

Jasper Johns, *Three Flags*, 1958

# Fiddles, Garage Bands, &

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD—A REPORT FROM CHAMBER M

## LOCATING AN AMERICAN CHAMBER MUSIC TRADITION

BY KYLE GANN

In November of 1981, I heard Glenn Branca at the Mudd Club in New York. The "hall" was about half the size of my current living room. It was crammed with around 50 people of whom I, at age 26, looked to be the oldest. Branca and three of his cohorts played electric guitars, their amplifiers pumped up to a volume at the threshold of pain. Afterward, my ears rang for three days.

Now *that* was chamber music. Or was it? It certainly took place within a space to whose sardine-tin-like dimensions the word "intimate" hardly does justice. The players kept synchronized through eye contact. They constituted, quite visibly, a string quartet. Yet the volume of sound they produced, sufficient for a football stadium, could have easily competed with the climax of a Strauss tone poem played at point-blank range by a symphony orchestra. Can we still call this chamber music or not?

This kind of query was the motivation behind "Chamber Music in America," the thought-provoking conference hosted by Chamber Music America in Manhattan's Crowne Plaza Hotel this past January. As the moderator Robert Martin mentioned in his introduction, chamber music is often defined as music made by a small number of musicians playing together. Is a jazz quintet, then, chamber music? How about a rock group? A Balinese gamelan? A woodwind trio with interactive computer? Then how about a trio of

# and Record Players

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people playing computers? Should chamber musicians open their definitions to those from non-European fields, or freeze the identity of the medium to a



narrative on this continent. Predictably, categories and definitions began to unravel in the post-1945 era. More surprisingly, they also unraveled in the

specific European repertoire?

Then again, "chamber" seems to indicate music played in small spaces. But what does this mean in the age of amplification? When a string quartet roars out, through loudspeakers, into the vast canyon of Avery Fisher Hall, is that still chamber music? Or how about those deafening electric guitars in the tiny little Mudd Club? Do space and musical medium still interrelate in an age of limitless technology? How is chamber music's fate altered in a world of multiculturalism, internet technology, amplification, mass culture, even ambient music?

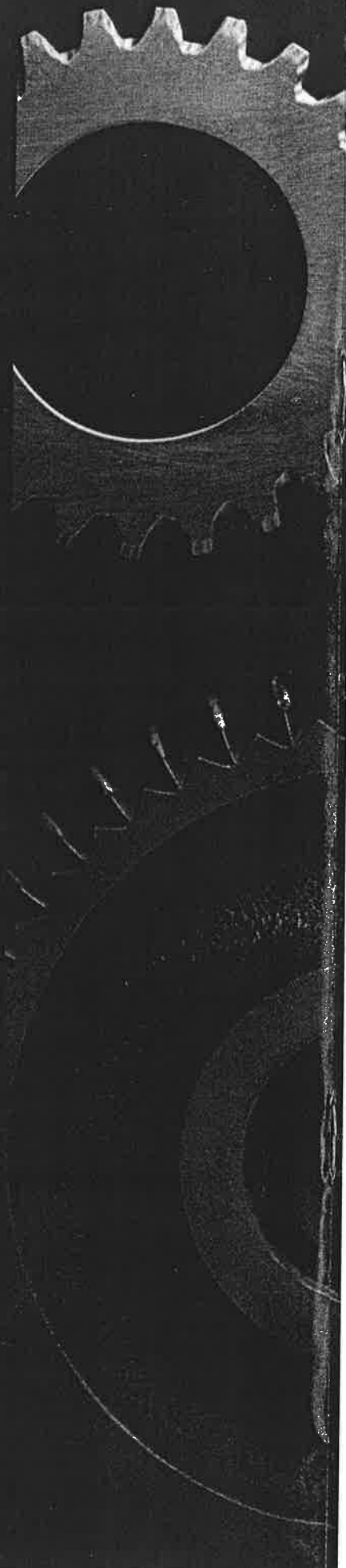
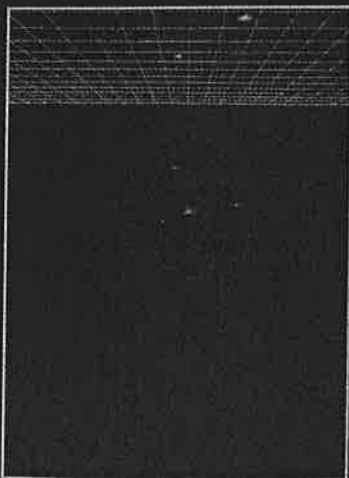
So Martin, associate dean of Bard College, co-director of the Bard Music Festival, and an excellent cellist himself, assembled three panels on consecutive days to assess the trajectory of chamber music in America, not only looking at current practices but delving into America's past. The panels dealt with America's musical history in three periods: before 1900, 1900 to 1945, and

since World War II. The division suggested, if it didn't exactly correspond to, a tripartite division in chamber music's

opposite direction as well, leaving an interested audience to wonder whether that European genre "chamber music" has ever really had an identifiably American counterpart.

