

Totalism and the 1990s

Any characterization of music in the 1990s must deal first and foremost with the overwhelming fact that there are far more active composers today than at any previous time in history. For one thing, the American birth rate rose dramatically during the period of post-World War II expansion and euphoria, resulting in the “baby boom” which began around 1946 and peaked in 1955. Released from economic worry by their parents’ newfound prosperity and at the same time reacting against the bland conformity of their Eisenhower-era upbringings, people born in this era entered the arts in unprecedented numbers. Cage, at the end of his life, wrote about the problem in a mesostic (a poem in which a keyword is spelled in capital letters down the middle) on the words “overpopulation and art”:

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Laurie Anderson wrote a song, "Daddy, Daddy, it was just like you said / Now that the living outnumber the dead." And, asked for a statement on the current scene, Robert Ashley once wrote: "I have tried to forget what certain composers are up to, because that doesn't seem as important as that there are so many of us."²

More than ever, the music of the 1990s cannot be generally characterized in terms of styles, for the era is too chaotically diverse. There is, however, a deep unity running through the music in terms of the social conditions influencing its production. Composers born in the 1950s all face certain challenges and all benefit from the explosion of media, both cursed and favored by the rapid shrinking of Planet Earth. Along with the tremendous increase in the number of artists, which exerts a huge effect on public perception of individual artists as well as on how careers are made, composers who find themselves in their forties as the millennium ends have had the following experiences in common:

- The generation born in the 1950s is the first to benefit from greatly increased exposure to non-Western musics in college. In the past, such an advantage came primarily as an accident of geography: West Coast composers like Cowell and Partch grew up with musics other than European as their major musical environment. Today, however, it is common for all students to encounter African, Indonesian, Japanese, Indian, and other musical traditions presented side-by-side with the European tradition—not to mention the increased teaching of jazz and the vastly greater availability of European medieval and

Renaissance music on recordings. Whether a composer takes advantage of this exposure or not, he or she is far more likely to learn at a formative age that European music of the common-practice period is just one music among many, with no privileged position. In fact, with greatly decreased classical concert attendance, the prestige of European music assumed by earlier generations has been fading rapidly.

- In a contrary tendency, music education has been phased out of many school districts, decreasing even further students' early exposure to music and the establishment of any common musical culture beyond what is heard on radio.
- Since the mid-1980s, sequencing software has become such a common mode of music-making that notation has been fading in importance as a compositional intermediary. Much music today is made, even by amateurs, directly on the computer screen. Even where notation remains central, the process of composing increasingly takes place without a paper trail of revisions. No matter how traditional a composer's training has been, the process of working on a lit screen rather than on paper has a powerful, if often unconscious, effect on assumptions about how to structure music, just as writing poetry on a word processor effects how poems are formed differently from a typewriter.
- Accompanying the deemphasis on notation is the fact that music publishers have quit publishing all but a tiny amount of the most conservative new music. It is nearly impossible for a composer to get his or her scores distributed through commercial channels in the 1990s. On the other hand, compact discs have become relatively cheap to produce, and distribution channels have multiplied. Therefore, whereas the mid-twentieth-century composer distributed his music through scores and had a difficult time getting recorded, those possibilities are reversed for today's young composer. To at least some extent this reversal has been healthy, for midcentury composers showed a tendency to consider the score the actual music, with a corresponding loss of concern for how the music sounded; today, more and more music can be judged only for how it sounds, for the score may either not exist or be practically unavailable.
- The ubiquity of samplers has effected a drastic physical change in the materials of music. The musical atom is increasingly no longer the note, but the sample, a sonic entity that can just as easily be a sound complex or quotation as a single tone from a musical instrument.
- Growing up in an environment pervaded with rock music has become an almost universal experience. It is increasingly

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rare, then, for composers to write without taking the rhythms, instrumentation, or performance conventions of rock into account. For many, rock has become the vernacular bedrock from which music must grow in order to gain any currency with a large audience.

