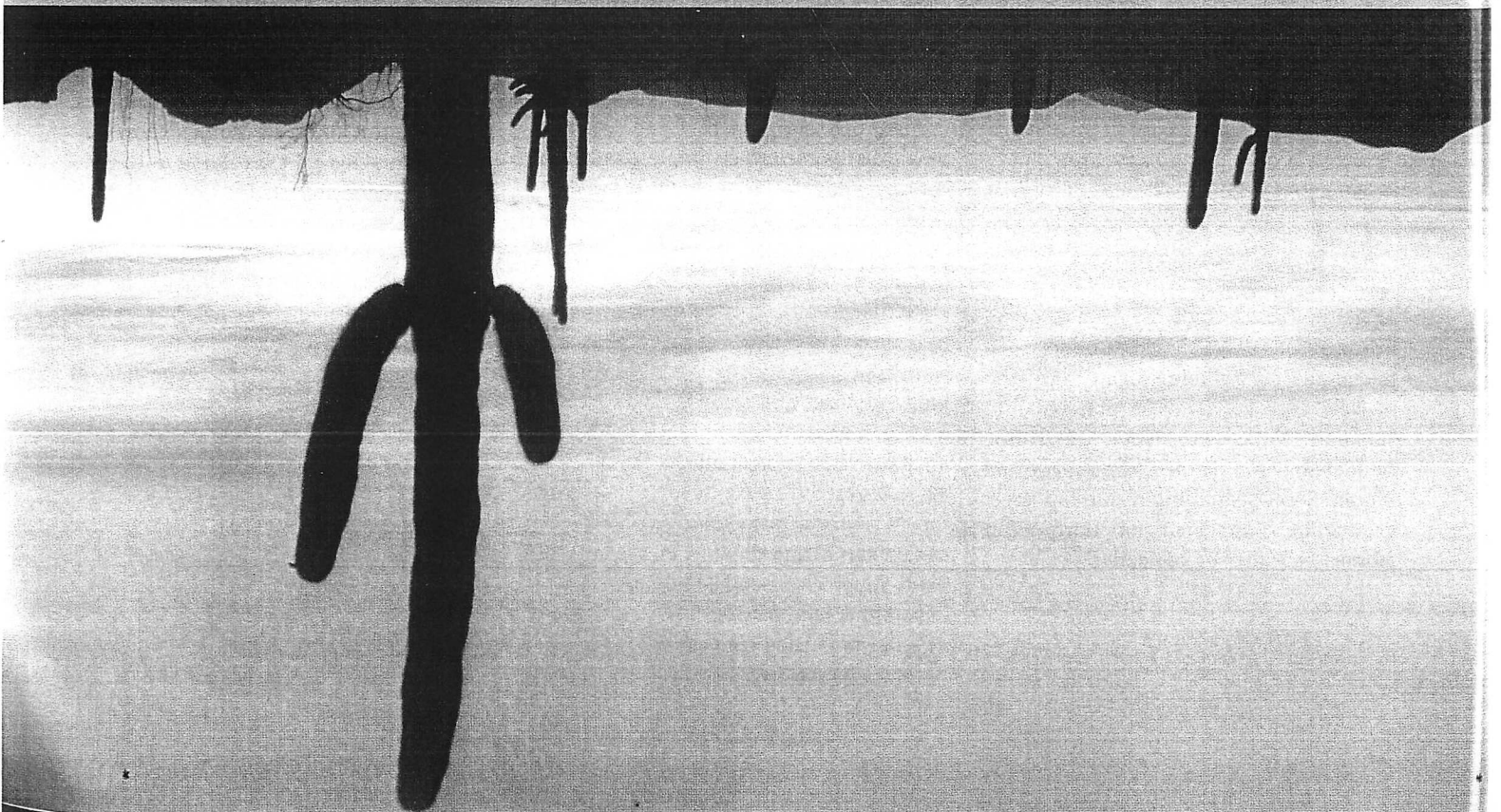


Long before I knew who he was, I used to notice Jerome Kitzke at concerts in New York. He looked quietly but distinctly out of place. Tall and strikingly lanky, with a long braided pony tail, western clothing, and various Native American accoutrements, he was not your average Manhattan, black-wearing, avant-garde sophisticate. He should have been walking into an Albuquerque bar for a Coors after a day spent watching the powwows. Then, one night I showed up at a concert and this long, thin figure was seated at the piano. He banged away at it with abandon. He'd grab a rattle and shake it while he kept playing with the other hand. He sang. He yelled. He whooped. His band yelled and whooped with him, in well-rehearsed unison.



