



Being an expatriate composer has one set of disadvantages; the predicament of the woman composer entails another set. Consider, then, the twice-cursed fate of the expatriate woman composer: considered an American where she lives, a foreigner when she returns home, all the while distrusted and condescended to by the more conservative, patriarchal members of the classical establishment. And if she is also a highly original composer, using techniques not found in music by others, and if beyond that she has the audacity to write for an orchestra—well, how could such a person survive at all?

AMERICAN COMPOSER

by **KYLE GANN**

And yet Gloria Coates, who fits all these descriptions, has indeed survived and is even flourishing. Germany—Coates has lived in Munich since 1969—is not nearly as accepting of women composers as America is, and she has put up with more than her share of condescending conductors. Still, through her strength of character, her courageous loquacity, and a compositional technique that is as simple and sturdy as it is strange and unprecedented, she has made such a case for herself as a thoroughly unique artist that other people are finally beginning to notice.

So if Coates's reputation has been slow to take off—and she seems to be on an overdue upswing in her sixties—the strikes against her given above are enough to account for it. But even those of us who know her music well and have no outdated prejudices about women writing music find her difficult to bring into focus. Clearly, she is a modernist. Her music is large, emotive, sometimes bursting with angst, bristling with dissonance that erupts into noise. Superficially, she has affinities to the so-called “Polish school” that was once centered around Krzysztof Penderecki and the 1960s works of Gyorgy Ligeti, an aesthetic that got tired of the serialist obsession with pitch and worked instead with pure sound masses and orchestral effects of which pitch was a minor component. The medium in which Coates paints her backgrounds are not complex pitch sets but tone clusters and harsh dissonances.

multiphonics, and tone clusters, but most distinctive are the sliding lines that streak slowly downward through the music as though someone had wet the page before the ink dried.

Here's where the discrepancy comes in: most composers who use the bracing sonic materials of modernism, like clusters, glissandos, and multiphonics, do so in contexts of rhythmic complexity and formal mercuriality. Most composers who make simple, symmetrical, easily-followed musical structures do so with relatively straightforward pitches and rhythms. But Coates's music disassembles these stereotypes, employing a modernist vocabulary in simple forms at times almost reminiscent of minimalism. And there's no reason not to—the combinations of musical elements we're used to were to some extent the product of historical accident. By cutting across the grain of contemporary musical styles, Coates allows us to see how beautiful some of those modernist gestures can be when isolated in pristine contexts.

She is best known, of course, for her symphonies. In fact, having recently completed her thirteenth, she is evidently the most prolific woman symphonist who has ever lived (and I've read through the entire *Dictionary of Women Composers* to confirm this statistic). In her symphonies, the size of the orchestra gives great scope to her effects: allowing her, for instance, in her Fourth Symphony, to draw a web of eerie sliding tones in the strings over a background passacaglia in the winds that turns out to be “When I Am Laid in Earth” from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. It sounds a little like hearing the band play bravely on as the Titanic goes down. In her chamber works there is less opportunity for clouds and varied landscapes, and such effects are pared down, sharper in their surreality for having no place to hide.

Thus every Coates chamber work is a collision of the weird and the familiar. Take the fifth, from 1989, of her six string quartets

so far (a predictable medium for a connoisseur of the glissando). The first movement is a canon in A minor, but the first violin and viola are tuned a quarter-tone higher than the second violin and cello, creating an unsettled feeling that never resolves. Then, from beneath the seasickness-inducing glissandos of the final movement emerge phrases of a familiar tune, “Fling Out the Banner, Let It Wave,” creeping out from the texture and disappearing back. It's kind of like running into an old college chum on Mars. Coates's powerful *Lyric Suite* for piano trio (1996) is a rare glissando-less work, but it compensates by having the strings play simple melodies a quarter-tone off from the big, resounding major triads in the bass of the piano.

Such music is brazen in its simplicity, and thrusts its weirdness on you without polite obfuscation, academic justification, or apology. There is something in Coates's musical personality that intermittently reminds me of Charles Ives: the mixtures of tonality and atonality, the atmospheric swirl of timbral effects, the big, sturdy melodies rising up out of the mist. Aside from that one comparison, though, Coates has evolved her own peculiar, arresting aesthetic that not only stands outside contemporary isms and trends, but contradicts the categories we're used to. No wonder it's taken her so long to convince us that she's a very serious composer indeed. ■



G L O R I A C O A T E S

That's how Coates's music sounds from the outside. But when you pick up a score and start to take it apart, a funny thing happens. You notice canons, and palindromes, and structures made by different tempos running at the same time. You find quotations, and passages of simple, even stirring tonality, entire pieces built of major triads. You even find arithmetical rhythmic processes, ostinatos, figures obsessively repeated—heavens, it even starts to look minimalist. How does Coates's music manage to sound so big and messy on the outside, yet look so clean and simple on the inside? How did this atonal-expressionist become a postminimalist—or vice versa?

It's because there's a discrepancy, at least a perceived one, between her structure and her materials. To begin with, Coates is a composer obsessed with glissandos. I don't mean portamento within a melody: I mean long, gradual, overlapping glissandos, layered on top of each other until the whole musical texture seems to melt like a lump of jelly on a hot day. The interest in clusters is innate with her; in 1962, while still a student at Louisiana State University, she wrote a string quartet entirely in glissandos. As she recalls, “My teacher wrote on the score, ‘Glissandos are for color once or twice in a piece, but all these are too, too...’ He couldn't even complete the sentence.” She uses other instrumental effects too, like extended trills, woodwind