

American **Composer**

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Nils Vigeland

by Kyle Gann

The flute starts by meandering up and down an F-major scale in its lowest register; almost spookily, the piano is running through the same notes at a slightly faster tempo. Sharp dissonances punctuate the line high in the

piano, while the flute's wanderings amble up to that register as well. The flute notes and piano chords fall temporarily into rhythmic unison. Flute and piano start fixating on repeated notes and chords respectively, then adding grace notes. The

flute drops out, and syncopated melodic figures appear in the piano. The music floats, atonally but often within a diatonic scale. Nothing happens suddenly, everything eases in smoothly. Frequently you notice that the texture has changed only measures after it happens.

I'm describing Nils Vigeland's *Vara* while listening to it, in about the only terms I can. The piece, for flute and piano, lasts half an hour, continuous, with no divisions into sections. And it reminds me of a new listening paradigm that composers sometimes refer to informally, but that hasn't yet been officially acknowledged in critical discourse. Let me call it, for the moment, the Wandering Continuum.

Take three listening models we're all familiar with: classical, 12-tone, minimalist. The classical model is broken into hierarchically ordered sections and units: theme, thematic group, exposition, development, recapitulation. Twelve-tone music often borrows from the classical model, but its organizing structures tend to be hidden: highly organized, as analysis can show, but opaque to experience (exceptions noted, I'm merely generalizing here). The minimalist model, formed partly in reaction, brought a new emphasis on perceived logic: often a linear process that can be easily followed from beginning to end.

But what of the Wandering Continuum? We now have a growing body of music that is not hierarchically divided into sections, not governed by hidden structures, in which it is not difficult to identify what's going on, which is often attractive and memorable but intuitive rather than logical. This music resists critical discussion because, as you can see, it can mostly be described only by what it doesn't do. The only difficulty this music presents to the listener is that it keeps going without pause, without clear goal, and without sectional division. It is often gorgeous, sensuous, lyrical, and attracts listeners only to eventually mystify them by never breathing. It

is the aural equivalent of trekking across a beautiful landscape with no landmarks, like an Alaskan snowscape or the Chihuahuan desert. It's music a little larger than life. Listening to it requires some element of surrender of one's expectations, which is why classical-music lovers may have trouble with it, though minimalist fans "get" it. Nils Vigeland is one of this

leads to tricky polyrhythms and interplay of rhythmic motives.

What Vigeland most inherits from Feldman is a non-motoric sense of repetition, the kind that some purists call, rather, reiteration. Take *Two Days*, a 21-minute piano solo from 2001 (and one can already guess the presence of the Wandering Continuum in any composer whose chamber

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paradigm's chief exponents; others are John Luther Adams, Michael Byron, Bunita Marcus, French electronic composer Eliane Radigue—and, daddy of them all, Morton Feldman.

It was Feldman who pioneered the kind of floating, momentum-less continuity that much of today's music takes as its rhetorical model. Vigeland, chair of the composition department at Manhattan School of Music, studied with Feldman and, as pianist, has played on recordings of many of Feldman's most important chamber works. Dating from 1979 when Vigeland was still closely associated with Feldman, *Vara* (the title is a Portuguese word indicating a variable unit of measurement) is one of Vigeland's most Feldmanesque works; but there are already important differences in style. Feldman's music jumps from one idea to another, but Vigeland's from the beginning has much to do with gradualness, easing from register to register and texture to texture. More obviously, Vigeland has always been interested in rhythmic precision, which

or solo works are longer than 20 minutes and in one movement). The piece starts out in floating, isolated motives sustained by the pedal, and ends up in staccato chords. The chords don't repeat predictably, but they keep coming back. Between groups of them a melody starts to emerge, and slowly develops. Besides gradualness, another Vigeland strategy is a teetering balance between tonality and atonality. Lyrical diatonicism and craggy atonality are merely two extremes between which the continuum wanders.

Some of Vigeland's works take the continuum as a starting point for something much more fluid and evanescent. Such a work is his *Aurochs and Angels* (1999) for string quartet. (An auroch is a species of wild ox that went extinct centuries ago, and from which present-day cattle are descended.) The piece's continuity is largely motivic, yet one or more quartet members is often holding a chord in the background, making it almost sound like a string quartet with a sustain pedal.

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