

AMERICA, THE BALEFUL

Sounds of protest in New York's downtown music scene.

BY ALEX ROSS

Meanwhile, up at Merkin Hall, Phil Kline offered two pieces entitled “Rumsfeld Songs” and “Zippo Songs,” as part of a concert presented by John Schaefer’s “New Sounds” show on WNYC. (The cycle is also available on Cantaloupe Music, the same label that released “Decasia.”) The notion of making music out of Donald Rumsfeld’s press conferences, which include such T. S. Eliot-like ruminations as “As we know, there are known knowns,” sounds like a throwaway joke, but Kline, a composer with a keen ear for speech rhythms, delivers a cunning portrait of a bureaucrat’s soul. The music is fey and detached, leaning on the raised fourth degree of the Lydian scale, which supplies a lighter-than-air quality. By some arcane alchemy, Kline draws clean melodic lines from such unpromising material as Rumsfeld’s analysis of the looting of Baghdad: “It’s the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase.” I caught myself singing this the other day, to my alarm.

The “Zippo Songs” show the underside of Rumsfeld’s flippancy. In Vietnam, soldiers etched mordant sayings on Zippo lighters. Kline collected twenty-six of them into one of the most brutally frank song cycles ever penned. The texts range from the caustic (“If you got this off my dead ass, I hope it brings you all the luck it brought me”) to the mystic (“You’ve never lived until you’ve nearly died”). The detachment between music and subject works differently than in the Rumsfeld series: the soldiers’ voices seem to be floating in from the beyond, as, no doubt, many of them are. When you hear all the songs in sequence—at Merkin Hall, Theo Bleckmann sang with unpolished grace—you can’t mistake Kline’s agenda. Yet the music has too much psychedelic mystery to be characterized as mere hectoring from the left. As the composer-monologist Chris Mann said at one point during Sounds Like Now, “I’m pretty sure that music itself votes Republican.” ♦

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