Twentieth-Century Originals

For anyone exploring the nooks and crannies of American music, Kyle Gann offers a guided tour in his recent survey, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (Schirmer Books, 1998; $35). As a music critic for *The Village Voice* for over a decade and composition teacher at Bard College, the author combines a broad knowledge of his subject with considerable journalistic flair in a readable and enjoyable book. Gann has both the compositional insights of an able practitioner in his own right and the contagious enthusiasm of a true advocate for a distinctively American musical “tradition of originality,” a history “not of procedures and rules,” he says, “but of resources, attitudes, and pragmatic inventiveness.”

The author’s forthrightly nationalistic objective is to “claim America’s creative heritage” and “find Americanness” by “taking the entirety of what American composers have done and subtracting from it the identifiable European, Asian, African, and Latin elements.” His “Prelude: What is American Music?” sets the stage by boldly alleging that “America is not an empty vessel into which the musics of other societies may be poured, but a culture capable of influencing other cultures as they have influenced us.” “Every American composition,” asserts Gann, “is a dialogue between inheritance and freedom.”

The book presents a chronological and stylistic panorama of the major composers in different periods with listening examples from representative compositions. Its taxonomy includes: Forefathers (Ives, Ruggles), Ultramodernism (Cowell, Varèse, Crawford), Populism (Copland, Schuman, Bernstein, Thomson), Experimentalism (Partch, Johnston, Nancarrow), Atonality and the European Influence (Sessions, Wolpe, Carter, Babbitt), New York School Revolution (Cage, Feldman, Brown), Conceptualism (Ashley, Oliveros, Lucier), Minimalism (Young, Riley, Reich, Glass, Monk), New Romanticism (Crumb, Adams, Druckman, Van de Vate), Electronic Music (Luening, Ussachevsky, Subotnick, Trimpin), Rock and Jazz Interface (Anderson, Brand, Braxton, Galas, Zorn), Postminimalism (Duckworth, Giteck, Lentz, Lauten), and Totalism (Rouse, Gordon, Vierk, Beglarjian, J.L. Adams).

Gann’s insights regarding more established, well-documented composers are generally interesting, but somewhat old hat. Fortunately, this review of major players is balanced by a broad overview of others less conspicuous coming off the bench. The book’s greatest value is its wonderful breadth and comprehensiveness: Gann offers a handy reference guide to the myriad of lesser-known American composers, particularly of more recent times. This is a virtual “who’s who” of musical modernism and post-modernism in America.

The author focuses primarily on the Cagean, experimental “downtown” tradition, as is clear from the array of composers cited above and the relative weight he devotes to them. Some readers might question, for instance, why Gershwin—arguably the most famous American composer ever—is dismissed in less than two pages of text, while the talented but less significant Anthony Braxton commands six, a bold heading, full-length picture, and a musical example. Likewise, Barber garners only a half-page against Partch’s seven. Gann’s teacher, microtonalist Ben Johnston, has five plus an excerpt, compared to a goose egg for serialist Charles Wourinen. Cage is clearly the pivotal figure, lording over thirteen pages. The book’s refreshing concentration on experimentalism and the under-reported contemporary scene is by no means exclusive, though, and requires no apology—only a caveat for those possibly expecting a more traditional “uptown” approach.

Gann’s personal experience as a journalist and composer is what makes this book tick. It has a compelling aura of authenticity and conviction; he knows the scene inside out. But his hands-on methodology presents a drawback: there are insufficient citations of other sources, and these are restricted mostly to direct quotations. Either Gann actually commands encyclopedic personal knowledge of factual tidbits about his composers (he did conduct some personal interviews), or he has cut corners in scholarly documentation. Whatever the reason, the relative dearth of comprehensive footnotes and bibliographic references detracts from the intellectual heft of his study. Where citations do appear, they often reflect Gann’s acquaintance with such arcana as Rhys Chatham’s *Composer’s Notebook* (on the internet), Laurie Anderson’s *Stories from the Nerve Bible*, and an interview with Diamanda Galas in *ReSearch Publications #13: Angry Women*.

Most theorists may find the analytic payload in Gann’s examples light fare, probably intentionally so. His analysis of Babbitt’s complex partitions and arrays, for instance, merely scratches the surface, thus avoiding confusion. But the musical excerpts, often from difficult-to-obtain scores, are useful in themselves. Where else can one readily find bits of Rosenboom’s *Systems of Judgment*, Young’s *Well-Tuned Piano*, Tenney’s *Chromatic Canon*, Lentz’s *Crack in the Bell*, and Gordon’s *Yo Shakespeare*?

*American Music in the Twentieth Century* does not present itself as a hardcore analytical primer. It is rather a lively, first-hand account by an articulate, enthusiastic, and well-versed observer of the contemporary scene, tracing its roots in our vibrant American tradition. Few authors could conduct this tour as deftly as Kyle Gann.

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