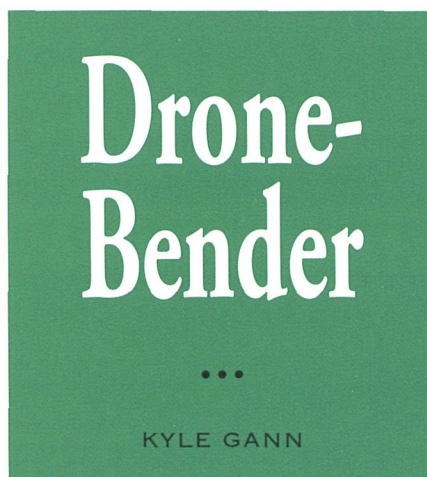


REVIEWS

Ten seconds into a piece of David First's music, you think, "Nothing's happening." After twenty seconds you think, "Ooh, those instruments are sure out of tune." And after thirty seconds, you think, "Wow, that's weird, what's going on?" After sixty seconds, you quit thinking and just flow with it.

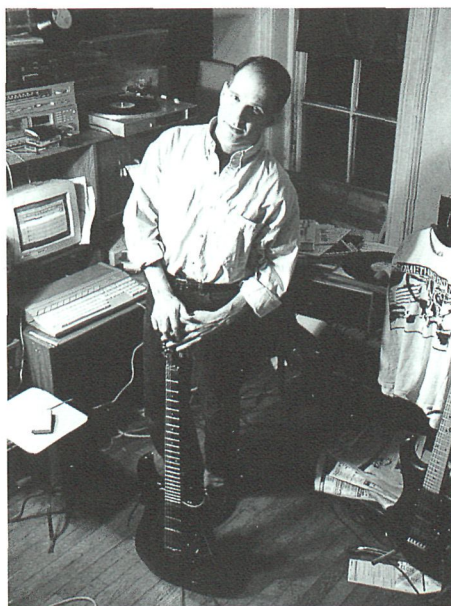
First has carved out a niche for himself in the New York music world: he makes music from the slow, gradual glissandos of drones going in and out of tune. And the niche seems permanent, for while music fashions have swung 180 degrees in the last few years, First remains as active today as he was in the '80s. Though he used to swear that he'd never do theater, his latest major venture was opera, "The Manhattan Book of the Dead," which premiered in New York last May and is going to Germany next August. In between, he's putting together a performance/installation for "Interzones," an exhibition to be held in Copenhagen this June; the work will last 720 hours -one month. The installation is a small segment of a year-long work called "The Reenchantment of the Earth," a theater work that will eventually use large ensembles, video, long-distance phone lines, and actors. That's quite a project for a guy who used to walk into his downtown Manhattan gigs with nothing but his guitar.

He's a modest guy, too. His press releases are notable for their self-effacing humor ("Well, Dave, you're looking great," he says in a mock interview with himself). Yet, while he's quick to give credit to others and fearful of exaggerating his achievements, the ambitious vision that informs his music occasionally pokes through into his conversation, too. "Since I was old enough to know what an innovator was",



he declares in his crowded Greenwich Village apartment, "I've wanted to be one, to feel like I started something." And while, at 41, he's a little too young to have followers, he is finding himself at the forefront of a downtown movement: Totalism, a music that combines a rock beat with complex rhythmic systems and number ratios.

To discuss how First's music works requires talking arithmetic: "The Reenchantment of the Earth" is based on 21 pitch frequencies whose relationships define different modes, and the rhythmic



First in his room. Foto: Jae Byun.

structure uses an analogous number system. And yet, unlike so much 20th-century music that is considered "mathematical," First music is sensuously visceral. In fact, the notes being played are rarely what you're listening to. By sliding past points of consonance, First's drones make acoustic beats that pulsate faster and faster, then slower again as a point of consonance is reached and passed by. In a typical First performance, overtones swirl around the room, changing source location with seeming randomness. Rarely can you identify which player is making which sound. By using acoustics as his raw material, First has extended the work of older pitch-tuners and benders such as La Monte Young and Alvin Lucier. But while Young's and Lucier's works are usually either immobile installations or slow, delicate meditation works, First has made the techniques viable in the concert hall.