The sharpest moment of categorical ambiguity came on the post-war panel when *Los Angeles Times* critic Mark Swed played a tape of a piece of chamber music written in 1942. As he began, we heard the unmistakable strains of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony—interrupted at last by a burst of clattering percussion. The piece, of course, was John Cage's *Credo In US*, in which one of the percussionists performs on a record player (the directions recommend using a vinyl disc of an orchestral warhorse). When a chamber work can *include* a recording of a symphonic work, assumptions about "chamber music sonority" fly out the window.

Yet another definition often trotted out is that chamber music is intended to be played at home by amateurs. Edward Rothstein, cultural critic for *The New York Times*, located a crisis in chamber music in the fact that we've been trying to establish it as a repertoire, whereas it was originally a participatory art. The number of American families who can boast a string trio within one household today is statistically insignificant, but David Schiff, professor at Reed College and author of *The Music of Elliott Carter*, pointed to the most common form of amateur chamber music currently found in America: the garage band. For the ultra-conservative, ultra-Eurocentric Rothstein, of course, this completely





# ... still interrelate technology?

sidestepped the crucial question of quality; the great repertoire of European chamber music, he claimed, taught amateurs how music works as they played it, thus elevating them to a new level.

Well, maybe. Schiff also provided a framework that mediated between such viewpoints. In one of the conference's high points, he enumerated four models by which chamber music and its changing history are habitually under-

stood by different groups:

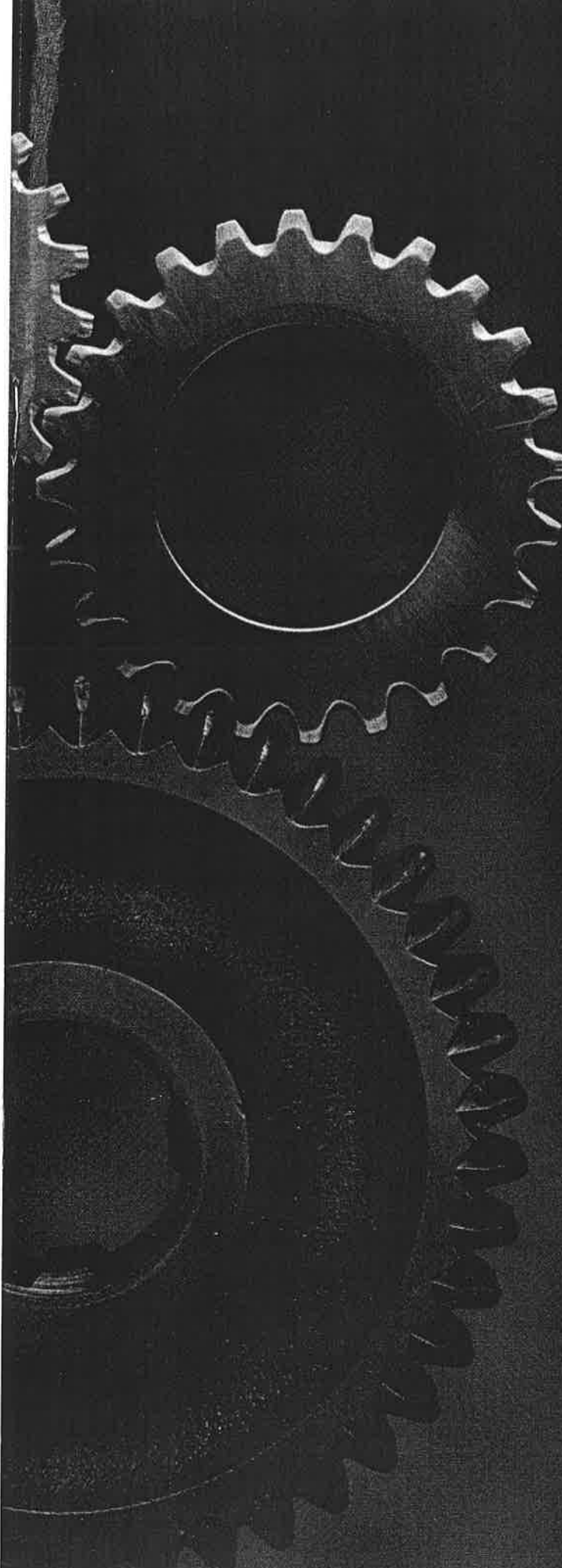
■ *The Man in the White Suit* model: Named for the 1951 film in which Alec Guinness's character invents a suit that never becomes dirty, this model contends that the repertoire of 19th century music possesses an indestructible value that will never decline, which transcends cultural relativism or historicism.