- In addition, the overpopulation of artists in all fields has led to a drastic splintering of audiences and a daunting multiplicity of subcultures. The number of routes toward a successful career has increased proportionately with the impossibility of getting a significant hearing outside one's subculture. The orchestral circuit, the opera circuit, the improvisation scene, the new-music community, the theater music world, the academic music world—as each of these milieus grows, they all become more cut off from each other, and moving among them becomes difficult with so many dozens of composers jostling each other for commissions, performances, and reputations in each one.

Out of all these forces, a characterizable style did arise in the 1990s, however, one which came to be called *totalism*. In the rawest meaning of the word, totalism suggests having your cake and eating it too: in this case, writing music that appeals to audiences on a sensuous and visceral level, and yet which still contains enough complexity and intricate musical devices to attract the more sophisticated aficionado. It also implies using all of the musical resources available, so that Indian raga-like melodies may fit together with jazz harmonies within classical structuring devices. Totalist composers are those who admired minimalism's ability to communicate to large audiences, yet also admired serialism's ability to yield more and more information on further hearings, and who also appreciated the inherent complexity, especially rhythmic complexity, of non-Western musics.

As a result, totalist music can generally be characterized as having a steady, articulated beat, often flavored by rock or world music. That beat becomes a background grid for polyrhythms of great complexity. Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt employ complex rhythms too, but without a grid to hear them against; for totalist composers, being able to hear and calculate the complexity is essential. Totalist harmony can be either consonant, dissonant, or both—the distinction having ceased to be very important—but it is usually fairly static, concentrating on harmonic or melodic images that are easily memorable even when quite complex. Especially in the music of Mikel Rouse, Michael Gordon, David First, Ben Neill, John Luther Adams, Diana Meckley, Larry Polansky, and several others, there is often some kind of implied correspondence between the ratios of simultaneous or successive tempos or pulses and the frequencies of the harmonic series, a theoretical tendency going back to

Cowell. The similar structuring of pitch and rhythm in a kind of musical “unified field theory” is another nuance of the word *totalism*.

A few composers follow totalist criteria rather strictly, many more compose in a populist-yet-intellectual spirit akin to totalism, and still others have taken a different route altogether. Obviously, no guarantee can be offered concerning the relative future importance of the composers described below. Careers move at different rates, people drop out, others bloom late, and if a list made in 2050 of important composers of the 1990s overlaps to any extent with the selections below, it will be through pure serendipity. All that can be guaranteed is that these composers exemplify the forces that have been at work on those who came of age artistically after 1985, and so far, some of the most inventive solutions.

Mikel Rouse

No other artist better expresses the intent of totalism, or more delicately straddles the line between pop accessibility and intricate classical structures, than Mikel Rouse. His music for his rock quartet Broken Consort—synthesizer, sax, bass, and drum set—explores rhythms drawn from the Schillinger system, with underlying patterns such as 3 against 5 against 8 spreading out in hypnotically geometric patterns. Yet, far from abstract, the music is memorably melodic, with a foot-tappable beat. In Rouse’s songs he innovated a technique he calls “counterpoetry” by analogy to counterpoint, in which he overdubs rhythmically different versions of the same text for a complex rhythmic interplay, yet still closely orbits pop genres. And in his operas *Failing Kansas* and *Dennis Cleveland*, Rouse has achieved a daring synthesis of rock and electronic theater that makes him a natural successor in the genre to Robert Ashley.

The son of a state trooper, Rouse was born in 1957 and grew up in the rural Missouri “boot-heel” region near Arkansas. In third grade he permanently changed the spelling, though not the pronunciation, of his name Michael to its present form. Equally talented at music and art, he studied both at the University of Missouri and the Kansas City Art Institute respectively, which were across the street from each other. He formed a rock band, Tirez Tirez (French for “pull pull,” stencilled on double doors in Paris), which was the only local band progressive enough to open for Talking Heads when they played in Kansas City. In 1979 the band relocated to New York. Rouse studied African rhythms in A. M. Jones’s *Studies in African Music*, and also chanced upon one of the few teachers in New York qualified to teach the Schillinger method. “Schillinger was never a system like 12-tone music,” Rouse notes. “It was a set of vocabularies . . . I was drawn to it because it was so naturally the way I thought.”³



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Mikel Rouse in his opera *Dennis Cleveland*.

