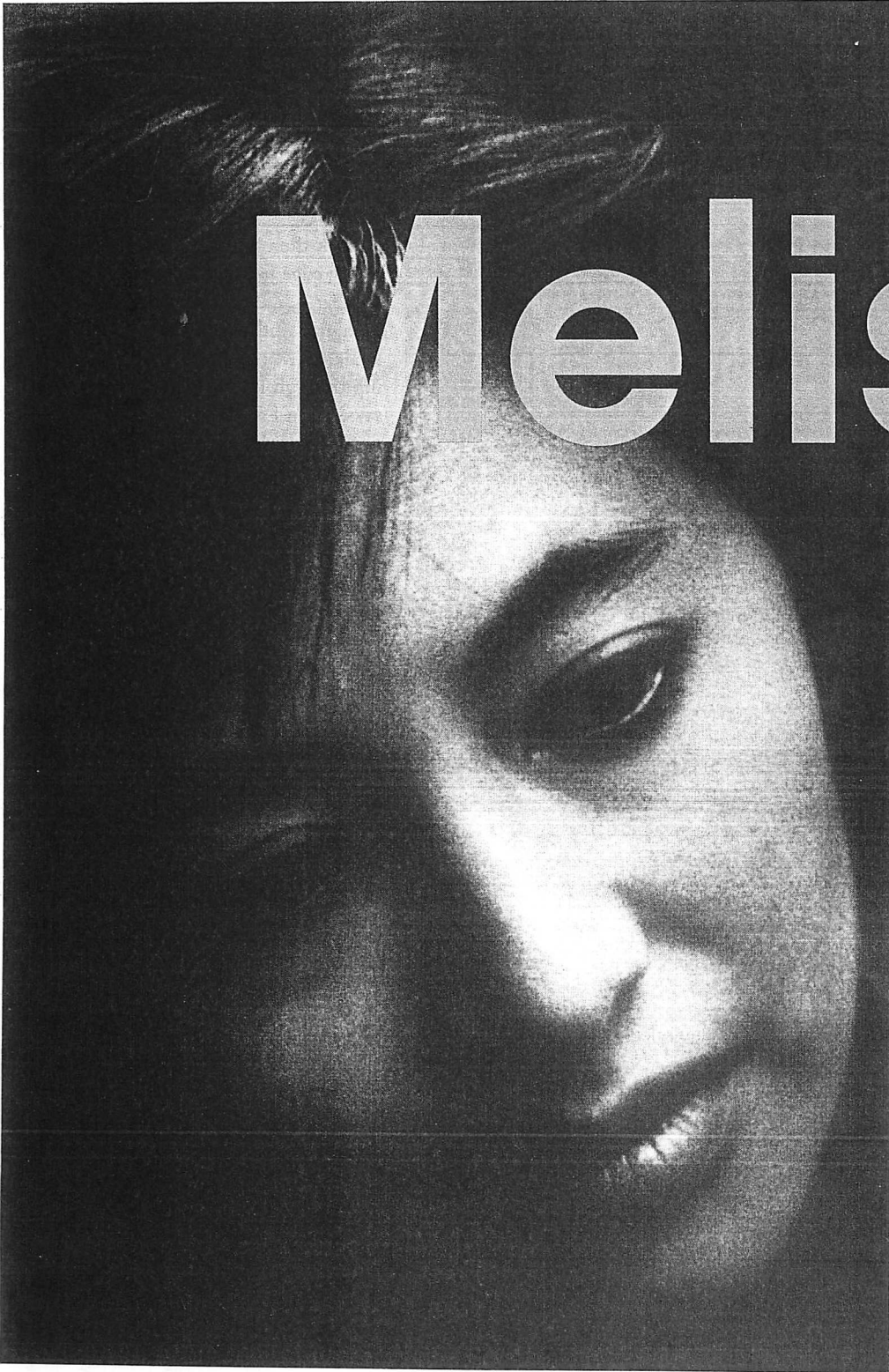


by Kyle Gann

**T**he first quality that strikes you in Melissa Hui's music is its stillness. The strange realization that follows is that, for her, stillness doesn't necessarily mean calm or quiet. Her music

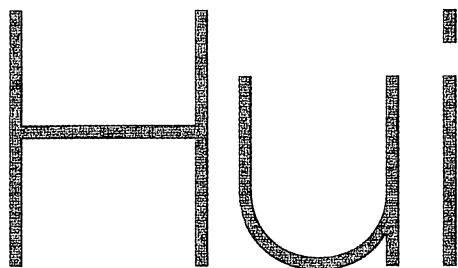


# Melissa

can be loud and still. It can even be boisterous and still, harsh and still, racing helter-skelter and still. Unlike most modernist music, hers contains no climaxes, few crescendos, almost never a build-up to an obvious goal. Yet the music does go places, surprising places—it just doesn't broadcast where they're going to be. It is also devoid of transition. At each moment it seems content doing what it's doing. Hui's music has no sales pitch, and it doesn't sermonize. It's more like a conversation with an old friend, one that may dwell on a single idea for a long time before veering off to a distant memory precipitating an unexpected question.