■ *Planned Obsolescence*: This opposite model, a continuing ideal of the avant-garde, contends that truly new art can be known by its novelty, and that the new is always shocking at first, then becomes normalized. By implication, older types of art also have to pass out of style and become eventually irrelevant.

■ *The Welfare State* model: New music forms a permanent underclass in the musical culture, a deserving minority that we buy off from time to time;

none of us want it to be there, but we give it a little money to salve our consciences.

■ *The New Testament* model: Like



*how is chamber music's fate altered in a world of multiculturalism, internet technology, amplification, mass culture, even ambient music?*

Thomas Kuhn's scientific model of the "paradigm shift," this model assumes that at certain points new paradigms come along, and a new social contract is drawn up. What had been alive and valid dies, and a new form arises; this never happens overnight, but at some point people realize that things have changed and new rules are in effect.

Schiff stopped short of urging one of these archetypes at the expense of the others—the fact that they've coexisted for so long indicates that none expresses more than a partial truth—but he did imply a perceived experience of the New Testament model. For his students, he said, the paradigm has already shifted. Playing in their garage bands, listening to CDs of music made across the world and throughout the centuries, they do not feel culturally deprived. "What is interesting and threatening," Schiff ended, "is that the separation of the world of popular music from the classical world, which once seemed easy to maintain, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain."

Such arguments about incorporation of the new into our ingrained listening habits are not novel, nor are they specific to chamber music.

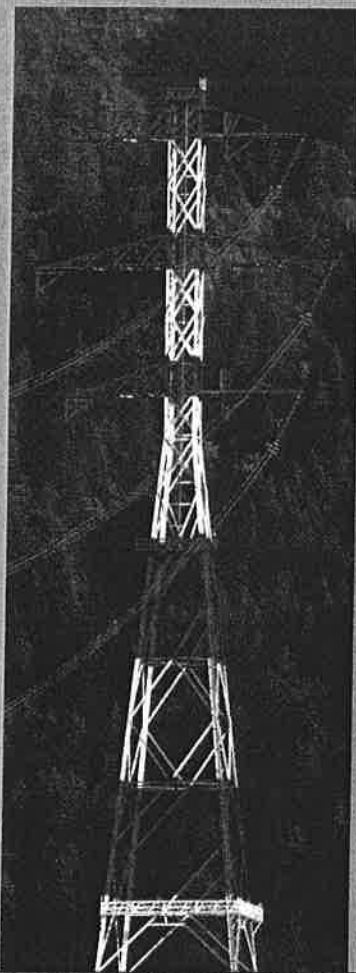
What was more revealing in the conference was the examination of America's past, for chamber music practice in our country's early history

is a subject that has been little explored, at least specifically. Music historian Frederick Selch from the Center for the Study of American Musical History, and Mary Jane Corry, harpsichordist at SUNY at New Paltz, described an 18th-century America filled with amateur musicians as rooted in their local vernaculars, and as little concerned about high culture, as Schiff's guitar-banging students. Corry drew her information

from a fascinating new archive resulting from an NEH-funded project she directed: a CD-ROM entitled "The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783." The project compiles notices about the performing arts from 60,000 issues of newspapers of the era. Some of Corry's findings exploded any hope for cultural progress.

For example, despite the primitivism of the musical conditions she examined, there were, in 1773—when the population of New York City was 21,000—at least six shops in New York selling what we now think of as classical music. Today there are three. Also, in all those 60,000 newspapers there were only "two or three" reviews by music critics. Some musicians would find that an enviable state of affairs as well.

Even more eye-opening was Michael Broyles's examination of the change in the reputation of the violin





in the American 1840s. According to Broyles, professor of music and American history at Pennsylvania State University, through the early 19th century the violin—or rather, fiddle—was disdained as merely an instrument for tavern keepers to play dance tunes on. Gentlemen serenaded their sweethearts on the flute or clarinet, young ladies learned to play the spinet or harpsichord. “The whole notion,” Broyles claimed, “of classical music as opposed to other kinds of music was essentially unformed.” Then, around 1840, when European virtuosos such as Ole Bull and Henri Vieuxtemps began to tour America, the situation changed overnight: “The concert tradition of European violin virtuosos in America in the critical years 1840 to 1843 probably did more to establish the viability of a musical style based on string instruments than any other single development; and with it, I might add, the notion, for good or ill, of a high culture began to grow.”

Soon the violin became synonymous with European polish and artistic sophistication. In 1843 Ureli Corelli Hill and members of the fledgling New York Philharmonic presented the first string quartet series in America, opening with Mozart, Ferdinand Ries, and a so-advertised “enormously difficult and wild work by Beethoven.” By the 1850s the American landscape was dotted with chamber groups, and the dean of music critics J.S. Dwight was resorting to religious metaphors to describe the heavenly effect of Mozart's string quartets.

