



# Larry Polansky

by Kyle Gann

An impression arises that America's pioneer composers created roles that the younger composers sometimes step in to fill. For instance, Peter Garland has taken over the Henry Cowell position that music can be simple and lyrical and still radical. The spirituality and gentle humor that Lou Harrison used to spread around now emanate from John Luther Adams. In the intense singularity of his vision and the continuity of his trademark style, Michael Gordon seems like a Steve Reich for the younger generation. And most clearly of all, Larry Polansky has stepped into the role formerly occupied by his teacher, the late James Tenney. Once asked whom he would study with if he were young today, John Cage (who had studied with Schoenberg) volunteered James Tenney. Today, I'd imagine Cage saying Polansky.

What Polansky and Tenney most obviously share is that they are both basically

conceptualists, fascinated by process and structure. In a way, they care even less than Milton Babbitt once famously did about whether you listen—and yet their concepts often blossom into a surprisingly visceral sensuousness. For many years Polansky has been chair of the graduate music program at Dartmouth, which is entirely oriented toward electronic music and cutting-edge technology. It's a job he's eminently suited for; he's got a genius for mathematical algorithms for music, and was one of the developers (along with Phil Burk and David Rosenboom, of a computer-music language called HMSL (Hierarchical Music Specification Language)). Still, that side of Polansky is less typical than the side that creates covers of jazz tunes, variations on folk songs, clever rounds and canons, and electronic music based on frog croaks and saxophone riffs. An earthy, jolly, quick-witted bear of a man, he's just about the smartest composer working

today—but for academicism and pretense he has no patience.

That said, Polansky's relation to the "accessibility" bandwagon is, if sympathetic, pretty distant. He's a great believer that music must adhere to its own truth (and that truth is often, partly, a mathematical truth) and that the audience will eventually catch up. His notation asks tremendous feats of performers; and he's waited, calmly, decades for some of his pieces to get performed, though they always seem to be, eventually. Despite their austerity, his pieces are often seductive because the concepts are so simple. As with Cowell, Tenney, Ben Johnston, and a number of other Americans, the harmonic series is his guiding paradigm, and many of his pieces require special tunings. For instance, his *Movement for Lou Harrison* (1975–7), scored for four double basses tuned in just intonation, is a slow-moving network of sustained tones; but it isn't difficult to hear the piece slowly come into focus, as complex intervals resolve into simpler and simpler ones.

Polansky's sense of humor is often too foregrounded to miss. *Another You* (1981), for solo harp, tunes the harp to a harmonic series and treats it like a folk harp, with almost no pedaling; the overall pointillistic texture of mistuned notes and chords is pretty foreign, but occasionally stretches of the tune of the Harry Warren/Mack Gordon song "There Will Never be Another You" come wandering through like an old friend showing up in a Martian landscape. Sometimes Polansky's conceptualist sense of humor is over the top. He's got a series, called *Tooytudes*, of two-second-long piano etudes; one of them uses all 88 keys of the piano, in a virtuoso whirlwind you could miss by sneezing at the

wrong moment. Even his computer expertise leads to music you can tap your foot to. In *51 Melodies* for two electric guitars, he starts both guitars off in a rock-syncoated unison melody, which they then proceed to repeat in a continuous-variation style in which each follows a different trajectory of alterations written in HMSL. I've heard it live, and it's one of the coolest rock-inspired pieces around; you'd never guess that it was basically written via computer.

One work, however, stands out above the rest of Polansky's output: *Lonesome Road (The Crawford Variations)*, written in 1988–89 while Polansky and his wife, Jody Diamond, were on sabbatical in Java, studying Indonesian gamelan music. (Diamond herself is one of America's leading experts on new music for gamelan. The couple lives next door to composer Christian Wolff, and Polansky jokingly likes to call himself "the third-best composer on my own street.") *Lonesome Road* is a mammoth, dense, varied, 90-minute set of variations on the eponymous Appalachian folksong that Polansky uses in its harmonization by earlier American composer Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953). In addition to his prolific composing, Polansky has done tons of musicological work on undersung American composers, including a critical edition (with Judith Tick) of Crawford Seeger's *The Music of American Folk Song*.

Staking out a large territory somewhere between Copland, Ives, and Rzewski, *Lonesome Road* is not your typical or even followable theme and variations, but a rugged musical landscape in which the poignant theme makes unexpected appearances. There are moments of spiky minimalism, Copland-y Americana, even Javanese gamelan patterns, all couched within an often atonal stream-of-con-

sciousness, like gems sticking out of a shaft of ore. As usual, Polansky wrote without worrying about the piece's difficulty for performers, and the 1994 premiere was accomplished only by having three pianists, each playing one of the three sections.

Though *Lonesome Road* is a huge exception among Polansky's most conceptual works, it can serve as a magnified example of the qualities that subtly unify his seemingly scattershot output. His musical language is algorithmic by paradigm. An algorithm is a "step-by-step problem-solving procedure, especially an established, recursive computational procedure for solving a problem in a finite number of steps." In music composition, that generally means that the composer applies a series of steps to generate material from some initial melody, chord progression, and so on, in a manner that is linear and consistent yet can result in such complexity that computer assistance is helpful. And Polansky's music is often complex enough to sound like chaos (often slow, sustained \*chaos) on casual listening. But the elements he begins with, like "Lonesome Road," or a rock riff, or a common cadence in purely tuned chords, are so simple that nuggets of surprising beauty float to the surface on a frequent basis. His music has a far-out, high-tech brain, but a funny, endearing, populist heart.

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