

We are entering an age of synthetic music, and I don't mean synthetic as opposed to natural. I mean that the overwhelming activity of today's composers is to make a synthesis of ideas that have come before. The twentieth century, thank God it's over and may it rest in peace, plowed up a slew of new ideas: collage, sampling, tone rows, rhythmic grids, quarter tones, multi-tempo designs, weird instrumental effects, minimalism, jazz harmony, just intonation, and on and on and on. The common wisdom is that everything's been done and there's nothing new under the sun. That's not only untrue, but beside the point. More specifically, further new ideas would just get lost in the welter of experiments. To make our way intelligently into the future, we need to collect some of those shards so invitingly thrown out, and start to combine them. Rich with hardly-touched building materials, we need to build.



Those shards become known as “influences,” which has become the word of the day. Composers are identified, and identify themselves, in terms of their influences. We used to call certain music “eclectic,” but now *everything* is eclectic. A guitarist seeking players for a new rock band will write an ad: “My influences are Captain Beefheart, the Velvet Underground, Beck,” and like that. It becomes a little too facile sometimes. For instance, the shorthand way to sum up the music of Bernadette Speech is: a combination of Morton Feldman’s quiet aesthetic, postminimalism, and jazz.

It’s true as far as it goes. A New York composer famously active and expert in arts administration, Speech studied with Morton Feldman, who has emerged as perhaps the most *influential* composer of the late twentieth century. Feldman was remarkable for writing works of up to five and six hours that were quiet throughout, often marked “as quiet as possible,” and his intuitive way of balancing repeating sonorities against each other has had an impact on young composers from a wide range of backgrounds. As one of his closest students, Speech inherited that sensuously sonority-based approach, and some melodic ties as well: the simple, repeated vibraphone from her *Trio des Trois I* for violin, piano, and vibes harks straight back to her teacher’s *Rothko Chapel*.

Some of Feldman’s repetitive tendencies connect neatly with the minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass (although Feldman preceded them by a decade), and postminimalism is a natural tendency of Feldman’s protégés. Like so much postminimal music, Speech’s tends to evolve slowly, using only a few pitches at a time. Then there’s that jazz influence, also honestly come by, for Speech is married to the jazz guitarist Jeffrey Schanzer. Some of her works—especially the numerous ones for the Schanzer-Speech duo—leave room for improvisation, particularly in the timing of melodic materials. One of Speech’s most frequent collaborators has been the poet and former *Village Voice* writer Thulani Davis, a heavily jazz-influenced poet with whom Speech has made several large chamber works full of a kind of beat poetry, swathed in jazzy chords and syncopated rhythms, all the Feldmanesque and postminimal qualities notwithstanding.

I’ve been guilty, in those crammed little bits of space critics often get to write in, of reducing her music to that convenient formula: Speech = Feldman + postminimalism + jazz. And it’s come time to focus on the Speechian elements missed by that oversimplification.

Waves, for example: Speech’s music often builds itself up in waves of tones that ripple up from the bass and evolve slowly. This became most explicit in one of her string quartets, *les ondes pour quatre*, “ondes” being French for “waves.” Each gesture at the beginning of the work (which was written for and has been played by the expert Arditti Quartet) begins in a

sustained note in the cello, quickly followed by notes entering in the viola, second violin, and first violin respectively. The three similar trios that make up the *Trio des Trois* series likewise begin with slowly rising arpeggios in the piano, from which tones in the other instruments emerge. There is nothing in Feldman’s music, other postminimal works, or jazz, to suggest this wave paradigm, which gives Speech’s music the feeling of being gradually stroked into existence.

Another frequent strategy is the trading off of notes between different instruments. In *Trio de Trois I*, the piano will play a gentle phrase; it repeats the phrase, but this time one of the notes is picked up by the vibraphone; on the next repetition, another note now appears in the violin, and so on, leading carefully to a complete transformation. This practice rises to an extreme in the works written for her duo, such as *Chosen Voices*, in which melodies pass note-by-note from Speech’s toy piano to Schanzer’s prepared electric guitar and back, like a paragraph spoken by a long-married couple completing each other’s thoughts. Feldman’s music was a continuum of overlapping instruments inhabiting different worlds, but Speech has developed her own original sense of bizarre textures that can neither be classed as harmonic nor melodic, neither

horizontal nor vertical but diagonal, like Webern’s, yet, unlike Webern’s, sensuous and arguably tonal.

Most of all, Speech has arrived at her own sense of atmosphere: moodily emotive, yet marked by a sense of restraint, as though a great power exists that is deliberately withheld, measured out in waves. You can hear her early works on a Mode CD called *Without Borders*, but the more recent ones, unrecorded as yet, often strip down to a few pitches at a time, with an intense sense of vulnerability. *Viola*, for instance—named both for its solo instrument and her mother—opens with just one bowed, soulful viola note over and over, and eventually climaxes the same way, insisting on that note against the piano’s chordal protestations. For all its austerity, the work bursts the bonds of postminimalism to evoke a thoughtful, introverted romanticism.

It is foreseeable that such restrained emotionality, surging forward in waves, may soon be recognized as an aesthetic all its own. And then, younger composers may start claiming, “My influences include Bernadette Speech....” ■