

THE KITCHEN

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Alarm Clocks and Lullabies

By Gregory Sandow

I heard the Harmonic Choir on October 17 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a perfect setting; On October 22, I heard Elliott Sharp's *Crowds and Power* at the Kitchen, which was fine, though the ideal place for it would have been . . . oh, I don't know: a subway tunnel, maybe, with scuffling trains.

I like subways, and I've liked them more ever since Branca-Chatham-style quasi-rock has gotten me used to loud music (in boldface red type). Even so, I took a deep breath when I saw 22 musicians listed on the program (electric guitars, violins, percussion, and various horns), and when I looked up, with my back to the wall, and saw myself surrounded in a semicircle by six drum sets. And even then I wasn't ready for what happened. Sharp's gang of 22 took their places and paused; then all at once the lights went out and World War III began, followed immediately by World Wars IV, V, and VI, in which the bombs came in short bursts instead of all at once. Even when I'd gotten used to missile attacks in darkness, I was still shaking from the first one. Lights out and a big boom combined for a dual effect of pile driver and guillotine.

Crowds and Power is also a mordantly eccentric book by Elias Canetti, which inspired the piece. Canetti plays in the thinkers' major leagues. Was there more going on than noise?

The Harmonic Choir, meanwhile, takes its own name from how its six members sing, and from what composer/director David Hykes says is their reason for singing. With techniques Hykes learned in Mongolia, each singer produces two notes at once, a more or less normal fundamental pitch and a selection of its overtones. "Harmonic" is another word for overtone, and suggests also harmony among people, within each person, between music and the search for what Hykes calls "inner silence." Overtones harmonize with their fundamental; they have to, since as a matter of basic acoustics they're literally part of it. They're like lofty implications of otherwise mundane acts. Hykes, describing one of his pieces, compares them to higher levels of consciousness, accessible once everyday discord is stilled: "The circle of singing listeners begin, metaphorically, by tuning a common, low tone. . . . At first,

what is held in common is the lowest tone, and one seeks to erase the impression that the voices are separate, like slices of a pie. Careful tuning erases the feeling of division in the usual, horizontal way, and a feeling can appear of there being one note. Immediately, this note is heard as having within it ascending harmonic levels, a kind of vertical division. The ascending levels stand above the fundamental tone, One, at levels Two, Three, Four, and so on. . . . Our listening, usually habituating the lower tones, is called upward to be present along a taller axis of awareness."

That's my emphasis. Obviously Hykes is groping for words but I like the phrase. He's not posing in borrowed ideas, as kids do when they give their address as U.S.A., Earth, Solar System, Galaxy, Universe. "Axis of awareness" is a living metaphor, partly, I'd guess, because it suggests the peculiar concentration the Harmonic Choir needs to sing overtones, and then to move them and the fundamental together, to hold either and move the other, or to move both independently.

Is Sharp's *Crowds and Power* a living metaphor for Canetti's? "There is no direct mapping from book to music," Sharp warns, "nor is the music intended to be programmatic." But the book did supply what Sharp describes as "models of individual freedom, rigid structure, total chaos, cooperation, decay, war, growth, etc.," which makes it almost ideal as the inspiration for a piece that's largely improvised whose composer invents general plans for performance rather than the music itself. The crowd, predictable as a whole even if individuals in it aren't, is a reasonable image for a large band of improvisers, or maybe I should say that a large band of improvisers is a reasonable illustration of a crowd, especially in this case, when toward the end two trombonists blaring their hearts out 10 feet away from me were inaudible in the general din. The models from Canetti didn't make much audible difference—I couldn't tell when "war" left off and "freedom"

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began (I might have done better the next night, when Sharp changed a few things). But quiet moments in the piece sounded poignantly like the crowd dispersing when its members, as Canetti said, go back to being themselves. Its physical impact and the engagingly tactile grubbiness of its sound and even of its setting (we sat on the floor, just as we did at the Kitchen years ago) brought to life the oddest part of Canetti's book, a chapter called "The Entrails of Power," about chewing, devouring, and monkeys playing with each other's fur. (*Crowds and Power*: the piece that ate its audience.)

The Harmonic Choir doesn't show its entrails, of course. Overtones—silvery, liquid, and brilliant, boy sopranos improbably blended with trumpets—melt gently into each other and into their fundamentals, in the vast resonant depth of the cathedral, with momentary shivering dissonances somehow still distinct. I was seduced by sound alone, like Stendhal, who was so enchanted by the tenor line of

a duet in *L'Italiana in Algeri* (or so he reports in his *Life of Rossini*) that it took him four or five hearings even to notice what the bass sang in accompaniment. An hour went by for me in what seemed like 20 minutes. Only when I listened to a tape later did I notice that Hykes's forms—ways of moving away from unity, and then returning—grow from the nature of the overtones, which, tied as they are to their fundamentals, imply consonance as a norm. His music really is, as he says, spiritual, or even, in some nondenominational sense, sacred.

Crowds and Power, on the other hand, is secular. And how! As Hykes writes (not about Elliott Sharp): "There are two teams, the Alarm Clocks and the Lullabies," one standing for life and the other for death. But to me they're two parts of life, the inner balance I need to ride the subway, and the subway I had to ride if I wanted to hear David Hykes. Why choose? Until crowds and power are gone from the world, I'll take both. ■