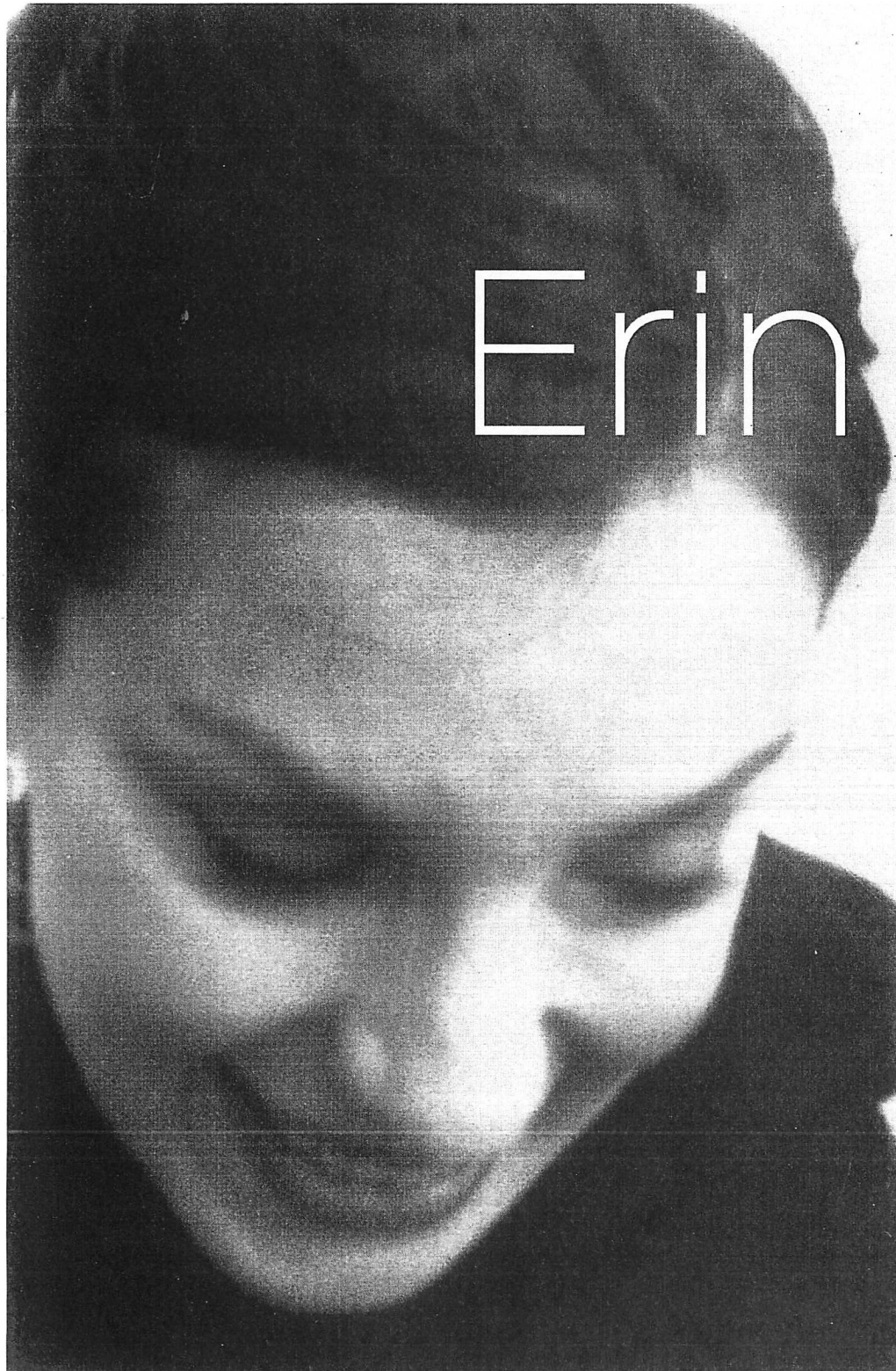


by Kyle Gann

Erin Watson's music is dreamy and quiet, yet there's something tough and prickly about it, too. Her titles are languid: *Prelude to a Dream*, *Ambling through Montmartre*, *To Swim in a Breakable Sky*. Wait a minute: a *breakable* sky? That's perfect, because there is something brittle about the music. It's quiet,



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but it seethes a little underneath, and her dreams are kind of surreal. The melodic lines are all *sotto voce*, and the textures whisper and murmur. Sound images come back over and over; and if they weren't so dissonant, their reappearance would be comforting. It's a self-effacing music, almost frustratingly difficult to hear at times; yet beneath the placid surface we get hints that all is not well. Much of Watson's recent music breathes this uniquely recognizable ambience—a sonic consistency all the more striking because she's only 27 and works with a great variety of instrumental and electronic means.

