

A M E R I C A N by KYLE GANN

composer

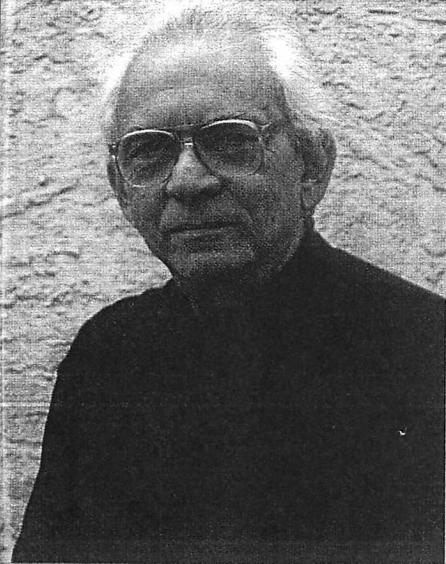
A bunch of us classical music critics, if I may include myself in that august fraternity, had an internet tête-à-tête over the summer at *Arts Journal* (still accessible at <http://www.artsjournal.com/cc/>). The subject was the current state of new music, and whether some dominant new style had emerged. I reeled off 75 or 80 composers who currently interest me, eliciting from John Rockwell of the *New York Times* the comment: “I worry sometimes that the composers Kyle champions are those left over from the ’70s who haven’t ‘made it’ . . .” A cold chill crept up my spine. Leaving aside that I mentioned many young composers, one of them only 23, the concept of “making it” leaves a harsh taste in the composing community’s mouth.

What constitutes “making it” today, when publishers have abandoned publishing all but a handful of new works, classical record companies exhibit no interest in new music, and the best new music is no longer written for orchestra (as John Adams himself keeps saying)? At what age has someone fatally *not* made it? Conlon Nancarrow and Harry Partch were discovered in their late sixties; Lou Harrison’s fame skyrocketed in his seventies; and who would have thought when he was eighty that Kaikhosru Sorabji (1892-1988) would ever become as well known a name as he is today?

No composer I named comes more perilously close to fitting Rockwell’s dour assessment than Paul A. Epstein. Born in 1938, he has nothing recorded on a label more mainstream than Mode, and no orchestral commissions—and I’ll bet that by the definitions of most classical critics, the last composer who “made it” without having written much for orchestra was Chopin.

Epstein does have a local reputation in Philadelphia. He taught at Temple University from 1969 to 2001, he was composer for the ZeroMoving Dance Company for 13 years, and his music has been championed by the Relâche ensemble. You can tell me you never heard of him, you can tell me he retired without having a national career, you can tell me I’ve hitched my critical advocacy to a falling star—but then I listen to his works and the words spontaneously spring to my lips, “Wow. Lovely. That’s just beautiful.” You’re outvoted by his music.

What if the kind of music you write just isn’t in style? Epstein is a postminimalist, one of the first and one of the best. That means that his music isn’t simple or repetitive or obvious, but it does husband its resources. Many of his pieces use only the uninflected major scale, and many are limited to a register of only two or three octaves. The music sounds simple, but actually it’s very intricate and tremendously inventive



Paul A. Epstein

within small confines. Epstein has written analytically about the hard-core minimalism of early Steve Reich and Tom Johnson; clearly he has a strong interest in note-logic. One Epstein piece is called *Palindromes*; others, like his harpsichord piece *57:4/5/7*, refer to their rhythmic structure in their titles.

You might be tempted to call Paul Epstein sort of a seven-tone serialist, and it's true there are sometimes hidden permutational processes going on. More often, though, the logic is audible, and makes sense musically, but is not predictable.

You can't say postminimalism is a style that hasn't caught on—there are many dozens of composers working in idioms similar to Epstein's, though he represents something of an extreme point of musical logic. But postminimalism is a style that has not been recognized to any wide extent by classical critics or performing organizations. It isn't an aggressive or revolutionary movement. There is no postminimalist *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The music is often gentle, usually emotively static. It doesn't make a great noise in the concert hall. (It's telling that Epstein's composer residency was with a dance company.) The composers tend not to write for orchestra; it's a perfect chamber music medium.

It can also be so beautiful. Epstein is often best working with words, and my favorite piece of his might still be the first one I heard, a 1986 cycle for mezzo-soprano and six instruments called *Chamber Music: Three Songs from Home*. The poems are by poet

Toby Olson, with whom Epstein has enjoyed a long collaborative career, and whose style is singably Gertrude Steinish. "Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes, we enter in sometimes to things we enter into things sometimes we enter in sometimes to things in which sometimes we forget ourselves we forget ourselves," the singer croons in pure, uninflected E-flat major, and the text is perfectly reflected in the quasi-reiterative but subtly permutational quality of Epstein's melodies. The music is highly and transparently contrapuntal, and every now and then it just suddenly changes texture, abruptly going from eighth notes to sixteenths, or dropping down to one instrument.

Some Epstein works exhibit a logic so tight-knit as to have made Webern gasp. His piano piece *Interleavings* (2002) opens with a complex melody based on some simple principle you just can't identify by ear; analyze it, and you'll find two repeating patterns, one 15 notes long and one 16, phase-shifting each other. *57:4/5/7* (1998) is built on what he calls self-similar melodies, so you're getting identical tunes on different rhythmic levels. So often you can tell the music is highly unified, but you can't figure out how. Meanwhile, it's delightful. *Reading*, for male voice and piano (1994), tells a 20-minute story about watching a woman read a book at a train station with an accompaniment that might sound like 1930s Copland, except for its inventively relentless, yet gentle, momentum. *Variations for Wind Quintet* (1991) is upbeat and dancelike, sometimes juggling only two

chords for a while with an engagingly offbeat logic.

But the critics don't care. They're looking for the next big noise, the next heroic style with intellectual, European cachet, the next music they can link with their postmodern social theories, the next young hotshot beloved of London taste-makers. I suggest that what we have here is a phenomenon born of the current tendency for everything to splinter into subcultures: an idiom ignored by classical critics, unplayed by the orchestra world, yet widely popular among certain circles of composers. Given the new technical and social realities, we need to revise our view of composers' career trajectories. They're just not going to follow the patterns they did in the past. Long-time sleepers such as Nancarrow and Partch were, unbeknownst to us, the new norms.

Meanwhile, modern technology gets Epstein's music out to the people whose spirit it makes dance, even if commercial channels don't. Listening to it, I can't worry about him. He's made it. ■

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.