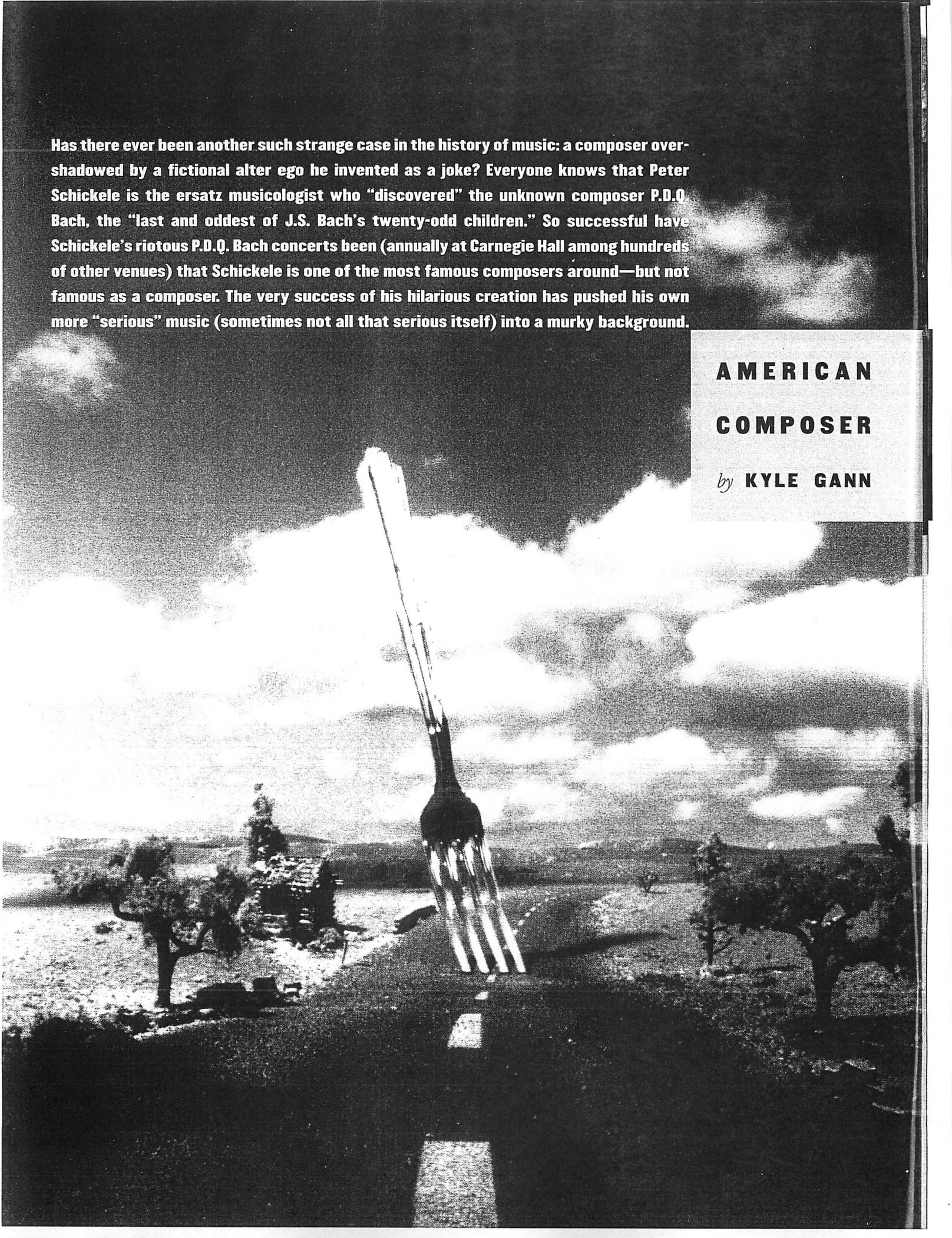


Has there ever been another such strange case in the history of music: a composer overshadowed by a fictional alter ego he invented as a joke? Everyone knows that Peter Schickele is the ersatz musicologist who “discovered” the unknown composer P.D.Q. Bach, the “last and oddest of J.S. Bach’s twenty-odd children.” So successful have Schickele’s riotous P.D.Q. Bach concerts been (annually at Carnegie Hall among hundreds of other venues) that Schickele is one of the most famous composers around—but not famous as a composer. The very success of his hilarious creation has pushed his own more “serious” music (sometimes not all that serious itself) into a murky background.

AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN



Most musicians are vaguely aware that Schickele writes "normal" concert music, which is indeed published and widely performed, yet any public sense of his musical personality remains elusive.