And what was he yelling? "Whom bomb? We bomb them! Whom bomb? You bomb you!" It was Allen Ginsberg's classic poem of Vietnam War protest, *Hum Bom!*, turned against the new Desert Storm war, for this was 1991. Looks like it's time to dust that piece off again.

That's the first pleasant surprise about Jerome Kitzke: he is what it looks like he is. He spends his non-New York time on reservations in the Dakotas and Arizona, and absorbs American Indian culture by working and collaborating with Native Americans. He loves the earth. He gets angry at those who do destructive things to it. But his anger doesn't get the better of his music. He expresses it in joyous rhythms and melodies that bristle with excitement, though they sometimes die away in sadness, too. The second pleasant surprise is, for all his no-holds-barred, devil-may-care performing style, his music is elegantly written and well thought out, every loose end tied up.

Take his *The Character of American Sunlight*, a big, 1996 piece for piano and four percussionists. At the beginning, as the percussionists audibly swirl water in pots, the pianist plays and whistles a slow, sad little tune. The atmosphere waxes raucous. The percussionists clap hands, laugh, and play sour notes on harmonicas. At the end, however, after the hectic climax, that opening tune comes back, sung in falsetto to a Jack Kerouac lyric:

endless, and takes place within a compositional technique entirely free from dogma. His music is sometimes tonal, sometimes modal, sometimes atonal. He'll get a good jazz swing going and you'll assume he comes from a jazz background, but then there'll be some chords like Messiaen and an angular passage that calls Bartók to mind. Sometimes the instruments will speed along in rhythmic unison in a way reminiscent of jazz fusion; any player off by a fraction of a beat would ruin everything. The most wildly disparate elements are seamlessly integrated into a propulsive momentum of finely calibrated accelerations and ritards. Yet you can't call Kitzke eclectic because the style is all of a piece, and it's only in the occasional odd measure that he reminds you of anyone. He's not minimalist, serialist, new romantic, totalist, free jazzist, or anything else—just totally human, and ready to do anything at any moment that his humanity calls for.

Ultimately, what his humanity calls for is fairness, justice, respect for the planet we all share. The title *The Character of American Sunlight* refers to a light that "searches...to illuminate the darkness of the American human nature." *Teeth of Heaven*, an evening-length work for piano, percussion, and four clarinetists playing seven clarinets from alto to bass, tells in music the Wasco Indian myth about the creation of the Big Dipper according to which Coyote took five wolf brothers up into the sky and left them there; riotous and joyous, the piece contains a sad chorale in

AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN



J E R O M E
K I T Z K E

Home in Missoula / Home in Truckee / Home in Opelousas /
Ain't no home for me. / Home in old Medora / Home in
Wounded Knee / Home in Ogalala / Home I'll never be.

Now you know where the opening tune came from, and in response the harmonica players slide softly, over and over, up to their highest notes, like souls ascending to heaven. The piece scatters its energies and references at the beginning, and at the end gathers them all back together in a casual but graceful gesture.

Kitzke, as I once heard one of his performers say, writes "not for the instrument, but for the whole person." It's true: you've got to be not only able to play unison lines in rapid successions of changing meters, but willing to shout, slap your knee, and boing on whatever weird percussion comes to hand. He's got a well-drilled ensemble in New York aptly called Mad Coyote whose members are just as uninhibited as he is. More than any other composer I know of, he inherited the "corporeal" aesthetic of Harry Partch, by which the performer is not just the unacknowledged force behind abstract sound, but a human presence confronting the audience.

Nevertheless, your overall impression of a Kitzke performance is not as much theatrical as musical. His melodic inventiveness is

memory of September 11. Kitzke's magnum opus to date is *The Paha-Sapa Giveback*, a large ensemble piece suggesting through theater and Native American texts a return of the Black Hills to the Sioux.

This sounds like Kitzke is a preachy composer, and he's not. The context sets you up for the message, but the music distracts and entertains you. Though disciplined, it's crazy music, with all the clever craziness of Coyote, the Trickster. The ensemble will sing "Hey, hey dillah hey, hey hey, dididilah hay," in rollicking 6/8, or the accordionist will play a tango in tone clusters, or the toy piano player will slap a happy beat on the top of the instrument. But after the craziness and dancing there's always some quiet moment, like the whistling birdsongs in *Breath and Bone* for accordionist Guy Klucsevsek, in which nature reasserts itself. The music is about man, and man is crazy and happy and sometimes mean and aggressive, but by the piece's end he is always recontextualized, placed back in the landscape of the earth that will outlast him, and often there is a slow melody of great poignancy in the final measures. As the accompanying text at the end of one of Kitzke's scores reads, "Let's dance...and call it praying." ■