio Cervetti, Phil Niblock and Tony Conrad. There will also be a few more familiar names, such as Emmanuel Ghent, David Behrman and Alvin Lucier. Another evening will be devoted to the group creations of Kirk Nurock and his Natural Sound Workshop.

The one-man format is seldom used in concerts of contemporary music, although there is much to be said in favor of this practice. It allows the composer to set the scene specifically for his music, and allows the audience to gain a more complete impression of what the artist is doing. In the past, many remarkable new ideas have gone by almost unnoticed, simply because they were stuffed into the middle of a concert which contained a potpourri of conflicting styles. And when they were noticed, they were often misunderstood, simply because it is so difficult to determine what a composer is doing on the basis of one short piece.

Of course, the disadvantage of the one-man show is that, if one finds that he doesn't like what he has come to hear, there is little chance that the rest of the concert will be much different. And since most of the things presented at The Kitchen have never been presented before, no one can predict what any of them will be like. So the audience has no guarantees, and it will probably continue to be common to have a few people leaving during the middle of the concerts instead of at the end. But that, in a way, is what The Kitchen is all about.

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