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A Symphonist Stakes Her Claim

By KYLE GANN

QUICK, who's the greatest woman symphonist? If you're up on your women composers, many names may flash to mind: Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, Lili Boulanger, Cecile Chaminade, Ruth Crawford, Thea Musgrave, Joan Tower, Betsy Jolas, Barbara Kolb, Nancy Van de Vate, Lucia Dlugo szewski, Katherine Hoover, Vivian Fine, Ursula Mamlok. There's a lot of orchestral music here, all right, but not a symphony among them.

Wait: Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and Libby Larsen have each written three. And Amy Beach wrote a celebrated "Gaelic" Symphony in response to Dvorak's criticism of American composers. It must be one of them.

But a more ambitious candidate, Gloria Coates, has four symphonies available on CD and, now working on her 11th, is well on her way to becoming the most prolific female symphonist ever. Ms. Coates's symphonies are dark and sensuous, and distinguished by an imaginative use of orchestral glissandos (gradual rather than stepwise changes of pitch, like slow sirens), which culminate powerfully in drawn-out crescendos.

Her music, with its coloristic textures of freely repeated ostinatos, has affinities to Krzysztof Penderecki's "Polish school," whose American exemplars include Ms. Van de Vate and Jacob Druckman. Yet it is quite original in its formal ideas and blurring of tonalities, more complex than Mr. Penderecki's and certainly more audience-friendly than Mr. Druckman's.

If Ms. Coates's name does not ring a bell, at least part of the reason is that she suffers the fate of the expatriate: ignored in her native country, considered a foreigner where she lives. Born in the United States in 1938 and educated here, she moved to Munich, Germany, in 1969. Although for much of those three decades she has kept an American address as well, Germany is where she gets her income, her performances and her radio play. She had one brief moment in New York in 1989, when her Second Symphony was included in the New Music America festival. Now that symphony has appeared on a new CD (CPO 999 590-2) along with two nonsymphonic orchestral works.

"Woman symphonist" almost doesn't even sound like a category, for the symphony seems the most male-identified of musical genres. In the analysis of symphonic form by the musicologist Susan McClary, the symphony is an implicitly phallic archetype, a prime example of patriarchy expressed in music: the first theme of a symphonic allegro is male, the second is female, and the recapitulation forces the female theme to convert to the home key of the male.

Even if you doubt the validity of such psychological analysis, to write symphonies has seemed an explicit competition with Beethoven ever since that master died in 1827. (Brahms, whose First Symphony was

called "Beethoven's 10th," complained, "You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.") Some women composers have felt unworthy to compete; others have scorned symphonic competition as a peculiarly male form of childishness. Whatever the reason, for every woman who has written symphonies, one can find four or five who have written piano or violin concertos.

Ms. Coates did not shrug off the competitive anxiety but consciously wrestled with it. Not until her Symphony No. 7 did she go back and retitle her earlier multimovement works for orchestra symphonies.

"When I did, I thought, 'That's really gutsy of me to call it a symphony,' " she said recently from her home in Munich. "I always had an idea of symphonies being in the 19th century, somehow. I never set out to write a symphony as such. It has to do with the intensity of what I'm trying to say and the fact that it took 48 different instrumental lines to say it, and that the structures I was using had evolved over many years. I couldn't call it a little name."

Her First Symphony, written in 1973 and originally called "Music for Open Strings," is scored for a string orchestra playing entirely on retuned open strings. The work opens with the strings tuned to a minor pentatonic scale (B flat, C, D flat, F, G flat), and they are returned to their normal tuning movement by movement. For that strange but persuasive technical oddity, this remains her best-known work. It is also available on a CPO CD, along with her Symphonies Nos. 4 and 7.

The opening movement of the Fourth will ring bells with Baroque fans; from its web of eerie lines emerges a background passacaglia that turns out to be "When I Am Laid in Earth" from Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas." The effect is as though someone had brushed across Purcell's score with a wet sponge. It might also remind one of the string quartet bravely playing on, amid the tumult, as the Titanic goes down.

In fact, Ms. Coates's music is evocative enough to summon such pictorial images. Her bittersweet tonalities, heard through a mist of glissandos and other timbral effects, can be like a bleak cityscape seen through a whirling blizzard.

The moody and introverted Symphony No. 2 inspires yet another image. Marked in the first movement by tiny, wavering glissandos, it gives a sense of a symphony heard underwater. Yet the subtitle is "Illuminatio in Tenebris" ("Illumination in Darkness"), and the three movements are titled "Aurora Borealis," "Aurora Australis" and "Dawn." (Her symphonies often begin as chamber orchestra works with colorful titles and receive symphonic numbering when revised for full orchestra, as with this one, written in 1974, and revised and expanded for New Music America in 1988.)

The subtitle "refers to the light that is always present," Ms. Coates said. "In music it is heard in the harmonic series which mirrors the upper partials and lower partials. I see it also as a physical light lighting up around one in times of deepest sorrow."

The glissandos create a sense of acoustic illusion, and Ms. Coates became fascinated with them when she was very young. In 1962, as a student at Louisiana State University, she wrote a string quartet entirely in glissandos.

"My teacher wrote on the score, 'Glissandos are for color once or twice in a piece, but all these are too, too---' " she said. "He couldn't even complete the sentence. I didn't go back to glissandos until 1972."

The new CD also includes her "Homage to Van Gogh," of 1993. The subject is a natural one, for Ms. Coates is also a painter of exuberantly cosmic canvases (the CD covers feature her paintings) and someone who, she says, "hears colors." Also on the disk is "Time Frozen" (1988/ 1994), one of her grandest and most characteristic works, with glissandos edging outward at both the bottom and top of the orchestral range, ominously punctuated by timpani rolls that will rattle your loudspeakers and raise goose bumps.

IF you're looking for symphonies to continue the Beethoven-to-Mahler tradition, Ms. Coates's offer a gloomy panoramic vision like that found in the recent symphonies of Giya Kancheli and Allan Pettersson, although her music is more complex and atmospheric than Kancheli's, less busy and more distinctive than Pettersson's. Given the centrality of symphonies to her output, she may well be the woman worthiest to be listed with Shostakovich, Sibelius and the like as contributing to the history of the genre. (The only woman credited with more than 10 symphonies by The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers is the obscure American Julia Perry, who died in 1979 after writing 12.)

"Symphony," after all, is a word open to wide interpretation. It does not, for Ms. Coates, refer to a work in several movements, the outer ones allegro and the second one adagio.

"If you only give the lighter side of yourself, that's not a symphony," she said. "I have to go into the deeper part of myself to make it a symphony. I have to have big spaces of time and quiet and be very at peace with myself to find that hidden place. That's what I feel is a symphony."

Photo: Gloria Coates, an American, has worked in Germany for 30 years. (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)