

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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# It's a Wold, Wold, Wold, Wold Mad

MARK ALBURGER

Erling Wold's operas *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* and *Queer* have been performed in America and Europe to critical acclaim. His music has also been heard on television and movie soundtracks, as well as in dance spaces and concert halls.

I met Erling Wold at a Vietnamese restaurant on July 24, 2001, in El Cerrito, CA.

ALBURGER: Are you as depressed as you were back in February when you wrote your *Great Day in New York* tirade?

WOLD: Right.

ALBURGER: Maybe we're on the wrong coast.

WOLD: I don't know....

ALBURGER: Maybe. If I really thought I were on the wrong coast I wouldn't be here.

WOLD: Is that true?

ALBURGER: Yes. But that's the Gestalt. For life, I have to be here.

WOLD: Me, too. I guess I do like it here, even if it is somewhat provincial. There is something about the West Coast and its tradition of experimentation and individualism, and that appeals to me. I think the music here is more prototypically American in that sense. I am primarily a Californian. I was born in southern California and went to high school there, although my family moved around a bit between -- North Dakota, Minnesota and New York to name a few places, but I feel most at home in California. At least this has been the most stable place for me -- even if there has been a lot of upheaval in my life recently, which we won't get into here.

ALBURGER: We won't?

WOLD: Sorry, Mark.

ALBURGER: So what are you doing these days? We'll start at the end...

WOLD: What am I doing? You mean, "What future?" Well, you know, this is a great question, because after the last piece --

ALBURGER: *Queer*. Where do you go from *Queer*?

WOLD: Oh, I have a lot of ways to go! You can take that any way you want...

ALBURGER: O.K.!

WOLD: It's so funny, because I worked on *Queer*, writing it and especially producing it, day and night, for months. Opening night --

ALBURGER: How long did it take to write?

WOLD: I'm a weekend/evening composer type.

ALBURGER: The Charles Ives approach.

WOLD: Yes. Maybe two months. Here's the CD, by the way, and also the one for *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*. Paul Drescher was the producer of *Little Girl*, with his organization, Musical Traditions.

ALBURGER: Interesting name for his operation.

WOLD: It's because originally he started out with some connection to world music -- gamelan music, and so on.

ALBURGER: How did you hook up with Paul?

WOLD: But wait, let me finish the story of opening night! So opening night, here I'd been working on this piece for a year and the few months before had been getting no sleep as usual, and the first person who walks up to me afterwards immediately asks, "So what are you working on now?" And I said, "I haven't been working on *anything now*, because I'm doing *this*!"

ALBURGER: And this *Queer* came off very well.

WOLD: Convincingly enough, I guess, that my mother called me last week and said, "I have to ask you something. Are you gay?" It's funny, because I had just taken an "Are You Gay?" Quiz sent to me by Trauma Flintstone, who played the Burroughs character in *Queer*. He was quite put out to have scored only 65% on the "Are You Gay" Quiz.

ALBURGER: So how'd you do?

WOLD: Like some of his other straight friends, I scored about 40%. And then he moaned, "Look, I'm only about 25 percentage points from these straight guys!" But it was a real obvious quiz with predictable multiple-choice selections. "Which of these women are more appealing to you?" and three out of four were pretty clearly trannies, and so on.

ALBURGER: Did you encounter any obstacles as a straight male writing on a gay subject?

WOLD: I thought I would, but, no, I didn't. I mean, there are obviously plenty of straight stories that have been written and performed by gay people and, anyway, who even really knows the sexual preferences of someone, especially an artist. I mean, maybe I prefer cats or dogs or whatever, really.

ALBURGER: What attracted you to the Burroughs novel?

WOLD: I go through almost manic periods of reading, and *Queer* was just one book that really struck a chord about the longing associated with love, which is one of my favorite subjects.

ALBURGER: Did you encounter any difficulty in getting the rights to make the novel into an opera?

WOLD: *Queer* was problematic. Steve Buscemi already had an option on a film version. When you work on these issues, you always have to find the right person. And Burroughs had just died before I started. If he had been alive, supposedly he was totally loose. But then it's "What do you want to do? We don't want you to do it. I don't know, whatever it is, we don't want you to do it!" You don't get fired for not letting someone do it; you only get fired for letting someone do it! But then, through some literary connection, Robert Gluck, I contacted James Grauerholz, who was Burroughs's secretary at the end of his life, who edited *Queer* in fact, who said "Great!" But then we learned about the option. But it turned out that John Morace, who helped with the dramaturgy, had worked with Steve Buscemi's brother for years, and so just called him up and Steve said, "No problem! Great!" So you always have to find artist types who are actually into it. If you just talk to the business people, it can be difficult.

ALBURGER: In the opera, the use of the combination of the first and third person in the narrative was intriguing

WOLD: I wish I could take credit for it, but that's the way Burroughs put it down. When I started to edit *Queer* down to a libretto I tried removing the third-person sections, but I quickly realized that that would be a mistake. As it turned out, third person was not only dramatically but legally necessary -- the only way I could obtain the rights was to agree to leave Burroughs's words unchanged -- luckily I had already come to that conclusion. In the introduction to the book (written 30 years later when it was finally published), Burroughs says that the book wrote him rather than the other way around. The experiences related were intensely painful, and he needed this extra level of distance to handle the pain.

ALBURGER: Did you write the role of the Burroughs character expressively for Trauma Flintstone?

WOLD: No, but I was extremely fortunate to find him. The casting was totally fortuitous -- the man who cuts my hair recommended him. Flintstone is a pretty well-known drag performer (thus the name), but I didn't know he did regular theater and music theater. I knew I had to have a really strong actor play the part, since the main character carries the show. He never leaves the stage; he is the narrator and the main character; and there are spoken as well as sung parts. I was willing to have any kind of voice -- I wasn't limiting myself to "big O" opera voices -- but I knew from past experience that even highly trained singers have a lot of trouble with my music, because of the constant meter changes and polyrhythmic nonsense. I was *really* pleased that he learned two hours of this stuff *really* quickly and took it to heart.

ALBURGER: Ultimately you had great performances and lots of positive press. How did you do it?

WOLD: By throwing lots of money at the project!

ALBURGER: Other people's or your own?

WOLD: Unfortunately, my own. We couldn't get funding, unlike *Little Girl*, which received quite a bit.

ALBURGER: So what were the budgets for these shows?

WOLD: *Queer* was about \$15,000, but the second production of *Little Girl*, the one recorded on this album, was about \$60,000, and the third production was completely supported by the largesse of the Austrian government. Despite all the support for the second *Little Girl* run, I still look back at the first production of the piece as the ideal one. That was back when I finally decided to just push something out onto the public. Before that, I was mostly doing synthesizer work, sitting in the basement and recording on CDs. It's not the same. Although I had done theatre pieces before.

ALBURGER: What were your early theatre works?

WOLD: Well, they're kind of embarrassing! I did some music on a found text, which was recorded

ALBURGER: Do you have copies?

WOLD: I have *plenty* of copies! I'm not that bright in some ways... Here's what happened. A friend of mine was walking down the street on campus and found a bunch of three-by-five cards.

ALBURGER: This was at Occidental?

WOLD: This was at Santa Cruz. I wasn't at Santa Cruz. He was at Santa Cruz. He found these three-by-five cards that were someone's notes on *Der Rosenkavalier* that they had taken in music class and then lost. We said, "This is our story!" I didn't even know it was *Der Rosenkavalier* at first, although I did say, "These names are familiar." We started looking at them and then put them into an order, and tried to figure out the story based on these notes. Of course, our ordering had nothing at all to do with *Der Rosenkavalier* by the end! It involved this boy that becomes a cultish figure who takes people into this vaguely Islamic religion.

ALBURGER: You have a later piece, *The Islamic Republic of Las Vegas*.

WOLD: Right, then later with this same guy, Eric Shot, we wrote this other play, *The Islamic Republic of Las Vegas*. But with *Little Girl*, I decided to put on a larger production, and I was prepared just do it myself and to max out my credit cards, but instead I got my first grant from Intersection for the Arts. Plus they provided the theatre for free, and we split the box, but it still ended up costing me a lot. It took me about eight years to pay off the debt!

ALBURGER: The old "Philip Glass returns to driving the cab after *Einstein on the Beach* opens" story.

WOLD: Obviously you and I read the same articles!

ALBURGER: So it took awhile to recover from the first *Little Girl*.

WOLD: Yes, but it was perfect in some ways! It was a total magical experience -- this right combination of people, actors, and the place. The Intersection theatre is like a shoebox: a 70-seat theatre; we crammed people into the place for all 14 performances.

ALBURGER: Laurie Amat was in both productions?

WOLD: Yes. I've worked with her quite a bit over the years, and have written a number of pieces for her. And Pamela Z was in the first production. She was too busy the second time around.

ALBURGER: First *Little Girl* was --

WOLD: 1995. And then the stupid thing I did was... I had started writing *Sub Pontio Pilato*, which was for full orchestra, chorus, and a big cast. I thought, "Why am I doing this?" considering that even small pieces were breaking the bank. But I finished it in 1996.

ALBURGER: So you were writing *Pontius* while you were producing *Little Girl*.

WOLD: Yes, and it may finally get produced in 2003. John Duykers is Pontius Pilate. He did John Adams's *Nixon in China*.

ALBURGER: And recently Clark Supryniewicz's *Caliban's Dream*.

WOLD: That's right. And he's done a couple of Glass operas, including *In the Penal Colony*.

ALBURGER: Sure.

WOLD: And John's son works for Philip Glass now. Anyway, the second *Little Girl* was produced by Paul Dresner, who got an initial, sizable grant from Opera America. They used to give grants for first productions, but they decided that there were too many operas that never got further hearings. So they started a program called *The Next Stages*, to enable subsequent productions. Paul was looking for something to produce to apply for one of these grants, and he had seen a video of *Little Girl*.

ALBURGER: How did you know Paul?

WOLD: I knew him vaguely for many years, because we had friends in common from the University of California at San Diego, where he had studied. He was a cross-over type who had been involved with rock as well as classical music. When he moved up here I met him a few times. I really respect what Paul's done. He has supported so many composer's works. We also received money from the city of San Francisco to support *Little Girl*. In fact, the publicity budget alone for the second *Little Girl* was probably as large as the entire first budget -- about \$15,000. But, by contrast, as I mentioned, I had difficulty finding funding for *Queer*.

ALBURGER: Amazing.

WOLD: I have no idea why. At some point I thought, "I'm spending too much time applying for grants. I might as well just *do it*." So I went back to credit-card financing. At least by now I know what things will cost. There were fewer surprises than with the second *Little Girl* budget.

ALBURGER: Listening and seeing both shows, I certainly couldn't tell that one was a \$60,000 and the other a \$15,000.

