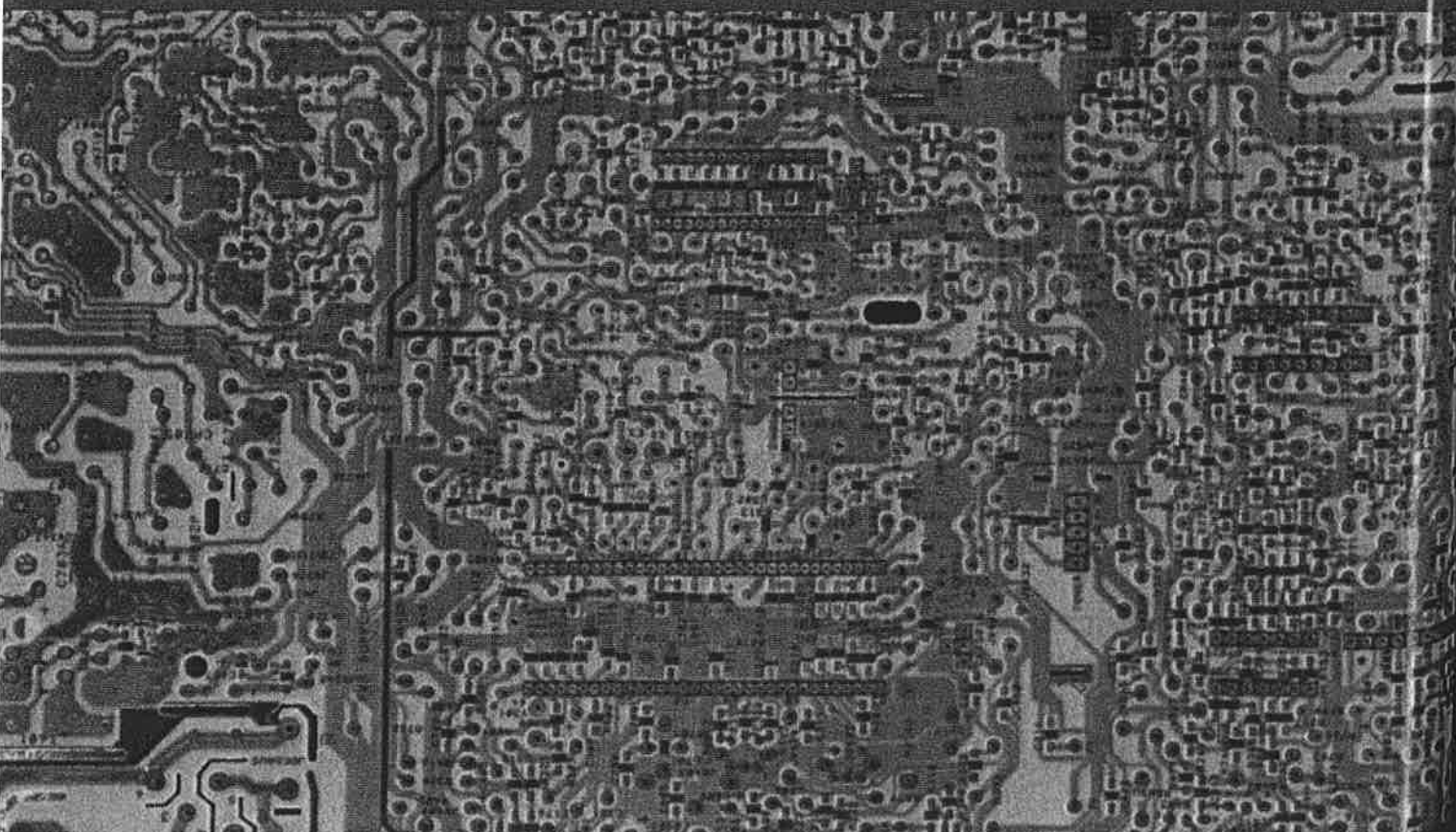


I suppose the strangest experience I've had in the last twenty-five years that could be counted as chamber music was the Impossible Music ensemble, led by David Weinstein, at a concert at the Alternative Museum in Manhattan. Four or five guys sat in front of the audience holding portable CD players. They pushed buttons, squeezed and tilted them, and little bits of music floated out in abrupt spurts, repeating maniacally and getting stuck in robotic soundbites. And somehow, among other things, these virtuosi of the hot-wired CD player replicated, live, the "Revolution 9" tape collage from the Beatles' White Album.



