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MUSIC

Rebel Composers on a Rock Tour of Sorts

By STEVE SMITH

“I used to be someone who wrote new music,” the composer Judd Greenstein says at the beginning of “The End of New Music,” a new video documentary by Stephen S. Taylor. “But there’s a sort of ossified new-music scene that privileges certain things that are no longer relevant to a new generation of composers. There are people for whom it is still relevant, but new music, as I think of it, is something apart from what I do.”

Hardly a week goes by without some new declaration of classical music’s declining relevance in contemporary society. Mr. Taylor’s film, which has its premiere screening tonight at Anthology Film Archives, might seem to be the latest verse of an extended eulogy. The film documents a 2005 tour of rock clubs and alternative spaces by Free Speech Zone, a collective founded by Mr. Greenstein, David T. Little and Missy Mazzoli. In it, these three busy, highly regarded composers, whose boisterous, attractive music is influenced by neo-Romanticism, Minimalism and rock, forcefully reject the standard conventions of concert halls and academia.

Presenting classical music in nightclubs to attract young audiences has begun to verge on the commonplace. But what Free Speech Zone was proposing in 2005 was a more comprehensive paradigm shift prompted not by age or aesthetics, but rather by frustration that followed the emotionally charged 2004 presidential race, during which Mr. Greenstein and Mr. Little had campaigned together on behalf of Get Out the Vote.

“It was a very visceral experience, that whole process leading up to the election,” Mr. Greenstein said during a recent conversation in the apartment in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, that he shares with Ms. Mazzoli and Mr. Taylor. “Afterward, it was like this calamitous blow, because we’d put all this energy into something that was a failure from our perspective.”

For a time, Mr. Greenstein was unable to compose. “I felt like I was wasting my time with something that didn’t have the societal import that working for the election had,” he said. “We needed to do something. And it couldn’t be just going back to business as usual in the world of new music, which is not just apolitical but distanced from the idea that music is connected to human emotion and human experience.”

What resulted was Free Speech Zone, a collective named after the spaces for confining protesters during political events. Eschewing traditional concert spaces, the group booked Mr. Greenstein’s Now Ensemble and Mr. Little’s Newspeak into Manhattan and Brooklyn rock clubs, a New Haven recording studio and a small hall at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#). The programs featured politically inspired works by the three members and fellow activists. Mr. Taylor, a friend of Mr. Greenstein and an aspiring documentarian, followed the tour, shooting film without any set notion of how it might be used.

Given the context, the near-complete lack of political content in “The End of New Music” is something of a shock. The election is barely mentioned. Instead, Mr. Taylor’s jumpy, kinetic 50-minute film, assembled from the 20 or

so hours he shot, emphasizes the human elements of the tour. He includes powerful performance segments as well as candid accounts of obstacles: grueling load-ins, tedious drives, one badly out-of-tune piano.

Mr. Taylor's voice is seldom heard, but his off-screen interrogations prompt the composers to discuss the challenges of taking contemporary music to places where young audiences will feel comfortable and receptive. Classically trained musicians ponder aloud how to play in rock clubs in a way that feels uncontrived.

Mr. Taylor also captured some of the epiphanies the tour occasioned. In one scene, Mr. Little describes a sense of freedom that allowed him to include a bombastic drum-set part in his piece "Electric Proletariat," which he had not been willing to risk in earlier versions.

"I was not caught up in the idea of writing music that anyone would approve of," Mr. Little said by telephone. "I was trying to find music that would communicate these ideas most clearly from a sort of activist perspective. The artistic results were really exciting and have had lasting effects on the work Newspeak has done since."

The tour had a similarly striking impact on Ms. Mazzoli. "I finally felt like I had control over how my music was reaching an audience, for maybe the first time in my life," she said. "And it was because we had taken control of all aspects of production from beginning to end. That was a really moving, powerful, addictive thing for me, and it was a turning point in the way I thought about how I wanted to get my music out there."

The members of Free Speech Zone, now including Mr. Taylor, are at work on a socially conscious multimedia opera. But all three composers have softened their iconoclastic stance toward conventional institutions. Mr. Greenstein still books Now Ensemble into clubs but also programs a chamber music series in Gallerie Icosahedron, a TriBeCa exhibition space. Ms. Mazzoli was recently named executive director of the MATA Festival, a prominent new-music series that originated as Music at the Anthology. Mr. Little, who plans to have Newspeak share bills with rock bands, was a co-winner of a chamber-opera competition last month.

"The main thing is understanding that you can actually take control over the way that your music is heard," Mr. Greenstein said. "Once you see that you had that power all along, then it suddenly doesn't become 'you versus the system' anymore. It's just you behaving as an adult, going out and making decisions in the world."

"The End of New Music" will be screened tonight at Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, at Second Street, East Village. Information: anthologyfilmarchives.org or (212) 505-5181.

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