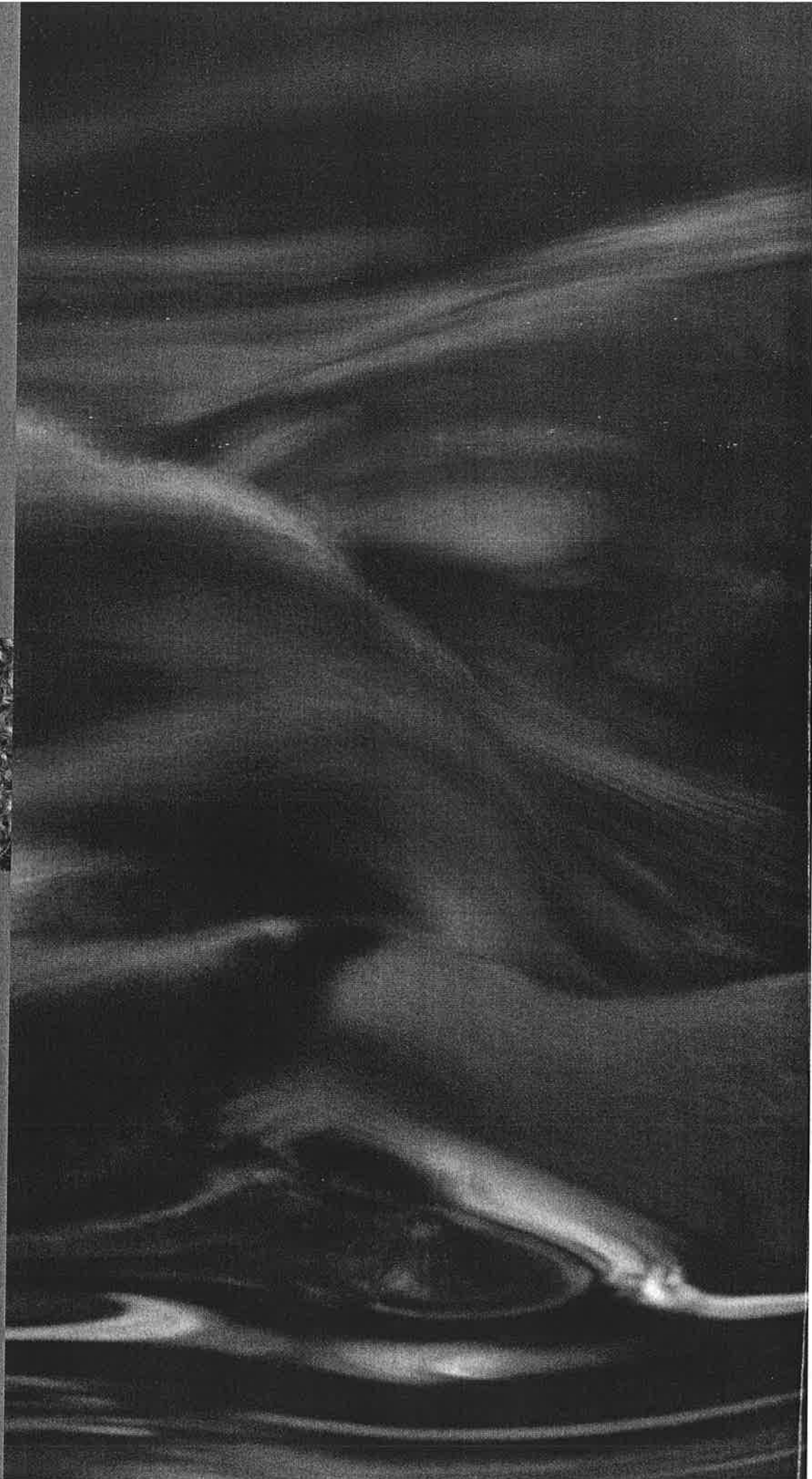


Carolyn Yarnell's music is as intense as she is. It runs relentlessly, but not in straight lines. It meanders, circles around itself, though without ever leaving its original thought far behind. It is intensely emotional music, but it does not use conventional devices for signifying emotion. It is not particularly lyrical, for example, but rather tends to burst off the page in arpeggios, scales, and more angular streams of sixteenth-notes. It does not tend to



crescendo into climaxes, nor is harmonic coloring a significant tool in her palette. And the very fact that she abjures the usual emotive signs inherited from Romanticism only underscores the passion of her music. It's as though she's trying her level best to write cold, objective music, and the rage, the fear, the love, pour out of her uncontrollably and unconsciously against her wishes.



Rage, fear, and love are all present in abundant amounts. Born in Los Angeles, Yarnell was abandoned by her mother when she was ten days old, a fact she is still quick to bring up in conversation. You can't help but feel that the tremendous quantity of music that pours out of Carolyn Yarnell, with all its would-be-subdued but relentless passion, is an attempt to heal an enormous wound stemming from that preconscious catastrophe.