It is not so much that chamber music has changed in the last twenty-five years as that its realm has expanded. People still write violin sonatas and string quartets and may always do so. But as the world opens up more and more to other cultures and other technologies, chamber music swallows up—or is forced to digest?—new instruments and methods. Violins are amplified, electric guitars are substituted, samplers (electronic instruments capable of recording and playing back any sound) croak out bird songs and clips from TV newscasts, and sometimes an apparently idle computer might be sitting nearby wreaking havoc with the whole thing. Chamber music, so vaguely defined by the number of its performers and the size of the space played in, is porous to social and technological change.

And perhaps more than any other musical genre, chamber music has always changed its style according to its social role. In the seventeenth century, when it was played by amateurs in the home, it was supposed to be easier, simpler music than the concerti and symphonies and operas written for professionals. Instrumentation was flexible, sometimes nonspecific. The high melody in a Baroque trio sonata was equally suitable for violin or flute, and the classical keyboard sonata was frequently published with an optional violin “accompaniment” that could be omitted if the violinist was unavailable when the clavichordist felt like playing.

The nineteenth century ushered in the art of the virtuoso, and with it the conception of chamber music as a public art. Over that century—already more than evident in Beethoven’s massive *Grosse Fuge*—chamber music evolved to become *more* detailed and difficult than its symphonic counterpart. In a nineteenth-century symphony, bass players hold whole notes and trombonists count rests, but in a chamber work the themes and other musical delights must be passed around from player to player so everyone enjoys the game. There came to be more subtlety and detail in a Brahms quartet or trio than in a Brahms symphony.

Then—as social philosopher and part-time composer Theodor Adorno astutely noted—a peculiar transformation took place in the early twentieth century. By Schoenberg’s youth, chamber music had acquired an intellectual prestige that symphonic music envied. In the hands of Schoenberg and his generation, orchestral music *caught up* with chamber music. A glance at Schoenberg’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, or any Berg score, reveals a chamber music level of detail, or continuous fluidity and soloistic writing in all parts. Throughout the twentieth century, most “advanced” music in any medium aspired to the condition of chamber music. Even a mammoth extravaganza like Stockhausen’s *Gruppen* for three

orchestras is, in the very texture and technique of its writing, chamber music.

And that’s where things stood when the great turnaround of the 1970s happened. Ironically, when composers of the 1960s rebelled against complexity in all forms, they did so with chamber works: La Monte Young’s extremely slow String Trio, Terry Riley’s janglingly repetitive *In C*, Steve Reich’s meditative *Drumming* and *Octet*, Philip Glass’s hypnotic *Music in Fifths* and *Music with Changing Parts*. Or at least we could call this chamber music, though it certainly didn’t fit the detailed paradigm we had been used to; the players often played in rhythmic unison, even melodic unison, with none of the contrapuntal give and take, the echoing of motives from instrument to instrument that chamber music had long assumed.

In fact, this chamber music had become *symphonic*, appropriating the arena that had earlier belonged to the orchestra. It was written, not for the delectation of the musicians (although it can be fun to play), but to project an idea clearly out to an audience. The snakelike endless melody of *Music in Fifths* was just as calculated to draw an audience in

AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN

CHAMBERMUSIC CHANGINGMUSIC

as was the folksong from the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. And it achieved this effect not only through the simplicity of its musical texture, but through the technique that promised the most thorough transformation of chamber music on every level: amplification.

Through the possibility of amplification the very concept of chamber music became hazy. Compare a conventional string quartet, a string quartet playing with amplification, and a four-person rock band—if any one of these is chamber music, how can the other two not be? And amplification is not only an issue in minimalist or pop-influenced music. George Crumb’s ground-breaking *Black Angels* of 1970, written for electric string quartet, drastically transformed its formerly mild-mannered medium, and led to a quickly inhabited new world in which players of delicate instruments could roar like tornadoes.

This is the ambiguous, pluralistic world that chamber music finds itself in after 1980. In terms of new compositional activity, chamber music can see itself as the pre-eminent genre, but so widespread and diverse, in fact, that it can no longer define itself. The 1970s may have been the great age of the soloist-commissions, with new music championed by

stars like soprano Bethany Beardslee, pianist Robert Miller, violinist Paul Zukovsky. Since then, though, the most visible midwives of innovative work are chamber groups: the Kronos Quartet, the Soldier Quartet, the Relâche ensemble, the California E.A.R. Unit, eighth blackbird. No orchestra has come close to such fertile commissioning activity since the St. Louis Symphony went downhill, though there have been a couple of aggressively marketed attempts like Albany's Dogs of Desire orchestra.

