

AMERICAN COMPOSER

JANICE GITECK

BY KYLE GANN

A sunny presence in rain-soaked Seattle, Janice Giteck has led a quiet career by temperament and choice. In 1979, after she had studied with Olivier Messiaen and Darius Milhaud, the San Francisco Symphony commissioned her for an ambitious four-movement work called *Tree*, which no less than Dennis Russell Davies conducted. Giteck seemed headed for big-time orchestra circles. But then she stepped away from that track, and found her center in a long, intimate, very Asian-sounding chamber work called *Breathing Songs from a Turning Sky*. She refused to take the glamorous route if it made her deviate by one note from her own, inward-seeking path. And that's why, today, Giteck is not as well known outside West Coast circles as everyone once expected her to be.

Which is not to say she's less of a composer for it: quite the contrary. Giteck's music glows with inner spirituality. Her melodies are heartfelt and memorable, her drones comforting, her textures utterly original. Perhaps the most outlandish example of the latter is the fifth movement from *Breathing Songs*: the pianist and two percussionists pound out a light, jingling ostinato at 200 notes per minute, while flute, bass clarinet, bassoon, and cello play a warm, mournful melody at an independent sixty-six beats a minute. It's like watching a cobra dance behind a gently swinging bead curtain.

The seventh movement is even more of a surprise: a brief, silent meditation for players and audience. The movement's title is "Majesty (hod)," for *Breathing Songs* is based on the Kabala, Judaism's mystical text. It is typical of Giteck in that it creates a spiritual ambience for the audience, but in other ways, it is difficult to call any of her music typical, because her different works reach out to so many cultures. Her Jewish roots are only one of many sources.

Of Russian Jewish stock (she has a photo of her great-great-grandfather, a klezmer musician, standing in the palace of the last Czar), Giteck was born and bred on Coney Island. As a girl she delighted in the buzz of Orthodox Jews chanting their daily prayers on the boardwalk, and in the great cantors who sang at her parents' synagogue. She had already been composing for a few years when, at the age of twelve, she relocated with her parents to Tucson, Arizona. Here she discovered the quite different spirituality of the Papago, Pima, and other Amerindian tribes in the desert. That influence would bear fruit in the 1970s, in works such as *Thunder, Like a White Bear Dancing* (based on Ojibwa Indian songs), and *Callin' Home Coyote*, a raucously joyous theater piece.

Later, after the San Francisco brush with fame, she would move to Seattle (she teaches at the small, ferociously individualistic Cornish Institute) and assimilate further sets of influences: Javanese music, East Indian Music, East European folksong, all of which, along with Jewish and American Indian music, she has integrated into her multifarious chamber works. Probably no other composer today alludes to so many cultural idioms.

HOME (revisited)

Janice Giteck



Dedicated in prayer to benefic people living with AIDS.



What lies behind all of Giteck's multicultural resources, though, is a concern with ritual. In every culture, she has written, ritual includes three elements: "people coming together (gathering), the intended activity (performing), and the going away (leaving/dispersing). This format may be completely obvious," she continues, "but... the ritual frame has not lost its charge.... It is, quite innocently, a function of our being human, something we need to do."

Before completing her international music education, Giteck detoured to Europe, where she entered Olivier Messiaen's class at the Paris Conservatory and met Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, with whom she also worked. Here she acquired the sophisticated compositional technique responsible for her music's technical expertise. Many composers have received a stringent European polish; many have absorbed ideas and methods from non-Western cultures. Very few have done both as thoroughly as Giteck. The combination is why her music—accessible, joyous, and universal in its appeal—is also exquisite in its detail and compelling in its inner logic.

In the mid-80s Giteck underwent a creative crisis and didn't compose for three years. During that time, to get herself through the crisis, she took a Master's degree in psychology and worked at the Seattle Mental Health Institute, dealing with AIDS patients, schizophrenics, and geriatric cases. With the aged, she elicited the stories of their lives; with schizophrenics she practiced non-verbal communication. Both activities she saw as stripping music down to a primitive experience, developing it as a common denominator for humanity. And out of that experience came her best-known work to date: *Om Shanti*.

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Om, of course, is the primal syllable used in yogic meditation; *shanti* is Sanskrit for peace. A soprano sings in the first and last of five movements, opening with a Sanskrit poem: "I am without thought, without form. I am all pervasive, / I am everywhere, yet I am beyond all senses... I am consciousness and bliss." The soprano later ends the work in a transcendently calm meditation, singing the piece's title over and over on a few pitches with ever-changing contours. In-between, the second and fourth movements weave melodic

figures from Javanese music into postminimalist textures infectious in their rousing momentum. The emotional center of the work, the middle movement, is a soulful duet for violin and cello. The two instruments intertwine in modal lines reminiscent of Jewish cantillation, but when they return to repeat the opening, the cello drops down to a soft drone, and the violin has to play the remainder without its partner: a vivid musical picture of bereavement.

Om Shanti is dedicated to people living with AIDS, one of several such homages Giteck has written since the epidemic appeared. The piece was the beginning of her music and healing series, which now includes the mournful "Tapasya" for viola and percussion, "Home" for gamelan and male chorus (a chant on the title word, which of course includes the sound "om"), and "Sleepless in the Shadow", a chamber theater work based on East European folk song. Some of these works raise pointed political questions via metaphor or stage actions; others charm the ear with floating postminimal melodies. All of them reach out to touch the listener personally, for Giteck is neither academician nor slick professional, but an activist who believes that music has the power to heal the world. ■

