

Concentration Can Have Its Rewards

Ann Powers, New York Times, 2000

One could say that the entire history of my work in music has been derived from a single, subjective experience with sound, the composer Arnold Dreyblatt wrote in the program notes to a 1986 performance by his Orchestra of Excited Strings. It is this experience which generates the music ideas - and not the other way around. This emphasis on the gut over the mind has had a deeply positive effect on his music, which he and a stellar ensemble performed Thursday and yesterday at Tonic.

The intuitive aspect of Mr. Dreyblatts work does not overshadow its intellectuality. A major guru in the minimalist lineage that connects LaMonte Young to Sonic Youth, Mr. Dreyblatt, who is 48, writes pieces that demand deep concentration and benefit from the listeners prior knowledge. Enacting theories of acoustics and harmonics that relate as much to physics as to Western composition, his works can sound not just repetitive but almost mechanical to the casual ear. Titles like *The Adding Machine*, which concluded Thursdays early set, indicate that Mr. Dreyblatt welcomes such associations.

In concert, however, his music is rewardingly visceral, a dual exploration of how instruments react to the touch and how musicians mesh with each other. The five pieces given their premieres on Thursday found the harmonics in rhythm and the cadences of harmony.

The first featured only Mr. Dreyblatt, playing his prepared excited bass, and the drummer Danny Tunick. The composer performed the beating drone, fast, swooping chops against the strings, producing a sound that recalled a pianists plucking of his instruments strings. Lightly fingering the instruments neck, he produced overtones of the astounding kind heard in Asian throat singing.

Mr. Dreyblatt, who very rarely performs, left the stage after welcoming an ensemble that included the Bang on a Can All-Stars Mark Stewart, on cello and guitar, Robert Black, on bass, and Evan Ziporyn, on a gamelan-style metallophone, with Laurel Smith on violin and hurdy- gurdy and Jeff Lieberman on guitar. Mr. Tunick sounded a military drumbeat that became one pulse in an interactive explosion.

The ensemble sped into an interaction that was limited melodically but extremely nuanced in its multiple pulsing rhythms and frequencies. On one level, this was the *sound of one string*, to quote the title of the recent compilation of Mr. Dreyblatts works on the Table of the Elements label. But inside that unity, deep complexity arose as each musician slightly shifted tempo and tone.

Each piece offered a different perspective into sounds journey in and out of what is commonly called music.

Sometimes the images conveyed were organic, as the playing proliferated like a single-celled organism dividing. Sometimes they were more abstract, stimulating heady questions about big subjects like mathematics and time. Always, though, the music was also fun, both for the players, who rocked and grinned at its physical challenges, and for the audience, asked to play the fulfilling game of paying full attention.

This set initiated a two-day celebration of minimalist music that would feature the pioneering composer Tony Conrad and the younger avant-rock stars Thurston Moore and Jim ORourke. Mr. ORourke took the stage immediately after the ensemble departed and offered a soothing counterpart to its clamor.

Mr. ORourke is best known for his guitar work, but this evening he explored electronica. Using a Powerbook and a mixing board, he composed a dreamscape of vibrations. Bells, strings, a snippet of a choir, woodwinds and unidentifiable buzzes collided and merged in the gentle yet portentous blend. It was an adagio for cyborgs, reaching through space for the same organic awareness Mr. Dreyblatt has found in seemingly simpler machines.

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