First grew up in Philadelphia and, like so many of the younger generation's visible composers, started out as a rocker. As a guitarist, he also played free jazz; his first New York gig was playing Carnegie Hall with Cecil Taylor's ensemble. One of First's bands was an instrumental trio called the Note Killers, whose style he describes as "free jazz meets Steve Reich meets Jimi Hendrix." (The group's first New York gig was a double bill with the then not-yet-famous guitar-banger Glenn Branca.) After moving to New York, First formed other bands, notably the World Casio Quartet and the Joy Buzzers. His solo work tended to be freely melodic guitar improvisation; his ensemble concerts were more austere, with groups of drones slowly shifting to form wild acoustic beats.

The '80s found many New York

composers adding a rock beat to their music, reaching out to an audience beyond the intimate circles of the avant-garde. For years, First avoided the tendency, partly because of his experience as a rock musician. "For me, rock wasn't some new toy to play with. I knew how it worked. I could do it any time I wanted. You can do whatever you want on top, put a beat underneath it, and it becomes palatable. That wasn't a challenge. I wanted to make sure my music was interesting without it."

Tuning had taught him, though, that the ratios between purely consonant intervals - such as 3 against 2, 5 against 4, and so on - were the same as the ratios between polyrhythms. Around 1990, he began tentatively adding drumbeats to his music, not in the manner of rock, but stripped down to support maximum rhythmic complexity. In turning to rhythm, First found himself approaching the same ideas that fascinated other New York composers such as Mikel Rouse, Ben Neill, and Michael Gordon. Though dissimilar in many respects, the group shared an interest in complex rhythmic structure and a static, non-European sense of harmony, traits sufficiently striking to suggest that a new movement had arrived. The name Totalism stuck, connotating an attempt to have it all: to combine the infectious momentum of rock with the complexity of modern classical music.

In "Reenchantment," First has added a new wrinkle to his drone-bending aesthetic: high technology. In the '80s, he had formed the World Casio Quartet because, at the time, Casio made the cheapest tunable keyboards, and he's usually made do with fairly simple electronics. Now, though, he's working with a software program called MIDIPhone. As he explains it, "MIDIPhone is a system that translates

audio information into digital information and allows it to go over phone lines." Sound engineers around the world will transmit live sounds from their location to First's performance; he hopes to access, for example, a windstorm in the Sahara, a waterfall in Brazil, or a basketball game in St. Louis. Such acoustic environments will generate "real-time information curves" that will in turn modulate, filter, and pitch-bend the drones.

The fact that First has roots in so many different scenes - rock, free jazz, minimalism, totalism - has made him popular among diverse groups in the New York scene. It has also encouraged him to take on a new role, that of entrepreneur. He recently curated the new-music segment of the burgeoning Soho Arts Festival (entitling his program, characteristically, "Sensuous Intelligence"), and he is also lining up concerts for a new series at Context Studios, a space deep in Manhattan's funky East Village. There he plans to experiment with a new performance situation which he's calling "Corporeal Mergers," in which composers who don't usually improvise will get together to collaborate. One artist may provide, say, a computerized rhythmic structure,

another some drones or an ongoing pitch structure, another perhaps samples drawn from recorded music.

"Curating is for me a way of composing, only on a larger scale. It's not just a matter of getting your favorite people. It's making a harmonic statement with upward and downward curves, expansions and contractions. I look at it the way I look at a musical problem: what's missing? What gap do I have to fill?" Though leery of definitions, First likes the sense of community that the Totalist network of concerns offers in '90s New York: "The greatest thing a movement can do is to argue with and encourage and inspire, not to form some solid manifesto of intent. I felt very alone in the '80s. I don't feel alone now." With so many projects attracting so much attention, First has the right to feel as central to the New York new-music scene as anyone.

Kyle Gann is the modern-classic music critic of the *Village Voice*, the legendary weekly paper of New York.

C.D. recordings available by David First: *The Good Book's (Accurate) Jail of Escape Dust Coordinates Part 2* (O.O Discs #23), *Resolver* (O.O Discs #5)

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The Manhattan Book of the Dead. At La MaMa's, New York. Spring 95. Photo: Jae Byun.