WOLD: Some of the expenditures are visible and some are not. Think of the world of film. "The movie had a huge budget" could mean simply that one of the actors received a huge salary. So whether you see the results or not, is another issue. Since the second *Little Girl* budget was bigger, in a sense I paid off "debts" to some people that had worked with me over the years. I gave them reasonable salaries, whereas before they had always worked for nothing. And that way, maybe the next time, they'll work for nothing again. I didn't take any money.

ALBURGER: No?

WOLD: I've never been able to take any money from any of these operas. I've done pieces for money, though.

ALBURGER: Such as?

WOLD: Film soundtracks.

ALBURGER: Before we get there, does this sum up your stage works?

WOLD: There's also *13 Versions of Surrender*, for solo soprano, which I wrote for Laurie Amat. That's a song cycle that's staged. It's based on a set of poems by Michelle Murphy.

ALBURGER: With whom you also worked in *I Brought My Hips to the Table*.

WOLD: Yes, in a dance work, where the text was an inspiration, but does not appear..

ALBURGER: So what of your soundtrack work? I have one album.

WOLD: You have *The Bed You Sleep In*, the second film soundtrack I did with Jon Jost. I've done some TV, but that was so horrible that I told myself I'd never go back to it, even though that makes a lot of money. Henry Kaiser and I did the soundtrack for this horrible TV series about mysteries that played as filler on independent stations when they had extra time. We did this in '87, and just improvised the music. The show's producers liked us because we were fast. They would send us a copy of the show by FedEx. We'd get it at, say, ten in the morning. We would do all the music, and our finished results would be on a courier plane at one in the afternoon! It was serious! And the producers just loved it! Because they were always way past their deadlines. So we did OK. The nice thing was that it was one of these shows that had music constantly, and we got paid by the minute, and we got paid royalties by the minute. The producers didn't know that they should have been taking the publisher royalties, so we got both the writers' and publisher's shares. Crummy show. 26 episodes, or so. In the years after, we probably made a total of \$100,000 just on royalties alone for all these filler placements. You realize what someone can make if they write a *Simpsons* episode. But it was just so icky.

ALBURGER: Was it icky music that you were doing?

WOLD: Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Actually, that's not completely true. The very first episode, when Henry wasn't around, I approached it very seriously. I really liked some of the music. It was about the Titanic. But then Henry arrived and said, "We gotta get this *outta* here!" I was just working too slowly! So it was just like *ding, ding, ding!* He had his Synclavier, and he would say, "O.K., let's scramble around the melody here!" "Arpeggiate!" *Ding, ding, ding!* "O.K., get it outta here!"

ALBURGER: Charles Amirkhonian also used Henry's Synclavier.

WOLD: Yes, and I used it for other projects.

ALBURGER: That's a storied Synclavier.

WOLD: The early days of sampling.

ALBURGER: So it was Henry and you on the Synclavier. It wasn't Henry on the guitar?

WOLD: Oh, I think he played a few guitar licks here and there.

ALBURGER: So mostly Synclavier four-hands.

WOLD: Exactly

ALBURGER: How did you establish an association and get this gig?

WOLD: Henry and I knew each other from years before. In my far distant background, I was totally a classical person when I was young. When I was 12 years old, I would go to the music store.

ALBURGER: Child of a Lutheran minister.

WOLD: I loved hymns and stuff. And spirituals. Loved all that stuff. I was born in southern California, but grew up in North Dakota. Grand Forks was what I felt was my hometown. I went to high school in southern California.

ALBURGER: Where?

WOLD: Garden Grove High School. We also lived in Minneapolis for a little while. Ministers tend to move around. For the first seven years of my life, I lived in North Hollywood.

ALBURGER: North Hollywood, Grand Forks, Garden Grove --

WOLD: Back and forth.

ALBURGER: -- a bit of cultural disorientation.

WOLD: It was good in a way. I got to spend the years from 7 to 12 in Grand Forks, which was great. When you're a kid that age -- the snow, the river, the forests -- you just get to run out into it. It was great. The seasons would happen. The river would flood, and icebergs would float down the river. Ice floes. It was just great. You could shoot BB guns. All this stuff. Right in your backyard, you could shoot bows and arrows.

ALBURGER: And then you moved to southern California, and could be in a shoot-up at the 7-11.

WOLD: My sister, who was high-school age, hated it, because it was a cultural backwater. Death. She didn't wear the right local clothes; she wanted to wear the snazzy southern California clothes. Then we moved back to southern California, which was interesting for me, having druggy friends and musician friends

ALBURGER: You weren't the country rube?



WOLD: No, I had been born there and lived there off and on. So when I was a kid I was totally into classical music, particularly modern classical music. So when I was 12, I would go to the music store, and I didn't buy the Monkees.

ALBURGER: How old are you?

WOLD: 43. I would buy Scriabin and Stravinsky, and then later, whatever. Messiaen. I would just buy things for their covers or liner notes. That was back in the days when you could read the liner notes on the back of something, so that you could actually find out something about it, and then you would buy it.... I would buy computer and electronic music, and I was totally into it. Then in high school, I had this one experience where, in terms of popular music, I said, "I'm, like, totally out of it. I'm, like, not a hip person." I had these druggy friends -- these totally interesting-people friends. This was back in the days when people did drugs because they had read Aldous Huxley. I went to these people and said, "You guys play in bands, you know this stuff, what kind of music should I be listening to?" So I took down all their recommendations, and compiled a list of what they all voted on the most, and I went to the store and bought 10 records. The list they gave me was actually pretty good. At that time, in the early 70's, it was all American and European "progressive" bands.

ALBURGER: And the "art rock" had connections with classical music.

WOLD: As a matter of fact, the next issue of *Progression* magazine, which is a progressive-rock journal that is still covering all those bands -- Kansas, Yes -- will have a review of *Little Girl* and *Queer!* The review seems out of place, but the reviewer is a big fan. So, back then, I started doing some art rock with friends. I was going to Occidental College and Cal Tech, studying music and getting a degree in electrical engineering. I won a composition award at Occidental and that had a big impact on me -- some validation of my abilities, I guess. So, when I moved up to northern California for graduate school--

ALBURGER: You started to compose when?

WOLD: '75 to '78. I went to college from '74 to '78.

ALBURGER: You're a genius.

WOLD: Yeah, right. Well, I graduated from high school early. The girl who would have been valedictorian got bumped by me, because I decided to graduate a year ahead. So I studied composition in college, but I had kept in touch with my progressive-rock-type friends. When I came up to Berkeley, two of these friends said, we're moving up with you to do a band. I said, "O.K., fine." But at the same time, I was writing these kooky pieces. One was in sixth tones and eighth tones, for four trombones, and chorus, with this totally made-up language. When I got to Berkeley, I went to Andrew Imbrie and said, "I'd like to study with you." So he looked at this piece and said, "This is totally incomprehensible!" It was a doublebass concerto -- the *background* was the four trombones and chorus! So you see what I grew up with. Academic music was my life. I was also writing this musical with these two friends, that had these rock aspects. And we got on KALX, which is the local UC Berkeley radio. So we ad libbed it on air, and the sound guy was laughing through it, because it was totally silly. And we get home, and the phone rings, and it's Fred Frith and Henry Kaiser. They're calling us saying, "We heard you on the radio. We're coming over right away." We were [whispering]: "Fred Frith. Henry Kaiser." We were in awe. We couldn't believe it. So they sat on the couch and we played the piece and they laughed through the whole thing. Henry decided that he wanted to take this little group of youngsters and mold them into something. Well, actually wanted someone to play all these old Captain Beefheart songs with him. So afterwards, when my friends and I had this band doing art-rock stuff, we were about to go on with our first concert, with Diamanda Galas, and our lead singer got deathly ill, in the hospital. Henry was there, and said, "I'll join the band." So from then I knew him for years.

ALBURGER: You were a keyboard player in the band.

WOLD: Guitar.

ALBURGER: Guitar.

WOLD: We had a lot of guitars. We had seven guitars at one time.

ALBURGER: Did you start as a keyboardist?

WOLD: I had studied piano when I was very young and hated it. I started playing guitar in college, and then I learned to play piano pretty well after that -- typical composer-level piano ability, I guess.

ALBURGER: How did you develop your enthusiasm for contemporary classical music in the first place?

WOLD: My mother played piano. She played in this eight-piano, 16-hand ensemble, for example (which got me interested in classical music in general), plus organ in church, of course. But in high school I only went so far toward the contemporary -- Stravinsky, Prokofiev. I remember in college the first time I heard *Pierrot Lunaire*, and I said, "If I ever like this music, I will know that my taste has changed so drastically that I will be outside the mainstream, and I will never understand how normal people hear music!" And eventually I loved it, and so much atonal, serial, and later "outlaw" music.

ALBURGER: So you and Henry played in a band for a few years.

WOLD: Yes. Oh, to get back to the TV soundtrack thread. That all happened because he had the connection to these Grateful Dead buddies who became TV producers. Henry still has Grateful Dead connections. I played in a Grateful Dead cover band with him once, to fill in. We played in Cotati and Bolinas. The thing I remember is that we were treated like *gods*, playing the Grateful Dead in Bolinas. I didn't know these tunes at all and had to learn them incredibly quickly!

ALBURGER: So after TV, there were the film collaborations with Jost.

WOLD: I knew Jost from the Just Intonation Network. Maybe I should explain this. Early on I was writing in a free-atonal style. I was never much for the rules...

ALBURGER: What's your earliest piece?

WOLD: The earliest was a Hindemithy-sounding piece for clarinet and piano, that was in two different tempos at once. It was tonal, but Hindemithy tonal.

ALBURGER: High school or college?

WOLD: College. Then I wrote a real atonal set of songs for voice and violin. And a theatre piece, based on *The Wasteland*, a setting for soprano and chamber ensemble, very much in that university free-atonal, timbrally-oriented...

ALBURGER: Precious.

WOLD: Precious. I started writing in other tunings, and using quarter-tones.

ALBURGER: Where did that come from?

WOLD: Well, everyone was using 12 pitch-classes, and I wanted to use more. I did this clever trick where I would resolve minor chords into major chords, but one pitch would go up a quarter-tone and two would go down a quarter-tone.

ALBURGER: Like some sort of weird medievalism. An updated Landini cadence.

WOLD: Right. So you kind of feel a resolve, but you wouldn't be quite sure.

ALBURGER: So writing microtonally wasn't coming out of listening to Harry Partch or Ben Johnston or others...

WOLD: Not at that time. I had heard Harry Partch. When I first heard him, his pieces sounded like percussion music.

ALBURGER: Such as *Castor and Pollux*.

