

by Kyle Gann

**B**arbara Benary is a quiet, diminutive woman whose music sometimes makes a big noise. Perhaps you've never heard of her, but for decades she's been on the periphery of music you know about. I first ran across her name in 1974, the summer I found my first Philip Glass record, for Benary was an early member of the Philip Glass ensemble—at a time so long ago that he and Steve Reich were sharing the same players, and still on speaking terms. Benary was the designated violinist of early minimalism, and since hers was a memorable name, I never failed to notice it when I ran across it again—though such occurrences were few and far between.

Eventually it turned out that she was a kind of minimalist composer herself, though she had started out as an ethnomusicologist. Most people only know about Glass and Reich, and maybe Terry Riley and La Monte Young; but minimalism was originally a far-flung and boisterous scene. For whatever curse was placed on the movement, many of its members (such as Richard Maxfield and Terry Jennings) came to untimely deaths, or else (like Dennis Johnson and Tony Conrad) got out of the music business. Benary, however, did neither. She inhabited the fringe of Manhattan's Downtown scene, much appreciated by those who knew her and obscure due to both a retiring personality and a focus on music for, and inspired by, Indonesian gamelan.

The infiltration of gamelan—the percussion orchestra of Bali and Java, with its ringingly out-of-tune unisons and repetitive rhythmic cycles—into American music runs deeper than most new-music fans could know. It's practically an underground industry. Of course, gamelan's influence on the West extends

# Barbara Benary

back to Debussy (who was enchanted by one at the World's Fair Exhibition) and thence to Henry Cowell, John Cage, and most of all Lou Harrison, who wrote many works for gamelan with and without classical European instruments. Last I heard, there were some 200 active gamelans in America, many of them in university settings (we have one at Bard College, where I teach), and many of them play not only traditional music, but pieces written for them by the performers. Jarad Powell directs the composer-based Gamelan Pacifica at Seattle's Cornish Institute; Evan Ziporyn started Gamelan Galak Tika, an MIT ensemble that often adds modern instruments, such as electric guitars; and in 1975 in New York, Benary was cofounder of one of the country's oldest composer-run gamelans, Gamelan Son of Lion. ("Son of Lion," in Hebrew, is "Benary.")

Some gamelan composers concentrate only on percussion; but with Benary, the influences extend in all directions—she's written European-style pieces for gamelan, pieces with gamelan patterns for European instruments, pieces with European and gamelan instruments, in both European and gamelan styles. In her early pieces, like *Braid* and *Sleeping Braid*, the patterns of gamelan fused effortlessly with the permutational melodies of minimalism, for a gentle, simple music. (*Sleeping Braid*, in fact, was a lullaby for her daughter.) *Braid* and *Sleeping Braid* can both be played by either gamelan or Western instruments. The former piece, like much of her early music, isn't fully notated; instead, written in instructions tell people how to play it. Indonesian music is much based on numerical patterns, and within the five-tone *slendro* scale or the seven-tone *pelog* scale, it wasn't difficult to concoct, through verbal instructions alone, a permutational piece that expresses both minimalist and gamelan practice.

One thing that fundamentally set Benary apart from the other minimalists

was her interest in improvisation, and almost every work of hers includes passages in which a player or two is encouraged to wander off the printed page. Even in *Exchanges*, a classic 1971 strict-process piece, she and her fellow violinists elaborated around the patterns and drones; in *Sun on Snow* of 1985, loosely scored for from five to eight instruments, players are free to ornament a melody indicated by rhythmless noteheads. These days she's notating more specifically than she used to, and her multiculturalism is spreading in all directions. *Gaelic Weaving Sampler* (2005) for string quartet, piano, percussion, and electric bass, sets gamelan patterns as accompaniment for some Gaelic folk-songs. The piece's intricate polymetric textures evoke patterns she learned in a weaving class at Gaelic College in Nova Scotia.

In addition, this quiet woman's music has gotten louder. In November I heard her *Downtown Steel* (1993) played in New York by the Downtown Ensemble and Son of Lion. It opened with an expectable pretty *ostinato* on glockenspiel, but as the first section came to a close, a fearsome quartet of saxophone, clarinet, trombone, and tuba boomed in like the Four Wind Players of the Apocalypse, and brought a recurrent, big-band energy to the piece. As it turned out, the "Steel" in the title referred not only to the steel bars of the gamelan instruments but to Steely Dan. And the work was held together by a gamelan-inspired idea that I sensed but couldn't explain—until I looked through the score. Every section outlined a rhythm of 3+2+3+2+2, first in quarter-notes, then 8ths, then 16ths.

Weirder and even louder is *Aural Shoehorning* (1997), commissioned by both the Zeitegeist percussion ensemble and the Schubert Club Gamelan of St. Paul, MN. (The piece is about to be released with *Downtown Steel* and others on a New World disc.) Indonesian gamelans use a different tuning than Western instruments, but Benary decided this time



to ignore the difference and let the pitches clash. She wanted, she says, "a marriage in which neither partner is asked to convert." Sometimes just the gamelan plays, sometimes just the Western instruments, but occasionally they intone a melody in skewed unison with spine-tingling effect. The most bizarre moments, though, were when the gamelan melody would end and suddenly reappear in the solo piano, harmonized and counterpointed as genteelly as a 19th-century English sonata.

And that's what's so delightful about Benary's music: it has tremendous energy, but no anguish. It throws together incongruous elements, but lets them happily coexist without integration. It acknowledges the complexity and conflict of modern life without railing that something should be done about it. It roars and stomps its feet, but cheerfully. For more than thirty years, her music has danced its way through our modern crises, and people are finally beginning to notice.

*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.*