

by Kyle Gann

It's gotta be tough for a young composer to arrive at a personal style these days. First of all, there's a huge gap between the music your college professors play you and the music your friends listen to, so that every schooled musician ends up at least bilingual. Even say you're



Caroline Mallonée

dedicated to going the composed music route, you're aware that there's kind of an academic middle-of-the-road mainstream that leads to career success, but also aware that it's not very hip. Serialist and spectral music are held up for your admiration, but minimalism has a sexy appeal that one's professors may not entirely approve of. Large universities offer courses in Javanese gamelan, African drumming, Latin American rhythms. You might get a hint that there's a whole Downtown tradition springing from John Cage. Jazz offers a different set of materials. Microtonality is resurgent. In my youth there were a couple of large troughs that a student fell into, depending on teachers and temperament; but today music history has separated into more than a dozen distinct lines. And somehow, the student is supposed to weave these disparate threads into a style that both makes sense on its own terms and expresses his or her personality. I can't imagine how bewildering it must seem.

Few are negotiating this maze more boldly than Caroline Mallonée. She is often spoken of as having a very, very good resumé: Harvard, Yale, Duke, The Hague Conservatory, composition studies with Louis Andriessen, Joseph Schwantner, Ezra Laderman, Mario

Davidovsky, Bernard Rands, Scott Lindroth, and Stephen Jaffe. Those names don't cover *all* of the aesthetic viewpoints available today, but they nearly circumscribe the range of diversity. Carrie, as she is called, is very prolific, with a surprising number of commissions under her belt,

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and almost as many awards. She's on the job market, and no one worries about her: doors will open.

But putting food on the table as a professional is different from feeding one's soul as an artist, and that's where Mallonée faces the more interesting challenge. Her music tends to be confident, aggressive, even punchy. One of her most high-profile works is *Throwing Mountains*, for bass clarinet, cello, double bass and piano (2003). The title intends the word *throwing* in the same sense as "throwing pottery." I heard her give a talk about the piece in which she explained how the pitch technique comes from Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*, with short repeated phrases going out of phase with each other. This becomes progressively clearer toward the end of the work, as, say, four notes in the piano left hand (E G A C) alternate with three in the right (F B-flat D-flat), and this is how many of the patterns are generated. However, if you didn't know that, you could easily just say that *Throwing Mountains* is an atonal chamber work in a rather Bartók-y idiom, based in small pitch cells or non-diatonic scales.

In other words, Mallonée has absorbed minimalism so thoroughly that she can imperceptibly work its techniques into a more mainstream style with no sense of

contradiction. With her generation, we may consider another deep fissure among late 20th-century styles fully erased. The attractive thing about *Throwing Mountains* is its irresistible rhythmic propulsion. The same is true of *Hammering Away (at the Great Unknown)* for saxophone quartet (2005), a sophisticated yet listenable piece full of canons, inversions, augmentations, and other clever devices. In these pieces Mallonée proves that she's mastered a catchy, high-energy style that one might associate with the Bang on a Can Festival, a style that's sure-fire for garnering commissions because it's idiomatic for the instruments and makes the ensemble sound so good.

And yet, there's another side to Mallonée's music that is quieter, simpler, less full of fireworks. She's written spare piano pieces in a formalist, rather Henry Cowellian vein, and a microtonal string trio based in light folk fiddling. Sometimes she'll bridge the sides of her personality in a single work. The most revealing for me is *'Stain*, a 2002 work for bass clarinet, piano, marimba, and two electric guitars. (As she explains the title, "*'Stain* is short for sustain... [S]ustained gestures, rhythms, and notes infuse the piece with color—stain it, if you will, like a deep batik pattern.") Like the others, the piece begins in motoric and curiously syncopated rhythms, another crowd-pleasing powerhouse. But toward the end, the pace suddenly freezes, and quiet chords begin to repeat in the piano, turning into a kind of hypnotic lullaby as the guitars (echoed by digital delay) rise in lithe glissandos.

It's almost as though the music is saying: "I know how to be the kind of riveting modernist perpetual motion piece that will make the audience think they got their money's worth, but it's almost too easy. What if I want to

suddenly turn quiet and meditative?" Like negative space in a Henry Moore sculpture, *'Stain* knocks you sideways with the effective techniques it knows how to use—and decides not to. One of Mallonée's most charming works is for amplified bottles, a piece called *Keeping Time in a Bottle*. It sounds like a slowed-down calliope in a dream, and I like imagining what use David Lynch might make of it. She's also made some kind of kooky electronic pieces using her own voice.

In short, it is as refreshing as it is rare to hear a young composer with technical chops as polished as Mallonée's are and who has the inner strength to sometimes refrain from exploiting them. Some of her pieces tell us that technique is not, ultimately, what's important: that *impressing* the audience (or one's colleagues) is not as rewarding as delighting them, making them think, asking questions. She is so technically proficient that one can hear

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the stylistic conflicts that dog a young composer today clearly etched in her music. And despite all the temptations to become another award-winning hotshot composer of macho virtuoso vehicles, it sounds like she's headed toward something braver—and more thoughtful.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College. His latest book is Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice, and his music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.