WOLD: Right. I didn't get the pitch aspects of his music at first, although later I read *Genesis of a Music* and all that. So, when I started using lots of pitches, but then I realized I needed an interval system to organize them. And that led me to just intonation, as an organizational way to get to any pitch. And that's when I started working back toward tonal music, since there is a tendency to feel tonal centers when using these just intervals around certain pitches. About that time I heard Philip Glass and thought, "O.K., it's O.K. to write tonal music again." Everything's O.K.!

ALBURGER: Your rediscovery of tonal music was via microtonal music.

WOLD: Kind of going around the other side.

ALBURGER: Not the typical approach.

WOLD: No. That's the funny thing. Sometimes I'm lumped in with these tonal people, who can't believe I like Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*! But they're great pieces. They're lovely pieces.

ALBURGER: Minimalism's rediscovery of tonality was in part neoaleatory, neoCageian: if we can do anything, this is our new anything -- playing the same chord for 10 minutes.

WOLD: It's funny, because minimalists were the total avant-garde at first, and then after that they were seen as reactionaries. But at first we thought, "They are the most radical." I like John Cage a lot, too, and many of his early pieces are very tonal, in fact just very beautiful pieces.

ALBURGER: Piano pieces.

WOLD: In college a friend and I played through his early piano duets, his pentatonic pieces, and Christian Wolff's limited pitch scales -- very tonal in a lot of ways.

ALBURGER: Well, if you only have five pitches...

WOLD: It's hard not to have a tonal orientation. Sometimes five pitches across the spectrum -- not even five pitch-classes. I loved the static quality of those pieces early on, and minimalism seemed like just another static music, but more pulse-driven.

ALBURGER: So you discovered minimalism --

WOLD: After college. I had friends who were visual artists who played *Einstein on the Beach* for me. And I had always been interested in rhythm -- but not lockstep. In the rock band years, we were rarely in 4/4, we were more likely to be in 17. I noticed that when you worked in the very free university-style at the time, it was very hard to feel a wide range of rhythm and tempi even though you have lots of different note durations. There was a tendency to always go towards slower tempi, or even if you tried to write pieces in faster tempi, they still sounded slow. I realized that just about the only way to get a faster feel is with a pulse. Otherwise, even if the notes are fast, it doesn't feel fast. *Zeitmass* always feels about the same with respect to tempo, even though there's this whole spin about going from the longest notes that can be played to the shortest.

ALBURGER: The notion of unpulsed music sounding "the same" is perhaps related to the perception that atonal music can begin to sound undifferentiated.

WOLD: And related to the Cage thought that, "I can make any sound, and they all sound the same."

ALBURGER: All the colors turn out gray.

WOLD: We see the small differences, but perhaps to do that, we need familiar references. But I felt uncomfortable writing those early tonal-minimal pieces, because that notion of atonal music being the future had been beaten into me so strongly in my youth. Anyway, we've digressed again. I've gotten away from my involvement in the just intonation world.

ALBURGER: Leading to the Jost invitation to write a film score...

WOLD: Well, I joined the Just Intonation Network. Henry Rosenthal. David Doty. Larry Polansky was involved with them, too. La Monte Young would come by and visit the Just Intonation Network. Actually, there's a great story about La Monte Young. He's notorious for asking for a lot of money. So Henry calls him up and says, "La Monte, you're in town. Come on by the Just Intonation Network, and we'll play some of your music." He says, "Well, O.K., my standard fee for an appearance is \$50,000" -- or whatever it was. And Henry says, "Well, we can pay you *nothing*." And he says, "O.K." The best thing, though, was that we had this table of food set up. La Monte says, "Oh, first I'd like to play this piece before I talk." He turns on the tape. And it's hours. It's hours. I think it's two hours before it's over. "I just want to play this piece." Luckily, I had not been caught sitting in the front row. I had been caught standing back by the food table, so I just ate the whole time and hung out and wandered off in time.

ALBURGER: You might say you wandered off Just In Time.

WOLD: Just in Time. In the *Just Intonation Newsletter* there used to be a little section called "Just in Fun." JI Jokes. So anyway, Just Intonation Network. I met Henry Rosenthal. Henry Rosenthal is like a kook magnet --- Just Intonation Network, various other enterprises. I mean, not to say that all Just Intonation Network people are kooks, but there they are! So here's this really interesting guy, Henry, and he's also a movie producer. He's produced a bunch of interesting movies. He was producing all of John Jost's movies at the time (Henry has released four of John's films). Henry also produced *Mod Fuck Explosion* -- I don't know if you've taken that in, but I'm in the credits. Probably John's best film is *All the Vermeers in New York*. It was his breakthrough, too. It was done for American Playhouse. It had a theatrical release. He had made 19 films, but they all played festivals. Very obscure. They'd play in one theatre in New York, and an art gallery, and just disappear. Now he's doing digital video installations. I went to see one of his films at Pacific Archive, and Henry and John were there. The music was great. It was by John English, who was involved with the Jazz Composer's Orchestra. I'm an engineer, in my other life. I was working for Yamaha music research division, and was in Tokyo in this little businessman hotel. This wasn't quite a tube hotel, but little teeny rooms. So small that when I was in the bathroom, I could hear the businessman upstairs had brought in a prostitute. I get a call from Henry in the hotel, who says, "John's film *Surefire* is going to go to Sundance in two weeks, and John English is deathly ill." He was sick a lot. He had had a bad disease as a kid. He had had Hodgkin's Disease. He had almost died.

ALBURGER: The English patient.

WOLD: Yes. So he couldn't do it. He had started the score, but couldn't finish it.

ALBURGER: A Leonard Bernstein opportunity.

WOLD: Right. Henry said, "It's gotta be in just intonation, and it's gotta be country music. I couldn't think of anybody else, and I thought you could do it." So I said, "O.K., fine, I'll do it." So I got back, and I wrote the music for it, and I got the pedal-steel player, and we played this thing in just intonation for synthesizer and pedal-steel, and we did it in two weeks, and it's O.K. It's an O.K. soundtrack; there are some nice parts. Actually, it's a real good film. It's got all these great Mormon quotes -- takes place in Utah.

ALBURGER: Mormon hymn quotes?

WOLD: No, sorry. There are crawling texts.

ALBURGER: From *The Book of Mormon*?

WOLD: Yes. And it's all in just intonation. There's significant numerology in the film, especially around the number 13, so that was a perfect opportunity to use a bunch of 13-limit intervals. For example, at the end, the strings are playing a big 13/7-ratio chord over these 13 big tolling *Sun-Treader*-like bass-drum hits. The pedal-steel player had no problem, because he was simply playing by ear anyway. No big deal. Then I did the next film, because John English stayed sick and eventually died. I actually worked on the music to *The Bed You Sleep In* before the film even went into production. John had always wanted to merge the on-location sounds with the music, so I went up with him when he went up to Oregon for the filming. The sound engineer and I recorded the sawmill sounds together. I'd like to do something like that again -- the mixture of sampled sounds with an instrumental ensemble -- to get a string quality from buzz saws. There are still some things you can do with electronic music that you can't do with instrumental music, like getting that spatial, sustained, static quality.

ALBURGER: Is that why you continue to incorporate synthesizer in your acoustic chamber music?

WOLD: Yes, I should do even more, but I don't. Actually, I use a lot of *one* particular synthesizer sound. I've just decided that that's an instrument I've taken into my ensemble. And I use it *all* the time. It's in *Little Girl*, it's in *The Bed You Sleep In*, it's in *Queer*. It's just "I have a cello, I have this synthesizer sound."

ALBURGER: What's the sound?

WOLD: It's a factory sound on the DX7II: "Warm String Section." I've decided I won't use it anymore, because I use it way too much.

ALBURGER: You've also worked with dancers.

WOLD: I tend to like dramatic pieces, so I tend to like working with dancers. Working with a dance is almost like working with text, right? It does give you structure. In classic ballet, the music often comes first and the dance is put on top of it. But in modern dance, usually the author is the choreographer, so the piece's structure already exists, just like in film. So a lot of your timing, and issues of motion and the feel, or what's going to happen, is more-or-less determined, and the composer is putting the music to the pre-existent structures.

ALBURGER: Was that true of *I Brought My Hips to the Table*?

WOLD: That was more of a collaboration -- a close, good collaboration. We wrote the piece together: a linear approach from beginning to end, no less. A story line. I think of myself as a dramatic composer, even when I write instrumental pieces. When you look at some of my instrumental scores, there are stories. I mean the text appears in the score, as a program or subtext, I guess. This is true of the new pieces I'm writing for contrabassist Ashley Adams, either solo or paired with other instruments. I decided a long time ago that I wasn't going to use any of the standard forms, or follow any of the standard sets of rules. Since even when I was in school, I didn't want to write serial music, even though a lot of people that I liked did. I always felt I wanted to be free, but I knew I had to find something by which to structure the music.

ALBURGER: The drama.

WOLD: I wanted people to feel that they had gone through a dramatic experience, whatever that is. It could be very vague. More than an absolute-musical cohesiveness, I want a dramatic cohesiveness.

ALBURGER: A musical structure generated on a purely dramatic structure can work wonderfully.

WOLD: That's right.

ALBURGER: What about the instruments you select for different pieces? You had your mixed experience with the *Sub Pontio Pilato*, with such a huge orchestra.

WOLD: I love orchestral music!

ALBURGER: But you have a fondness for unusual ensembles.

WOLD: That comes totally out of the university-music experience.

ALBURGER: Nothing unique there?

WOLD: I don't think so. When I was a college kid, what you listened to was written by Joe Shmoe at Columbia, and it was scored for accordion, bowed cymbals, cello, and live electronics. I think it comes out of that. And it's totally for the same reason; it's an economic reason. You want a broad palette that gives you a wide range, but fits together and doesn't require too many people. My combinations are probably less unusual than those of a number of people.

ALBURGER: That's probably true.

WOLD: Why do you think they're strange? The *Bed* ensemble and the *Little Girl* ensemble are similar, because they were written at the same time, and I knew that probably the same people would be willing to perform in both.

ALBURGER: You've talked about an affinity toward winds.

WOLD: Yes.

ALBURGER: And away from strings.

WOLD: Yes, although I use a lot of low strings.

ALBURGER: Still, some of your combinations I haven't seen often, particularly in having larger instruments used in smaller capacities. You only have five instruments, and one's a tuba; only have five instruments and one's a string bass rather than a cello. Having a French horn with only a few other players.

WOLD: *Hips* has trumpet and tuba.

ALBURGER: *Queer* has trumpet, too.

WOLD: *Queer* has a mariachi influence: trumpet, violin, nylon-string guitar, acoustic bass, and then piano. The piano is the orchestra -- I personally have to fill in the extra texture somehow.

