



# David First

by Kyle Gann

Even though I've been enjoying David First's music for more than twenty years, his music can still fool me into thinking something's gone terribly wrong. A First piece typically opens with a calm, consonant sonority. Two minutes in, you are suddenly disagreeably struck by how out of tune the instruments are. Two minutes after that, the harmony will become complex with vibrations, and

then you remember that this is no ordinary music. The opening of a First piece can sound like a plane taking off; the ending can sound like a huge cluster chord on a pipe organ resolving into a glorious triad. It's an oceanic music—always in motion, yet gradual, lulling you into complacency before rousing itself into a majestic climax. The music fills you up, bears you through surprise after surprise;

it finally dies away in a long decrescendo, you can feel like the breath's been sucked out of you.

First is one of the drone composers who emerged from a particular side of minimalism—some would say, the more austere and demanding side, though his music is anything but puritanical. Aside from the original droners in La Monte Young's Theater of Eternal Music, one could name Charlemagne Palestine, Eliane Radigue, Ellen Fullman, and Phill Niblock. But Radigue, a true French original, makes music only for electronic tape; Palestine is a solo performer and almost a performance artist; Fullman performs (with others) on her own instrument of long strings; Niblock puts music and film together and usually has most of the sound components on tape, against which a soloist or small group can perform and blend in. First is perhaps the drone composer who has most kept the form evolving in the performance world, as I've been reminded by the pieces involving acoustic musicians on his superb new three-CD release, *Privacy Issues* (XI label). Never a purist of any stripe, First has led a career committed to both improvisation and composition, design and spontaneity, free jazz and rock and notated music.

First started out in Philadelphia as a guitar-banger with a band called The Note-killers—a group that has made a rather surprising comeback in the last few years—and later moved to New York. (In 2001 his apartment was across the street from the World Trade Center, making him perhaps the composer most closely affected by 9/11.) His father taught him about electronics, and a guitar teacher named Dennis Sandole sparked his interest in Hermann Helmholtz's classic *On the Sensations of Tone*, from which, like Debussy, Harry Partch, Ben Johnston, and many others before him, he became fascinated with the mathematical principles behind tuning and harmony. Determined to perform with drones in a live-ensemble format, he formed

the World Casio Quartet, bending pitches on the only cheap tunable synthesizer available at the time. It was the 1980s, when a lot of young minimalists were adding a rock beat to their continua in search of a wider audience. First, who'd already been a rocker, found that a cheap ploy, and determined to make high drama with nothing more than harmony itself.

First's specialty is to skirt the liminal area between consonance and dissonance, the edge at which chords seem just about to either come into or go out of tune. His music now shimmies in complex clusters, now breaks into a gloriously in-tune harmonic series, the real thrill being at neither extreme but the points at which you can hear what's coming. Electronics are usually involved. He often performs solo with guitar (strings often sustained with an E-bow), theremin, synthesizer, or laptop, and he can make just as much noise by himself as he can with an ensemble. I should mention that First's titles are drawn from a personal mythology and are some of the longest and most whimsical you'll ever hear. A work on the new CD set called *My Veil Evades Detection; My Veil Defies Exhaustion; My Veil and I Divorce* is scored for violin, clarinet, guitar, piano, and First himself on e-bow guitar. *Pipeline Witness Apologies to Dennis* (a tribute to his late guitar teacher) adds trombones to tuned keyboards and guitar. One of the most memorable live performances I heard in the 1990s was an ensemble piece titled *Jade Screen Test Dreams of Renting Wings*. Another was perhaps First's magnum opus, a minimalist/rock opera called *The Manhattan Book of the Dead*, a moving lament for AIDS victims.

What happens in the ensemble pieces is that you can't tell who's playing what. The instruments, some acoustic and some electronic, completely fuse; and part of what you're hearing, the part that raises the hair on the back of your neck, are acoustic phenomena that arise from the

various lines going in and out of tune. You watch a group of people playing almost motionlessly, but the sound masses are swirling around the room. Some of what you hear, they're not even playing: it's the sum and difference tones that get created in your inner ear, illusions that no microphone could capture. I've seen some of First's scores, and they often don't have many notes: just whole notes in a measureless time field with notations as to how many cents sharp or flat each note should be. It's not chamber music in the conventional sense, perhaps, but it is a group of players reading from paper and blending themselves into an ensemble sound so tight that you can't distinguish one from another.

Niblock's and Alvin Lucier's compositions are more classically minimalist, but First is using some of the same acoustic tricks; his music moves slowly in and out of focus and can be exciting for the attentive listener willing to meet it halfway. First's music is not so demure. It swoops, roars, grinds, lifts you up and, having whirled you around, sets you back down. Though gradual, it is hardly subtle. Sometimes when a grand major triad, more perfectly in tune than that of a piano, comes barreling out of a roar of overtones, I get the impression that I'm listening to a Romantic symphony—Carl Nielsen comes to mind—stripped down to its harmonies and blurred into slow glissandos. No one else has done so much to take drone music out of the electronic loft concert and bring it back into the concert hall as a live-performance medium. And the result is some of the most stunning sonic surprises I've ever heard.

*Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Yale University Press). His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.*