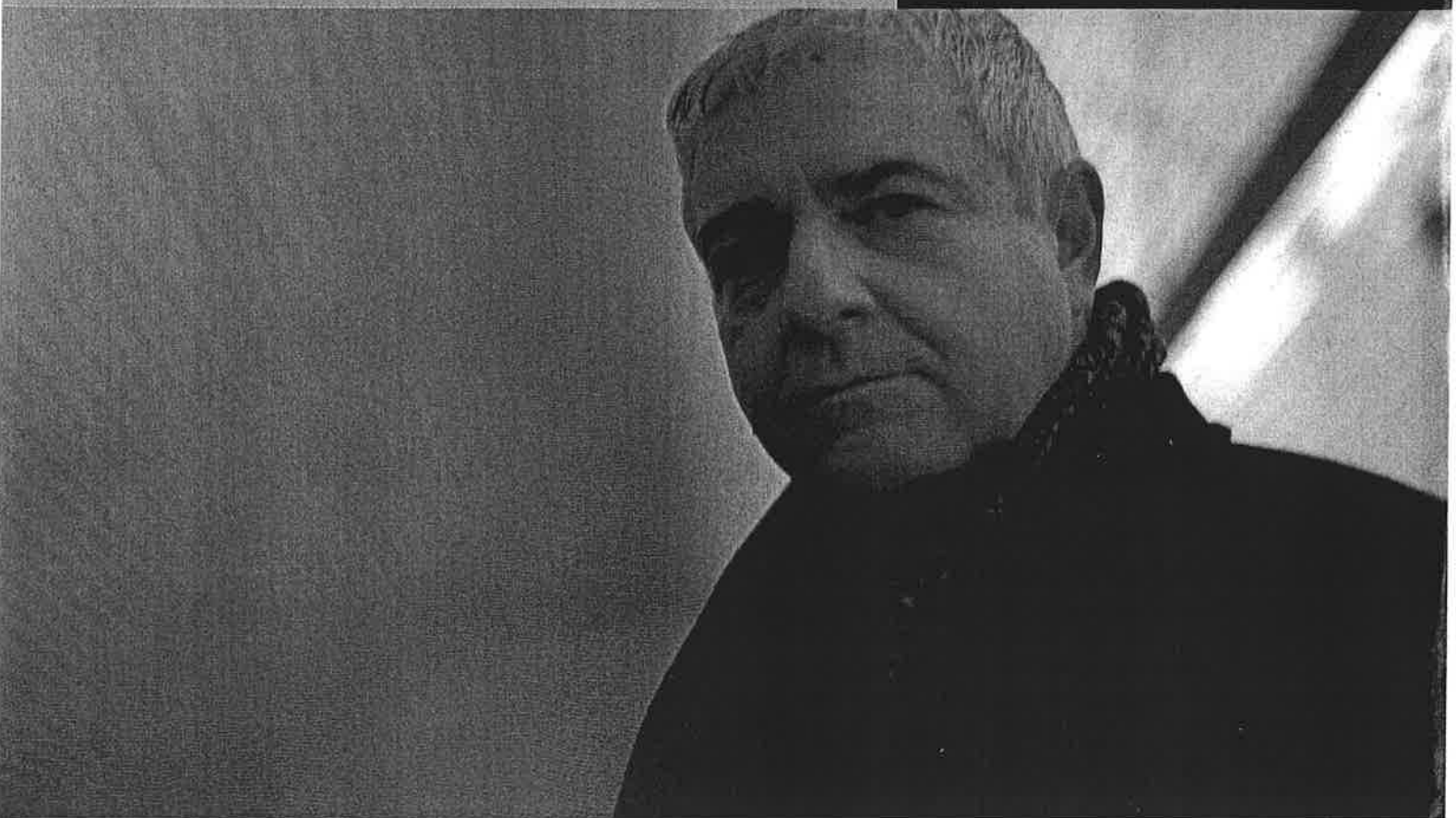




The thing that has always struck me about William Duckworth's music is its elegant craftsmanship. That's hardly an unusual thing to say about a composer. In fact, it became an uninviting cliché of the late twentieth century, an era in which any sense of clear melodic expression was more often than not buried under mountains of compositional detail. "Well-crafted" has become a euphemism for "Well, I can't tell what the piece is about, but the composer obviously worked hard."

WILLIAM DUCKWORTH



But that doesn't apply to Duckworth's music, which is remarkable for its limpid, effortless-seeming melodic logic and deceptive simplicity. Mozart believed in an "artless art," in which the hard work of composing disappears beneath a surface of serene simplicity. It's not a very twentieth-century notion, and I can't think of another recent composer whose music so embodies that ideal as William Duckworth's.

Duckworth is one of the leading figures in a farflung movement that has remained strangely invisible in critical discourse. I call it postminimalism, a term loosely thrown around by some critics, but one that acquires a very specific meaning if you take a broad look at recent repertoire. American composers born in the 1940s and fifties (Duckworth was born in 1943) came of age just as the minimalism of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass was making its first big splash in the late sixties. Dozens of them found the new style too simplistic, obvious, repetitive, and long-winded, but also relished the new starting point it offered after an era of dense serialist dissonance and complexity. Starting with minimalism's simple tonalities and steady-eighth-note rhythms, the postminimalists threw away the simple repetitions and turned up the subtlety.