ALBURGER: Have there been other instrumental ensemble models that you've used?

WOLD: *Surefire* was definitely a country band. *Bed* was supposed to have some sort of American rural quality. It has a classical quality, too, with viola and cello. I used to not like violin. Katie Wreede played the viola part. She said, "Violin -- that horrible screech box! In other instrumental families, it's the second-to-the-highest instrument that is the main instrument! Think of it. Flute is the *main* instrument! Not the *piccolo!*" Violin = piccolo, as far as she was concerned! And I kind of liked that, because I tended to like the warmer string sounds and winds. That's probably because I loved Stravinsky. Stravinsky was my total idol growing up. A perfect orchestra for me was, "have the violins check *out*, and add a couple of pianos."

ALBURGER: The *Symphony of Psalms* orchestra.

WOLD: In *Pilate*, I wrote music for high strings, but I could be perfectly happy to take out the violins, and just leave the low strings, winds, and a couple of pianos or harps. In fact, when an excerpt was played, the violinists came up to me and said, "We have *never* had to play a part before where we had to count up to *97 measures* of rest!" There's no instrument I don't like, really. But I like anything low, and sometimes things that are really high, and I love piano. I've been trying to think of how to integrate rock instruments again. But something that goes along with those instruments that is not compatible with my classical side. And I'm encountering something similar in writing the solo double bass piece. All I could think of, initially, was music in the Bertram Turetzky tradition, "Ho!" "Scrape!"

ALBURGER: Just as just about everything sounds slow without pulse, with unaccompanied basically-monophonic instruments just about everything sounds spare and lonely, because either the instrument is playing, or it's not. It's hard to keep a pulse going, because then often all you get is the pulse. So as you pair the string bass with other instruments, perhaps you'll come up with an electric guitar / double bass as a "power duo."

WOLD: Right. And I'm attracted to the string bass now in part because of its wide range. Ashley plays that range really wonderfully -- she's opened up the instrument for me. In *13 Versions*, the instruments are bassoon, cello, and piano -- bassoon and cello have these enormous ranges. Composers know the ranges, but often they still don't write in the extremes.

ALBURGER: Well, we'll look forward to the evolution of these bass pieces.

WOLD: So are we wrapping up here?

ALBURGER: What do you think?

WOLD: That's fine with me! I want to make public this little secret aspect of my music...

ALBURGER: Tell all.

WOLD: Ahem, well, I quote... In every single major piece I've written, there's a composition I quote. I did it in my very first big work (I don't use it in a little 20-measure piece). In every major piece I quote --

ALBURGER: You sure you want to reveal it?

WOLD: Yeah.

ALBURGER: You sure you don't want to leave it to the next generation of musicologists?

WOLD: I think it might be interesting to try to find it.

ALBURGER: Go. Drum roll, please.

WOLD: It's one of Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*.

ALBURGER: Which one?

WOLD: It's the "Colors" movement.

ALBURGER: It's the third.

WOLD: I think so! I should know, since it's my signature piece! He didn't give titles to any of those pieces; the publisher forced him to give titles. And there's a nice Webern arrangement for two pianos.

ALBURGER: Of the "Colors" movement! I like that!

WOLD: Because it's not just instrumental colors, it's the chord progression. And the chord progression I love -- that's what I quote.

ALBURGER: Right from the front end of it?

WOLD: Yes, the very opening seven chords. Do you know what it is? It's a beautiful chord progression. I've always loved quartal harmony, and I still use quartal harmony. The opening chord is C-G#-B-E-A. People have analyzed the piece for the color changes, but the chord progression is perfect, and perfect for me, because it's like a lot of things that I do. It's harmony that's derived from linear motion, more than from harmonic, or root progression.

It's a canon in all five voices. So they all move up a half step and down a whole step, not in the same rhythm, of course, because they have to move at different times to get the different chords. You start on that opening chord and you end a whole step down by the end of the progression. I use that in *Queer*. You can find it.

ALBURGER: All right, sleuths, get on it!

# Concert Reviews

## BMOP Bop

DAVID CLEARY

Moston Modern Orchestra Project presents *The BMOP/NEC Connection*. January 20, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

There are many ways one can prepare for a major snowstorm. Stocking up on provisions at the grocery, moving the car to a no-tow zone, and renting a stack of videos to while away the time spent indoors are popular options. This critic chose instead to head out and review the latest Boston Modern Orchestra Project presentation. Despite a few less than memorable entries, this proved to be a good decision.

The first half of the concert was terrific. Soprano saxophonist Eric Hewitt, winner of BMOP's Concerto Competition, gave a fine performance of *Chemins IVb* by Luciano Berio that demonstrated Hewitt's excellent command of special effects (including multiphonics and fluttertongue) and commanding, substantial tone quality. The piece, an elaboration on the solo work *Sequenza VIIIb*, is a jittery toccata of sorts densely laden with busy figures that swirl around the pitch B above middle C. It never bores for second. *Perspectives II* for chamber orchestra by Arthur Berger is an early entry from this composer's serial period—pointillistic in gesture, yet possessing an overall sense of line that expertly keeps the work from feeling like a mishmash of fragments. Tightly constructed from small, jagged gestures and repeated note figures, it unfolds in a unique, yet logical manner and makes for fine listening. Past winners of the orchestra's annual student composition contest have elicited less than enthusiastic responses from this reviewer, but this year's selection, *The Spanish Songs* by Lior Navok, is good enough to hobnob with the pros. Had Richard Strauss grown up in Iberian lands and heard a bit of film score music, this might have been the result. But the piece goes beyond its polished scoring and careful construction to delineate a warm, yearningly expressive universe that exhibits a genuine, personal sense of depth. Its two soloists performed ably; soprano Monica Garcia's voice proved nicely even from the bottom to the top of her range and was pleasing to hear (though her diction was mushy), while bassoonist Ron Haroutunian made the most of his relatively subsidiary part. Lee Hyla's *Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Orchestra* is tight, punchy, and riveting, utilizing a formal structure that proves to be both unusual and satisfying. While its bass clarinet writing shows a bit of Eric Dolphy influence, the solo part remains sufficiently personal as to sound like no one but Hyla. Bass clarinetist Tim Smith was terrific, sporting agile finger technique and a huge, bold sound that knifed through the thickest scoring.

Try as it might, the back half fell a bit short of previous heights. *Romance for Cello and Orchestra*, by Alan Fletcher, is plush, luxuriant, and idiomatically written throughout, suggesting a polytonal take on Samuel Barber's slow movements. Unfortunately, it also meanders formally, is rather short on contrast, and proves a bit too lengthy. But the cello soloist here was superb: Andres Diaz performed with an exquisitely warm tone and flawless intonation. Writing music for children's chorus and orchestra usually dictates much about said work's style and approach. Not surprisingly, Larry Bell's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (which sets a bushel basket's worth of William Blake's poetry) is dead-on triadic, perfumed with hints of Brahms, Britten, and folksy Mahler, though exhibiting some surprisingly imaginative harmonic progressions at times. The piece is charming, sweet, and sentimental in nature, well composed for its young singers. If it sounds a bit old-fashioned and foursquare, that's most likely a by-product of writing for this kind of ensemble rather than anything Bell injected into the work's fabric.

Conductor Gil Rose presided over the well-drilled ensemble, presenting all selections with intelligence and sympathy. And thanks to Rose and his group for providing a compelling reason to attend a concert on the cusp of a blizzard.

## Z Space Gets an A

DAVID SASLAV

Mark Alburger's *Antigone*, Dwight Okamura's *Bern and Louise*, Clark Supryniewicz's *Caliban's Dream*, and Erling Wold's *Queer*. January 27, Z Space, San Francisco, CA.

An eclectic and delectable pastiche of musical theatre and operatic works-in-progress were presented on January 27 at Z Space Studio in San Francisco. These works in development found a nurturing stage and audience here. Developing theatre is the goal of Z Space, according to Clark Supryniewicz, who runs the New Music Theatre Project there with Cherylene Lee and Elaine Magree.

Erling Wold's *Queer* led off the program, billed by the composer as a "longish trailer" for the complete work. An adaptation of an early autobiographical work by William Burroughs from the 40's and 50's (which was published only in the 80's), *Queer* follows Burroughs on his struggles to pick up men and boys in Mexico City. The textual elements of the story are only partially set to music. Lee (the Burroughs character) was portrayed by strong-voiced Trauma Flintstone. Ken Berry portrayed the primary love interest, Eugene Allerton, as well as various other roles, and Jim Cave directed.

The scenes demonstrated Wold's primary strength to be his wide-ranging palette of musical colors. Starting from a melancholy, minimalist scene set in a bar where Lee attempts to seduce Allerton, Wold deftly employs musical repetition, from extended passacaglia forms featuring various solo orchestrations designed to convey the south-of-the-border atmosphere, to more minimal counterpoints. Padoxically, the narrative texts and arias tended to fly by too quickly, with no repetition -- so if one happened to miss a key line here or there, there was no second chance to recover the storyline.

Nevertheless, the scenes of *Queer* could be clearly discerned as growing more and more restless throughout. The frenetic Lee kibitzes a chess game, visits a doctor in a quest to score drugs, and eventually convinces the indifferent Allerton to join him on his quest for the mystical Yage. A great deal of the material delivered at Z Space was spoken over a musical backdrop, and much of the plot was difficult to follow, but in the end the ensemble -- consisting of keyboards, bass, trumpet, violin, Wold himself on guitar, and the two singers -- commanded a warm reception from a discerning audience.

Dwight Okamura and Brad Erickson's *Bern and Louise* was directed by Elaine Magree. One year after a New Music Theatre Project retreat, the work continues to evolve into an ever more cohesive whole.

Two disturbed and frightened characters, running from their pasts and afraid to face what they have become, were portrayed by Trauma Flintstone (Vern) and Julie Queen (Louise and other roles). Composer Okamura's open-fifths prologue piano score accompanied Vern's opening of a package and listening to an old tape of himself and a woman singing -- to shockingly forceful effect. Haunting and haunted, his reminiscences reveal a past consisting of himself and a fellow journalist dabbling in and eventually staging scenes of arson together, conjuring visions of today's "Reality TV". Louise is an Asian art dealer who lives in an enormous house in Palo Alto. Recently separated, she puts an ad for a roommate out of pique, and Bern, attempting to escape his dark past, applies as her roommate. In the final scene presented, Bern reveals to Louise the terrible reason why he had to leave New Orleans, and the tragic fate that befell his journalistic partner.

Okamura's graceful, sensitive, soaring rendering of his own score at the piano set a wonderfully affected mood throughout scenes of flashback upon conflagration, death, and destruction. Flintstone's and Queen's voices were especially well-matched, to the point where an augmented octave between the two could be clearly understood as the dissonance of the characters' lives. All of the scenes presented here were hypnotic and compelling -- one senses a stunning tour de force is possible when the work is completed.

