

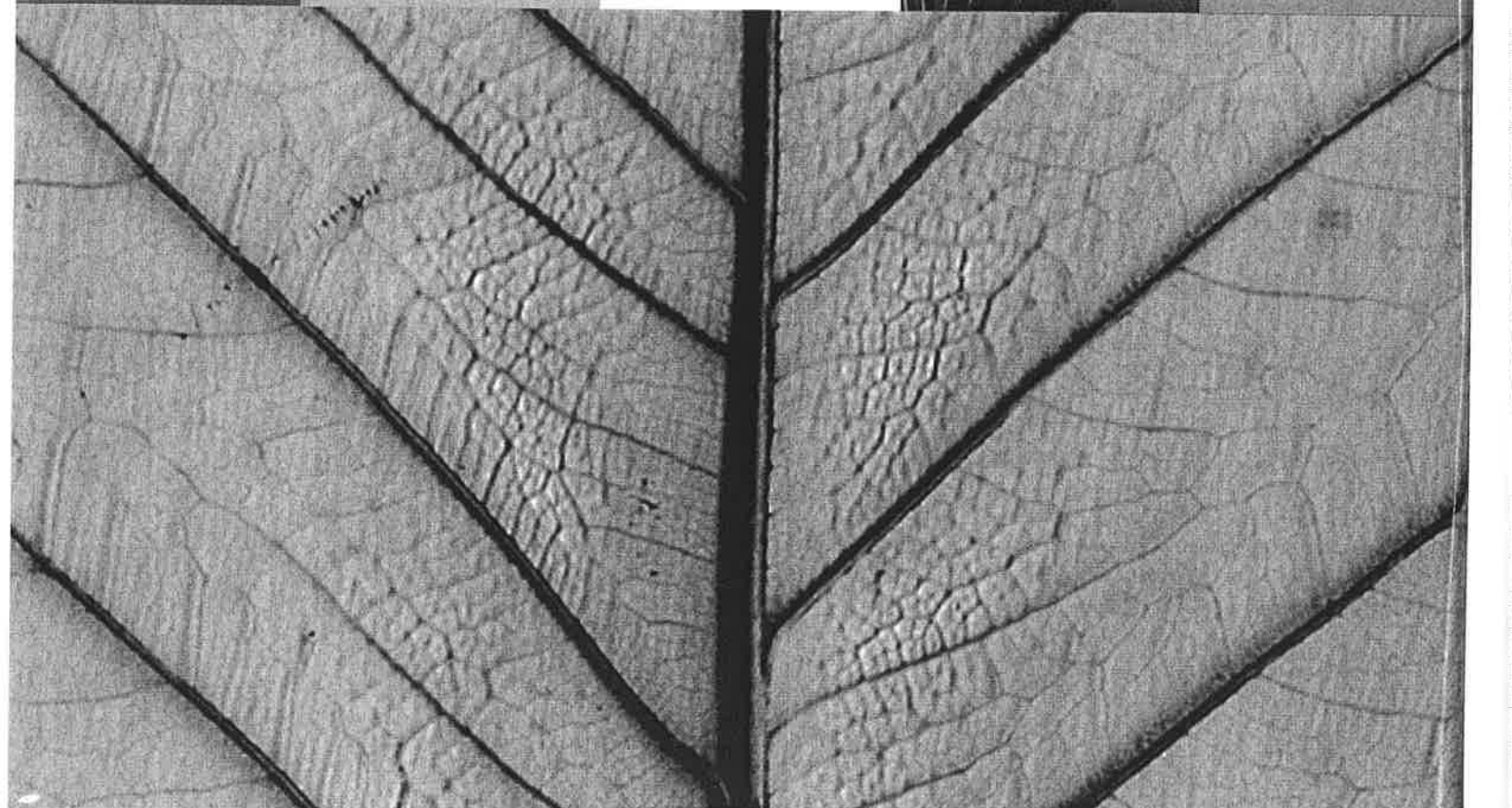


**AMERICAN
COMPOSER**

by **KYLE GANN**



**JUDITH
SAINTE
CROIX**



The archetype of Judith Sainte Croix's music is an inhabited wilderness. You frequently hear nature in the background of her music: the singing of birds, the chirping of crickets, the occasional thunderclap, and most of all the wind, always the mournful, sighing wind without ceasing. There's no way you would mistake it for city music. Sometimes the identification with nature is achieved through Native American references, drumming and native-style flute playing. In any case, the human element is always in the foreground. Unlike Pauline Oliveros's or Annea Lockwood's music, we're not so much listening to nature as listening to someone interact emotively with nature.

