



by Kyle Gann

Last Sunday evening I went to a restaurant where the piped-in music was fast and raucous, forcedly partylike, even though only a handful of diners were present. The next morning I got up and, in preparation for writing this

extra percussion and making a cliché of the John Adams device of repeated chords in propulsive crescendo—not to mention all the Downtown groups who play over a backbeat and list Led Zeppelin among their influences.

But the truth is that slow, quiet, thoughtful is practically a musical subculture these days, and that Smith, an American composer resident in Toronto since 1981, is hardly its only exponent. It began, of course, with Morton Feldman, the composer brave enough to write two-, four-, even six-hour pieces with a single dynamic: as soft as possible. Moreover, Feldman demonstrated by example how silly it was to think a composer can only impress an audience by showing how many different tricks he knows: he proved a piece can be all soft, all loud, all in D-flat major, all in eighth notes, and seem to have even more to say than an opus that runs around touching all the bases. After decades of limitless variety, focus suddenly seemed like a great idea.

Feldman's insight touched hundreds of composers and spun off in all directions.

Linda

article, listened again to all my recordings of music by Linda Catlin Smith, all of whose pieces are slow, quiet, thoughtful. Now, what kind of career strategy is slow, quiet, thoughtful? In these days when new music has to compete with TV, movies, the Internet and rock concerts, doesn't a composer have to exhibit a considerable level of auditory energy to entertain people, or even just to attract their attention? You'd certainly think so, from all the orchestra pieces people write today bristling with

For the slow, quiet, thoughtful crowd (one might mention Bernadette Speach, John Luther Adams, and Jim Fox along with Smith) he represented an abdication from the entertainment business. "I'm not going to compete with pop music and action films," you can imagine their music saying. "Those who like—who *need*—that kind of thing have plenty of options. I'm going to quietly sit here and get into this." And it turns out to be a strangely attractive proposition. That raucous restau-

rant music had the same effect as fast Muzak in a grocery store, making us feel like we needed to eat fast and get out, move on. A restaurant that wanted us to feel at home and savor our leisurely meal would have played something slow, quiet, thoughtful. It might have played some Linda Catlin Smith. Because in this noisy world, we tune out all kinds of people shouting at us for one reason or another, but when someone suddenly *whispers* to you, you listen.

And Smith's music is difficult to not listen to. (Find some at her website, www.vex.net/~rixax/LCSmith.html.) It makes a gesture, pauses, then makes the gesture again with a slight difference. It does nothing to grab your attention, but the persistence of its materials rouses your curiosity about where it's going. Most of her music is calculatedly arrhythmic, and sounds like it could be improvised, but look at the score and you'll find that her types of arrhythmia are carefully differentiated in notation. Even when she lets loose a line of sixteenth notes, she'll mark them, "not too steady, wavering in tempo."

irregularly repeated middle D-flat on the piano, over which the tenor sings. The sense of intensified focus is almost palpable, and you're in increasing suspense thinking that, soon, *something* else has got to happen, which it eventually does. In *Ballad* (2005), a leisurely 45-minute, one-movement work for cello and piano, the two instruments play the opening pages *in unison*, the piano more quietly shadowing the cello. Then the cello drops out for a couple of long, slow pages, as the pianist simply rolls a slowly evolving series of chords in quarter notes and half notes.

If a student brought pieces that tried these things, most of us would reflexively carp, "No, you can't do that, it'll never work, you need to create more variety here, you can't drop the soloist out for so long," and so forth. But so confidently does Smith compose, so quietly and slowly does her audacity hit you over the head, that she elicits a kind of fascination before you can raise the obvious pedestrian objections.

The broad pacing of her works also lets their skillful unity creep up on you. No

Memory Forms keeps revolving around the first chords of Ives's *The Unanswered Question* as a reference point. *Garland* (2004) for flute, harpsichord, and string quartet, is entirely based on the theme from Bach's *Musical Offering*, though it takes a while to realize that, as new pitches are folded in slowly, the theme is played backward, and the harpsichord articulates it as rolled clusters. *Brush Line* (2004), written for New York's Continuum Ensemble, uses as text a dislocated series of descriptions of colors from the notebooks of the great Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner, and the voice floats over slowly changing clouds of instrumental color.

Vague, soft-edged, revealing its meaning only toward the end of the piece, such studiously noncompetitive music will hardly break into the mainstream, though it helps that Smith lives in Canada, where thoughtful musical paradigms have an easier time getting a hearing. She's had some recordings on the Canadian label Artifact Music.

But where loud, bangy music makes you want to get up and go, hers makes

Catlin Smith

It's the slow evolution of her pitches that holds the piece together and makes you wonder, despite yourself, what's next.

The other thing that piques your interest is the courage of her gestures, so many of which you wouldn't think a composer could get away with. In *To the Horizon* (2004) for violin, piano, percussion, and tenor, the first section uses shimmering metal, violin harmonics and soft diatonic clusters in the piano. Then, *for more than sixty measures*, the music strips down to an

one would call her music minimalist: besides being pulseless, it's usually highly chromatic, within ambiguous tonal references. But over the course of a work, the same "characters" will return, like a low arpeggiated cluster in the piano or a winding around a certain pitch, and you gradually realize that she closely limits the resources of each piece, giving you the same unpredictable but closed-in feeling as a play by Beckett or Pinter.

Catlin Smith's 1995 orchestral work

you want to stay where you are, going in deeper and deeper.

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.