Rouse's early magnum opus, the source work for his later rhythmic style, is *Quorum* (1984), for intricately sequenced Linn drum machine. From *Quorum*, a totally rhythmic exercise, Rouse expanded his language in Broken Consort pieces such as *Quick Thrust* (1984), a twelve-tone rock piece that varies its row only rhythmically, and *Leading the Machine* (1990). *Quick Thrust* (see example 13.1) is a concise example of what Rouse gained from Schillinger technique: every rhythm in the piece is derived from rhythms of 2-against-3-against-5-against-8, defined either as durations in eighth-notes or as divisions of a cycle of thirty eighth-notes. The saxophone line has a new attack every third eighth-note, every fifth eighth-note, and every eighth eighth-note, (some of the attacks coinciding, of course). Likewise, thirty eighth-notes in the bass line are divided in half by one note, in thirds by two others, and in fifths by four others. The result is that three forms of the same twelve-tone row pass by each other at different rates.

Rouse unveiled his counterpoetry in a compact disc called *Living Inside Design* whose lyrics, poking deadpan fun at American pop culture, attested to his talent with words as well as with notes and colors (from "Thinking About Myself"):

He warms the streets deserted palms
Erasing where he wept
His favorite pastime?
Barking up the wrong tree where he slept

The envelope and history
Of two wrongs make a right
Sits well upon the bottoms
Of America 2-Night

The musical score for 'Quick Thrust' consists of four staves. The top staff is for Soprano Sax, the second for Electric Keyboard, the third for Electric Bass, and the bottom for High Hat Snare Drum Bass Drum. The Soprano Sax and Electric Keyboard parts play a complex, interlocking rhythmic pattern based on a twelve-tone row. The Electric Bass part provides a steady, low-frequency accompaniment. The High Hat Snare Drum Bass Drum part features a complex, interlocking rhythmic pattern that complements the other parts.

EXAMPLE 13.1 Mikel Rouse, *Quick Thrust* (1984), twelve-tone row at different rates.

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Counterpoetry led to Rouse's one-man "opera" *Failing Kansas* (1995). Rouse had been fascinated by the novel *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote; the author had grown up in circumstances similar to Rouse's, and the murders it describes happened in Kansas, also country Rouse knew well. For his libretto Rouse fanatically scoured through the same newspaper and court documents Capote had relied on and used words spoken by the actual murderers, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Rouse performs the opera by speaking in rhythm over a rich taped accompaniment.

Rouse followed *Failing Kansas* with an even more innovative opera, *Dennis Cleveland* (1996), in which he played the title role: a talk show host. As Dennis, a cool postmodern guru, speaks his Buddhist-flavored commentary on modern society, the opera's other characters rise to speak from the audience as their host walks around with a microphone. Many theater directors have broken down "the fourth wall" in this fashion, but no composer had ever before synchronized such acting feats with a computer-sequenced tape. Complex canons arise from the chorus of talk-show "guests" onstage, and passages of music return superimposed on each other for polytonal effects that are as musically challenging as they are emotionally thrilling. Several recent composers have equalled the rhythmic intricacy of Rouse's music but none have combined it with such an insightful attunement to mass culture.

Listening Example: Failing Kansas (1995)

Those familiar with Capote's superbly crafted novel *In Cold Blood* will catch references to the story in *Failing Kansas*, but Rouse's treatment of the text is abstracted, fragmented, into what he's called a "75-minute pop song." In nine movements, the opera is structured with four primary sections separated and surrounded by a prelude (in which Rouse plays harmonica), three interludes (in which the counterpoetry technique is less dense), and a closing song. The rhythmic devices that liven the first major section, "The Last to See Them Alive," are typical. The section is in a rock 4/4 beat, and yet Rouse speaks the Protestant hymn that Perry Smith sings, "In the Garden," in 12/8 meter, so that his measure, stretched across $1\frac{1}{2}$ measures of the rock beat, creates a continual polyrhythmic tension.

