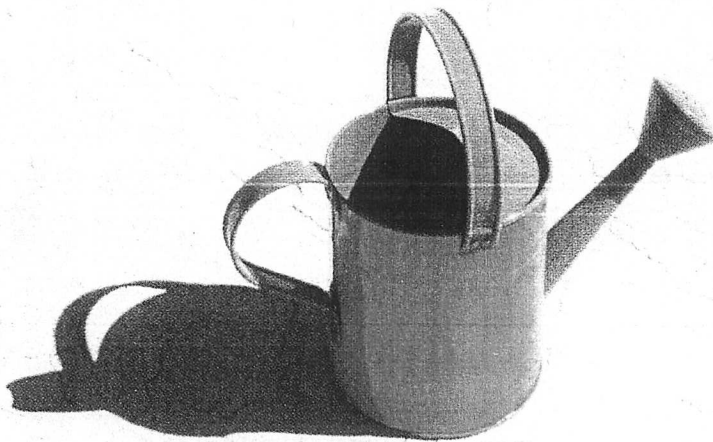


**In one of his recurring brilliant salvos on his NPR radio show Schickele Mix, Peter Schickele recently played two passages whose rhythms and texture were strikingly similar. The first was the opening movement of Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*; the second *The Chairman Dances* by John Adams. And that, I thought to myself, was just the nearest tip of the iceberg. For a rarely acknowledged strain of Stravinsky runs through American music like a Russian strand of DNA. As tonality disintegrated around him, Stravinsky developed a new way to use harmony without the conventional glue between chords. In *The Rite of Spring*, *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, *Les Noces*, and other works, he would take a handful of sonorities or pitches and bounce back and forth among them in a rhythmically lively manner. Thanks to that technique, he could sustain harmonies longer and avoid the listener-repelling chromatic pitch saturation of the twelve-tone crowd.**



In this country, the practice of using rhythm to articulate a basically static set of pitches was first picked up by a composer who had paid close attention to Stravinsky in Paris: Aaron Copland. You can hear the technique in some of his most "American" works, including *Billy the Kid* and *Appalachian Spring*. William Schuman inherited the technique, and even Roger Sessions's twelve-tone usage was inflected by it. John Cage's use of fixed pitch gamuts in his String Quartet and Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos, whether wittingly or not, continues the Copland tradition, which then took a new lease on life with the advent of minimalism. For postminimalist composers such as John Adams, William Duckworth, Rhys Chatham, Mikel Rouse, Julia Wolfe, and others, Copland's sonority-bouncing gambit is a staple of compositional practice. Copland may have stolen the technique from Stravinsky, but by now we've thoroughly Americanized it and made it a central strain of our musical heritage. It's as American as apple pie—which also probably didn't originate here.

What brought this entire train of thought roaring back was the mere title of a string quartet by Rain Worthington: *Rhythm Modes*. A perfectly good title for a percussion piece, it seemed an odd choice for a string quartet. But, in fact, Worthington has taken Copland's structural use of rhythm to a further extreme

employs her music partly to that end. So some of her ensemble pieces have percussion instruments played in jaunty but simple rhythms. Oddly, these can have a strong exotic air about them of Chinese or Egyptian provenance, with exotic oriental modes—a seeming affectation until you learn that she once lived in Istanbul for seven months, touring the Middle East with a boyfriend who was studying the *oud*, and immersing herself in Greek, Egyptian, and Turkish musics.

To call Worthington's music postminimalist would be to ascribe to it a veneer of trendy sophistication to which it does not pretend. Worthington will admit to influences of minimalism, along with romanticism and world music—she was fascinated, for instance, by Turkish music's total lack of harmonic development, a feature she's appropriated in her own way. But there's something intentionally naive about her music on the surface, a comforting periodicity that she inflects with an expert hand. Many of her pieces include some figure recurring every measure or so that re-centers the tonality: such as *At night...* (2001) for soprano, clarinet, violin, viola, and piano. Eighth notes on F C D bring back a recurring cadence, still felt even after it ceases to happen. Above such simplicity, Worthington is clever. Melodic motives in the instruments all eventually turn out to have originated in the vocal line, pre-shadowing it.

## AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN



than most composers. She uses it to enliven and articulate, not only a fixed gamut of harmonies, but motives and melodies. So the modes in *Rhythm Modes* (written in 1999) include clocklike ostinato, canonic imitation, and repetition out of phase with either the meter or another instrument's version of the same line. Though without key signature, *Rhythm Modes* is entirely in a G-minor/D-minor mode inflected by E-flats and C-sharps. Aside from a crescendo in activity in the final pages, the piece is almost entirely static on a formal level, but she keeps its surface lively and unpredictable via a broiling permutation of motives and melodies. Like passages of Stravinsky and Copland, hers can have a lot going on without really going anywhere.

If you haven't heard of Worthington, it's partly that she's been expending a lot of her creative energies on a sub-professional level. Trained as an Orff-Schulwerk teacher (a method that incorporates Orff percussion instruments in storytelling and theater), she spent eleven years teaching in elementary schools in New York, and many of her pieces were written for performance by a mixture of professional musicians with fifth- and sixth-grade schoolchildren. Like the early twentieth-century composer Ruth Crawford—whose music has something of the same gently dark atmosphere, even some of the same melodic mannerisms—Worthington has a commitment to educational outreach, and

Another nocturnal piece, *Yet Still Night* for orchestra (2001), plays out the dichotomy of outward naïveté/underlying sophistication on a larger scale. You first think the piece is a lullaby, rocking back and forth between D-flat and B-flat in quarter notes that wander around the orchestra. But this is an urban lullaby, and the nocturnal world intrudes in growing chromatic lines and thickening textures. (I wish I could draw some clever metaphor from her first name, but there's nothing specifically rainy about her music.) More than anyone I can think of, Worthington has a knack for beginning a piece self-effacingly, leading you to expect something simple, pretty, insubstantial. But she also has a quite contrasting characteristic final gesture: big, chromatic, climactic, and often whooping up to some final chord you didn't expect.

And so Worthington's music clicks along comfortably, like an unhurried walk in the park. But it's Central Park, and the things you encounter are more bizarre than you expected. There's a lot more chromaticism and gently introduced dissonance than you thought at first. In a hallowed American tradition, the music doesn't really go anywhere, but it sure mulls over a lot of things, abandoning them and then bringing them up again in different combinations. And it isn't afraid to come up with its own startling conclusions. ■