The new movement broke ground in the late seventies, and seemed to go public with Neely Bruce's performance of Duckworth's *The Time Curve Preludes* at the 1980 New Music America Festival. Departing from the endlessly static continua of Glass and Reich, *The Time Curve Preludes* was a series of twenty-four piano vignettes drawing together bluegrass banjo figures, Erik Satie quotations, the *Dies irae* chant, and Fibonacci number structures into a warmly-blended style, pretty and cheeky by turns. From that point, postminimalism grew into an American lingua franca: a style marked by diatonic tonality, a steady and sometimes motoric beat, strict contrapuntal or rhythmic procedures, and in general a consonant smoothness embraced as a continuing reaction against the ugly discontinuity and fragmentation of serialist music.

(Other postminimalists one could name include Janice Giteck, Daniel Lentz, Elodie Lauten, Peter Garland, John Luther Adams, Paul Drescher, Peter Gena, Ingram Marshall, Paul Epstein, Mary Jane Leach, Stephen Scott, Mary Ellen Childs, David Borden, Jonathan Kramer, Guy Klucevsek, Phil Winsor, Joseph Koykhar, Thomas Albert, Wes York, Sasha Matson, and many others. If this were Europe we'd be having postminimalist festivals; instead, and astonishingly, the music-critical establishment has taken no notice whatever of an indigenous American style whose borders range from Alaska to Florida and Maine to Hawaii.)

In any case, Duckworth's music continues to be one of the movement's crystallization points. Setting the tone for later postminimalists, his influences are strikingly diverse, yet blended into an individual idiom that never sounds eclectic. Having grown up in North Carolina with bluegrass music and rural shaped-note hymn singing (recaptured in his seminal choral work, *Southern Harmony*), he worked those into his music. He embraced the rock revolution when it arrived in his teen years, and credits his piano style to Jerry Lee Lewis. Interestingly, he gravitated toward the early musics of Reich and Glass, but—not

wanting to imitate a style so easily identifiable—enriched their motoric rhythms and simple melodic materials via study of the music of Olivier Messiaen, whose air of mysticism and inscrutable rhythmic structures became part and parcel of Duckworth's own aesthetic.

So if you can imagine bluegrass banjo melodies threaded into a tapestry of Renaissance choral polyphony, you might get a rough sense of Duckworth's *Mysterious Numbers*, for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, marimba, and piano. His specialty is a sprung rhythmic surprise within a smooth melodic flow. He is by aptitude a miniaturist, able (in *The Time Curve Preludes*, *Music in the Combat Zone*, *Simple Songs About Sex and War*) to string together brief movements with the subtlety and overriding logic of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* or *Davidstanz*. Yet when I once compared Duckworth to Schumann in print, he (the former) soon responded with *Blue Rhythm*, a bouncy, blues-tinged one-movement work for flute, cello, and piano.

Duckworth was also an experimentalist from way back—his early works were often graphic scores—and a close associate of John Cage. In fact, he's used Cage's chance processes in works that you would never suspect from listening, like *Revolution* and *Gathering Together* for multiple keyboards and percussion. In these pieces, the music jumps unexpectedly, though not disconcertingly, among different chance-determined keys and rhythmic grooves. One trademark, however, marks a Duckworth piece as being unmistakably his: an alternation between the major and minor third of the scale, keeping the music in constant fluid suspension between major and minor mode.

Ever conscious of the tenuous role of the composer in a technology-driven and changing society, Duckworth took up a mammoth challenge in the late 1990s: to create the first multidimensional interactive

internet composition. Called *Cathedral*, and available at <http://www.monroestreet.com/Cathedral/main.html>, the work-in-progress is a combination of interactive sound sites, live webcasts of orchestral and chamber concerts, prerecorded music and images, and sound collages of viewer contributions. Some of his chamber works, such as *Mysterious Numbers* and *Dreaming Dances, Round and Square*, are parts of *Cathedral*, available in both acoustic/live-performed and electronic/web versions. *Cathedral's* planned climax occurs this year, with networked concerts across the United States and as far afield as Australia.

In any other composer's hands, such an all-inclusive techno-experiment would have degenerated into a Stockhausenesque free-for-all, but *Cathedral* never loses the imprint of Duckworth's personality, for the same reason that he can combine chance, chants, and banjo-picking in his piano and chamber works: because he is, by nature, an integrator. Everything that feeds into Duckworth's cool sense of musical logic becomes smoothed out, quietly lively, rhythmically bouncy but never disruptive, tinged with the vernacular yet expertly contrapuntal. It's why he can pursue the leading edge of technology in his music, yet still maintain a delicate sense of craftsmanship that seems to reach way back into the eighteenth century—because everything Mr. D eats turns into Mr. D. ■

