

# Felling the Wall

BY KYLE GANN

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Kramer studied the real way we hear music.

*photo: O'Lynn Waldron*

In my early years at the *Voice*, I wrote quite a bit about a 1988 book called *The Time of Music*, sometimes even drawing ideas from it without crediting it. In it, author Jonathan Kramer used then new research about left-brain/right-brain processing to explore how differently various kinds of music can define and structure (or not structure) time. Left-brain listening Kramer described as analytical, deductive, sequential, objective, and literal; right-brain listening was holistic, imaginative, simultaneous, subjective, and metaphorical. Among other conclusions, he noted, "Studies comparing musically trained and musically illiterate subjects have yielded the significant result that, as musicians are trained, they shift their musical activities to the left, analytic hemisphere." And this partly explained why classical composers had lost touch with the ineluctable facts of how most people hear music.

A side effect—if not in fact the veiled main point—was to create an intellectual framework in which minimalist music made sense. Kramer described a phenomenon he called "vertical time," a simultaneous listening mode in which past and present were not linked causally, but seemed telescoped into one. Hardly new to minimalism, the phenomenon was familiar from several world traditions. Suddenly, the classical paradigm in which music told a cumulative narrative, each new phrase a result of its predecessor, was no longer privileged. It was merely an endpoint on a continuum.

Kramer even went so far as to say that certain kinds of music involving vertical time can't be analyzed—not that we haven't developed the techniques yet, but that analysis has no purchase in a right-brain process. It was a bold statement, especially coming from a professor at Columbia University and one of the country's best-known program annotators. To this day it can make high-powered classical-music types wince. The Berlin Wall fell about that time, and, in Kramer's book, so did the theoretical wall between sonata form and 12-tone music on one hand, Tibetan chanting and minimalism on the other—even if few people noticed. In that highly polarized era, it was the most important achievement any musician could have accomplished. Kramer tossed it out there as though there was nothing radical about it—but he knew what he was doing.

He was not, however, an uncritical fan of minimalist music, and his own music was a searching critique of the genre. His grooves ran in uncomfortable meters like 11/16. He'd strip a piece down to only six pitches, à la Steve Reich, but then within those six pitches flit between different tempos and styles: Mahlerian romanticism, Terry Riley-ish jazz, stark expressionism. What he learned from this ultimately enabled him, in pieces like *Notta Sonata* and *Surreality Check*, to break through into a truly postmodern style marked by collage-like fractures. His was a deeply philosophical music that brought together musical attributes in strikingly counterintuitive ways, like simple tonality combined with nervous arrhythmia. As colleague Fred Lerdahl noted, "It was a music that contained its own commentary."

Jonathan Kramer died June 3 of acute leukemia, at only 61. He divorced last year and remarried three weeks before his death. He seems to have told almost no one that, last fall, doctors gave him only six months to live. All semester he insisted on attending concerts and sitting on doctoral boards at Columbia, where he had taught since 1989, at the usual rate: "My students count on me." Composer Rafael Mostel received a long May 28 e-mail from him with no hint that he was ill. Fortunately, Kramer did complete his long-awaited book on postmodernism, which is scheduled to appear. Stories at his June 6 memorial service attested to his penetrating sense of humor. As fellow professor Elaine Sisman recounted, he told one music theory class, "You've probably all been taught the fiction that there are three kinds of minor scales."

Student: "If that's the fiction, what's the reality?" Kramer: "There is no reality."

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