The middle of the movement (example 13.2) provides a simple, transparent, and delightful example of totalist rhythm. Notice that the guitar ostinato outlines an eight-beat pattern, while the bass and harmonica change pitch every five beats. The bass's rhythm—3 + 3 + 1 + 3 in eighth-notes—is a recurring motif through several movements of the opera, as is the bass's pitch line. Meanwhile, Rouse's voice, intoning a ballad Perry Smith composed, plays around the 4/4 downbeat, sometimes starting on it, sometimes shifting away from it, with an off-balancing feel typical of Rouse's text setting. No other work has demonstrated the apt-

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EXAMPLE 13.2 Mikel Rouse, *Failing Kansas* (1995), from "The Last to See Them Alive."

ness of totalist rhythmic structure for dramatic form as eloquently as *Failing Kansas*, the first viable music-theater work of the new generation.

Michael Gordon

The contrast between Rouse and Michael Gordon is symptomatic of the 1990s. Where Rouse's music represents the application of classical structures and strategies to rock materials, Gordon's music is the opposite: an infusion of rock energy into classical materials. Rouse uses a trap set and a rock beat to achieve cool, objectivist, arithmetically patterned textures. Gordon uses mostly classical instruments—violins, bass clarinets, a percussionist rather than a drummer—to create a pulsing, irregular energy reminiscent of rock groups such as Led Zeppelin. Rouse's rock is clean and elegant, Gordon's chamber music is raw and crude. Yet just as Rouse played for years with Tirez Tirez, Gordon played keyboard for a New York band called Peter and the Girlfriends. Similar experiences, similar desires and misgivings, very different results.

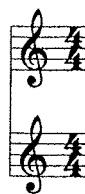
Gordon was born in Miami to Polish parents in 1956 and lived until the age of eight in Managua, Nicaragua. He began composing as a child as a strategy to distract his piano teacher from the fact that he hadn't practiced, and, back in Miami Beach as a teenager, played in rock bands. His checkered college career included graduation from New York University and afterward, at Yale, study with Martin Bresnick. Even

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while at Yale Gordon lived largely in New York, playing with Peter and the Girlfriends from 1979 to 1983. When that band disbanded, he formed—after the tradition of Steve Reich and Musicians and the Philip Glass Ensemble—the Michael Gordon Philharmonic, which lasted from 1983 to 1996.

The Philharmonic's first concert in December of 1983, in a small Manhattan art gallery, featured a work already in classic Gordon idiom: *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!* (1983). The title refers to the clash of wills represented in the piece as a clash of tempos, for the violin, viola, electric organ, and electric guitar, playing reiterative patterns in 9/8 and 6/8 meter, are periodically interrupted in angry terms by the marimba and drums who impose their own time-frame of four or five quarter notes.

In particular, a bumpy gear-shifting effect of suddenly changing tempos is characteristic of Gordon's music. The Michael Gordon Philharmonic became expert at keeping two beats in their collective head at once, so that one half the ensemble was playing off subdivisions of a triplet quarter-note beat, the other half off of a dotted eighth-note beat. This technique climaxed in *Four Kings Fight Five* (1988), in which nine instruments gradually build up a Nancarrowian array of simultaneous tempos, in ratios such as 8:12:18:24:27. A later work, *Yo Shakespeare* of 1993, treats triplet quarter-notes as independent units, so that a measure might contain triplets in groupings not divisible by three (see example 13.3). Another common Gordon device was the use of repetitive patterns of different lengths, which would loop and recombine differently with each repetition. All of these rhythms are couched in memorable but deliberately inelegant lines, as crudely pounding as the bass line of a rock guitarist.

In 1984 Gordon married another composer, Julia Wolfe (for whom, see more below). In 1986, the pair founded, with third composer David Lang, the Bang on a Can festival, which since 1987 has been New York's annual outlet for totalist, postminimal, and experimentalist music. All three composers had studied with Bresnick and inherited his open-minded, nondogmatic appreciation of various contemporary styles. Remarkably successful, Bang on a Can began at the fairly raw R.A.P.P. Arts Center in New York and graduated to prestigious Lincoln Center in 1994.



EXAMPLE 13.3 Michael Gordon, *Yo Shakespeare*, opening cross-rhythms.