And for peculiar reasons. When you listen to it in bulk, Schickele's music clearly has a strong, well-defined, characterizable personality. But that personality bleeds into P.D.Q. Bach's in a way that makes the boundary slippery. There are, for instance, theatrical pieces like *The Bestiary* for narrator and early-music ensemble, a tongue-in-cheek work based on Renaissance idioms that could almost be P.D.Q. Dufay. And there's the joyous folk fiddling in the "Dance" movement of Schickele's first string quartet, a bold reminder that some of his best talent is for satirizing, or at least taking off from,

like incompetence in P.D.Q.'s music but like luminous sleight-of-hand in Schickele's.

This expert musical technique, coupled with invariably modest ambitions, is the source of Schickele's charm. There is never a sense of urgency to the music, even when it courses at breakneck speed. This is no criticism unless you can't live without a European sense of large-scale dissonance resolution. The music has no tightly wound mainspring propelling you from opening to final cadence because it is not harmonically conceived. Rhythm seems the generating principle of every movement, and the *modus operandi* is often no more elaborate than simple rhythmic repetition, with occasional contrasts for variety but always with an assumption that the original momentum will

return. The music is carried along, and carries you along, on a sense of good-natured buoyancy. The ear acquiesces not because the music has buttonholed you and compels you, but simply because it offers such pleasant companionship.

You get the impression that Schickele is tempted to write minimalist music, but his heart really isn't in the post-1960



P E T E R S C H I C K E L E

preexisting musical forms. Anyone else could have written that "Dance" movement without raising eyebrows, but because it comes from the creator of P.D.Q., you're braced to have your leg pulled.

Before going further, let me insist on the legitimate modernist prestige of the P.D.Q. Bach connection. I first heard P.D.Q. on the radio when I was 15, before I had heard most of the classical warhorses Schickele was quoting, and at the time I was just beginning to discover modern music. The bizarre noises, the surreal stream of consciousness of the *Concerto for Horn and Hardart*, the cantata *Iphigenia in Brooklyn*, were as ear-opening as almost anything I would encounter in Ives, Stockhausen, or Cage. And the music wasn't only funny and bizarre, but cogent in its musical insights. To take just one example, P.D.Q.'s Prelude to *Einstein on the Fritz* (a take-off on Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*), by fusing Bach's *Well-Tempered Klavier* with minimalism, draws historical parallels in one stroke that would have taken a musicologist some tedious length to unravel.

So I thought Schickele was a musical genius from day one, and while that's admittedly not the same as a great composer, it's enough reason to keep an ear out for him; P.D.Q. may be his *bête noire*, but also an irresistible advertisement. Among the Schickele chamber works, many are deft but forgettable satires, particularly those for brass ensemble, like the Piano Concerto No. 2 (subtitled "Olé!") for piano and brass quintet. But the works with strings, particularly the Piano Quintet of 1996 and a 1982 Quartet for a Quartet-for-the-End-of-Time ensemble, are devoutly serious without being at all stodgy. Fascinatingly, one can hear in them the same DNA that runs through the P.D.Q. Bach music, particularly an underlying reliance on simple folk-song and Baroque forms and occasionally, especially in the quartet, a playful use of bitonality that sounds

era; or rather, the fortuitous advent of minimalism allows him to get away with a formal flatness, a lack of harmonic goal-directness, and a reliance on rhythmic repetition, that he finds congenial but that wouldn't have been countenanced in an earlier part of the century. It's interesting to note that he was at Juilliard, as a teaching assistant, in the 1960s, where students who came in contact with him included Steve Reich and Philip Glass. It seems as though his orbit has been inflected by their gravitational pull, but not strongly influenced.

In fact, Schickele strikes one as an artist profoundly out of sympathy with his time, uninterested in contemporary music politics. Aside from some Bartók textures in the slow movement of his first string quartet, it is rare to hear an idea in his music reminiscent of any other composer, rich as it otherwise is with references to a wide range of vernaculars. Even his best music is unlocatable in the rhetoric of twentieth-century-isms; it is stubbornly ahistorical. And from that aspect of the serious music, you realize, amidst the ideological serialism/dissonance/complexity wars of the 1970s, what a comforting refuge an eighteenth-century persona like P.D.Q. might have been for Schickele.

If Schickele's music is never deep or ambitious, neither is it ever awkward or miscalculated; a smooth musicianship runs through every measure, a delight in introducing new ideas with the most gracious unobtrusiveness. If often jovial, it is capable of a jovial dignity, and an attractive sense of self-possession. "You may think I sound funny," the music seems to say, "but I know where I'm going, and you'll find I entertain you more along the way than a lot of music that's convinced it carries the world on its shoulders." There is no doubt, in listening to Schickele's music, that he knows where he's going as a composer. The question, I imagine, is how to keep P.D.Q. Bach from going along for the ride. ■