



American **Composer**

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

CHAMBER
MUSIC

John Kennedy

by Kyle Gann

People talk about the “good citizens” of the new-music world, those who do much to promote other people’s music as well as their own. There is no better citizen than John Kennedy. When I first knew him in the late 1980s he was administering, along with fellow percussionist Charles Wood, a percussion-based ensemble in New York City called Essential Music. The group championed local composers of the experimental variety, and also filled in crucial gaps in the history of American music. Essential Music unearthed some early Cage scores that had been lost for decades; they gave the first concert of the innovative, even proto-minimalist music

of Johanna Beyer, Henry Cowell’s assistant in the 1930s and ’40s, whose struggles with Lou Gehrig’s disease prevented her from having a public career; and they brought back to light the percussion music of William Russell, an originator in the field parallel to Varèse (one piece included firecrackers) but who disappeared after 1940. When needed, Essential Music seemed to expand effortlessly into an entire orchestra.

But Kennedy’s connection to New York City was not to last. He became director of the new-music component of the Spoleto festival in Charleston, where he carried on his intrepid experiments, and eventually moved to Santa Fe, where he

founded the concert series called Santa Fe New Music, and he continues to conduct new works around the country. So Kennedy is better known as a concert organizer, conductor, and entrepreneur than as a composer, though he does manage to get some large works played here and there. I rather assumed, early on, that Kennedy—as a long-time advocate of American experimentalism from Cage through post-minimalism—would follow, in his own music, the tradition he’s long championed. Interestingly, that’s turned out not to be the case, or at least not in any simplistic or obvious way.

Following a spate of noise-based percussion pieces for his ensemble, Kennedy’s ostensive magnum opus was *One Body* of 1998, a 60-minute cantata for voice, string trio, and two percussionists. For this great pantheist hymn to Gaia, to the Earth as a single living entity, he assembled texts by Martin Luther King, Walt Whitman, Kenneth Patchen, St. Augustine, Gary Snyder, and others into a continuous minimalist reverie. It was rather Arvo Pärt-ish in tone, though with occasional blasts of percussive momentum, and a gamelan-like melodic style that echoed Lou Harrison. This ambitious manifesto of spirituality seemed almost an act of self-abnegation on the composer’s part, a simultaneous summing up of his experimental past and an emptying out of himself. With that out of the way, more peculiar sides of his musical personality began to emerge.

In *Transition Songs* (2000) for flute, cello, piano, and two percussionists (not songs in a literal sense), the Harrison/gamelan patterns seemed to be the stable feature: melodies running up and down fixed modal scales. An aspect of *One Body* that became more prominent here was the layering of several tempos at once, with triplet quarter notes in one instrument against quintuplets in another against running eighths. (Beware the percussionist-

“Kennedy’s stylistic trajectory is opposite from that of most composers. He grew up in the world of American experimentalism and then re-appropriated Classical rhetoric.”

composer, who wallows in polyrhythms like a duck in water. I won’t even describe *Recession and Procession*, his tricky brass quintet in 11/16 meter.) The major-key harmony usually holds everything together as the rhythms run amok. Even so, the piece jumps among non-sequitur panels, some in pastoral D-flat major, some dissonant, some ambiguous. The gamelan patterns also reappear in a string orchestra piece, *Baghdad* (2006), written in response to the Iraq War, which he calls “an on-going travesty and tragedy—albeit maintained at an abstract level for many Americans.” The work is entirely based on a scale G A Bb B D, which contains, in traditional German notation, the letters of the title.

An orchestra piece *Storm and Stress* of 2005 moves further away from experimentalism. A conventional fanfare in the strings is echoed by another, and melodies begin to proliferate in almost 19th-century profusion. References of the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth even abound. The piece would sound almost like normal Romanticism at times if it weren’t for those rhythms and meters: 5/2 with the trombones marking four even beats per measure, string octaves playing 5-against-3 with the beat. The texture sounds so familiar, but darned if you can figure out where to tap your foot. A homespun theme comes in that seems to have escaped from a Copland ballet or a Western film score, and would be comforting except for those eerie glissandos behind it.

In 2007, Kennedy followed *Storm and Stress* with a Horn Concerto, a genre distinctly foreign to both experimentalism and postminimalism. The horn gestures sound Straussian, heroic, though the per-

cussive background uses wind whistles and the rustling of sticks and leaves. Finally it dawns on me that Kennedy has taken an opposite direction to most composers—rather than grow up in a classical tradition and become more modernist and experimental, as a percussionist he grew up in the world of American experimentalism and has reappropriated Classical rhetoric. Phenomena that classical music listeners would consider odd—the strange percussion, the rampant polytempos, the notated irregularities of string bowing, the glissandos—are in the background, while the foreground swings with galloping melodies and arching themes. There’s nothing particularly disunified about the music; it just seems to cut a diagonal swath through our learned stylistic associations.

All the music is imbued with the practicality that Kennedy’s unusual career has given him abundant experience with. The music is clearly notated but not intricately, the odd techniques well marked for playability. It’s accessible, even joyous music, aimed to impart wisdom and celebrate our existence on earth. The background noises and peculiar string effects ground the music in an earthiness, in fact, that seems to keep the transcending melodies tied down, from a distance, to the physicality of the instruments. It’s experimental and classical music at once, memorable and even hummable—but so peculiar around the edges!

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