

Peter Garland

by Kyle Gann

Peter Garland thinks that in the 21st century we should already be in a post-prohibitive era. That is, by this point, nothing should be prohibited in music. And in a sense, of course, that has already happened—there is nothing that any composer isn't "allowed" to do in his or her music today. But many things will prevent your music from being taken seriously by the orchestral and chamber music world, and one of them is to write the kind of simple, stripped-down music Garland writes. He likes to point to Henry Cowell as a predecessor. Cowell's music was considered radical in the composer's youth but, according to the conventional view, it took a turn for the conservative in his later years. Cowell disagreed with that assessment, and so does Garland. Cowell simply realized, Garland

argues, that to go back to the basics can be as radical as anything else.

It is difficult to do justice to Peter Garland in a page or two. He is an avatar of an experimental American tradition; a musicologist of the underground; an ethnomusicologist; a composer of mesmerizing music; and in many ways, the musical conscience of my generation. For years in the 1970s and '80s, he was best known as the editor (and sole employee) of the important journal *Soundings*, which first published scores by, and articles by and about, Conlon Nancarrow, Lou Harrison, Dane Rudhyar, Henry Cowell, James Tenney, and other composers recognized today as major figures, along with Garland's comrades, such as Michael Byron, John Luther Adams, Lois Vierk, and Guy Klucevsek. To the extent that we recognize an experimental tradition in American music today—sometimes referred to as the Mavericks (by the San Francisco Symphony) or the "eccentrics" (by Lincoln Center)—it is largely due to Garland's tireless publication and musicological work.

Garland sees that tradition as having been sideswiped and marginalized by not only the social but by the musical conservatism that followed Reagan's 1980 election. So in 1991 he finally folded *Soundings*, and has lived most of the time since in Mexico. He's now produced a multi-volume treatise on festivals of indigenous music in rural northern Mexico, and is searching for a fearless publisher (perhaps an extinct species, admittedly). In an unexpected twist, since Garland has always been closely associated with the Sante Fe area and Mexico, he's recently relocated to Maine, where he was born in 1952.

All this activity has not exactly obscured Garland's work as a composer, because it's understood these days that composer advocacy is now mostly done by composers. (As Larry Polansky once said to

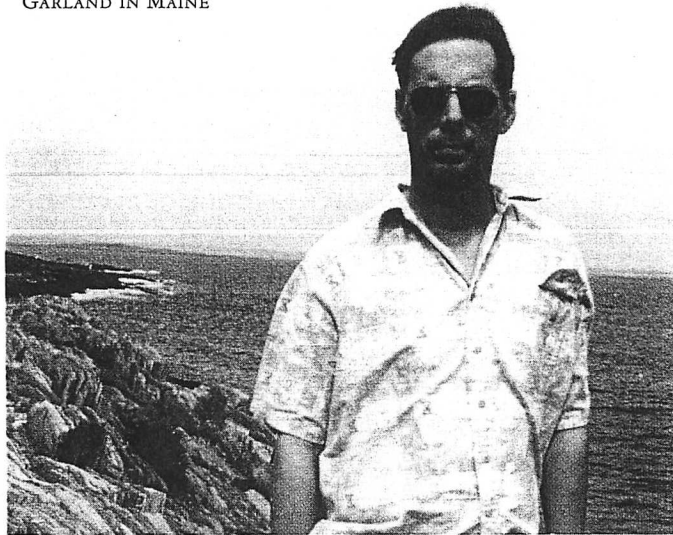
me, “Composers are now doing the work that musicologists used to do, while the musicologists are all off doing gender studies.”) But Garland is one of those composers who seem more verb than noun, more doing for others than someone done for. And that’s a shame, because his own music is absolutely individual and riveting.

To a small extent, Garland’s trajectory has echoed Cowell’s. His early music, using sirens and blocks of wood to play the entire keyboard at once, was as noisy as any anarchist could wish for, straight out of Varèse. By 1977, however, Garland rediscovered tonality in *Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Cottage* for voices, harpsichord, and anklungs (a kind of Indonesian pitched rattle). By 1986, in his String Quartet No. 1 (a little self-lovingly subtitled “In Praise of Poor Scholars”), an idiom had coalesced to which he’s been faithful ever since: melodies of limited range, sometimes only four or three or even two pitches, energized by rhythmic surprise and variations in contrapuntal combination. Often the music takes place completely within a major scale, and the harmonies are mostly triadic, though any given triad is likely to be contradicted by an ambiguating pitch in another voice. You could call it minimalism without the repetition, although Garland likes to say, “I feel influenced by American modernism from the ’20s, not the ’50s and ’60s.”

It’s stunning stuff. My favorite piece so far, if I had to choose, may be *Another Sunrise* (1995) for two pianos and four percussionists. The break of its first joyous chords energizes a room, and having grabbed your attention, the music doesn’t

let go. The simple alternation among triads creates an expectant quality—any earlier composer would have used these progressions as the buildup to a climax. But Garland uses that expectancy to hold you while the music’s real devices sink in: simple permutations of notes, contrapuntal lines that combine one way in this measure and a different way in the next measure, rhythmic motives that seem repetitive until you listen closely, when you find that they’re really varied as intuitively as they might have been by any Romantic. He gets unusual sonorities by having dis-

GARLAND IN MAINE



parate instruments, often piano and mallet percussion, play in unison, or at least rhythmic unison. (Rhythmic unison in chamber music is a pervasive postminimalist legacy.) The opening of *Love Songs* (1993)—for violin, piano, marimba, and rattle—sighs its love in little two-note phrases, almost like what you’d think Webern might have done if limited to the pentatonic scale.

It is no secret how much modern music is kept alive today by performers proud of their ability to negotiate its daunting complexities. These people will see little opportunity for self-validation on

Garland’s pages. With its close-position triads, almost complete lack of accidentals, and frequent rhythmic unison, his music doesn’t look like what we think “modern music” looks like. Garland is convinced that the reason the Kronos only played his “Poor Scholars” quartet once, after having commissioned it, was that it didn’t show them off well—and the late Morton Feldman cited similar reasons for being neglected by performers who claimed to consider him a genius. (Personally, I’m pretty bored by the typical, tiring modern-music experience that keeps reminding you how much hard effort is involved.)

The quiet joy of Garland’s noble simplicity—akin to what is suggested in the murals of Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and in much indigenous Mexican art—is one good reason to play his music. And Garland’s work always brings increasing cognitive involvement; it is much more intricate than it sounds at first. Championed by pianist Aki Takahashi, the Essential Music group from Santa Fe, and by the Bay Area’s Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio, Garland is also represented in a respectable

discography on the New Albion, Tzadik, Mode, and Nonsequitur labels. These compositions don’t show off the soloist’s fingers, but they do show off the ensemble’s spirit, unanimity, and devotion. And there’s no reason to prohibit that.

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.