Even though she lives in New York today, Sainte Croix grew up in Minnesota, and she's an outsider composer, by aesthetic and reputation. Her music sits out the battle of current styles: serialist versus minimalist, vernacular versus neo-romantic. It doesn't even sound particularly recent, yet it doesn't remind you of any other historical period either. When it does remind you of another composer's music, that person is most often Debussy, and occasionally Messiaen. She has a penchant for textures of arpeggios, and her most Debussy-like recent work, the piano piece "Tukwinong," is named for the Hopi Kachina that represents a cumulus cloud. (Compare Debussy's "Nuages," another cloud piece.)

Yet this doesn't seem to represent a debt to Debussy so much as the fact that composers who love nature will gravitate toward certain archetypes. In fact, Sainte Croix's style of piano writing is quite personal and effective, modulating between wisps of arpeggios and Lisztian thundering octaves. Her resemblance to Messiaen is even more abstract: not so much that she sounds like him, but simply that, like him, she's evolved an idiosyncratic set of personal formulas.

More importantly, it's Sainte Croix's rhythmic eccentricity and cheerful acceptance of noise that mark her as an American. Odd-numbered meters run through her work; the first movement of her *Bright Leaf Trios*, for flute, cello, and piano, may be the only entire movement I've ever heard written entirely in 11/8 meter. The second movement is in limpid $\frac{3}{4}$ with a gliding melody in quarter notes, yet septuplet arpeggios fall through it, alternating between all three instruments. *Vision I* bounces along most often in a surprisingly jaunty 7/8. She doesn't stay for long in a common meter, and that's partly the Native American influence.

Look up Sainte Croix's web page (conveniently judithsainte-croix.com) and you'll find her music sharing space with her political activism regarding fair treatment of Native Americans. Many of her works are inspired by Native American themes, and titled as such. It's a vein that hasn't been mined much: oddly so, since Indonesian, East Indian, and African music have had so much impact on contemporary American music. Aside from Sainte Croix, one can only mention Jerome Kitzke and Peter Garland who have made Native America a career-long occupation. Native American



music doesn't offer the sophisticated pitch and rhythmic patterns of music from Indonesia or India, nor the specifically difficult cross-rhythms of African music. But it does offer a dance-derived sense of drum-driven energy very foreign to the Euro-American world, and also an unexpectedly elegant approach to melody, once you get past the rough-sounding vocal technique. I've found devices of melodic foreshortening in Native American tunes that reminded me of Mozart.

In Sainte Croix's music, however, you won't find those melodies quoted. What you get instead are drumbeats and timbral evocations. *Vision I* for chamber orchestra and *Vision II* for seven instruments each employ a Native American flute, whose melodies throughout are based on drum patterns imitative of that culture's music. Not very directly imitative; she doesn't appropriate anything except for the wooden flute itself. As with her depiction of nature, what she offers is a subjective response to Native American music.

Lastly, and perhaps most disturbing at first for the classically trained musician, noises and odd vocal sounds hover around the edges of Sainte Croix's otherwise lyrical idiom. She often asks her instrumentalists to speak while playing. In "Naked" from *The Bright Leaf Trios*, the players whisper, one by one, words from a poem she wrote with Emily Dickinson-style capitalizations:

*Naked, as a Bright Angel
I comb the Yellow Hair of the Dawn
and so, the Dazzling Door of my Heart
Does not close
Like a Bone.*

Elsewhere she has her performers breathe audibly or make hissing sounds to manifest the wind that always blows through her music. The Native American flute solos in her works are basically improvisatory, to allow for the variable expertise of players and variability of wooden flute tunings (in *Vision II*, the oboist may opt to play the flute or obtain a separate player).

That's the curious mix of qualities that makes Sainte Croix difficult to pigeonhole, and makes her compositional persona so slippery. She has moments of lyricism as delicate as Debussy; passages which give way to noises and vocal sounds with Cagean abandon; sections of bouncing rhythmic momentum as propulsive as Bartók; and atmospheric flute solos of a kind more often associated with New Age music. It's a crazily eclectic mix, yet so casually and smoothly blended that you can't imagine she's even struck by the incongruities. They're all part of her personal language, and she moves back and forth from the arpeggios to the drum beats to the vocal sounds with a grace that will surprise you.

Most evident is the elegant musicianship she shows in every measure for, despite her strong images, hers is a music eternally in transition, always discreetly moving toward the next textural idea. We don't know what to do with these composers who do a lot of things in their music. We acknowledge the occasional all-embracing genius, like Cage or Stockhausen, whose music traverses entire continents of musical territory, but we usually expect a composer to select a shtick and stick with it. All the more reason that we should take a closer look at Sainte Croix, because bringing her diverse yet always exquisite work into focus requires a very large view indeed. ■