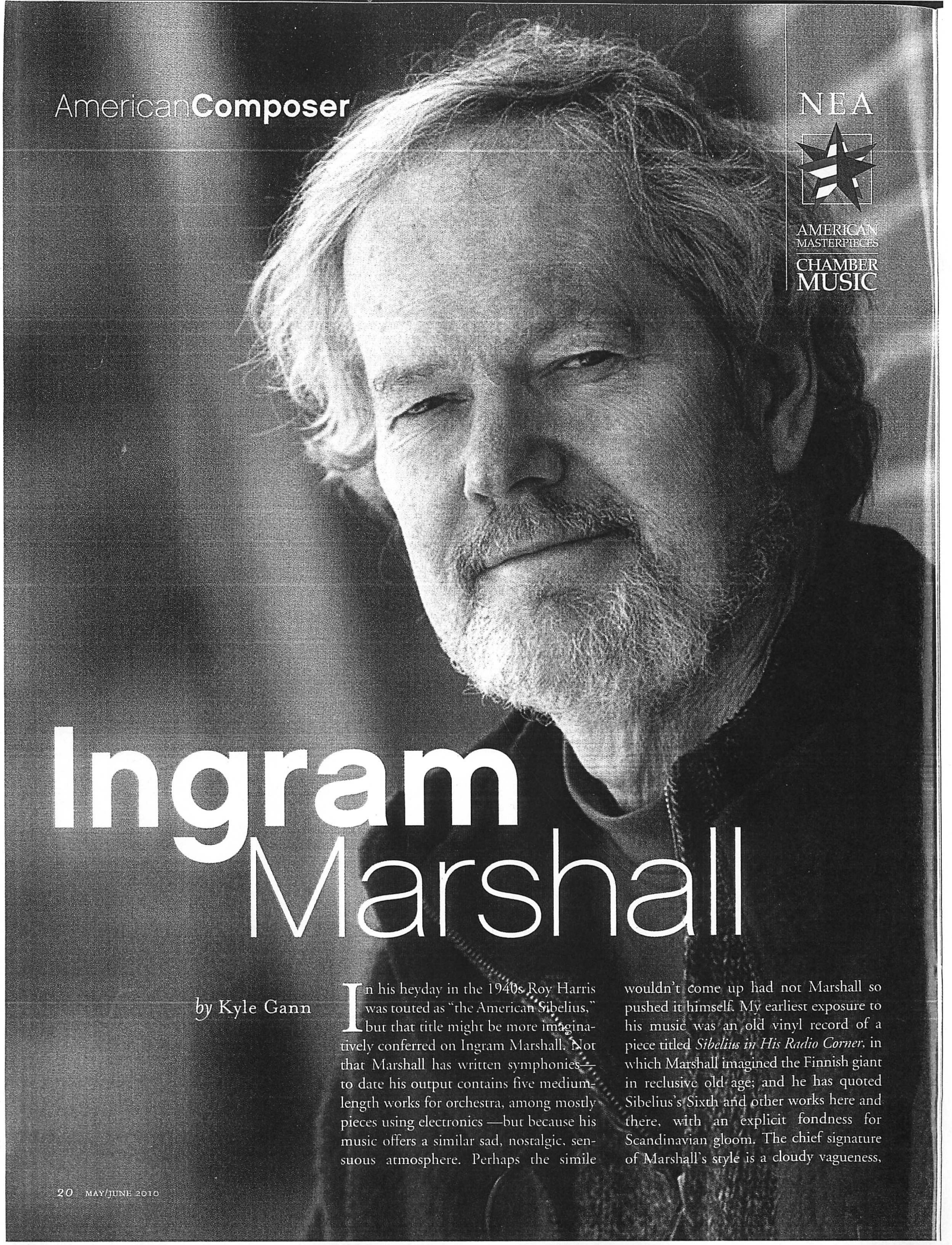

Ingram Marshall

by Kyle Gann

In his heyday in the 1940s Roy Harris was touted as "the American Sibelius," but that title might be more imaginatively conferred on Ingram Marshall. Not that Marshall has written symphonies—to date his output contains five medium-length works for orchestra, among mostly pieces using electronics—but because his music offers a similar sad, nostalgic, sensuous atmosphere. Perhaps the simile wouldn't come up had not Marshall so pushed it himself. My earliest exposure to his music was an old vinyl record of a piece titled *Sibelius in His Radio Corner*, in which Marshall imagined the Finnish giant in reclusive old age; and he has quoted Sibelius's Sixth and other works here and there, with an explicit fondness for Scandinavian gloom. The chief signature of Marshall's style is a cloudy vagueness,

much of which comes from the use of electronic reverb and delay. His sound sources are usually acoustic, often nostalgic quotations—Charles Ives is another chief influence—but Marshall's textures are filmy and blurred.

