



Nick

pop song or bebop harmony decide to try out notated music. For these, the mandate to leave part of their musical heritage behind is unacceptable.

The attempt itself, however, brings the composer to the edge of troubled theoretical waters. Let's say you've got the brilliant idea to meld classical music and jazz. Whose classical music? Bartók? La Monte Young? John Corigliano? And whose jazz? Duke Ellington? Cecil Taylor? The Miles Davis of *Kind of Blue*? Millions of pieces are grouped under the rubric "classical music," but there is no such thing as "classical music" as such—no generic or average classical idiom, only thousands of individual solutions, many more different from one another than modal Miles is from Steve Reich. Likewise with jazz. From whatever individual seed, each genre of music evolves out into its own elaborate specificity. Deciding you're going to make a hybrid is like deciding to cross a mammal with an insect. Which mammal and insect? Koala and preying mantis? Elephant and butterfly? There is no such thing as "a mammal" or "a classical piece" that is not idiosyncratic in its details.

Common as the attempt is, rare is the composer who has bypassed the problems with ease, which is what makes Nick Didkovsky so intriguing. Didkovsky is the brains and designated composer behind a band called Doctor Nerve, a raucous, punchy, yet precisely virtuoso New York ensemble of reeds, brass, drums, keyboards, and electric guitars. Rhythmically speaking, Doctor Nerve's percussion often has a rock beat. Saxophone- and guitar-wise, its soloistic riffs and spells of improvisation

by Kyle Gann

An ineluctable trend in post-1980 music has been the move to erase the distinctions between popular music, classical music, and jazz. To a small extent, the motivations have sometimes been opportunistic: add a rock beat or a wailing sax solo to that orchestra piece, and maybe you'll lure in some younger listeners who find orchestra music unhip. (Evidence for this strategy's effectiveness is so far unimpressive.) Far more often, though, the move to run roughshod over the boundaries is a gradual, relentless, underground movement led by younger composers whose training acknowledged no such divisions, and who refuse to recognize any in their music. Typically, composers today start out playing in garage bands in high school (or making electronica in GarageBand software), and then study jazz improvisation in college; later, those impatient with limitations of the 32-bar

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float like jazz. Yet the music is mostly carefully notated, composed both according to stochastic chance processes like those of Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, and the kinds of complex tempo shifts are typical of 1990s New York Downtown groups. Didkovsky's music does not try to "mix" "classical music" with "jazz" and "pop." Instead, it combines a particular heavy metal drum style with a couple of well-defined processes of the classical avant-garde, overlaying it with a specific type of improvisatory solo. In the end, it has something for everybody, and you can't quite classify it as this or that. But it just sounds like Nick Didkovsky.

Few artists have ever forced the cerebral and the kickass into such close quarters. Aside from his music, Didkovsky is best known as one of the pioneers of a composing software called Hierarchical Music Specification Language (HMSL) and as author of its Java version, JMSL. Until a few years ago, his day job was teaching math; his musical skeletons are sometimes fleshed out via Myhill distributions, a type of statistical probability that allows the unexpected to emerge. He even applies computer processes to texts to obtain his titles, which is why he's got pieces called *Take Your Ears As the Bones of Their Queen*, *Their Eyes Bulged with Sparkling Pockets*, and *They Were As If They Also Which Pierced Him*. Sometimes he composes freely, and then submits what he's written into computer software to generate the rest. Sometimes he lets the computer spin out some really weird material, and then shapes and finesses it into something playable and lively.

But unlike the other 300 composers who use these kinds of brainy computerized composing methods, Didkovsky hands his results to a crack team of players who perform the hell out of them. The most basic paradigm of Didkovsky's music is an incredibly odd one: the complex, unmemorable passage played over and over again. We've been conditioned to associate repetition with simplicity, and complexity with unrepeatability; but Didkovsky challenges our perception by throwing wild atonal riffs into 23/16 meter—and then adding repeat signs. You expect that wild musical object to just pass by, but it comes back over and over, and so does the next, and the next. You're being assaulted with music from Mars, the weirdest stuff you've ever heard, but its elements get so burned into your memory that they start to make sense. Despite yourself, you learn a different musical language. And Doctor Nerve's rivetingly exciting, turn-on-a-dime performance style helps, too.

Consequently, there's a curious, exuberant introversion to Didkovsky's music. It's wildly excited about something inexplicable, and captures your attention without being quite communicative. I think of a crazy old man who performs curious rituals in public whose point you can't fathom, but which are too entertaining not to watch. His music would have to be called generally atonal, but frequently a reiterated drone note imposes a tonality through sheer force. The gestural style ranges from bluegrass to bebop, and also occasionally to slow, thick, metamorphosing textures. He's best known for his work with Doctor Nerve, but in recent years has been branch-

ing out prolifically. He's written some engaging little one-minute pieces for the Prism Saxophone Quartet, and for the Sirius String Quartet he created a CD-length work called *Ereia* (letters chosen by some Myhill process), in which they are joined by Doctor Nerve in the last movement. His *Rain on a Frail Cutie* is a tight rhythmic romp, with quintuplets *within* 5/8 meter, for the California E.A.R. Unit; and, characteristically, its movement titles are anagrams of the title:

"A fair, uncertain oil"

"An unfair, icier alto"

"Fear in a coital ruin"

Ultimately, like other genre-benders, Didkovsky runs up against a problem symptomatic of his generation. Is there an audience that wants its genres mixed? Jazz fans may resent the tight adherence to notation, classical buffs may resent the intrusion of a powerful drumbeat, and pop fans may object to their heavy metal riffs being "academicized." Audiences have not yet followed the composers' lead in this respect. But that's not, for now, Didkovsky's problem; and the powerful attraction of his Doctor Nerve music suggests that this brand-new hybrid will eventually create an audience all its 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.