One of Gordon's largest works was his *Van Gogh Video Opera* (1991), made in collaboration with the video artist Elliot Kaplan and based on Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo. Even more ambitious is *Trance* (1995), written for Holland's Icebreaker ensemble: amplified, continuous, and fifty-two minutes long, hammering home Gordon's trademark rhythms, and containing sampled religious vocal sounds such as the chanting of Buddhist monks and muezzins singing the *Ku'ran*.

Listening Example: Four Kings Fight Five (1988).

Like *Thou Shalt!/Thou Shalt Not!*, the title of *Four Kings Fight Five* speaks of conflict, and an unequal one at that. The title is a Biblical reference to an incident in the book of Genesis; here the reference is to nine players: oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, electric keyboard, percussion, violin, viola, cello, and electric guitar. The opening melody, descending and climbing somewhat atonally over a drone on E, goes back and forth between quarter-notes and dotted quarters, laying out the basic rhythmic conflict at once. The work is dedicated to Glenn Branca, and the strumming of

EXAMPLE 13.4 Michael Gordon, *Four Kings Fight Five*.

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open E strings and quadruple stops on the electric guitar does seem reminiscent of the energy of Branca's symphonies.

After three minutes the piece builds to a climax followed by a brief pause. At this point, a slow textural crescendo begins: first with six quarters to a measure against four dotted quarters, then with a tempo $3/4$ as slow as the dotted quarters, triplet quarter notes, and so on, finally suggesting no fewer than eleven different tempos, at ratios of 8:9:12:16:18:24:27:36:48:54:60 (see example 13.4). As the rhythmic complexities increase, however, the harmony grows more and more static, as though so much complexity can only lose its melodic clarity in a textural blur. At last, after some nineteen minutes, the viola enters with a long, lonely soliloquy played out over the motivic repetitions of the other instruments. Few totalist works have surpassed *Four Kings* in either complexity or clarity.

Lois V Vierk

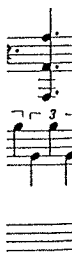
Although many, many Americans born after 1935 have taken inspiration from the musics of non-Western cultures, Lois V Vierk is a rare example of an ethnomusicologist who turned to composing. Her best-known and most characteristic works have been scored for multiples of the same instrument, a common medium among postminimal composers. Where others came to this concept through minimalism, however, Vierk reached it via the ancient Japanese court music *gagaku*, which contains passages of identical wind instruments playing a melody at slightly different rates. Through her study in Japan, Vierk has become the American composer most expert in *gagaku* and became, in 1996, the first American to ever be commissioned to write for a *gagaku* ensemble.

Born in 1951, Vierk grew up just south of Chicago. When the family moved to Philadelphia in 1966, she discovered a passion for Beethoven (via a new piano teacher) and a fascination with the ethnic diversity of her new community. Her interest in ethnomusicology, still an exotic subject at the time, eventually brought her to UCLA, which offered courses in Chinese music and dance, Balinese gamelan, Ghanaian drumming, and Yugoslavian dance, as well as concerts of rare Asian art forms. Studying *bugaku* dance, she encountered *gagaku*, the music that accompanies it, and fell in love with it. Until 1982, throughout her time in Los Angeles, Vierk performed in UCLA's *gagaku* ensemble.

Though she had composed since high school, Vierk didn't look to composition seriously until after graduation in 1974. She sought out Leonard Stein, Schoenberg's assistant, and advised her to go to CalArts. There she studied with Mel Powell and Morton Subotnick. Meanwhile, Vierk supported herself accompanying dance classes and working as assistant music director under Carl Stone at KPFK radio. In 1980

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UCLA's *gagaku* orchestra was invited to play in Japan, where Vierk took lessons with Sukeyasu Shiba, an expert *ryuteki* player who could trace his family back through thirty-two generations of members of the royal *gagaku* ensemble.