The passion results, too, in mixtures of elements that don't normally coexist. On one hand, Yarnell, born in the early 1960s, is clearly a product of a postminimalist generation. The textures of repeated notes in her music, the perpetual motion of sixteenth-notes, mark her as the inheritor of an aesthetic indebted to Steve Reich's *Octet* and John Adams's *Grand Pianola Music*. More deeply than that, she thrives on a smooth sense of continuity. She does not break the music up into sections, she does not repeat passages or create hierarchies, even less is there any appearance of serialist fragmentation. The music is like emotion itself, continually in motion but never abrupt.

And yet clearly Yarnell was not one of the younger composers strongly moved by Reich's *Piano Phase* or Glass's *Music in Fifths*. One can't imagine the austere, literal logic of those pieces appealing to her. Though she studied with John Adams at San Francisco Conservatory, she was also a student of Jacob Druckman at Yale. Thus the prickly textures of the American atonalists survive in her work, and even more a kind of subtle motivic sense that goes back to late-period Aaron Copland. Her music is angular, muscular, but neither cold nor abstract. In terms of the Uptown/Downtown dialectic of American music, she is clearly in between, with one foot in each camp. (Notably, she's had her successes in Uptown venues—Aspen, Tanglewood, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo—though she's also been performed on Downtown festivals like Bang on a Can.) One could imagine the Uptowners rejecting her music for being too pretty, too emotive, and the Downtowners finding it too complicated, not literal enough in its ideas.

It is this refusal to fit in that makes Yarnell seem so individual, more than any particular habitual tic or device one could point to. Her sheer quantity makes clear an output unified by sensibility rather than by specific techniques. One could divide her works into fast, sparkly ones, and slow, sad ones. *L.* for small chamber orchestra including piano, harpsichord, and celesta is a slow, sad work, the piano solo weaving a mournful melody whose notes bleed into the rest of the ensemble. *Lapis Lazuli* (1995, part of a piece punningly called *Rock Music*) for quintet is even sadder, a heart-breaking chorale whose piano-laced diatonicism comes close to middle-period Copland, only more poignant. Yarnell's most ghostly work is entitled *10/18* (presumably a date) written in 1998 for flutist Stephen Schultz; she runs the solo flute through a guitar effects processor that repeats its isolated gestures and slow glissandos in disembodied echoes. The

piece seems little more than a sustained sigh, but its timbres are voluptuous.

The other side of her output is full of dash and humor as well as passion. *The Same Sky* (1999–2000) is a beautifully sparkling line of sixteenth-notes for piano bouncily accompanied by computer; during performance, a video is projected inside the piano lid. *More Spirit than Matter...*, written in 1995 for flute, oboe, harpsichord, violin, cello, and viola da gamba, is more postminimal in its simple diatonic scales, but still quietly takes unexpected twists and turns. *Slade* (1998) for brass quintet and trap set is a bumptious collage of images, including irregular trumpet arpeggios in thirty-second notes that come blasting back over and over again. In *Enemy Moon* (part of her First Symphony, 1988–91), Yarnell's immense anger bursts through in masses of percussion and savagely repeated chords with the uncontrolled fury of an infant's outrage.

Yarnell seems to get performed a lot, but she hasn't made her reputation alone. She is one of the composers in a bi-coastal group called Common Sense, a composers collective that has banded together to find strength (and funding) in numbers; the group also comprises Dan Becker, Ed Harsh, John Halle, Marc Mellits, Melissa Hui, Belinda Reynolds, and Randall Woolf, all of whom shared a CRI disc a few years ago. It's a highly postminimalist crowd, generally oriented toward

## CAROLYN YARNELL

jaunty pattern-making, and sometimes with political texts and subtexts. Some of the composers live in New York, others in San Francisco, and a typical strategy is to select a specific chamber ensemble each year for all the composers to write for, and raise funding for an entire evening of world premieres for that ensemble. It's a smart plan, more economically feasible today than the Philip Glass-Steve Reich model of maintaining your own ensemble, and also allowing for a higher level of performer virtuosity. And they create a chamber repertoire as they go along.

Within Common Sense, Yarnell is the romantic, the one with the unstable lifestyle; she's flitted between New York and San Francisco for years, spent last year in Italy on the Prix de Rome, and recently toured Egypt looking, she says, for "magic rocks." She's never held a conventional job, but has held her life together, as she puts it, from commissions, awards and fellowships, piano students, computer score copying, sales of her paintings (yes, she loves to paint as well), and good fortune. But you get the feeling that what really holds her life together is the healing connection to her inner pain via the raging river of her music. ■