

KYLE GANN

Cyber-Angel Plays Pianos
as the Platitudes Fly

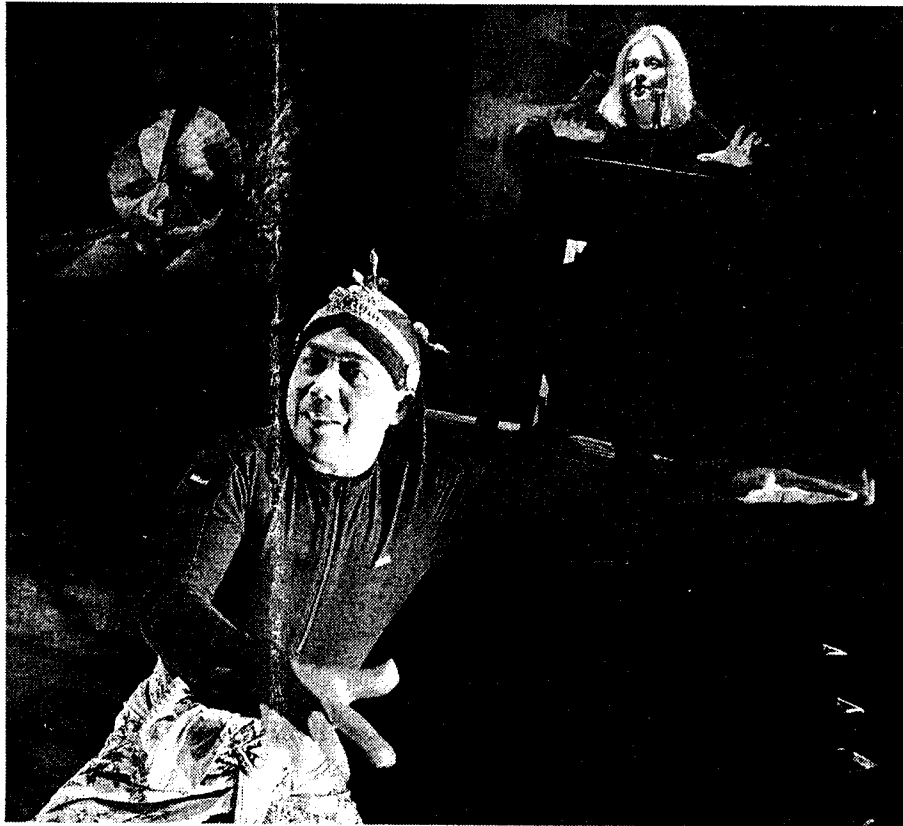
The Poetry of Technology

Computerized Butterflies

The lighter side of Morton Subotnick's imagination is filled with hummingbirds and butterflies. He may never again write anything I love as much as his MIDI-controlled ensemble piece *The Key to Songs*, but the titlepiece to his newest disc, *And the Butterflies Begin To Sing* (New World), a 1988 composition, is a close second. Both works flow from Subotnick's love for Max Ernst's surrealist novel *The Hundred Headless Woman* (*La Femme 100 Têtes*, which also inspired a huge 1933 piano piece by George Antheil). In *And the Butterflies* . . . the Amerneet String Quartet plays propulsive tonal melodies which are modified by the computer, as keyboardist James Tocco elicits prickly synth timbres. Though tonal, the music is tense, skirting hairpin turns in a repeated-note idiom that keeps you on seat's edge, and the quartet gets computer-magnified until it sounds like layers and layers of quartets. I wish the liner notes were specific about the techniques involved, but I like Subotnick best in this furious melodic mode.

The disc's "flip side," again based on Ernst, is *All My Hummingbirds Have Alibis*, played by the California E.A.R. Unit. Sparser, more pointillistic, and not as attractive to my ears, this is the work Subotnick wrote for CD-ROM, but its chamber idiom is rather conventional, and it works just as well on audio alone. What the CD-ROM (*Voyager*) gives you is the still pictures by Ernst that inspired the piece, plus you can follow the score, which makes it clearer how the computer modifications work. (At least on my Mac, however, the music stops at each page turn.) Music conceived for interactive CD-ROM performance remains to be written, and Subotnick will probably get around to it. First.

—K.G.



Sorcerer's apprentice interrupts airy generalities:
Balinese dancer I Nyoman Wenten and soprano Joan La Barbara.

Intimate Immensity
Morton Subotnick
LaGuardia Theater
July 16

In order to understand why Morton Subotnick's high-tech "media poem" *Intimate Immensity* made such an ambivalent impression at Lincoln Center Festival '97, let's go back to the beginning. Subotnick started out in the late '50s making music with junkyard percussion for the Ann Halprin Dance Company in San Francisco. In 1962 he helped found the San Francisco Tape Music Center with Pauline Oliveros, Ramon Sender, Terry Riley, and Phil Winsor, giving—in Haight-Ashbury's heyday—concerts in which performers sprayed the audience with perfume and in which tropical fish, swimming in tanks lined with musical staves, acted as living notes. It was a generation of free-wheeling conceptualists. Centrally involved in the hippie origins of West Coast new music, Subotnick came to New York to provide music for the psychedelic Electric Circus nightclub, and in 1966 was commissioned for the first electronic work ever made specially for a record, *Silver Apples of the Moon*.