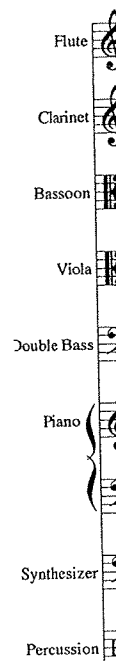
Vierk's earliest mature works, from 1977 to 1978, were scored for homogenous groups such as three clarinets, eighteen trombones, or six male voices. She brought with her an interest in minimalism from her CalArts days, but as with many in the current New York scene, the minimalist who most influenced her was Phill Niblock, with his austere clusters of densely-packed, sustained tones. In all of Vierk's work, one can hear the expressive glissandos of *gagaku*, the effect of different lines played by multiples of one timbre, and the sustained linearity of not only Niblock, but Lucier's *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, another important piece in her development. The basic formal idea she has reworked again and again, however, comes from no minimalist or Asian sources at all: the idea of a gradual, almost imperceptible transformation from a still, quiescent texture to a rousingly active one, often in a kind of exponential curve.

Vierk studied in Japan again from 1982 to 1984. Her return to America was not to the West Coast but to New York. The first piece with which she went public was *Go Guitars* (1981), the first word of which, "go," is Japanese for five: thus, five guitars, or more often in performance, four taped guitars and one live one. The piece begins with a steadily plucked, Glenn Branca-ish energy, enlivened by microtonal pitch waverings. Gradually long glissandos are mixed into the texture, until by the end it is a pulsating mass of up and down glissandos. *Go Guitars* represents a straightforward and fairly linear pattern (though there are more textural details than mentioned here) that Vierk would refine and develop in subsequent works, including *Cirrus* (1988) for six trumpets and *Simoom* (1986) for eight cellos. The slight pitch-bendings which inflect Vierk's music give it an Asian flavor, but her development of an initial meditateness into textures of great complexity is a Western tendency she attributes to her love for Beethoven. The combination makes for a distinct and recognizable personal flavor.

Listening Example: Timberline (1991)

Scored for flute, clarinet, bassoon, viola, double bass (alternating with electric bass), synthesizer, and percussion—the instrumentation of the Relache Ensemble from Philadelphia, which commissioned it—*Timberline* was Vierk's first major work to explore her sense of large-scale textural crescendo in an ensemble of diverse timbres. The opening pentatonic scales and small glissandos between scale notes in the viola give the piece a mildly Japanese flavor. Soon, one of the piece's most beautiful features begins: melodies of little thirty-second-note arabesques in the piano. As always with Vierk, the texture and plot thicken in tandem, leading to an ornate texture of rising pentatonic scales.

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This time, however, the energy level drops down after climax to a slowly moving bass line providing a foundation for glissandoing melodies. The crescendo back to maximum energy is complex, running through mysterious trills and abrupt key changes to a lively texture with repeating chords hammered in the piano (see example 13.5). *Timberline* is a remarkable example of the extreme and eclectic originality of texture brought by young composers of the nineties to a classical chamber medium.

EXAMPLE 13.5 Lois V. Vierk, *Timberline*, mm. 281–284.

Eve Beglarian

Eve Beglarian (born 1958 in Ann Arbor and raised in Los Angeles) is typical of her generation in the eclecticism of her sources, exceptional in the audience appeal of her music, and quite unusual in her development. Interestingly, she is the daughter of a composer: her father, Grant Beglarian (b. 1927) is a Russian-born composer of chamber music in a style grounded in Bartók and Stravinsky. Beglarian began her career as an “Uptown” composer, trained at Princeton and Columbia. During the early eighties, however, her music gravitated toward postminimalism and vernacular sources, and she soon found her work unwelcome in the academic circles where she worked as administrator of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Finally, around 1991 she was discov-

ered by Mary Jane Leach, the composer-singer Kitty Brazelton, and David First, who programmed her music in downtown Manhattan circles, where it became an instant sensation.

Beglarian has written contrapuntal variations on medieval songs, computer-altered disco collages, postminimal and numerically structured synthesizer pieces, songs of nonsense syllables, and wild theater pieces. Her largest theater piece to date is *TypOpera* (1993–1994) written for the California E.A.R. Unit, based on the *Ur Sonata*—an abstract vocal sonata of nonsense syllables from the 1920s—by the German painter Kurt Schwitters. Part of her transition from uptown to downtown, though, was that she went from writing music for ensembles to primarily performing her own music. Often speaking texts over electronic backgrounds, she is almost as much performance artist as composer, and she concertizes with pianist Kathleen Supové in a duo named Twisted Tutu. *No Man's Land* (1995) is characteristic; over an intentionally ugly background of industrial noises, she intones a text describing the provisional and mutually unrelated character of the businesses surrounding the corner of Church Street and White Street in New York. The piece wittily conjures up an atmosphere as dirty as the neighborhood it depicts.