One of the things I've tried to do with this column is to increase the number of women composers profiled. Another has been to lower the average age of composers covered and not just give you the usual-suspect sexagenarians you already know from concert programs. I try to keep up with what young composers are doing, because they predict the future. There's a perennially refreshing, non-ideological honesty in their concerns. Their college educations may have only exposed them to one side of contemporary music (this is regrettably often the case), but it can't shield them from mass culture or the latest technology. They like what they

like, and they rarely fall for academic arguments. As Roger Sessions is supposed to have fretted, "Damn the young composers, they're always right!"

To generalize, I find 20-somethings dividing into two categories, depending on their pop-music involvement. On the one hand are those who spend their lives

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staring at the screen of a laptop. They make music without outside assistance, thriving on drum tracks, found sounds, and improvisation algorithms, and creating noisy, beat-oriented music with little connection to the classical tradition. On the other hand are those who (frequently) begin as performers and pick up the modernist tradition from their teachers, starting with dissonance and advanced instrumental techniques. Shunning the artificial discipline of 12-tone thinking, they aim for infectious rhythms and more audible processes. (I don't find young composers inheriting the Downtown, experimental tradition; it's not taught in schools, and they no longer encounter it on the street.) All in all, I'm impressed with how much more enjoyable and sophisticated student-composer concerts are now than in the 1970s, when pretentious complexity was the goal.

Watson is intriguing because neither characterization fits her neatly. She graduated from Bard College, where I teach, but she was there before I was and studied with Joan Tower. Now she's just finished her master's in music at Rice University. True to form in one respect, she started as a violinist, and is now playing accordion as well (shades of Pauline Oliveros, another

Houston product!). But she also makes electronic music, and it's not the beat-drumming, electronica type. Her wide range of instrumental techniques brings George Crumb to mind. Her delicate, birdlike sonorities suggest Messiaen, and indeed she once played violin in *Quartet for the End of Time*. Her use of dissonant chords in endless pianissimo must reflect some debt to Morton Feldman, the most influential composer of the late 20th century for the student generation. And, like Lutoslawski, she uses free notations that direct the player to repeat a number of pitches *ad libitum*.

In short, Watson is still at the stage at which influences are discernible, but hers are so well balanced—Uptown against Downtown, American against European—that nothing sounds imitative. And they all serve her strikingly introverted personal aesthetic. "I may be quiet and unobtrusive," the music seems to say, "but it doesn't mean I acquiesce: it's just that transformation must take place on the inside before it can affect the world."

The result is often a sustained contradiction, unresolved and unexplained. Disparate elements coexist; *Ambling through Montmartre* (2000), for orchestra, features a solo for amplified toy piano. There is nothing minimalist in the sound of Watson's music, but there is a minimalist concept in the way each piece gradually transforms itself into something else. Her *String Quartet* starts off in Webernesque thorniness, except that each returning gesture seems frozen in pitch-space; and somewhere along the way, the music melts into the quiet consonance of pianissimo perfect fifths. *Stomata* (2004), named for the pores in leaves through which gases are exchanged, is nominally atonal, yet centered around a low C-sharp that syncopates on the first and fourth

eighth-notes of every 4/4 measure, migrating from the piano to the vibraphone to the bass clarinet to the cello, as soft, dissonant figurations whirl around it. Watson has invented her own dynamics: *asap* for "as soft as possible," *alap* for loud, *afap* for fast—and *asap*'s outnumber *alap*'s a hundred to one.

To merely list what goes on in *Prelude to a Dream* (2002) would make it sound chaotic: the pianist drops marbles on the strings, the percussionist rubs pieces of sandpaper, the players whistle and sing. Yet the accordion sits on a drone on G, the tuba keeps dotting out staccato low D's, and the flute has the same little high-register quintuplet over and over again. It's a zoo of little noises, but they fuse into a remarkably sustained, self-transforming image. Eventually a line of angular triplets emerges in the vibraphone, easing by degrees into the piano, and both are overtaken by the tinkling of music boxes, with whose dying plinks the piece ends. It

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remains a miracle when a young composer can reach into our de-centered, mainstreamless musical potpourri and pull out something that is distinctly hers. But I can already imagine someday hearing some soft, atmospheric, yet subtly discontented music and thinking, "Why, that sounds rather Watsonesque."

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