

Angels Online

By Kyle Gann

Electronic Café
Annie Gosfield

The Kitchen put its new Electronic Café to its most sophisticated test yet November 12. Instruments physically present in front of us were played via telephone lines by pianist David Rosenboom in Santa Monica and MIDI-violinist Steina Vasulka (one of the Kitchen's original founders) in Santa Fe. Morton Subotnick and J. B. Floyd in New York played a piano in Santa Monica by remote control, and Rosenboom computer-modified Leo Smith's trumpet from 3000 miles away. The performances were monitored more or less continuously by audiences in all three locations. Subotnick was quick to point out that playing our present music online is like playing Liszt's B minor Sonata on harpsichord. "There needs to be a new music," he added, "that demands the telephone lines." True enough; the technology leaped ahead of the music, but the music wasn't without interest. I felt a thrilling premonition of the 22nd century when Subotnick called out, "Play us a note, David," we saw Rosenboom on video screen strike a note on his piano in Santa Monica, and the piano at the Kitchen responded. If nothing else, the Café will save on airfares.

Subotnick's work was the most delightful I've heard him create since *The Key to Songs*. The conceit of his work-in-progress was that of a piano concerto played by

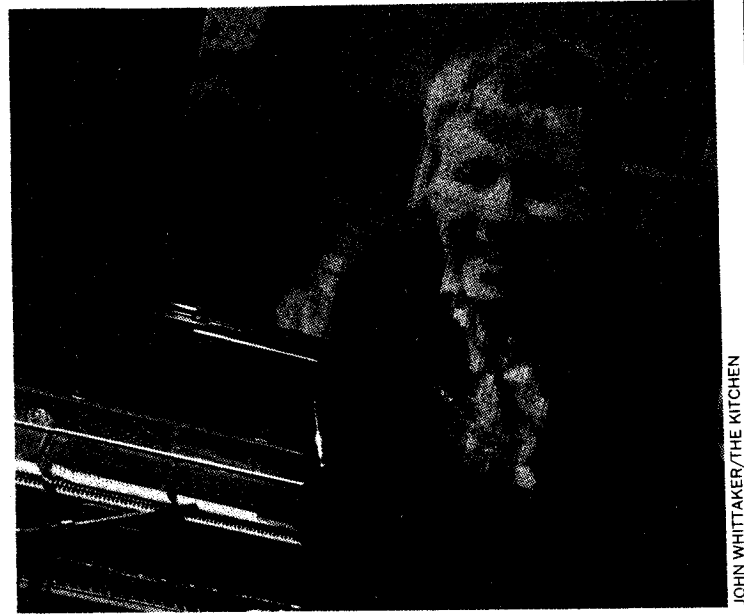
an angel. Subotnick ran MIDI pianos at the Kitchen and in Santa Monica by remote control, squeezing sensors in his hands. The pianos responded with melodies in multiple octaves and heavenly wisps of glissandos culminating in a romantic chorale, providing the Nancarrowian pleasure of music not playable by human fingers on the keyboard. Equally impressive was a wild (though structured) modal improv by Floyd at the Kitchen and Rosenboom in Santa Monica, both veteran computer composers with amazingly fluent keyboard techniques, even though their thickly layered style was too homogeneous to make much distinction between the pianos. It turns out that there's an approximate one-second delay in the signal between New York and California, making exact synchronization difficult (and providing a musical demonstration of Einstein's relativity: which audience gets to decide when cross-continental chords occur "at the same time"?). Ensemble performances via the Internet will have to be rhythmically rather loose.

There was more talk than music, with questions from all three audiences. Some worried about who'll have access to this technology once it's widespread. The Electronic Café's founders, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, pooh-pooed such concerns onscreen from Santa Monica, claiming that the technology itself opens access to more and more people. I'm not so confident. For the moment the Internet, operating somewhere be-

tween the FCC and the First Amendment, is enjoying a fortuitous state of anarchy. But every advance in sophistication cuts out people who can't afford the necessary equipment or training. David Mamet likes to point out that anybody can hold up a piece of film and see what's on it, but you can't look at video or microfilm without access to machines. I'm already appalled at the financial commitment required simply to maintain my current level of computer use. Old equipment that fails can't be replaced, and new equipment invariably entails expensive upgrades in all related soft- and hardware. I know the inventor of a software program who is forced to add bells and whistles every year even though there are no meaningful improvements to be made; if she doesn't, her distributor will drop the product because they won't sell something they can't keep making people re-buy. The computer industry is greedy, and has us all by the balls.

I'm no Luddite. I can't wait till I can live in Santa Fe myself, watch New York concerts live on my living room screen, and modem in the review for you to read on your e-mail version of the *Voice*. But I don't believe for one second that this technology is going to be allowed to advance democratization, or that access won't ultimately be restricted to those with enough money and expertise. You're welcome to prove me wrong.

Annie Gosfield's October 28 concert at Roulette was brief, enigmatic, and interesting. In addition to her own music, she played works by her mentor P. W. Schreck, a kind of modernist, self-proclaimed ne'er-do-well, a real-



Wired strings: violinist Vasulka on the screen

life P. D. Q. Varèse. In the '40s and '50s he anticipated some of the ideas Fluxus would later try out, but "his idea of high concept," she said, "consisted of showing up at the gig and getting paid." Along with various jazz and film-score jobs, he was a night watchman at Steinway, and was fired one morning when management showed up and found that he and a drunken friend had retuned all the pianos and were busily playing away. His theories seemed entirely determined by exigencies of low-budget performance, including concepts such as "calamitonality" and the "law of diminishing harmonic returns"; one work was scored for a piano that grew progressively out of tune. It was unclear how seriously to take all of this, but the music was pretty advanced for its period, with sound complexes suggesting

train engines, noisy musique concrète, and piano keys tuned to two pitches at once. Schreck's only tragedy was that he was a Downtowner born 20 years too early.

Gosfield's own music was impressive for its tunings and sampling. Her electronic keyboard used neither just intonation, quarter-tones, nor apparently any other systematic tuning, simply fascinatingly intuitive, out of tune "wolf" intervals. Her noise constructions, aided by Christine Bard on drums and Roger Kleier on guitar, put industrial noises through George Antheil-ish patterns with a jazzy flavor. And her sampling techniques, offering a plethora of complex metallic and percussive noises, resulted in the most kaleidoscopic and sophisticated keyboard-sampler performance I've ever heard. ■