

by Kyle Gann

Watch out, classical fans and performers: composers are banding together in gangs, for safety, self-defense, and to better carry out nefarious schemes. Many composers feel that, sometime around World War II, classical performers abandoned them and devoted themselves primarily to playing music by stiff, and so they've been seeking strength in numbers for quite a while. Back in my day, whenever that was (it seemed to go by awfully fast), the paradigm

People often ask us, "Why 'Anti-Social Music'? Who are you trying to fool? Clearly you're just a bunch of nice kids with music stands." By way of an answer, I suggest an experiment. Next time you throw a party... put our CD in your changer between the Strokes and Portishead and see how long it takes before your guests begin to shift back and forth uneasily....

Anti-Social Music & Andrea



was for a composer to assemble a bunch of misfit performers to play only his or her music: Steve Reich and Musicians, the Philip Glass Ensemble, the Michael Gordon Philharmonic. Today, however, composers have gotten savvier as times have gotten harder, and they band together in groups of composer/performers all supporting each other's music. That way, there's more incentive for each member to stay in the group even when no income is flowing in.

The most notorious such group recently, the one most likely to appear soon on your radar screen under questionable auspices, is Anti-Social Music. Based more or less in New York City, they came together in 2000, and seem to be the early-30s generation. There are twelve names listed on their website at www.antisocialmusic.org, but their concerts have featured music by more than twenty. Their moniker acknowledges a certain thorniness in their work. As Anti-Social Music explains to its online readers:

However, there's more to their good-natured rebellion than dissonance and snarky rhythms, which would hardly be news at this point. Anti-Social Music has declared war on classical music's stuffy performance conventions. Concerts are informal, with much composer-to-audience talking between pieces and laughter during. Their program notes are more likely to give you a recipe for jambalaya (no kidding!), urge you to drink more water, or warn you that "Philippa Thompson is not to be trusted. You should hear her play spoons," than to provide the usual details of birthdates, awards, and college degrees. Composers at Anti-Social concerts will be found mingling with the crowd, not standing on pedestals.

More important, the Anti-Social composers attack classical conventions within their music, which tends to be jaunty, rough-hewn, postmodern, and stylistically heterogeneous. Let's take as example the composer who has most come to my attention through her feisty presence on

“Andrea La Rose knows you can decide for yourself why she’s special without her having to list her musical activities from the past thirty-four years.”

new-music web sites: Andrea La Rose. La Rose is a flutist who circular breathes and is capable of playing many, many notes very fast for a long time. Raised in New Hampshire, she’s completing a doctorate at CUNY Graduate Center and writing a dissertation on improvisational aspects of Frederic Rzewski’s music. (One of her program bios, though, states: “Andrea La Rose knows you can decide for yourself why she’s special without her having to list her musical activities from the past thirty-four years.”)

punk-rock bass line,” and in several of her scores it’s assumed that you swing the eighth- or sixteenth-notes as in jazz.

Like many of her cohorts, though, La Rose has covered her developmental tracks well, and other debts to earlier composers are difficult to snoop out. There’s no minimalist trace, though if the music gets stuck

Advertising Changed My Life reminds me a little of Harry Partch. It’s a musical subway ride, with passengers’ thoughts and sung ad copy interspersed among the usual conductor’s arias (“Stand clear of the closing doors”), the stemless noteheads allowing speech rhythms to control the flow. But you get the impression that she didn’t so

La Rose

Stylistically, the Anti-Social composers can seem to have sprung full-blown from the head of Zeus, but the Rzewski connection provides some insight: like them, he’s radical, an outsider, neither Uptown nor Down-, a composer willing to use a wide array of varied idioms for a wide range of expressive purposes. Take La Rose’s *Testify*, for solo trombone. Amid a virtuoso array of notes, the trombonist pauses for utterances like “Yeah, yeah,” “Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm,” and “Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!” At one point he or she screams and foot-stomps, and the score says, “As wild as you like.” Such theatrical interpolations aren’t new, of course; they appeared in hundreds of theater pieces from the 1970s, and among certain scores of the Darmstadt avant-garde as well. What’s different about La Rose’s use of them is how well they’re integrated into a subtly underlying pop-music sensibility. In *Snit*, for baritone sax and bass, there’s an eighth-note line marked “like a slow

on a couple of pitches for a half-minute or so before veering off into something else, well, why not? Some of the melodies and textures could remind you of Webern, but they’re interspersed with jazz riffs, and devoid of European climax orientation. One of her most delightful pieces, *Take Out* (2003), is a setting of fortune-cookie fortunes for soprano, three flutes, and bass clarinet, an instrumentation she had available at the moment. From this, “A secret admirer will soon send you a sign of affection” devolves into the soupy romantic theme from Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which then becomes the basis for a tempo canon. “You are surrounded by fortune hunters” keeps the soprano on a high F as the flutes trill multiphonics. “We should not expect from others what we cannot do ourselves” is a contest to see how long (sans circular breathing) the performers can sustain a pitch. It’s funny stuff, but the humor always has a point.

La Rose’s eight-minute chamber opera

much listen to Partch as share his impulse to go to the vernacular heart of everyday life, to set to music what she sees and hears every day. So where does La Rose’s music come from? Well, it seems to come mostly from being in a group called Anti-Social Music, from having the freedom to experiment with a large and versatile stable of performers with pop, jazz, and classical experience, and from bouncing ideas off of other composers in a lively scene. There’s not much connection to the past, but the connection to the here and now is particularly intense.

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.