If American chamber music thus originated in response to Euro-

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Alexander String Quartet  
American String Quartet  
Angeles String Quartet  
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#### *From Europe*

Artis Quartet (Vienna)  
*next tour: February 1-14, 1999*  
Orpheus Quartet (Dusseldorf)  
*debut tour: March 1-18, 1999*  
Parisii Quartet (Paris)  
*next tour: January 8-27, 1999*  
Talich Quartet (Prague)  
*next tour: Fall 1999*  
Ysaye Quartet (Paris)  
*next tour: November 3-22, 1998*

### Mixed Ensembles

Los Angeles Piano Quartet  
New York Chamber Soloists  
Paris Piano Trio  
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Trio Fedele (flute, cello, piano)

### Soloists

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pean visitors, the conference's middle panel—covering the era 1900–1945—portrayed an American chamber scene overwhelmingly dominated by European string quartets (Busch, Kolisch, Budapest, Pro Arte) and composers, especially those who came to escape totalitarian and anti-Semitic regimes. Cyrilla Barr and Susan Cook spoke about, respectively, the important patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and one of the string quartets she championed, the Pro Arte Quartet, which, having emigrated from Belgium, was unable to return. Towering and intimidating, the six-foot-plus Mrs. Coolidge found her noblest role, Barr said, in helping find teaching jobs and funding for European musicians displaced by the war. Despite Coolidge's penchant for commissioning works from the twelve-tone school, she did not enjoy all of the thorny music she helped bring to life. She went deaf in her later years, and once when someone asked why she didn't support living painters the way she did living composers, she replied with arresting irony, "I may be deaf, but I'm not blind."

The eventual purpose of this conference, as Martin explained it, was to form the first step in the creation of a multi-volume, multi-author work on the history of chamber music in America. So what will this huge and hitherto undescribed animal, American chamber music, look like? If the conference was any indication—and it did provide a series of telling snapshots—one could think of it as a huge sonata form whose first movement is a jig for solo fiddle, the second movement a highly polished string quartet, and the finale a collage of computer-sampled vernaculars from all over.

What does that mean for a future

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prognosis? This is, of course, actually two questions. One concerns future chamber music yet to be composed in America; the other, the future of the performance of past chamber music already in the repertoire. For the first category, the direction is actually quite clear. In an important sense, the future of American music, at least the immediate future, *is* chamber music. As funding dries up for orchestras and opera houses, and as financial pressures force those institutions into ever more conservative programming, composers are obliged more and more to turn to small ensembles to get their work heard. As Swed pointed out, "John Cage, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich did things on the chamber level because that's what they could afford to do." Younger composers such as Michael Gordon, Paul Drescher, and many others have formed their own small ensembles on the Glass/Reich pattern, and other groups of composers, such as the Common Sense collective, have banded together to perform each other's works.

In fact, this brand of American music has come to fulfill the ideal Rothstein invoked, of chamber music as a participatory art, more than any ransplanted European string quartet. While American composers on the European pattern have mostly written meticulously-notated music for pre-existing ensembles, the American underground is a history of collaborative creation in chamber settings such as lofts and apartments. Such groups as La Monte Young's Theater of Eternal Music in the '60s, or the Philip Glass Ensemble of the '70s, hardly made a distinction between rehearsal and performance. To "sit in" with them was to watch music in creation. I hope that when Martin's dream of a comprehensive history of chamber music comes to pass, that some large section or two will be devoted to this indigenously American brand of socially loose yet musically tight-knit chamber performance.

The other question is more tied to the future of European classical music in general. Even more than other genres, chamber music is intricately knitted to the conditions of daily life, and as the historical panels made clear, America has never duplicated to any great extent the familial and community patterns from which the great tradition of European chamber music arose. The string quartet may not play a major role in the future of American chamber music; the historical panels indicated that it did not play a large role in America's past, either. By using amplification and commissioning composers outside the West, the Kronos Quartet has opened up the chamber tradition to forces that will disintegrate its traditional forms, making it more fluid. Likewise, the Soldier, Sirius, and Turtle Island quartets have voraciously absorbed vernacular influences of rock and jazz. However deeply rooted chamber music is on this continent, it will not survive without accommodating to the climate.

What did seem clear from the conference is that chamber music's supporters are neither as stodgy nor as fearful as their colleagues in other areas of classical music. There seemed to be a feeling that nimble little chamber music is better fitted for economic survival than those lumbering dinosaurs, the orchestra and opera house. Few present seemed to share Rothstein's doom-and-gloom assessment; when Swed countered him by stating, "I don't feel any sense of crisis," the audience burst into applause. It may be garage bands, or computers, or electric string quartets, but as long as there are chambers in America, there will be chamber music. ■