Admittedly, a tremendous amount of new chamber music is still recognizable by the old definitions. People still write string quartets, and perhaps always will. The so-called New Romanticism entered through the string quartet medium with the "Concord" Quartets of George Rochberg (1972–79), explicit style-collages making reference to Handel, Beethoven, Mahler, and Schoenberg. Composers seeking to revive the glories of nineteenth-century repertoire were naturally drawn to the genres of stringed-instrument chamber works, like John Harbison's *November 19, 1828* for piano quintet, which is partially based on a melody from a work Schubert left unfinished. George Tsontakis's Third and Fourth String Quartets offer an enticing lyricism, not so much nostalgic for the Romantic past as relieved to find that sweetness and melody are still possible after the cataclysmic twentieth century.

The number of string quartets being written probably surpasses any other classical genre—insofar as one can talk of genres in late-twentieth-century music. Kronos has commissioned a number of them from composers who might not otherwise have written for the medium, such as minimalist Terry Riley and astrologer-composer Dane Rudhyar. It may be, though, that the mixed ensemble is catching up, especially the ensemble of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. That's the instrumentation of both the Da Capo and eighth blackbird ensembles, and since Joan Tower's *Petroushskates* of 1980, dozens of pieces have been commissioned and written for such a group, often with the optional addition of percussion. In any case, in contrast to the relentlessly fixed instrumentation of the modern orchestra, chamber music has become a fluid, genre-less world.

One composer has so stretched the temporal and sonic boundaries of chamber music that he fits in a category by himself. Morton Feldman (1926–87), once known as John Cage's sidekick and a composer of monochromatically quiet music, began lengthening the scale of his works in the 1970s. By the time of his death, he had written several chamber works several hours long. *Crippled Symmetry* for flute, percussion, and piano is ninety minutes long; *For Philip*

Guston, with the same instrumentation, lasts for five hours. And Feldman's String Quartet II is surely the mother of all string quartets, lasting either five or six hours depending whether you believe Feldman's description or his tempo markings. A surprising number of groups have taken on these Everests of chamber performance, tackling the concentration and bathroom problems with reverent success. There are already two recordings of *Guston*, and three quartets (Kronos, Flux, and the Ives Ensemble) have played the six-hour string quartet in public. So far, few younger composers have followed Feldman's example in length (thankfully, perhaps), but his works are becoming known as the mixed-ensemble equivalent of the late Beethoven quartets for massiveness and profundity.

For those willing to grapple with the issues of amplification, a whole new field of chamber music is opening up. Already there are amplified soloists who not only can address larger crowds, but also obtain effects unavailable on unaided instruments: electric violist Martha Mooke and electric cellist Jeffrey Krieger. If the minimalists wrote largely for synthesizers, their offspring the postminimalists have more often mixed acoustic instruments with synthesizers and other electronic instruments. Art Jarvinen's sextet *Murphy Nights* has a long solo for a MIDI wind controller. Michael Gordon's *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* and *Acid Rain* include synths, as does William Duckworth's *Simple Songs about Sex and War*. The balance problems of combining acoustic and electric instruments can be considerable, but they are part of everyday life in new chamber music.

A sub-genre of amplified chamber music has already become prevalent in New York: the electric guitar ensemble. Classically trained flutist and composer Rhys Chatham got the ball rolling in the late 1970s with pieces like his Guitar Trio and *Drastic Classicism*, and within a few years his erstwhile associate Glenn Branca was making headlines with a series of symphonies scored for anywhere from six to twelve guitars. (Chatham later wrote three symphonies for 100 guitars each, but any medium requiring space and extension chords for 100 amplifiers clearly takes us out of the chamber realm.) John Myers, Wharton Tiers, Susan Stenger, Christian Rober, and Todd Levin are among the composers who have fronted electric guitar ensembles, sometimes with drums and/or synthesizer, sometimes not.

Any attempted argument that these ensembles belong to the pop field doesn't hold water. Chatham's and Branca's works can be upwards of half an hour; Levin's and Rober's are carefully composed in terms of melody and counterpoint. One could compare the

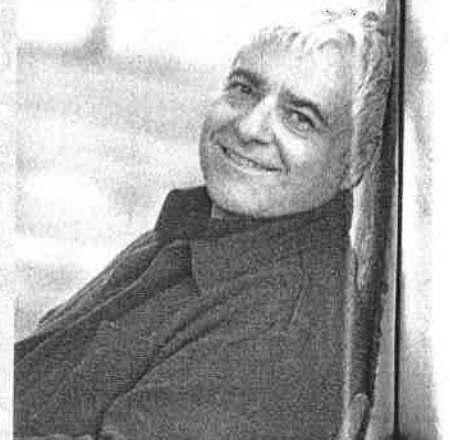


John Harbison



Joan Tower

William Duckworth



present development of the guitar ensemble with the string orchestra of the 1740s, still in formation and beginning to add in new timbres. I truly believe that the orchestra of the mid-twenty-first century will be made up of electric guitars instead of violins, synthesizers instead of winds and brass, samplers (electronic instruments capable of recording and playing back any sound) instead of percussion. The fact that it hasn't arrived yet is a good indicator of social, economic, and institutional inertia.

