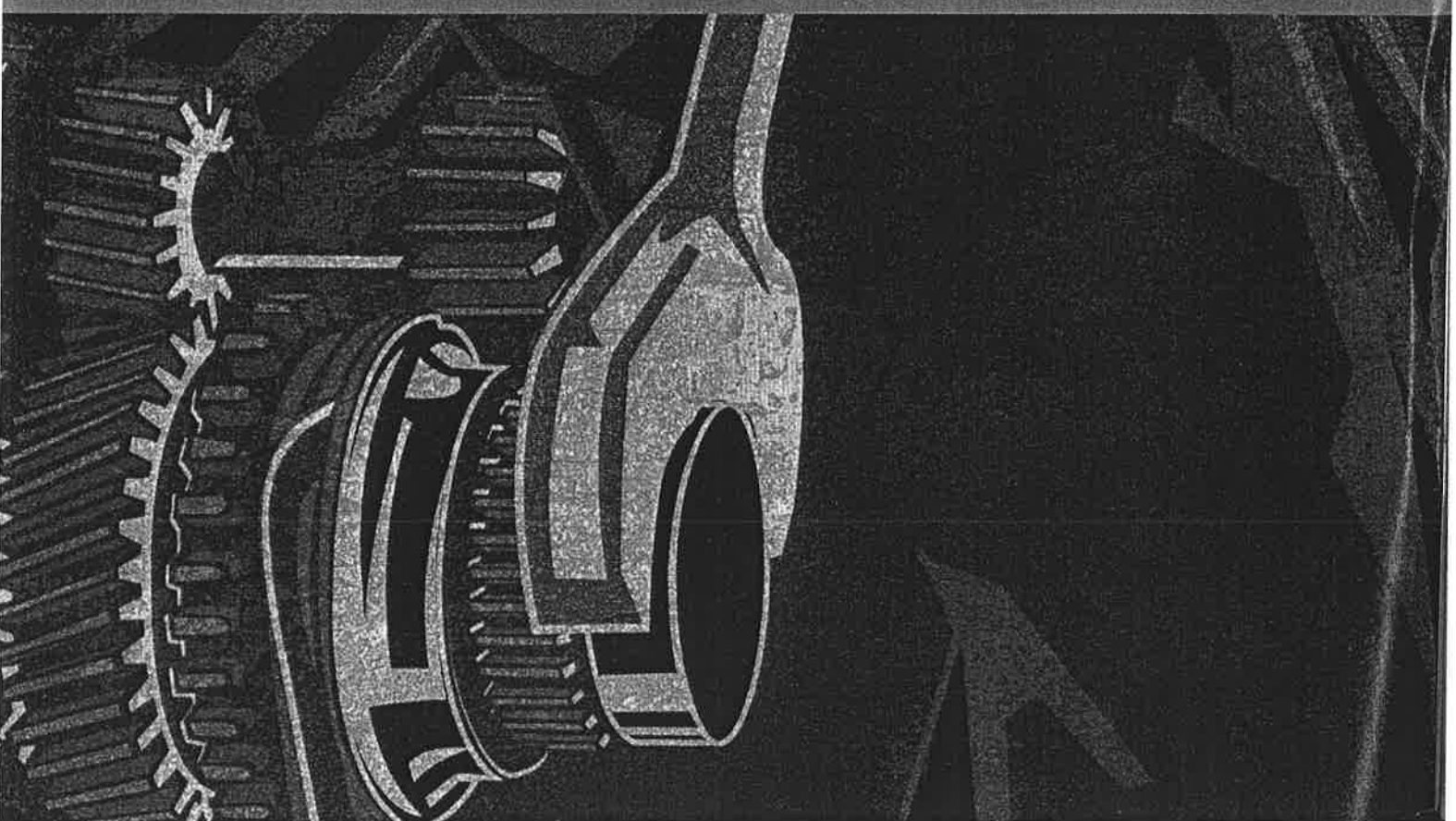




Some years ago, Robert Carl and I were discussing the work of another composer whom I admired and he had reservations about. Her music, he said, "just doesn't seem wrought." *Wrought* is an interesting word, originally the past participle of work. "Worked into shape by artistry or effort," says my Merriam-Webster dictionary, "elaborately embellished," and in another sense, "beaten into shape by tools." And, in yet another sense, "deeply stirred: excited (often used with *up*)." Carl's own music is certainly wrought in all these ways. It's music of struggle, passion, and drama. It's tremendously complex music, not in the serialist way of being the result of some imposed mechanical system, but because it does many things at once.



Keeping as many levels going as possible, Carl's music fights to master "each imagin'd pinnacle and steep/Of godlike hardship" (Keats). There's often a payoff at the end, a relapse into lyricism or nostalgia or even joy, but it is never given easily. It must be earned.

