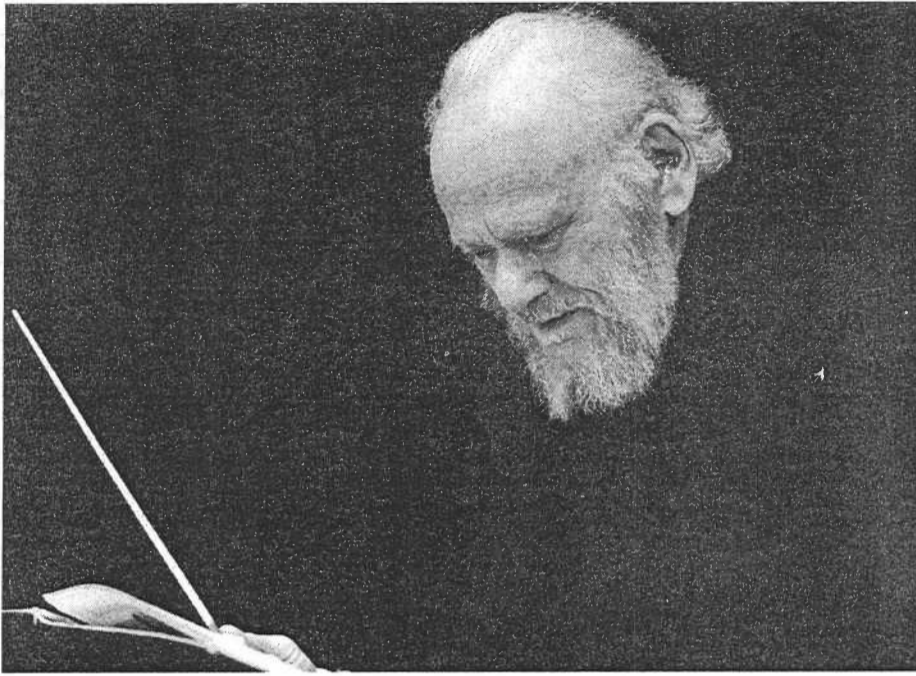


Muscular and Misunderstood

RALPH SHAPEY (1921–2002)

BY KYLE GANN



A FREEHANDED PAINTER OF SONORITIES

Chicago composer Frank Abbinanti called to tell me that Ralph Shapey had died June 13. Not many of my Downtown friends will notice, and several will wonder why I have. Shapey seemed like one of those fairly successful Uptowners embraced, if warily, by the orchestral establishment—but few recent composers have been so misunderstood. Born just before the generation that took on 12-tone technique as a holy cause, he remained an intuitive atonalist, out of place in the late-20th-century academic world in which he spent his last decades. He wrote far more beautiful, more spiritual, more listenable music than did the composers he was most often grouped with. I did mention his death to one Downtown composer who burst into momentary enthusiasm: “There was somebody who wrote really muscular music, but it could also be very tender.”

I knew Shapey back in my Chicago days, in the 1980s. He was a stormy character whom many Chicago musicians tiptoed around, but (even though he was at the University of Chicago and I had just gotten my degrees across town at Northwestern) I gravitated toward the delicious fun of his evenhanded animosity. My favorite memory of him was when the Arditti Quartet played Chicago. I arrived on the hour, and the only vacant seat left in the hall was next to Shapey, as though it were cursed. I threw myself into it and said hello. For the next two hours, as the Arditti played Xenakis and I don’t remember what other recent European masters, I got to watch the notes Shapey scrawled and passed to his patiently indulgent wife: “They call this MUSIC?! This is shit!” It’s worth remembering, as I once related here, that Shapey once wrote “FUCK YOU” across a Guggenheim grant application he submitted.

But Shapey’s legendary querulousness was in part caused by the fact that contemporary music had moved in directions he found sterile. In one respect he was luckier in his obituaries than many major composers have been: Everyone called him a “radical traditionalist,” which is the term he picked for himself. He boasted to me that students would come to him saying their main influences were Boulez, Ligeti, and Stockhausen, and leave him citing Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven in-

stead. He was an intensely musical composer, as unimpressed by the strict procedures of Babbitt and Carter as he was by the chance processes of Cage. Mavens pried him into a serialist pigeonhole, but he was actually an imagist, a freehanded painter of sonorities.

In fact, the composers I most associate Shapey’s music with are Messiaen and Wolpe, and the figure I see as most parallel to him is Morton Feldman. Shapey got hired at Chicago in 1964; Feldman at SUNY Buffalo in 1972 (both without college degrees; Shapey liked to joke about how “iggerant” he was). Before that they both lived the hand-to-mouth existence of New York composers with day jobs, while hanging out with abstract expressionist painters at the Cedar Bar. Shapey didn’t arrive at as personal or instantly recognizable a language as Feldman’s, but his music has the same delicate touch, the same exquisite ear for harmony, the same painterly sense of balanced chords, though in a thornier and—truly—muscular idiom. Feldman achieved the sensuous flat surface, but Shapey’s music seems etched in stone.

Listen to those big, granitic sonorities at the beginning of Shapey’s *The Covenant*—the proper reference point for them isn’t the dry, technical music of George Perle or Jacob Druckman, but Messiaen’s *St. Francis of Assisi*. The fervent end of Shapey’s Seventh String Quartet with its maze of turn figures achieves a late-Beethovenesque spirituality. Piano music was his especial forte: The *Fromm Variations* and *21 Variations for Piano* are like steel mobiles, massive sonorities suspended in air and heard again and again from different perspectives. It’s been great to get out my near complete collection of Shapey recordings, almost all on vinyl, and hear how clear, strong, and uncompromising that music still sounds.

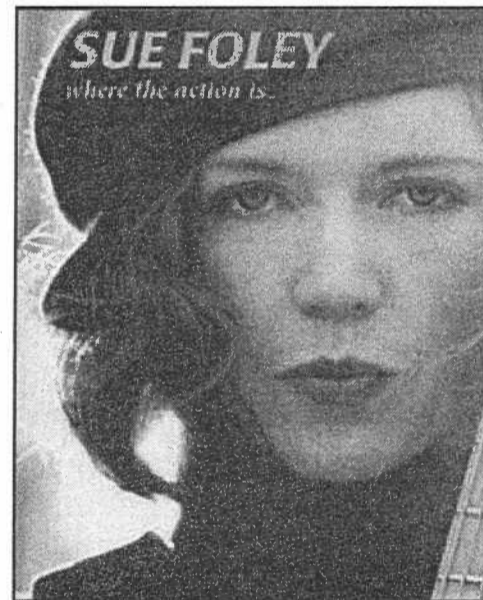
Like many ambitious men of little formal education, Shapey yearned for intellectual distinction. He relished his position in the university, but he was no academic—that sentence, for me, sums up the great dissonance of his professional life. He was non-verbal, an intuitive, a colorist, and an artist. He could turn as tender as his music, too. After a review I once wrote of him, he called me up and said quietly, “I’m trying to make *more music*. Thank you for recognizing that fact.” Thank you for writing it, Ralph. **U**

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