"My brain is wrapped around a hedgehog" -- so opened the excerpts from the Amanda Moody and Clark Suprynowicz Tempest-inspired *Caliban's Dream*. John Duyker's swaggering, drunken portrayal of Caliban following a drunken binge was hysterical -- part-spoken, part-sung, his raging oaths played marvelously off of Prospero's mocking island spirits (sung with commanding grace by the Ancora Girls Choir, conducted by Bob Geary) and Ariel, portrayed with gusto by Amanda Moody.

A surreally staged set realized the two scenes presented here (the first of Acts IV and V), both involving Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero's spirits -- island natives whom composer Suprynowicz sees as deserving of narrative treatment in their own right. Part of a trilogy of Tempest-related works being prepared for 2003, *Caliban's Dream* takes us to the unnamed Island where Prospero, the Milan-deposed duke, will (eventually!) set up a fiefdom and exact revenge on his oppressors. But whereas Shakespeare concentrates on Prospero, Suprynowicz chooses to focus instead on the inner lives of the native Caliban and Ariel instead. Amanda Moody's taunting, hectoring Ariel (played with a Jamaican accent) induced laughter from the audience on numerous occasions.

Berkeley Opera's Jonathan Khuner conducted a well-rehearsed and confident cast which, besides the lovely voices of Ancora, included piano, flute, bass clarinet, guitar, and three percussionists. The overall effect was transporting -- Missy Weaver's direction kept the eye entranced at all times, the mind engaged on the unfolding interactions. All in all, a beautiful reworking of a timeless classic.

Fifteen short selections from Mark Alburger's intriguing *Antigone* closed the evening. The story continues in the aftermath of Sophocles's Oedipus tale, wherein the two sibling inheritors of Oedipus' throne have warred with and killed one another over a power-sharing arrangement. Antigone, their sister, maniacally and fatalistically pursues her desire to bury her beloved brothers' bodies, unfortunately a capital offense according to the new king, her uncle Creon.

Alburger draws upon quirky and diverse musical inspirations (from Bach to *Dances with Wolves*) in a straightforward and crystalline effort to convey Antigone's sense of rebelliousness and tragedy. Driving, raging rock beats alternate with tender, berceuse-like duets to shake, rattle and roll the action toward its inevitable end. Each piece of music challenges the listener to discern its original inspiration -- here a *Magic Flute* aria, there a Casey Casem chartbuster from the 1970's. All in all, a lot of fun.



Tisha Page's virtuosic portrayal in the title role left little doubt as to the demons which haunt her character. Richard Mix was a forceful and troubled Creon. Accompanied only by the driving, dynamic force of the talented pianist Melissa Smith (and sometimes singing a cappella), the ensemble of Page, singer-director Harriet March Page, Alburger, and bass Richard Mix gave a resounding, well-blended, and dramatically satisfying performance which whetted the appetite for more on the larger stage.

A resounding vote of thanks to the folks at Z Space for giving the creators such formative elbowroom to evolve and advance their brainchildren. One hopes for more such evenings in the future.

## Auros for New Music

### DAVID CLEARY

Auros Group for New Music. April 7, Edward M. Pickman Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

The title for the Auros Group for New Music's concert, *Modern Masters*, contained not a jot of false advertising. Three talented local senior citizens and a legendary member of the Second Viennese School contributed music to the proceedings.

Leon Kirchner's *Trio No. II* (1993) for piano, violin, and cello is a lush, showy, energetic pleasure to hear. It can most succinctly be described as a mix of hyper-Romantic gestures and Bartók-like harmonies. But hints of composers as diverse as Messiaen, Debussy, Ives, and Berg peek through the musical fabric as well—this last suggested in no small part via employment of Bach-like chorale fragments at a dramatically crucial spot in the piece. While its large structural underpinning is a bit loose, a splendid feel for local drama and a convincing sense of contour is obviously manifest. Nina Ferrigno (piano), Sarah Thornblade (violin), and Jennifer Lucht (cello) tore into it with relish.

Speaking of Berg, his *Adagio* (1925) from the *Chamber Concerto* as arranged for clarinet, violin, and piano made a welcome appearance. A classic as wonderful as this simply defies criticism. It received a superb presentation from Ferrigno, Thornblade, and clarinetist Scott Andrews, spotlighting carefully gauged ensemble balance, sensitive tone coloring, and nimble finger technique.

Scored for three spatially spread flutes, *Tributary* (2000) by Ruth Lomon is as light and scrumptious as a fancy meringue dessert. Built from crisscrossing impressionist-style linear figures, the piece boasts a splendid ear for timbre, tastefully utilizing special effects without calling undue attention to them. Like the Kirchner, its larger formal sense is a little vague, but one might just as fruitfully critique the structure of a bubble bath or sunlight here; one scarcely minds the modest lack of rigor in such gorgeous music. Flautists Susan Hampton, Ann Bobo, and Deborah Boldin made the work purr seductively. And Mary Oestereicher Hamill's accompanying video work, *What Water Tells Me*, proved a most felicitous complement.

The concert concluded with the Boston premiere of Donald Martino's *Serenata Concertante* (1999), a piece scored for the unusual octet of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, flugelhorn, French horn, piano, and percussion. The instrumental writing at times shows kinship to the dramatic flair encountered in his best chamber pieces, though here one also finds genial charm and sensitive reflection somewhat analogous to that of late Beethoven or Verdi. Thinner chamber textures and solo cadenzas help make up the work's appealingly broad palette of sound. And formal considerations are not neglected here, either. The performance, solidly conducted by Michael Adelson, suffered from weak flugelhorn playing but otherwise was worthy.

Berg, Kirchner, Lomon, Martino -- one can properly consider this a quartet of experts. But one can rightly affix such a label to this talented ensemble as well, for here was a presentation worthy of the adjective "wonderful." Very much enjoyed.

## Cambridge Madrigal

### DAVID CLEARY.

Cambridge Madrigal Singers. May 12, Dane Street Church, Beverly, MA.

As their name suggests, the Cambridge Madrigal Singers specialize in performing Late Renaissance choral literature. But the group also feels very much at home presenting contemporary compositions. It was thus no surprise to see cutting-engine fare on this choir's recent series of concerts.

Bernard Rands's *A Melancholy Madrigal*, a work newly commissioned by the choir that sets a text by Geoffrey Chaucer, is an effective updating of this ancient genre and a fine listen. It tellingly alternates sections of uneasy, oozing chromatic lines (later treated contrapuntally) with more dramatic block chord writing. But ties to older models can be seen in its painterly text sensitivity and emotive feel.

Winner of the chorus's annual composition competition, Julian J. Wachner's *there is a moon sole* is an unusual but compelling mix of e.e. cummings's brilliantly eccentric poetry and Leonard Bernstein-influenced music, replete with angular rhythms. The piece is evocative stuff that makes a chorus sound great, a description that equally fits *La ver l'Aurora*, by Raymond Fahrner. Fahrner's offering is colorful, sensitive, and fetchingly written for massed singers -- and like the Rands, pays heed to tradition without becoming a slave to it.

*Two attractive foreign madrigals from the 20th century were also presented. Il giardino di Afrodite, by Ildebrando Pizzetti, is the more baldly triadic of these, at times suggesting affinity with film score choral writing of many years ago. Smooth almost to the point of slickness, it fortunately possesses gutsy undercurrents that impart needed depth. Domingo Santa Cruz's En la tierra arada del invierno uses a more chromatic language, effectively conveying the autumnal, expressive nature of its text.*

Performances of these selections at the May 12 concert were excellent. The chorus's sound proved nicely honed, exhibiting a personable warmth but equally capable of projecting forceful vigor when called for in the score. Text enunciation was capably attended to as well. Fahrner conducted splendidly, expertly shaping textures and melodic contours, drawing out a variety of well-delineated moods, and imparting careful polish to the choir's already well-considered sound.

Presentations such as this one perfectly demonstrate that old and new music can complement each other, not simply coexist, and that alone would have made the concert worth attending. But kudos should also go out to Fahrner and his chorus for offering up a burnished, ably executed evening of music making. Very much enjoyed.

## Arden Right at Home

### DAVID CLEARY

Arden String Quartet. May 25, Pickman Recital Hall, Longy School of Music, Cambridge, MA.

Boston is home to a number of first class string quartets, the Borromeo, Lydian, and Muir among them. After hearing last night's concert, any perceptive listener must include the Arden String Quartet alongside the best such foursomes in the area.

Three local composers contributed fine pieces to the proceedings. Eric Sawyer's *String Quartet No. 2* (1999), with its sonata-derived opener and ternary middle movement and finale -- as well as a Bartók-influenced sound world -- shows especially clear ties to traditional fare. But this does not preclude its composer from filling his work's skin with music of splendid craft, eloquent speech, and emotional depth. Somehow, it transcends any likely predecessors to put forth a compelling personal statement. Bartók's shadow is also audible in the *String Quartet No. 3* (1999) by Andrew List, particularly in its intensely soulful slow movement and melodically folksy, octatonic based finale. By contrast, the first movement suggests an idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the bouncy march from Schoenberg's Opus 24 *Serenade*. Like the Sawyer, though, List's entry is no lazy snitch--this is convincingly argued, expertly formed stuff, very much enjoyed. John McDonald's *Cri du Coeur: String Quartet No. 1* (1992-93) is terrific, one of this prolific and talented composer's strongest pieces -- a gutsy, gripping masterwork not afraid to plunge deeply into anguished depths of feeling that too many composers simply pussyfoot around. And the work's unusual bipartite construction (including an intense, unison-filled "Rhapsody" opener and passionate, nicely wrought conclusion titled "Fantasy Variations") imparts substance without sonata leanings. It's a definite must-hear.

Two Latin American oriented entries, one written by a long-dead Mexican icon, the other by a young U.S. composer, concluded the proceedings. *Musica de Feria: String Quartet No. 4* (1932), by Silvestre Revueltas, is raw, wild, and thoroughly absorbing, loaded with ostinati and folk idioms yet possessing not a jot of debt to Stravinsky or Bartók. Its formal sense and manner of unfolding is concise to the point of syllogism, as lean and taut as a piano's top string. In short, this work is well worth a rescue from its current state of near-oblivion. Herschel Garfein's *Cumbia and Trio* (1992), deriving its material from Panamanian folk tunes, is delightful, frothy fun. If string quartets ever decide to give pops concerts, this piece should head the list of considered repertoire.

Performances were top-drawer. The quartet's playing exuded poise and personality from every pore. Intonation and finger technique were exemplary, and ensemble sound was excellently blended while still scrupulously cognizant of voice differentiation and balance. And all perfectly illustrate that the Ardens belong in any serious discussion of Boston's best string quartets. Long may they prosper.