Now zip ahead 30 years. In on the ground floor of the musical use of electronics, Subotnick has kept up a reputation as being the first to do practically everything; most recently, he put out the first new-music CD-ROM, *All My Hummingbirds Have Alibis*. Being first has become, in fact, his most habitual aesthetic strategy, more central to his output than any specific characteristic of style. Meanwhile, his conceptualist

contemporaries—Oliveros, David Behrman, 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 hippies-now-turned-sexagenarians inherited from the druggy '60s.

And so we get first *Jacob's Room* (1986), an angst-ridden 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 tripartite 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 fist 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, staring into computers. Their dialogue, written by Subotnick with quotations from Gaston Bachelard, Kafka, and others, constituted an airy flow of abstract generalities. "I am aware of a transforming immensity within me," La Barbara declared. "Immensity is the movement of emotionless man," countered Buckner after awhile. "We can alter the blind direction of the senseless forces that surround us." "The lesson of the machine

is objectivity and neutrality." "Immensity is within ourselves—vast." And so on.

Wow—like, cosmic, dude, but that's an awfully flat conversational surface for the audience to get a toehold on. Artists like Samuel Beckett in *Molloy* and Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* (just to list two examples that spring to mind) made grand universal statements by concentrating on the minute details of daily existence. But Subotnick's strategy is just the opposite, to focus on unimaginably grand generalities. And the results were, well, mundane. Impersonal. It would be easier to identify with CEOs at Philip Morris (oops—one of the sponsors) than with these drugged-out, passionless zombies.

But that was the bland foreground, and in the background amazing things happened. Between Buckner and LaBarbara—the first character to appear, in fact—danced a "Cyber-Angel," the Balinese dancer I Nyoman Wenten.

As Wenten moved his elegant hands across a light beam, two MIDI pianos at opposite ends of the stage began to stir. Just a note or two at first, then a flourish, as this sorcerer's apprentice called the pianos to life via telekinesis. It was a moment of gorgeous poetry. It could have continued for half an hour and I would have been entranced, but instead it was very brief. The pianos then continued on their own, and every time they played, the musical interest quadrupled. Though Subotnick didn't indulge the kind of idiomatic player-piano tricks he could have learned from Conlon Nancarrow, the pianos frequently sent quick echoes back and forth across stage and traded melodies as if reading each other's minds. Delightfully, the pianos (uprights) had their lids removed, so that you could watch the hammers flip, like neurons in the two halves of an exposed brain.

So *Intimate Immensity* fused these two simultaneous layers, one bland and off-putting, the other lively and seductive, because while Subotnick doesn't know the poetry of theater, he does understand better than almost anyone the poetry of technology. To my ears, his least ambitious, most equipment-focused works, such as *Silver Apples of the Moon*, *The Key to Songs*, and the fabulous *And the Butterflies Begin To Sing* (just released on a New World disc) achieve more depth than his head-scratching attempts at philosophy. When he operates on the same level as Behrman, Lucier, et al., he can concoct amazing things to do with sounds. But, thanks perhaps to what-

ever they burned out their brains on way back when, the hippie conceptualists (with the singular exception of Robert Ashley, who opted out into a radically different narrative paradigm) were not very good at making concrete comments about the world. Their focus was too enormous. Subotnick called this work a "media poem" to avoid calling it an opera, but aren't abstract generalization and poetry virtually antonymous?

I found *Intimate Immensity* more enjoyable than *Jacob's Room* (whose New York premiere I reviewed several years ago), largely thanks to the smoother continuity of the pianos rippling in minor keys with Lisztian grace. Subotnick's musical habits are not inherently untheatrical, even though as a conceptualist his music is more oriented toward process than content. (When he needs composed musical material he sometimes borrows it, as in his use of Schubert's "Erlkönig" in *Key to Songs*.) Interestingly, *Intimate Immensity* relied on textural paradigms that go back to *Silver Apples* and *Touch*, alternating thin, noncontrapuntal textures with occasional dancelike passages of swirling ostinatos that act as a sustained climax. Here the ostinatos consisted of LaBarbara chirping her inimitable scat singing and Buckner crooning light, angular lines, techniques that suited each singer perfectly.

The singers were also called upon to perform, in alternation with Wenten, the quick "chaka-chaka" syllables of the Balinese Monkey Chant; the effect was smoothly integrated even though it contrasted oddly with the work's impersonal tone. One of the most successful threads of the production was the laser-disc video by Woody and Steina Vasulka, images of whirling globes and infinitely receding hallways that offered precisely the detailed, tactile, earthy quality that was missing in the text. Technologically impressive, often musically engaging, but theatrically misguided, *Intimate Immensity* made a rather low climax for a Lincoln Center Festival that looks to have nearly bailed 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 summer, it suggests that Lincoln Center should stop counting more on high-tech toys to bring audiences in than musical quality. People don't applaud 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 sent to Thomson by his editor Geoffrey Parsons: "Incidentally, if I see the word 'amateurish' in your column again, I shall scream. I haven't the faintest 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. V

Best thing is that he assumed
every one knows who you are!