



**There are two kinds of composers. That's fun to say, and there are a hundred contentious ways to continue: Apollonian vs. Dionysian, programmatic vs. absolute-music, pencil vs. notation software, short vs. tall. But today it strikes me that many composers start out by imitating music they've heard and played, then gradually and incrementally develop their own style by altering and adding features from their own musical intuitions. On the other hand are the theoretical composers who doubt everything, who are eternally returning to the archetypal drawing board and saying, "Forget the music that's already out there—what kind of music could exist, if earlier composers hadn't already screwed it up?"**

The intuitive types probably vastly outnumber the theoretical types, and the theoretical types got a terrible rep during the 1970s and 80s, when so many composers achieved major careers by seeming to believe that ugly music could be justified by elegant twelve-tone analyses. But there are many ways to theoretically conceptualize music besides the twelve-tone route, and sometimes the theoretical composers bring about more dramatic progress in music history than the intuitive types would achieve on their own. When they are honest and pragmatic enough to check theory against experience, their music can sometimes reveal unexamined assumptions on which our listening habits are based, and force us to rethink the whole field from a fresh viewpoint. And that's the effect I find in the music of Jonathan Kramer.

Kramer teaches at Columbia University, where for many years his reputation as a theorist and cultural critic has outraced his image as a composer. Like other theoretically inclined composers—and one could include Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage, Iannis Xenakis, and James Tenney in this august legacy, not to mention Richard Wagner—Kramer has prepared for a compositional career by writing articles and books about his musical ideas. For composers this always serves a dual purpose: to prepare potential listeners for the initial weirdness of the music they plan to write, and also, I suspect, to help the composer himself

limitation of pitch—which you'd never notice if I hadn't mentioned it—holds the whole piece together and unifies it in an unidentifiable way. It's sort of like listening to a Steve Reich piece turned sideways.

The surprisingly unifying effect of those scales convinced Kramer that our conceptions of what unifies a piece of music are more arbitrary and socially conditioned than we realize. This insight prepared him for his next breakout, which came with *Notta Sonata* of 1993: a two-movement work scored for two pianos and percussion, and intended as a companion piece to Bartók's Sonata for that same instrumentation. Kramer had become enchanted with the postmodern literary idea that the unity of an artwork is more in the mind of the listener than in the artwork itself, which is usually fraught with subtle disjunctions. In *Notta Sonata* he put that idea to the test. This vibrant work bristles with non sequiturs, jumping from style to style, sometimes resuming in mid-phrase a melody it had as abruptly abandoned a moment ago.

Now, a lot of composers, from classical heavyweights like William Bolcom to rabble-raising downtowners like John Zorn, have made collages from passages of music in identifiable styles. What Kramer is doing is more imaginative than that, because he's not simply quoting or imitating: he's making up his own styles from musical elements that we think of as not belonging together. *Notta Sonata* contains passages of angular,

## AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN



# J O N A T H A N K R A M E R

sort out his thoughts about where music could go that it's never gone before.

Kramer's writings have been largely devoted to the concept of musical time and the nature of musical continuity; his book *The Time of Music* was an important and influential challenge to the European concept of linear continuity, with counterexamples drawn from Stravinsky, minimalism, and non-Western music. Although he has written that he never lets his theories constrain his composing—quite rightly, since the subconscious is more artistically fertile ground than one's conscious analytical skills—his music of the 1970s and 80s flouted many assumptions about music's directionality and continuity.

In particular, intrigued yet not entirely convinced by the minimalism of Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and others, Kramer invented his own peculiar brand of postminimalism in which the unity of a work was ensured by a strict limitation on pitches. His *Moving Music* of 1975–76, for instance, for solo clarinet and twelve clarinets uses only F, G, A-flat, C, and D over a continuous drone on F, coursing through a wild variety of textures over its thirty-five minutes. A later work for mixed sextet, *Atlanta Licks* (1985), confines itself to a scale of A, C, C-sharp, E, F, F-sharp, and G. The piece's textures, hesitant, jazzy, and frantic by turns, turn on a dime and make unpredictable leaps, yet somehow the

Boulez-like serial gestures, except that they're tonal, and melodies of Wagnerian heroicism, except that they're accompanied by xylophone and glockenspiel. More subtly, Kramer's *Serbelloni Serenade* for clarinet, violin, and piano opens with an almost Schubertian melody in D minor only to have the clarinet break in with a loud twelve-tone gesture, introducing a long contrapuntal passage in 5/8 meter. *Surreality Check*, a more recent trio (1995), breaks from quasi-minimalist repetition textures into a Webernesque pointillism in G major.

It's intellectual music—not because you have to think hard to ferret out what's going on at any given moment, as in most twelve-tone music (and I don't mean to concede that this tendency suffices to make twelve-tone music “intellectual”), but because ultimately you have to stand back from the music, suspend your momentary immersion in it, and figure out how the different idioms serially represented relate to each other. In fact, to deal with the music on any but the most superficial level, you have to think about the nature of music. How do we mentally fit that D minor tune and that clarinet glissando into the same piece? Kramer's music is finely sculpted and enjoyable, and usually makes sense moment-to-moment. But as wholes, his best pieces force you to become a philosopher and make you suddenly realize that, as a listener, you've been taking too many things for granted. ■