## Arcadian International

### DAVID CLEARY

Arcadian Winds in International Boston. June 2, First and Second Church, Boston, MA.

This last in a trio of concerts presented by the Arcadian Winds featured four composers born in foreign lands who have strong ties to the Boston area. For the most part, it proved to be an enjoyable evening.

*Kagiroi* by Yoko Nakatani, newly commissioned by the quintet, is a splendid, well-made little piece. Its ternary structure is clearly delineated, consisting of warm, elegiac outer sections surrounding an energetic, impassioned center. And its moderately dissonant sonic ethos is felicitously handled. Theodore Antoniou's *Decem Inventiones (Ten Inventions)* revels in a sound world that is more angular and raw. But the music here, while gruff, speaks with a compelling voice; each brief movement is riveting, as concentrated as pure hydrochloric acid. And despite a tendency to group these inventions in pairs, a larger overarching shape manages to make itself manifest. Had Igor Stravinsky composed for this medium, chances are the result would have sounded a lot like Andy Vores's *Wind Quintet*. The work, with its polytonal verticals and employment of ostinati, perky gestures, and figurations from older idioms such as the waltz, could have been written sixty years prior to its 1988 composition date. What raises it above the routine is its irresistible charm, quirky unfolding, and hearty sense of humor. *Wild Landscape and Underbrush* by Stefan Hakenberg proves a bit of a puzzle. This is an ambitious entry, cast in a sophisticated rondo-like format. Its feel for direction is hard to grasp, though, often seeming block like and static within sections while simultaneously disdaining ostinato writing. It's a very curious listen.

Of the two selections composed by non-Boston based migrants, the more striking was Chen Yi's *Woodwind Quintet*. Its resolutely odd manner of speech takes some getting used to, but works well once its wavelength is divined. Sections that feature crawling, chromatic solo lines (sometimes spiced with extended techniques) alternate here with craggy, biting music derived from drone-based figures—all inspired by sonic experiences from Chen's native China—resulting in a piece both feisty and unique. *Fumon Magna* by Vancouver-based composer Rudolf Komorous slowly unrolls a musing, plaintive melodic line from highest instrument to lowest, embellishing this lengthy tune at various points with fuller textures. Tonal though only sometimes triadic, it's a low-key piece that has its share of appeal.

Despite very occasional ragged attacks and exposed melody blips, the Arcadian Winds performed skillfully. The pieces on this concert contained an unusually large amount of solo writing, and Matthew Doherty (flute), Jane Harrison (oboe), Mark Miller (clarinet), Janet Underhill (bassoon), and John Paul Aubrey (horn) acquitted themselves well; Underhill's solo bassoon arrangement of the shakuhchi tune *A Bell Ringing in an Empty Sky* provided her a chance to festoon this traditional melody with a crackerjack display of pitch bends, microtones, and color fingerings. Melodic shaping and structural balance were sensitively handled this evening. And the group's sound proved a nicely honed one. Congratulations to this fine ensemble on both a strong concert and a worthy season that effectively showcased a gaggle of first-rate Bostonian tonemeisters.

## Sodden Gomorra

MARK ALBURGER

American premiere of H.K. Gruber's *Gomorra*. June 22, College of Marin, Kentfield, CA.

The title city is beset not with fire and brimstone, but fire and flood, and indeed at times the proceedings are all wet. But there is much to enjoy in the College of Marin's American premiere of *Gomorra*, by the important Austrian composer H.K. Gruber (June 22, 23, 28, 29).

Music director Paul Smith leads a brilliant, trebly orchestra, devoid of cellos and basses, which caterwauls throughout the proceedings. Gruber's musical/theatrical sensibilities are close to Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, but updated to recent times. *Gomorra* includes faux-pop songs and twisted harmony, lyric placards and socio-political sentiments.

The large cast, directed by John Swole, is mostly managed by a process of crowd control. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of how else 54 people can be arrayed on a stage. The leads carry on admirably, and include the stentorian Mayor of Gomorra (Kenneth Rowland) and the enigmatic Exalted Guest (Kyle Lemle). Vivian Poole, as Valentina (the Firechief's daughter turned hippie anarchist), has a big voice, which soars and vibratos over all obstacles. Steven Patterson's Augustin (a freelance reporter) captures the Everyman quality which this role demands. Hilarius is portrayed appropriately fiercely by William Gorton, who brings power to the demanding high notes of this Anarchist leader. Linda Noble's Gwendolyn is visually and vocally attractive.

Some of the strongest and most memorable numbers are the choruses -- and the College of Marin forces brought off their songs heroically, if not always accurately. Particularly impressive were "Burn, Baby, Burn" and the ridiculous chorus of elderly and infirm Non-Productive Citizens "Been There, Done That" (which far predates the geriatric walker dance routine of *The Producers*, incidentally).

The producers here felt a need to localize and transform Viennese references into Marin ones, so this was not exactly an ur-text performance (and sung here in English, after all), but this is a wonderful effort and worthy evening of stimulating music theatre from one of the more important composers of our time.

# Book Review

## What Ever Happened to Theremin?

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ

Even after he publicly disappeared from New York in 1938, Leon Theremin remained one of the legendary figures in modern music. What happened to Theremin, I remember asking the great musical lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky in the late 1980s. He didn't know, though reporting that Dmitri Shostakovich told him a decade-plus before that Theremin was still alive, but Shostakovich could not reveal where. As the author of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Slonimsky could write in the 1984 Seventh Edition only that his sometime friend was "still active in 1977." Few figures of Theremin's stature in any modern art had so completely and inexplicably vanished.

Why was Theremin remembered? At the end of WWI, when still a young man, he had invented an early electronic sound instrument, eventually named after himself, which differed from all previous instruments in that it was not directly touched. Rather, the performer moved his or her hands in the air around two thin electrified poles. One antenna, customarily extended vertically, controlled pitch; the other, customarily horizontal, could control volume. Technically, it depends upon body capacitance. Theremin later invented a rhythm-machine and a proto-television. (The Soviets wanted the last not for consumer use, typically, but for border security.)

Thanks to supportive entrepreneurs, Theremin went west, first to Berlin and then to New York, where he acquired a patron, who rented him a townhouse at 37 West 54th Street, and new business partners, forming the Teletouch Corporation. Several composers, awed by the new instrument, wrote pieces for it, while young musicians, most notably Clara Rockmore (1911-1998), performed on it in live concerts. RCA contracted Teletouch to manufacture it, only to fail commercially, simply because it was too hard to use (Holography similarly failed to become commercial likewise because of recalcitrance). Just before his disappearance Theremin married a young African-American dancer, Lavinia Williams, who spoke several languages, including Russian.

Why did he disappear? Slonimsky, whose memory was prodigious, told me that Theremin had two wives and that, feeling some heat, he returned to his native Russia. A feature-length documentary film produced a few years ago by Stephen Martin, *Theremin* (1993), repeated the story believed by Williams that her husband had been abducted by the Soviet secret police (I remember thinking this odd at the time, recalling that while the KGB executed people in North America, I couldn't recall another kidnap).

The first achievement of Albert Glinsky's new biography, *Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage*, (Univ. of Illinois, 403 pp., \$34.95) is disputing both those stories. After more than a decade of research, Glinsky discovered that Theremin in New York had maintained contact with Soviet agents to whom he gave technical information. Always planning to return, he didn't apply for US citizenship, not even after marrying a native-born American. As his companies were failing badly and his personal debts were mounting, he simply boarded a Soviet freighter in a New Jersey port and sailed home. At a time when prominent European artists and intellectuals were moving west, he headed east -- eventually, way, way east.

However, once there, he was imprisoned, his personal papers confiscated, and exiled to a Siberian labor camp. Escaping the US as a victim of capitalism, he became a victim of Stalinism who couldn't escape. When Soviet chiefs recognized his genius, he was assigned to a WWII prison complex housing other technicians. Soon after his release, he received a Stalin Prize for invaluable work. Once on his own, Theremin decided to work for another secret Soviet agency known as a "mailbox," because its buildings had no address and its workers were forbidden contact with outsiders, even their blood relatives. Here he designed miniature security machines (responding as his instrument did to changes in the air around them) and eavesdropping devices. One was successfully installed in the American embassy; another, in Stalin's own apartment. No wonder his friends in the West thought him dead (and Shostakovich couldn't say where he was).

Curiously, his instrument survived in America, not only in Clara Rockmore's occasional concerts but in the soundtracks to horror and sci-fi films, where it provided otherworldly sounds with sliding pitches. The pioneering synthesizer manufacturer, Robert Moog, began his electronic-instrument career by producing in the late 1950s a homemade theremin. For a mid-1960s rock group called Lothar and the Hand People, Lothar was not a human but a theremin. The instrument memorably accompanies a cello in the Beach Boys' classic *Good Vibrations* (1966). More recently, groups like Led Zeppelin, Pixies, Portishead, and a duo called the Kurstins have used theremins.

In 1989, Theremin emerged again in the West, now in his 90s, to the surprise of everyone remembering his name, initially to be honored at electronic music festivals. The filmmaker Steven Martin, mentioned before, brought him to New York for a dazed tour of Times Square and a memorable reunion with Clara Rockmore. (The final, tear-evoking scene of the film has them walking arm in arm down 57th Street to the sound of *Good Vibrations*.)

I remember hearing leftist friends of mine speak of Alger Hiss, for one, as "a wasted life, given what he could have done," implicitly blaming anti-Communism; but, of course, more lives were wasted by Communism, not only in the sense of being prematurely killed but in assignment to a narrow range of tasks. My hunch is that, had Theremin stayed in America, he would have joined his countryman Vladimir Zworykin in developing television or, at least, become an émigré professor at an Institute of Technology -- an acoustic analogue to Harold Edgerton (1903-1990), the M.I.T. engineer who invented the strobe light. What additional inventions could have come from Theremin's mind, had he stayed in New York, are beyond speculation.

What makes Glinsky's *Theremin* a first-rate biography is elevating our knowledge of a previously hidden unique figure. This is not a reinterpretation of familiar history but the product of original research, including an interview with Theremin just before his death. The biography it most resembles in this respect is Reynold Weidenaar's *Magic Music from the Telharmonium* (1995), which likewise rescues from obscurity the previously under-understood development at the beginning of the 21st century of the first musical synthesizer serviced by a private cable network (Its inventor, Thaddeus Cahill, later joined his brothers in developing night lights for baseball stadiums). The obstacle that makes both these books special is that first-rank musical technologists are more difficult subjects than composers.

# Calendar

September 1

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with music by Joseph Pehrson. Pulse Ensemble Theatre, New York, NY. Through September 15.