Hui was born in Hong Kong and raised in North Vancouver, British Columbia. Already one thinks, involuntarily, of the Asian-American classical music stereotype: sparse textures, pitch bends reminiscent of the pipa (Chinese lute) and *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute), a resistance to forward motion. A fraction of Hui's music could be summed up by that thumbnail sketch, but her range and variety are too broad to fit. After all, she's a product of Yale and CalArts, and a student of Jacob Druckman, Martin Bresnick, Mel Powell, Morton Subotnick, and Earl Kim. A member of the bicoastal

Common Sense composers' collective, some of whose members I've written about here before, Hui has also taught at Stanford. Her Canadian connections have given her access to more orchestral and



chamber commissions than most American composers her age, and besides having recorded with Common Sense, she has a disc coming out on the Centredisc label. Many ethnic forces flow through her pieces, most of which, in a blindfold test, wouldn't give any hint of Asian origin. Multicultural she is, but predictably so, she ain't.

She spent 2001 in Spain, setting Garcia Lorca's poems to music, and she has also drawn on the sensuous texts of Mexican-American poet Sandra Cisneros. Her trumpet concerto, *two sides to the wind* (1990), was inspired by Mbuti pygmy music of Zaire, Northern Indian ragas, and the jazz improvising of Charles Mingus. Her *Come As You Are* (2000) is for *pipa* and nine instruments, but the first thing you hear is an African *gankoqui* bell. Her piano music gives no hint of wandering outside any American tradition. In short, she's not like such composers as Chou Wen-Chung, Toru Takemitsu, or Chen Yi, trying to bend a European notational and performance tradition to an Asian aesthetic. She's a kind of composer we're going to hear a lot more of in the future: an omnivorous citizen of the world, borrowing from every-

where. Some of her music sounds Asian because—well, that's there, too.

Hui often speaks of her pieces as being landscapes, but I think the composer who currently owns the landscape metaphor is John Adams, whose musical objects do loom slowly into view and then slowly recede. Hui's music is more like a walk in the forest, on which new plants appear after turning past a rock, or one can suddenly step into a clearing. The tendency of her melodies to evolve through subsequent addition of new pitches or chords points to a certain minimalist pedigree, but one long since sublimated. Her music brings together incommensurable elements that come to seem related through sheer persistence. *Come As You Are*, for instance, starts austere with steady beats of drum and bell and sustained brass tones glissandoing in and out of tune. This gives way to a long *pipa* solo of isolated gestures, finally sliding into phrases of an apparent folk song. In the second half, the *pipa* solo and glissando tones are superimposed, as bits of the former begin to be picked up by the woodwinds.

A recurring Hui archetype is a comforting foreground tonality with melodic elements playing outside the key. *And blue sparks burn*, for violin and piano (2001, her 9/11 memorial), uses this technique, with the violin in high harmonics always threatening to resolve into the piano's A-flat major and never quite bringing themselves to. Likewise, in the outer movements of *From Dusk to Dawn*, for ten instruments (1997), the woodwinds keep coming back with motives that contradict the tonalities of the fervent major triads of the piano and strings. Where the technique works most beautifully, though, is in a 1991 piece called *San Rocco* for oboe d'amore, chorus, and percussion. The chorus sings in Latin with the radiant chromaticism of a Gesualdo madrigal. But like a bird singing outside the cathedral, the oboe keeps its own tonality, as do the

chimes, which suggest a distant church. Written in an ancient Italian town, the piece radiates the kind of otherworldly spirituality associated with the works of Arvo Pärt and John Tavener. I like this better.

Then there are those perpetual motion pieces. In *From Dusk to Dawn*, the first movement is "Dusk," the third "Dawn," and in between is a relentlessly nervous midnight dance filled with constantly changing clusters. And as you start to listen to a 1996 piece for two pianos and percussion called *As I Lie Still*, you'd expect it to begin in motionless calm. Wrong—the first movement is a hectic hocketing of piano and drums in incessant sixteenth notes. Yet the music is still, in Hui's terms, because no passage is more important than any other, and the music, without repeating itself, never moves *toward* anything.

For all her drastically different sonic archetypes, all her cosmopolitan elements, what holds Hui's music together and distinguishes it is a sense of centeredness. There is no "technique" leading from one point to another. Her phrases evolve as they recur, but reach no goal. And this seems to stem from her rejection of a conception of music as being heroic, or above the quotidian concerns of life. Explaining one piece, she writes, "Our days are neither continually filled by cataclysmic nor ecstatic moments after all. They envelop us and we must search for the beauty that exists in the everyday situations we encounter." In between the cataclysmic and the ecstatic, she's discovered a sustainable sense of beauty all her own.

*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.*