

Kevin Concannon, "David Mahler: Head Theater/New Records," *Art New England*, July 1986, p. 15.

Real Time/Reel Time  
Performance and Sound Art/Boston  
**David Mahler: Head Theater  
New Records**

Seattle composer/performer David Mahler recently presented his performance piece HEAD THEATER at Mobius as part of a state-sponsored Art Exchange with 999, an experimental art space in Seattle. HEAD consisted of a funky set of tables and boxes, resembling a twisted shrine of some sort, built around a cardboard box with cut-out panel, suggesting a television through which Mahler's mute head appeared during most of the performance. Equipped with cued tapes and players below, Mahler created a wildly amusing contemporary vaudeville act, at once live and electronically displaced.

The show opened with a prerecorded announcement setting up the pretext upon which the Head concept operates: The Head is a mechanical recreation of the human head—complete with its own brain. A few simple demonstrations dispelled any doubts the audience might have had about the truth of this claim. Sure enough, on command the head winked, turned, opened, and closed its mouth. You would have sworn it was the real thing. (Quite impressive, even though it was the real thing.) Moving his lips in sync with the prerecorded soundtrack, Mahler told jokes, managed some very realistic sound effects, and performed an amateur ventriloquist act. At other points, the Head played *Name That Tune*, answering in "Head Charades" fashion, performed a hilariously choreographed *Dawn on Mt. Head*, using a bald skullcap and low-intensity desk lamp for "dramatic" lighting, and competed in a "Facial Olympics" with guest head, Hulda Klenzer (Mari Novotny-Jones). Individual events included "alternating eye-blinking" and "eyebrow-raising." An otherwise successful, hilarious performance was flawed by a horribly boring story about a baseball player at the end of the first act.

In Mahler's Oz, illusion is turned in on itself when his audience pays attention to "that man behind the curtain." HEAD THEATER cleverly manipulates the conventions of electronic media into a hybrid performance style that contrasts real time and reel time with sharp wit.

In the reel world, Laurie Anderson and Phillip Glass have both released new recordings, both consciously targeted to the commercial market. Anderson's LP serves as the soundtrack to her new concert film; Glass's record features lyrics and vocals by an all-star line-up from the *Billboard* charts.

*Home of the Brave*, Anderson's new multi-market product, features a hit single produced by Nile Rogers (producer of David Bowie and Mick Jagger). The single, *Language Is a Virus*, meshes the artist's and producer's talents to great effect. Rogers's distinctively clean sound serves Anderson well; she approaches both words and sounds as plastic media (or vinyl as the case may be), molding them into something much more than poetry and music. The rest of the record isn't quite up to the standard set by this piece, but it might simply be that, having seen and heard so much of her, the material seems more tired than it really is. Maybe not.

Just when I finally learned to like Phillip Glass, he too, has turned around and gone to bed with the record business. The argument that prompted my newfound admiration for his work was built on an attention to the real complexity of his seemingly droney and repetitive music. Not long after I first enjoyed or even noticed the beauty of detail so essential to his work, he one-upped the Muzak people by trivializing his work before they could get to it themselves. Among the dogs with whom he lies are Linda Ronstadt and Paul Simon. How did David Byrne ever end up in this corny kennel? With *Songs from Liquid Days*, Glass panders to the intellectual pretensions of yuppies looking for the right tape for the Blaupunkt stereo in their BMW.

Laurie Anderson might well have sued for damages upon hearing what Linda Ronstadt and the Roches did with the lyrics she contributed on *Forgetting*. Diabetics stay away.

Kevin Concannon