

by Kyle Gann

I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that," sang the soprano.

It's not the kind of lyric one normally hears trilled in dulcet tones. The words are from a 1991 memo—written by Lawrence Summers when he was chief economist at the World Bank—that got leaked to the press and caused considerable controversy. And in 1999 John Halle set it to music, over a mercurial accompaniment of clarinet, bass clarinet, viola, cello, and bass. Now that Summers has been named next head of the National Economic Council by our new president,

expertise in linguistics; an article of his on the relation of ancient music notation to the metrics of speech and lyrics is coming out in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*. That has something to do with why he can get away with using such unmusical texts and make them so understandable. He's also a member of the bicoastal Common Sense composers' collective, others of whom (Melissa Hui, Belinda Reynolds, Dan Becker, Carolyn Yarnell) I've written about here before.

The piece described above is titled *Mortgaging the Earth*. Another, *Full Spectrum Dominance* (2003), is written for flute, cello, piano, percussion, optional tap dancer (!), and narrator. Google the

John Halle

whom may God bless, the piece retains its relevance. There are actually two sopranos, and the other sings a response written by José Lutzenberger, at the time Brazil's minister of the environment: "Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane." Touché.

Welcome to the outspoken world of John Halle. Halle writes political music, but I can't really tell you what his politics are. He just puts found texts out there and lets you have your own reaction. Aside from composing, he's dabbled in real politics himself, and used to be "the Honorable John Halle," an alderman on the city council of New Haven. The son of MIT linguist Morris Halle, a big name in that field, John Halle has his own

title and you'll find the text: it's one of those Project for the New American Century credos about how the U.S. should militarily control the world at every level:

Full spectrum dominance includes maintaining a posture of strategic deterrence. It includes Theatre engagement, including conflict involving employment of strategic forces and weapons of mass destruction; major theatre wars; regional conflicts and smaller scale contingencies; [and] those ambiguous situations residing between war and peace....

The piece is fairly high-energy, with repeated chords and pointillistic melodies;

but at the point quoted it breaks into a rather naughty boogie-woogie. (Later there's a sultry tango.) But the music doesn't really comment on the text, it just puts it out there for you as a jaunty piece of music, and you can ignore the words—or decide how hearing them so earnestly intoned makes you feel.

It's my favorite strategy for political music. I don't think audiences much like being preached to, and variations on "Which Side Are You On?" don't necessarily get the point across, but there's something about being clearly sung that makes the menacing undertones of bureaucratise impossible to overlook. Something you might breeze through in a newspaper suddenly registers as a call to action. Halle's got his lighter side, too. His *Apology to Younger Americans* sets a text by long-time D.C. journalist and activist Sam Smith, a mea culpa for the '60s generation:

I apologize for Bhopal and Three Mile Island and, in advance, for all the biological, chemical or nuclear disasters that will occur thanks to economic rapaciousness and without the slightest help from a terrorist.

I am truly sorry for Martha Stewart, the Washington Post, Howard Stern, the Brookings Institution, and Bill O'Reilly.

I regret any lasting infirmities—such as the loss of the republic—that occurred unnoticed while the country's elite was sedated by Morning Edition, C-SPAN, Jim Lehrer, and Ted Koppel.

Like the Summers memo above, this is prosy text for music setting. Halle keeps the words foregrounded in a fluid, but not a *Sprechstimme*, kind of way. He has a nice method of speeding up and slowing down by progressing from, say, a half-note pulse to dotted quarters, to triplet halves, to quarters, to dotted 8th-notes, to 8th-notes, and back. And the music is grounded in a

background pulse, so it's never amorphous. His harmonies are largely tonal, though not necessarily consonant, especially when the text deserves to be contradicted. Within the tonality he favors extremely angular instrumental melodies, which appear as glittering points above and below the voice, and this, too, gives the music interest without getting in the text's way.

In fact, Halle is one of several composers of his generation whose music plays



with a pulse-based rhythmic complexity grounded in minimalism. Others include Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, Evan Ziporyn, David Lang, Art Jarvinen, John Luther Adams, and Ben Neill; in the 1990s the movement acquired the term "totalism." The idea of totalism was partly "having your cake and eating it too," by combining a pop pulse with classical har-

monies and rhythmic structures, but the word also harked back to the Henry Cowell idea of treating rhythms melodically and using the same kinds of patterning for rhythm and harmony. In Halle's music, the trick has a distinctive, jazzier feel of intuitive freedom; in fact, he started out as a jazz pianist and used to perform with Sonny Stitt and Woody Shaw. You always feel some pulse going on, and the dovetailing melodies have their own independent pulses that move a little faster or slower than the general one, something like a really tight jazz ensemble.

One of Halle's earlier works in the style is a fully notated "jazz" quintet called *Invisible Hand* (1997). It's a masterful deconstruction of a post-bop style; and, as rendered on the page, it has a calculated rubato that sounds lyrical and improvisatory. More minimalist-sounding in their origins are *Spooks* (1997) and *Vox Pop* (1999) for small mixed ensembles. Both sound like a bunch of people improvising lines at different tempos, yet all managing to change key in unison. It's a beautiful technique in itself, but Halle is clearly one of those composers for whom music itself is not enough, who insists on getting involved in society and raising consciousness. His instrumental music makes you want to tap your feet, without knowing exactly when; his vocal music makes you squirm in your seat and wonder what our country's coming to.

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.