September 5

*San Francisco Symphony Opening Gala*, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. Adams's *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, Gershwin's *Overture to "Girl Crazy"*, Ellington's *Sophisticated Lady*, *Solitude*, *A Turquoise Cloud*, *Digga Digga, Do*, and *I'm Beginning to See the Light*, and Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from "West Side Story"*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Repeated September 8.

September 12

Henze's *L'heure bleue* performed by Ensemble Moderne. Frankfurt, Germany.

Tavener's *Mystagogia* performed by the London Schools Symphony. London, United Kingdom.

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Mahler's *Symphony No. 6*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through September 15.

September 19

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Mahler's *Symphony No. 1* and *Kindertotenlieder*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through September 23.

September 22

Omaha Symphony in the premiere of Stacy Garrop's *Thunderwalker*. Omaha, NB.

September 23

Premiere of Mark Alburger's *The Wind God* (libretto by Harriet March Page). Goat Hall, San Francisco, CA.

September 24

San Francisco Contemporary Players present *Andre Imbrie -- Now*. *Spring Fever*, *Chicago Bells*, *Songs of Then and Now*. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA.

September 25

95th anniversary of the birth of Dmitri Shostakovich.

September 27

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony in Copland's *Quiet City* and Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through September 15.

September 30

Philadelphia Orchestra in Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Kronos Quartet performs Partch's *U.S. Highball* (arr. Ben Johnston), Gordon's *Potassium*, Mingus's *Myself When I Am Real*, and Golijov's *Vespers*. Hertz Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

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# Chronicle

July 1

San Francisco Symphony performs Ellington's *From the River*. Stern Grove, San Francisco, CA.

Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*. Aspen, CO.

July 3

Extension Ensemble presents music for brass quintet by Moondog. Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, NY.

July 6

Gyan Riley performs music of Terry Riley, as well as his own compositions. Old First Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, CA.

Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, directed by Joan Panetti, presents Eighth Blackbird, in music of Dorothy Chang, Kati Agocs, Carolos Carillo, Laurie San Martin, Shawn Crouch, and Gregory Spears. Music Shed, Norfolk, CT.

New Juilliard Ensemble in Ives's *Symphony No. 3*, Guo Wenjing's *Inscriptions on Bone*, Mozart Camargo Guarnieri's *Flor de Tremembé*, and Agustin Fernández's *Peregrin*. Bryant Park, New York, NY. "*Flor de Tremembé*, a likable piece from 1937 by the Brazilian composer Mozart Camargo Guarnieri, sounded like the Brazilian music of Milhaud" [Paul Griffiths, *The New York Times*, 7/10/01].

July 7

90th birthday of Gian Carlo Menotti.

Death of Fred Neil, at age 64. "[He was] a folk singer whose hits included 'Everybody's Talkin' and 'Candyman'" [*The New York Times*, 7/11/01].

July 8

Daniel Barenboim conducts Wagner's *Prelude to "Tristan und Isolde,"* in violation of the informal ban on the 19th-century composer's music. Jerusalem, Israel. "Mr. Barenboim, who is Jewish, debated at length from the stage with people in the audience as some angry concertgoers heckled him, hurling insults before walking out of the hall. But most people stayed in their seats, and the performance drew rousing applause. . . . [A]t the end of the concert . . . he turned to the audience and asked whether it wanted to hear a piece by Wagner as an encore, noting that the request was his own initiative. 'This is something very personal, between me and you,' he said in Hebrew. 'The decision is yours.' His remarks set off a lively debate. Some people hurled epithets like 'fascist' at Mr. Barenboim, and they were shouted down by other concertgoers. 'This is a disgrace and a deception!' one man shouted at the conductor. During the half-hour exchange, Mr. Barenboim said those who were offended could leave the hall, allowing others to hear the piece. 'If you're angry, be angry with me, but please don't be angry with the orchestra or the festival management,' he said. Some people walked out, banging doors behind them, but most of the audience stayed, giving the performance . . . a warm ovation . . . 'Not playing him in Israel is like giving the Nazis one last victory,' [Barenboim] said in a radio interview. Mr. Barenboim added that the idea of defying the decision not to play Wagner came to him when he heard the musical ring of a cell phone during an airport news conference when he arrived in Israel on Wednesday. 'Suddenly a phone rang,' he said, playing a melody from *Die Walküre*. So I thought, Mr. Barenboim said, 'if it can be heard on a telephone, why not in the concert hall?' [Joel Greenberg, *The New York Times*, 7/9/01].

July 10

*A Glass Celebration*. U.S. premiere of *White Raven*, an opera in five acts by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. New York State Theater, New York, NY. Through July 14. Programs through July 29. "With *White Raven* . . . you sense that he is working harder. It's amazing how by adding just a little complexity here and there . . . breaking up foursquare rhythmic repetitions with asymmetrical patterns and nudging syncopations, or surprising us with a jarring bass line that adds a dissonant ripple to the tranquil pool of diatonic harmony -- Mr. Glass can suddenly perk up your ears" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 7/12/01].

July 11

Symposium with Philip Glass. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

New Juilliard Ensemble in music of Salvatore Sciarrino. Paul Hall, Juilliard School, New York, NY.

July 13

50th anniversary of the death of Arnold Schoenberg.

July 14

Opera Festival of New Jersey presents Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero* and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*. Princeton, NJ. Through July 27. "[L]ike many Italians during the 1930's, [Dallapiccola] initially fell for Mussolini's nationalistic propaganda. He soon became a committed anti-Fascist (his wife was Jewish), who was periodically forced into hiding during World War II. With the war still raging in the mid-1940's, Dallapiccola began composing his bleak, anti-totalitarian one-act opera" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 7/16/01].

July 15

Christopher Rouse's *Seeing*. Aspen, CO.

July 19

*Mickey, Dumbo, and Betty Boop: Jazz in Cartoons*. 92nd St. Y, New York, NY.

*Mercy*, by Meredith Monk and Ann Hamilton. Page Auditorium, Durham, NC

July 20

Premiere of Nyman's *a dance he thinks little of*. Yorkshire, United Kingdom.

*Fresh Voices*. Mark Alburger's *The Little Prince*, John Partridge's *The Soldiers Who Wanted to Kill Death*, and music of Nancy Bloomer Deussen. Goat Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through July 22.

Death of Milton Gabler (b. 5/20/11), at age 90. Jewish Home and Hospital, New York, NY. "[H]e founded America's first independent jazz record label . . . and was a midwife at the birth of rock 'n' roll, producing 'Rock Around the Clock,' by Bill Haley and the Comets, in 1954.. When major record companies declined to record Billie Holiday's searing anti-lynching song, 'Strange Fruit,' for fear of losing sales in the South, his Commodore Records did. . . . He was the first to pair Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald on record" [The *New York Times*].

July 21

Philip Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts*. Lincoln Center, New York, NY. "[I]t was the work's first New York performance in more than a decade. What *Music in 12 Parts* has in common with *The Art of Fugue* and *Well-Tempered Clavier* is that it is a comprehensive overview of a particular set of compositional techniques and the style that encompasses them. In Mr. Glass's case, that style was the version of Minimalism that he practiced from 1965 through the completion of this work in 1974 -- or, one could argue, until the stylistic sea change of *Satyagraha* in 1980. However one parses Mr. Glass's history, *Music in 12 Parts* is a monumental work. The ensemble's vigorous performance . . . reconfirmed its stature, both in the context of Mr. Glass's output to date and as a 20th-century classic. . . . The opening examines the hypnotic aspect of Minimalism by establishing a drone that is sustained for 20 minutes, but around which melodic fragments spin. From there, Mr. Glass's journey includes manipulations of tempo and textural density, contrasts between slow-moving melodies and brisk accompaniments, and forays into the world of harmonic tension and chromaticism. There is a sense of humor here, too. In Part 12, Mr. Glass gradually builds the symbol of the musical language against which Minimalism rebelled: a 12-note row" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 7/23/01].

July 23

*Shorts: Philip Glass*. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 25

*Choral & Chamber Works (1976 to 2001)* of Philip Glass: *Three Songs for Chorus*, *Vessels*, *Father Death Blues*, "Knee Play No. 3" from *Einstein on the Beach*, and *Voices for Didgeridoo, Organ, and Narrator*. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 26

Robert Ashley's *Dust*, with Sam Ashley, Thomas Buckner, Jaqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, and Robert Ashley. Palais Royal, Cour d'Orleans, Paris, France. Through July 28.

San Francisco Symphony performs Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.



Cinematic *Shorts* (2001), with music of Philip Glass [*Passage* (Shirin Neshat), *Diaspora* (Anton Egoyan), *The Man in the Bath* (Peter Greenaway), *Notes* (Michal Rovner) and *Evidence* and *Anima Mundi* (Godfrey Reggio)]. Lincoln Center, New York, NY. "Philip Glass has been writing music for films since the mid-1980's, but unlike most other film composers, his scores for commercial hits like *The Truman Show* are far less well known than his contributions to experimental films, particularly Godfrey Reggio's sweeping paeans to nature (and humanity's malignant effect on it). . . . *Evidence* [is] a study of children filmed while watching television, and *Anima Mundi* an evocation of the world's soul through close-up, slow-motion and time-lapse photography of dozens of exotically (if sometimes terrifyingly) beautiful animals . . . Glass's score for [the latter] has a grandeur none of his recent filmscores match, and it shows what he can do when the filmmaking and imagery inspire him" [Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 7/28/01].

July 27

San Francisco Symphony performs Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Appalachian Spring*, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

July 28

Boston Symphony performs Harbison's *Most Often Used Chords* (1993). Lenox, MA. "This is a charming spoof of pedantic rudimentary musical instructions found on the covers of blank notebooks. . . Harbison spins out a Toccata, illustrating scales, modes and chord types; *Variatione*, on the triad; a *Ciaconna*, deploying the most often used chords; and a *Finale*" [James R. Oestreich, The New York Times, 7/30/01].

July 29

Ives's *Symphony No. 2*. Aspen, CO.

*Beyond Multiculturalism, Freedom?*, by Holland Cotter, printed in the New York Times.

Chen Yi. Bennington College, VT.

July 31

Margaret Leng Tan performs works by Philip Glass and the Beatles on toy piano. Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, NY.

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# Comment

## A Response to Orlando Jacinto Garcia

PAYTON MACDONALD

Orlando Jacinto Garcia deserves approbation for honestly expressing his thoughts regarding the current environment of contemporary classical music in the U.S. [21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, June 2001] Many of Garcia's thoughts are provoking and I heartily agree with his assessment that the most critical force lacking in many young composers' thinking is auto criticism.

