

MUSIC

THIS OLD SONIC HOUSE

An unusual concert series is set at a historic Schindler building. The goal: Get audiences to think about the interplay of space and sound.

By JOSEF WOODARD

Residents in West Hollywood near the Schindler House no doubt have an attitude of peaceful coexistence with the famous structure, built by noted Modernist architect Rudolph M. Schindler in 1922. It now houses the generally unobtrusive MAK Center for Art and Architecture (an offshoot of Austria's Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, which in German yields the acronym MAK).

But a few weeks ago, the neighborhood experienced a peculiar sonic rumble: the gong crescendos, drum-kit flailing, booms, taps and rattles of percussionist William Winant, realizing the scores of new-music composer James Tenney. Suddenly sound was emanating from the property—and from the curatorial mission of the center.

Speaking to the lawn-party-like gathering of listeners before the performance, Tenney encouraged them to circulate during the music, to interact with the house, to try to escape from "what my son calls the concert jail." Being polite creatures of habit, they didn't budge, but then Tenney pushed the point, turning the microphones and a digital delay loop back on the listeners, making

them part of the program.

It was a particularly apt move. The Tenney/Winant concert kicked off the second season of a series called sound.at the Schindler House. According to Cindy Bernard, who created and curates the series, one of its goals corresponds to Tenney's impulse: to get an audience thinking outside of the box.

"The house has an audience that is art-related and architecture-related," she says. "[They] come to hear some of this music they would never hear otherwise. And there are people, including almost all the musicians, who would have never gone to the house without the opportunity to perform, and they're bringing in their audience as well."

Still to come on Bernard's series is Kingston, N.Y., composer Pauline Oliveros, who will play accordion Saturday with Philip Gelb on *shakuhachi*, a Japanese bamboo flute. Los Angeles Conceptional artist and sometime-musician Stephen Prina will present the third concert, "Sonic Dan," in August. Then, in September, New York City-based composer Glenn Branca will perform guitar solos and duets with Reg Bloor, in a program called "Harmonics Guitars (Loud Music for Unusual Electric Guitars)."

These concerts will be complemented by a

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Schindler: An Unusual Concert Series

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handful of other MAK Center aural projects. As part of the exhibition "In Between: Art and Architecture," which runs through Sept. 2, Steve Roden will be interpreting the house through abstract soundscapes that he will create in various locations. In mid-August, the center has organized a musical event at a satellite location, the Yates residence in Silver Lake. Starting in the 1940s, that Schindler-designed house was the venue for a music series that continues 60 years later as Monday Evening Concerts at LACMA. The MAK-sponsored performances will re-create the spirit of those early events.

And finally on Sept. 8, the center will present performances, workshops and tours as part of a day dubbed "Site and Sound."

The sonic boom at the Schindler House began with Bernard and her series, which had its first outing there in 2000.

A multimedia artist, with a master's degree in fine art from Cal Arts and pieces in the collections of MOCA and LACMA, Bernard began hosting "sound art" events in San Pedro in 1998.

"Musicians' names were put into a hat," she recalls of the first event, involving various improvisers, some of whom "were musician musicians and some of them were artist musicians." Bernard drew names to create sonic liaisons. The idea, she says, was to build "a stronger network between these diverse groups. They weren't mingling enough and I was trying to get them to mingle some more. I also invited some artists to make works in the landscape surrounding the old Army barracks where this thing was held."

She went on to present a more-or-less monthly series of sound- and music-related shows at Sacred Grounds coffeehouse in San Pedro, from January 1999 through April 2000 but was growing frustrated by the casual—and noisy—nature of the venue. When Bernard had an exhibition of her own at the MAK Center early last year, she incorporated sound elements, "trying to emphasize the architecture of the house through this relationship of the sound being produced in different parts of the house."

In the course of that project, she recognized the performance potential of the space. The MAK Center sponsored her series last summer, after which, Bernard says, "it was pretty clear that it worked well.



CINDY BERNARD

Sound at the Schindler House featured Voice of the Bowed Guitar—Joseph Hammer, left, Rod Poole and Doug Williford—last year.

The attendance was great and there was a lot of enthusiasm on the part of the people playing. So we decided to continue."

Bernard explains that the 2000 series "was based on local, mostly improvisational work. I decided that if we were going to continue the second summer, it might be nice to work with people who weren't necessarily local. There's a strategy to that, of course, which is to build [the series]."

