

# Call It Spectral

BY KYLE GANN

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American expat pianist Heather O'Donnell  
*photo: Oliver Schneller*

**BERLIN**—For the first time, it feels like the reign of postserialist music is over in Europe. Not that there isn't a lot of postserialist music I love. But Boulez's *Pli Selon Pli*, Stockhausen's *Mantra*, and Nono's *Contrappunto dialettico* have come to feel like Brahmsian classics of my youth now, and Europe's reluctance to keep evolving musically has seemed scarily perverse. My first night at the MaerzMusik festival, March 19, in Berlin (where I was invited to tangentially talk on a panel about American music), made me fear more of the same. A brand-new work by French composer George Aperghis, *Dark Side*, however brilliantly performed, regurgitated Boulezian vocal and mallet-percussion riffs that feel threadbare with use by this point.

And so the next evening, even if less impressive in a way, allowed me to exhale with relief, and made it seem that Europe was exhaling as well. *natures mortes* by Georg Friedrich Haas, played by the SWR Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden and Freiburg under the baton of Sylvain Cambreling, was admittedly not as elegantly written as *Dark Side*, but at least it ventured boldly out of serialist territory. Big atonal sonorities moved in chaotic parallel, and for once a recent

out of serialist territory. Big atonal sonorities moved in chaotic parallel, and for once a recent European had put away his tiny tools and microscope, and was painting with a big brush. Several minutes in, a pulsing single note from a marimba began to infect the entire orchestra. "I may have to shamelessly imitate Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* to break loose," it seemed to say, "but I'm as tired of oh-so-precious Stockhausen gestures as you are." And Europe had found its John Adams.

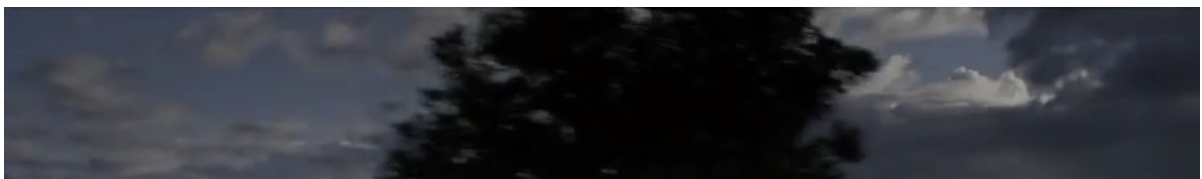
Tristan Murail's *Terra d'Ombre*, which followed, was something else altogether. Murail is the leading figure of spectral music, the only visible new movement in Europe to make inroads against postserialism, and in some ways a reaction against it. Spectral music, as it's been explained to me and as I can see from scores, uses harmonies derived from the overtone series, and sometimes takes computer-graphed waveforms of natural sounds as models. Thus the composer fills in the sound-envelope with pitches, overtones, and volume fluctuations derived from real sound samples, making spectral music the latest "natural" model in opposition to the artificiality of 12-tone-row-based serialism.

"Spectral music," growled the guy sitting next to me (actually, he is a famous composer, so I won't reveal his name, but it rhymes with "Frederic Pzewski"), "always sounds like Debussy." And it's true—if you take the first 10 overtones you get a Debussyan ninth chord, and the horns played quite a few of these in *Terra d'Ombre's* background. But the piece was harmonically heterogenous and extremely elaborate in its overall form, interesting in detail but difficult to keep in memory once it was over. Of course, American microtonal composers have been basing harmonies on the overtone series too, since Harry Partch dabbled with it in 1928, but they never came up with a great PR term like *spectral music*. Say it—it sounds so impressive: spectral music.

Nevertheless, pre-spectral Charles Ives was the central focus of MaerzMusik, and there was plenty of American work, including a strange performance of Ives's Fourth Symphony with the orchestral pianist up front, as in a concerto; the whole thing seemed to be heard sideways. American expatriate pianist Heather O'Donnell gave as fiery a performance of Ives's *Concord Sonata* as I've ever heard, *following* an exhausting recital of works in homage to Ives, the best being by Sidney Corbett and Frederic Rzewski. And the day-long Sunday marathon climaxed in some American works for three orchestras by New Yorkers Petr Kotik, Christian Wolff, and Phill Niblock, all with the Janacek Philharmonie Ostrava. Niblock's *Three Orchids* in particular was an astonishing essay in an orchestral drone slowly retuning itself through imperceptibly changing chords. Any possibility that we might eventually hear such a work closer to home than Berlin?

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