I've recently been to several concerts where the composers' "vision" consisted of little more than asking the performers to fool around with some new electronic gimmick or chant some profane lyrics over banal squeaks and squawks. Even at my own nascent stage of artistic development I could write pieces of this type in ten minutes or less. I'm dumbfounded when I discover that some of the creators of this work are earning Ph.D.s or D.M.A.s from established and expensive universities. Truly, "my kid could do that" is the most justified response to such drivel.

Unfortunately, however, while Garcia's essay stokes a smoldering fire of important issues surrounding the relationship between composers and the public, his antagonistic, "us versus them" rhetoric solves no problems and accomplishes nothing. I propose that if one does indeed perceive a problem with the contemporary classical music scene in the U.S., there are other solutions than publicly attacking young composers and the academic institutions that support performances of their works.

The cultural mechanism that produced the current compositional environment is a complex one and cannot be explained solely from the university level. Garcia's exclusive focus on university students and faculty as the source of the "problem" (as I'll explain later, I don't think there is a problem) gives us a one-sided account of the current situation.

After all, music is a social discipline. If we are to accurately discuss any aspect of its existence it must be from a more holistic perspective. Audiences, impresarios, recording labels, musicologists, theorists, students, professional performers, critics, instrument builders, pedagogues and writers are all part of a community that works together to produce the phenomenon of music.

Composers are often viewed as solely responsible for changes in the musical landscape, but the reality is that composers are typically only the most visible members of the community. Indeed, we frequently give ourselves too much credit. Certainly the presence of a performer like Placido Domingo, or the theatrical work of Robert Wilson draws many people to a show.

If indeed there is a problem with contemporary classical music and its place in academia, then all of the aforementioned specialists in our field are also partially responsible for this state. If writers cannot write about music in a way that challenges but does not turn off lay-people then they have made as great a contribution to the problem as composers. If performers agree to play music by composers who are unwilling to push their work into broader circles and play it in a dry, academic style, then they are also responsible for the problem.

The issues are bigger than this, though. It is never the case that we can gain something and not lose something else. In the interest of inclusivity and cultural awareness we have lost much in the way of objective criticism. However, I for one am not interested in returning to earlier decades when the only music allowed on campus was "serious" music (i.e., Bach to Brahms, etc.) and the work of folks like Cage, Feldman, Reich, Stockhausen, Coltrane, Art Ensemble of Chicago, etc. was not taken seriously and/or actually prohibited from exposure.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem healthy for us to return to an age when music by female composers or people of non-European descent was ignored. It is true, however, that most of the work being done today by composers working in the "art music" genre is completely ignored by the American public.

I once conducted a personal experiment at a large party made up entirely of teenagers from a mid-size Midwestern town. I asked over 50 kids whether they had ever heard of John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Louis Andriessen, and other important composers of the 20th century. The answer was a unanimous "no." When one looks backward, however, one realizes that our situation is hardly unique. Was it ever the case that your average shoemaker in Austria could hum the tunes from Beethoven's Op. 106? Were theorists and writers in the 16th century not proud of their *musica reservata*? Were the composers in Avignon at the end of the 14th century distributing thousands of copies of their *ars subtilior* works?

The fact is that many, if not most of us, are elitists to some degree and interested in music for an elite group of people. The very people Garcia puts on a pedestal (Cage, Varèse, Webern) did not create music for elevators or shopping malls, they created music that was meant by and large to be listened to in a quiet, attentive setting by people who understood the subtleties of art music. When Garcia criticizes composers writing for composers but then also reprimands composers for not having international careers he confuses the issue, especially since many of the composers whose work he admires were largely ignored during their time.

Would Webern then be part of the large, "gray mediocrity?" His works never were and never will be a major staple in the performing repertoire. (They will persist, however, in theory classes...) Does Morton Feldman's work have both the popular and analytical appeal comparable to the work of Beethoven? I've participated in several public performances of Feldman's work, including the gigantic *For Philip Guston*. As tantalizing as this music is, I have a hard time believing that it "travels" and communicates much past the university.

Furthermore, what constitutes "the real world?" Most professional contemporary music ensembles in this country are actually not full-time professional organizations. Many of the members of these various groups also have jobs teaching, playing in an orchestra, or the groups subsist entirely on grants, not revenue from ticket sales. The situation in Europe is only slightly different because the performers there are often working from government funding. Additionally, when professional organizations here perform it tends to be mostly in large cities where impresarios are likely to get a large audience not of taxi-cab drivers and secretaries, but of students.

In this sense I'm not convinced there is a serious problem with contemporary classical music in academia in the United States, especially not a problem that justifies negative rhetoric and divisive social gestures. Historically, we don't seem any worse off than we were 200, 500, or even 800 years ago.

However, if one wants to meaningfully address the issue of communication between young composers and the general public, I think a more effective approach might be to discuss education. The low quality of much U.S. public education is well known, so much so that many states have recently initiated programs with ample funding for rectifying the situation. In the past three years I have participated in outreach work in the state of Kentucky. The focus of my program was composition and world music. In concert with an exceptional flutist, I've presented over 100 programs to over 10,000 students. Our presentations have included performances of some of the most sophisticated classical music of this century, including works by Cage, Feldman (excerpts!), Harrison, and the work of many of our peers and mentors.

The students, many from severely disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds with no exposure to classical music, have responded with universal enthusiasm. (In one rural town the high school kids thought Beethoven was a dog... They loved our performances of *4'33"* and *Variations III*, however.) The trick is not fancy lighting or garish clothing, but dexterous public speaking skills and energetic performances.

The fundamental importance of composers reaching out to communities and sharing their work with lay-people seems obvious to me, but I was surprised a few years ago when I attended a well-known summer festival and asked a room full of composers and composition students if any of them ever spoke to their audience about their work. Out of over 30 artists in the room not one raised his or her hand. I am frequently shocked by how inarticulate many composers are and how uncomfortable many of them are in front of a group of people. If I were in charge of a composition department, I would insure that students spent ample time learning how to communicate their ideas verbally and in writing. In a time when there is no common practice, no consistent musical language and little coherent connection to the past -- these skills are essential if one wants to expand one's career beyond academia.

Additionally, it seems to be a matter of pride amongst many young composers not to be able to perform on an instrument or sing well. The composer/performer coupling that was so important and natural for most of history has diminished in importance in many social circles. I have no doubt that this further specialization and stratification between performer, composer and public is central to the issue of non-communication between the general public and us.

The problem with Garcia's epistle is that after reading it a few times I still wasn't sure what he was so angry about. So there are thousands of composers writing poor music. So what? This has always been the case. For every Beethoven there are always a hundred Clementis and for every Clementi there are at least five hundred people writing even worse music. Of course, "good" and "bad" music means different things in different contexts. And, the skills required for one type of music are entirely different from the skills required from a different type. I've observed time and again that virtuosos in one genre often sound foolish in another. If one has ever observed an orchestra trying to swing an arrangement of a big band chart, one knows what I mean.

Further, there is a problem with evaluating all music on the same grounds. One could say that Duke Ellington wasn't half the composer Bach was, but only if one evaluates Ellington's music by the same criteria that one evaluates Bach's music.

What the current compositional scene in academia really reminds me of is a group of old ladies at a church squabbling and gossiping about the younger members. Not only are the "important" issues discussed by the ladies relatively trivial compared to the problems the majority of the world's population faces on a daily basis, but the example set for the next generation is poor.

At one summer festival (my last, due to this experience), I spent two hours each morning listening to "famous" composers lambaste the current state of affairs in the composition world. Much of this rhetoric was clearly a result of professional jealousy ("...Steve Reich and Philip Glass are ruining classical music the way Copland and Harris ruined it a generation before!" A verbatim quote.) and much of it was likely the result of having little to say about their own work.

In effect, what these well-fed folks were saying to the younger generation was that petty competition and slander is part and parcel of being a professional composer, and we'd all be better off if we just dug right in. More than anything I felt sorry for these men and women: all at the peak of their careers and none of them better off spiritually than they were in grade school.

Does the current academic system of awards, grants and prizes contribute to this nonsense? Certainly, and we all know that he or she with most ASCAP awards has as little chance of making a permanent mark on our culture than he or she who dropped out of college. However, the purpose of organizations like ASCAP and BMI was originally to foster recognition and financial support for outstanding creative work in the field of music, and often the judges of these competitions hit the mark. Would we be better off without these organizations and others? Perhaps, but their existence doesn't seem to hurt all that much. For those that play the awards game, they're a source of interest and accomplishment (and in the least, gossip); for those who don't, they are still useful for bringing in royalties.

In the end, cultural differences and interests *do* mean a lot when making aesthetic judgments. I once hosted a master dancer and tabla player from India in my home for a few weeks. In his country people travel thousands of miles to see him dance and he regularly performs at major festivals. His knowledge of Western classical music is minimal, however, and I was amused to hear him tell me after a concert of western classical music that the work by Bach "lacked melody." This man certainly wasn't deaf and he certainly wasn't insensitive, but his whole technical apparatus for listening to and evaluating music excluded polyphony.

As we move into the 21st century we had best be sensitive to these issues. Certainly as a rich, aggrandizing, peacetime country, our youth feel entitled to absolute freedom, as well they should. Auto-criticism is absolutely necessary, but when not exercised the results will simply disappear into the ether, leaving space for those of deeper sentiments and a tireless work ethic.

## Writers

MARK ALBURGER began playing the oboe and composing in association with Dorothy and James Freeman, George Crumb, and Richard Wernick. He studied with Karl Kohn at Pomona College; Joan Panetti and Gerald Levinson at Swarthmore College (B.A.); Jules Langert at Dominican College (M.A.); Roland Jackson at Claremont Graduate University (Ph.D.); and Terry Riley. Alburger writes for *Commuter Times* and is published by New Music. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, and has interviewed numerous composers, including Charles Amirkhanian, Henry Brant, Earle Brown, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, and Frederick Rzewski. An ASCAP composer, his opera *The Little Prince* is scheduled for a nine-performance run at Dominican University this November.

DAVID CLEARY's music has been played throughout the U.S. and abroad, including performances at Tanglewood and by Alea II and Dinosaur Annex. A member of Composers in Red Sneaker, he has won many awards and grants, including the Harvey Gaul Contest, an Ella Lyman Cabot Trust Grant, and a MacDowell residence. He is a staff critic for *The New Music Connoisseur* and 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC. His article on composing careers is published by Gale Research and he has contributed CD reviews to the latest *All Music Guide to Rock*. His music appears on the Centaur and Vienna Modern Masters labels, and his bio may be found in many *Who's Who* books.

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ recently completed a second collection of essays on music, *More On Innovative Music(ian)s*. Among his previous books are *Nicolas Slonimsky: The First 100 Years* (Schirmer). An earlier version of this review appeared in *The Weekly Standard*.

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