A native of Georgia, Carl detoured through the University of Chicago, ended up teaching at Hartt School of Music in Hartford, and, musically, has become something of a New Englander. This is not as contradictory as it sounds. New England and the South are both relative backwaters, removed from the surge toward progress evident in our northeastern cities and on the West Coast. Less swayed by passing trends, southern and New England composers seem freer to assert the presence of something unchanging in the American spirit. The quintessential voice of New England in music was Charles Ives; and certain aspects of Ives—the hymn tune quotations, the use of dissonance to express strength rather than violence or anguish, the use of tonality as nostalgia, even the non-ironic expression of noble emotions—remained available to southern composers (one could also cite Ben Johnston and William Duckworth here) after New Yorkers and Californians had learned to opt for a more sophisticated veneer. By finding himself in New England, Carl has been able to hold on to his Southern roots.

Like Ives, Carl is eclectic in his sources, combining an angular, puritanical sense of atonal melody with passages of tonal lyricism that seem to suggest a nostalgia that is never given into for long.

More explicitly nostalgic, *Time/Memory/Shadow* of 1988, for two trios, culminates in a neoclassic march Carl had written as a teenager.

Over the years, this dual aspect of Carl's music has become subtler and more pervasive. In his *String Quartet No. 2* (2001), subtitled "Fear of Death/Love of Life," the movement from dissonance to tonality takes the form of a soul journey. The opening "Fear of Death" movement piles up just about as much dissonance as four string players can handle, given even more edge by unison double-stop glissandi in all four instruments at once. In the second movement, "Hymn: In Growing Awareness of Beauty's Presence," the second violin and viola embark together on a long melody with an almost Brucknerian tonal palette, while the stratospheric first violin marks the heavens atonally. Then the finale, "Love of Life," bursts into streams of 32nd-note scales with all the energy of a Beethoven fugue, though with a tonal ambiguity held over from the hymn movement.

Nothing is more Carlesque than this soul-searching; yet the extroverted aspect of his music must also be given its due. The second quartet may depict an internal struggle, but every Carl piece depicts something, often quite literally. The *Villa of the Mysteries* (1997) for flute, violin, cello, and piano is written "about" a site of Bacchic mysteries in Pompeii, and the subject of his *Die Berliner Hornisse* (The Berlin Hornet) for saxophone and piano is no less identifiable than in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight*

AMERICAN  
COMPOSER  
by KYLE GANN



R O B E R T  
C A R L

In Carl's case, the eclecticism makes his music difficult to describe *in toto*. There is a tendency toward growling glissandi in his string music, a facility for generating cascades of notes in fast passages, the occasional "ghost" reminiscence of characteristic tonal musics, some improvisation, even rhythmic chanting, and—once in a while—a calm impressionism. All this makes for a mixed artistic profile: a liability for a composer in today's crowded scene, which gives the edge to those with trademark styles. Yet there is a constant in Carl's music: an angular but organic sense of melody reminiscent of the piece that Carl analyzed for his doctoral dissertation, *Sun-Treader* by Carl Ruggles.

Along with that sense of craggy, mountain-climbing melody, Carl inherited from another teacher, George Rochberg, a self-conscious sense of the modernist predicament. Rochberg was, after all, the establishment renegade, the twelve-toner who abandoned dissonant abstraction in its heyday and returned to writing music in a lushly neo-Romantic and even imitative style. Carl is no neo-Romantic; yet his basic dissonant, modernist idiom seems always conscious of the perceived "normalcy" of a tonal background. This has been evident at least since his piano sonata *Spiral Dances* of 1984: out of great, crashing atonal gestures eventually appears a simple waltz in F minor as—what? A reminiscence? A memory of a simpler time? A seduction into laziness and easy normalcy? A tweak of conscience? It's difficult to tell.

*of the Bumblebee*. Carl's comic side can be raucous, as in *Les gedowd a heah*, a crescendoing mixed-ensemble riot imagined as a hasty retreat from Newt Gingrich's "Republican Revolution" of 1994. Also dark, *El Canto de los Asesinados* (Song of the Murdered Ones) contrasts rhythmic chanting and electronically altered dog barks with the innocent simplicity of a children's clapping game.

Every now and then, Carl seems to take a break from hammering away at his materials and lets fall a calm, contemplative work that gives no appearance of being wrought at all. Such is *Duke Meets Mort*, a piece for chamber orchestra (also arranged for four saxophones) that imagines the late Morton Feldman musing on the opening chords of "Duke" Ellington's "Mood Indigo." It's an image of the composer at momentary rest from his work—and a lovely endpoint to the wide-ranging spectrum of a body of complex, thoughtful music very difficult to generalize about. ■

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College and the new music critic for the *Village Voice*. He is the author of *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press) and *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (Schirmer Books). His music is recorded on the *Lovely Music*, *New Tone*, and *Monroe Street* labels.