Yet Marshall's original reputation was that of "the sixth minimalist," after his close friend John Adams became known as the fifth (the original four, of course, being Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass). In 1979 Marshall recorded an homage to San Francisco's fog horns called *Fog Tropes* (tellingly, the original title was just *Fog*) for brass quintet, tape, and electronic delay. At the same time, Adams's *Shaker Loops* got picked up by the ECM label. Marshall's work didn't, and his explanation for why his fame failed to parallel Adams's is that he's just not as prolific: "If I write one big piece a year," he says, "that's it." Nevertheless, through his recordings on the New Albion label Marshall became one of the underground stars of the then-burgeoning American electronic scene. Just lately, in a surprise windfall that netted him a low five-figure fee out of the blue, both *Fog Tropes* and the darkly atmospheric 1984 tone poem *Alcatraz* are among the avant-garde pieces used in the soundtrack to the film *Shutter Island.*

In fact, I've been a Marshall fan for thirty years, but it never occurred to me to write about him for *Chamber Music* magazine, because I'd always thought of him as an electronic composer—at least until recently, when I heard his 1992 string quartet, *Evensongs.* No medium seems less amenable to fogginess than the clearly etched, polyphonic string quartet, but *Evensongs* blew me away. On recording (New Albion), even this piece is not entirely electronics-free, for some layered music-box samples cover the transitions between movements. But most of the piece is conventionally scored, conventional in playing technique, quite warm, and even Romantic in feeling, if never in rhetoric. This and other acoustic pieces have revealed a whole new dimension of Marshall's make-up. It turns out that what is most central is not the fogginess, but the nostalgic evocation of memory, for *Evensongs* is a piece frankly and fearlessly based on the Protestant hymns of Marshall's childhood.

"Abide with Me" is the primary recurring tune, but "Onward, Christian Soldiers" also makes an appearance. The piece ripples with canons. One movement starts with the former hymn, accompanied by a three-part canon on a chromatic version of the latter. "Abide with Me" comes back in canon with itself at various intervals, often designed to make languid half-step clashes that may or may not resolve. On the recording the piece is paired with a piano quartet titled, "In My Beginning Is My End"—not a palindrome as other musical uses of that title might lead one to expect, but a lush fantasy on the hymns "Rock of Ages" and "Watchman, Tell Us of the Night." (The quartet's title might also be a reference to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets,* but given Marshall's interest in the persistence of childhood memories, it certainly refers to life.) At one point the hymns are contrasted in the keys of C major and E-flat major simultaneously, bringing Ives to mind. But there's little Ivesian drama or complexity here, despite a playful, casual sense of non sequitur. The textures are sometimes repetitive but not noticeably minimalist, lushly Romantic in line, but conversational, never accumulating the tension that would imply a drive to a climax.

In these stripped-down contexts, the remarkable thing about Marshall's sound is its combination of warmth and looseness. Given today's changing practices, we have to include within his chamber output works for soloist and electronics, such as he's written for oboist Libby van Cleve and violinist Todd Reynolds. The latter plays Marshall's *September Canons,* the 2002 piece that is also the title of his new CD on New World. The score makes the electronics look easily performable; the violinist clicks a button on a foot pedal to initiate each new series of looping echoes, and then plays within them. The motives are hauntingly simple, the timing flexible. When the original violin input is tremolos, a cloud results. When it is a melody, canons result. Likewise in *Holy Ghosts* (2000) for oboe d'amore and electronics; what starts as a web of synchronized melodies thickens and fades into a distant and blurred background wash. The distinction between reverb-fog and canon turns out to be an illusion. The common denominator is memory. And memory, as we know, fosters illusions.

Marshall is, as he admits, the go-to guy for ensembles that want a piece for ensemble and what used to be called tape, though these days it's usually a digital sound file. *Peaceable Kingdom* (1990), also on the new CD, has the Yale Philharmonia playing ostinatos and slow melodies over a tape of church bells, a funeral procession taped in Yugoslavia, and children's voices. (In fact, several Marshall pieces have used the voice of his son Clement, taped when he was a child.) The atmosphere, as usual, is sad, nostalgic, yet somehow childlike. It's not without tension, but the tension never builds, it simply dissipates and something else happens. He doesn't accumulate musical karma. How does he make such original textures with such simple, childish motives? Why does his continuity make such intuitive sense, when it seems to lack any linear direction? How can it be so sad and yet so calm? Those are questions I also find myself asking when I listen to Sibelius.

Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Yale University Press). *His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.*