Bernard views the concerts as visual as well as aural art. "It's almost like I'm putting musicians into a space instead of objects. When I'm thinking about the shows, I'm thinking about a certain level of visual impact as well as aural impact, and the relationship between those particular people and that house."

The events are usually staged in a large room that opens onto the back lawn. "That room acts as a big resonating chamber," Bernard says. "It's usually amplified outside of that, but there is some ambient resonance occurring, as well. Then the audience is inside of that room and flowing onto that lawn."

Next up on the 2001 series is Oliveros, known as much for her performances as for her compositions and an ideal choice for a site-sound event. Oliveros has lots of California connections—she co-founded the San Francisco Tape Music Center in 1961, attended Mills College and later taught there and, for 14 years, at UC San Diego. Her well-received 1988 album, "Deep Listening" (New Albion), was recorded in a large, naturally reverberant cistern. She has also recorded in caves and performed in such architectural spaces as the Lowe Library rotunda at Columbia University in New York.

Speaking on the phone from Montreal, where she had played a concert with her trio, the Space Between, Oliveros explained that her Schindler House concert promises

an ideal context for the personalized, improvisationally based creative system she calls, like the album, deep listening. Her music usually revolves around ambient, drone-based sonic environments. In performance, the actual environment is critical to the end result.

A gentle rebel, the 69-year-old Oliveros feels that traditional concert settings "carry a lot of baggage. There's a certain kind of expectation that's set up around fixed seating. The hall is focused in a certain way, to project at the audience. It's a particular category of presentation, which is not exactly what I'm interested in these days."

For one thing, she complains that the normal concert hall "is designed to shut out or to exclude sounds, except for what's coming from the stage."

For the MAK Center performance, she will begin by arriving early and "sounding out" the Schindler House. In performance, the deep listening begins and it applies first to her.

"I will be listening for the characteristics of the space, but also to the audience and whatever sound might enter the space," she says. "In other words, it's a global form of listening."

"The music arises from that listening. It's also a way of modeling listening for the audience. The audience usually catches on, because audiences are a lot smarter than some people give them credit for. They listen back. Then, the performance can grow and develop from that."

In her years of new music-making, Oliveros has found a particular symbiosis in the relationship of visual art and her corner of the music scene. "There's a kind of openness which they have, which is an interest in sound and space, that doesn't necessarily happen with someone who is a classically trained musician."

Bernard says she wanted to in-

clude Oliveros on the MAK series after seeing her perform last summer at an event called Beyond Music in Venice. "I just thought, 'Wow, it would be so amazing to see her play accordion at the Schindler House.'"

The shows that finish the series have very different agendas. Bernard has known Prina since their days in art school together. "He sometimes uses music in his work, along with a lot of other things," she explains. In addition to his artwork, Prina played in the band the Red Krayola and put out an album on the alternative rock label Drag City. Music is front and center in "Sonic Dan." Written for voice, electric piano, guitar and prerecorded sound, it combines twisted versions of the music of Sonic Youth and Steely Dan, along with prerecorded snippets of Webern string quartets.

Branca, the final entry this sum-

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PAULINE OLIVEROS
composer

mer, is famed for his adventures in cacophony with multiple electric guitars. Theater has played an important role in his work, as he cathartically "conducts" his guitarist troops. He has been focusing more on composition, but as a conductor, he unleashed his 100-guitar Symphony No. 13 in New York City last month to the usual mixed response.

Bernard acknowledges that Branca's sonic intensity and usual volume might be a little much in the neighborhood. His inclusion, she says, is "one of my whims. For me, it was almost entirely a visual choice. I thought if he's playing again, that might be a really interesting thing to do. In some ways, it might be completely inappropriate. But maybe it's OK to test that once in a while. I don't know what's going to happen."

Which is a good thing?

"Yes," she says, "it can be dull to always be predictable." □

• *Sound at the Schindler House, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, 835 N. Kings Road, West Hollywood. Pauline Oliveros, Saturday; Stephen Prina, "Sonic Dan," Aug. 24-25; Glenn Branca, Sept. 28-29. Door opens at 7 p.m., show is at 7:30 p.m. \$12. (323) 651-1510.*

Josef Woodard is a frequent contributor to Calendar.