The economic basis for the rise of the guitar ensemble is obvious: three or four electric guitars can substitute for an entire battery of violins, violas, cellos, and basses, a synthesizer or two can act as an entire wind section, and thus a composer has at his or her disposal a massive-sounding orchestra with only ten people on the payroll instead of seventy-five. In an age in which patronage will no longer support orchestras, the small amplified ensemble will take over. We need a new musical repertoire for it, and that's in production. (For purists convinced that electronic sound will never match the subtlety of acoustic, be assured that some of the deficiency lies in loudspeaker design, which has hardly changed in ninety years, and experts are working to bring more subtlety to that part of the equation.)

A new genre of chamber music hardly recognized as such is the interactive computer-music world. For almost two decades now, pioneers like David Behrman, Richard Teitelbaum, and George Lewis have been designing software to make computers play music along with live performers. Behrman in particular has made subtle sound environments for soloists to work within; a trumpeter like Ben Neill or a flutist like Maggi Payne will play his or her instrument and the computer will hum harmonies, with new timbral effects or contrapuntal lines triggered by certain pitches or volume levels. In 1985 Teitelbaum made a Concerto Grosso for three soloists accompanied by computer-driven synthesizers and MIDI pianos; material played by the soloists was memorized, altered, and regurgitated by the computers.

So far such pieces remain pretty much in the hands of the composers, but one could easily imagine the software being put up for sale some day, so that an oboist could order the computer program for Behrman's *Unforeseen Events* to put on a program, just the way she'd order the music to a Handel Sonata. There are also the computer whizzes like Mark Trayle, John Bischoff, Chris Brown, and others, who improvise together on linked computers, taking material from each other, transforming it, and sending it on to the next computer—very much as players in a string quartet will pass the melody back and forth in continually developing variation.



There is no more reason to be afraid of these innovations than there is to be easily impressed by them. They will inevitably arrive, some will prove fertile, others will date quickly, and ultimately the ear and the spirit will be the final arbiters of what works and what doesn't, just as with every new wrinkle in the musical field. Purists may balk at applying the term, but that some of the chamber music of the future will be performed by computer, and using computer, seems hardly open to doubt.

On the other hand, in the last ten years I've become aware of a new burgeoning of chamber music for good old acoustic instruments. Many younger composers who started out as fans of minimalist and pop-influenced musics are now swinging back into the acoustic chamber music field and revivifying it with ideas brought from those areas. Composers from this postminimalist area—one might mention Beth Anderson, William Duckworth, Elizabeth Brown, Bernadette Speach, and the composers of the Common Sense collective, including Dan Becker, Belinda Reynolds, Melissa Hui, Carolyn Yarnell, Randall Woolf, and others—tend not to write pieces called String Quartet or Piano Quintet, but rather works for miscellaneous small ensembles with coloristic titles like *Sage*, *My Insect Bride*, *Artificial Light*, and *Rosemary Swale*.

These postminimalist composers grew up in a world of rock songs, pop music, and relentless minimalist assaults. Interestingly, they represent a spirit of compromise with the ages-old chamber medium. There will always be an audience for acoustic music, always be an audience for quiet, serious work that doesn't make you want to jump up and dance, and an audience that prefers the "reasonable" fifteen- or twenty-five-minute work to the evening-length minimalist tone avalanche. For these audiences, the postminimalist composers write music that fits the familiar concert paradigm, but they are not going to be unfaithful to their own upbringing to do it. And so the vernacular inflections of pop music work their way into this music, along with additive and/or repetitive structures derived from minimalism, jazz harmonies and syncopations, even tunings from Indian and Japanese cultures depending on the background of the composer.

What it all means is that chamber music has Americanized. The four-movement piano quintet, the abstract string trio with scherzo and fugue, were European constructs. Chamber music has been remade in America's image: multicultural, rhythmically catchy, informal, full of references to the self-contradictory world around us. We may prefer it to the European classics of the past (which will not be replaced by it), or we may "tsk, tsk" over what we insist on seeing as the decline of taste in it. But it offers us a mirror we will never find in nineteenth-century music. ■