Beglarian has often based her works on earlier music. Especially notable in this regard is her *Machaut in the Machine Age* series, which transforms various vocal pieces by the fourteenth-century master Guillaume de Machaut. In the most daring of these, *Machaut a GoGo* (1991), the medieval French love poetry

Moult sui de bonne heure née,
Quant je sui si bien amee
De mon doulz ami . . .

is translated literally into supremely modern lyrics over a Gogo beat (a type of jazzy rap music popular in Washington, D.C.):

How very much was I under lucky stars conceived,
When so much good, good love do I happily receive,
From my amazing lover, who ignores every other
And his heart completely leaves for the love of me.

(The translation is by Kitty Brazelton.) Sung to a cool beat in which the words feel right at home, the piece eloquently makes the point that, while musical styles have changed considerably in 600 years, the basic impulse of erotic poetry is unaltered.

Beglarian makes her living as a sound producer, and as a result possesses a high-tech sophistication that she applies to simple sonic materials. Her *FlamingO* (1995) broke new ground in combining chamber orchestra and samplers in such a way that the samplers dominated, the orchestra emerging from an engulfing whirr of electronic noise that came from a sampled bull-roarer or thunderstick, a flat piece of whale

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baleen swung on a string. In her *Wonder-Counselor* (1996) for organ and tape, flurries of melody on the organ are laid over an ecstatically ebbing and flowing harmonic series, with the occasional accompaniment of natural sounds: the ocean, bird songs, a couple having orgasms. One of new music's most uninhibited spirits, Beglarian is not afraid to tackle subjects of sex and religion in her music, sometimes both at once, and her music has a rare joyous and uplifting quality.

Peter Garland

Peter Garland has been better known as a scholar than as a composer; specifically, from 1971 through 1991 he edited the journal *Soundings*, which for years was the only published source for music and writings by and about many of the most original American experimentalist composers: Nancarrow, Lou Harrison, Tenney, Lentz, Harold Budd, Rudhyar, and many others. But though this activity has overshadowed Garland's own music, he is an heir to the musical traditions of Cowell and Harrison. His musical style is based in a modal idiom with frequent but irregular repetition of rhythms and motives. "I feel influenced," he has said, "by American modernism from the '20s, not the '50s and '60s. My take on modernism goes back to Cowell and Rudhyar."⁴

Born in Maine in 1952, Garland attended Ussachevsky's electronic music class at Columbia, dropped out after one semester, and headed west. He became part of CalArts' signal founding class in 1970, studying (like John Luther Adams and Guy Klucevsek) with Tenney and Budd and befriending Harrison, Rudhyar, and the irascible Harry Partch. Garland starting *Soundings* through a publishing workshop with Fluxus composer Dick Higgins. The journal ran erratically for twenty years, publishing some of America's most significant music in an era in which no conventional publisher would pay any attention (not to imply that this era is over). Meanwhile, Garland lived in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1975–1976 and again in 1977–1979, eventually settling in Santa Fe in the early eighties. In his travels he has become a leading authority on the musics of several Native Mexican tribes, as well as of American Indian culture in general.

The postminimal orientation of Garland's music obscures the fact that his style comes not from minimalism per se, but from a combination of older influences. The repetitions of simple motives in *A Song* for piano (1971) owe more to Erik Satie than to Reich or Glass. Some of Garland's early music—notably *The Three Strange Angels* and *Three Songs of Mad Coyote* (both 1973) for piano, bass drum, bull roarers, and other percussion—roars with the booming of forearm piano clusters and the wail of sirens, minimalist in its limitation of materials but inspired by the raucous soundworld of Varèse. In later works, his modal sense of melody

can be traced to Lou Harrison and the late work of Cowell. Going straight to the sources of American music, American Indians included, Garland has fashioned a repetitive, modal idiom that is only coincidentally postminimalist.

Garland's largest theater work has been *The Conquest of Mexico* (1978), written for the Peter Garland Ensemble, couched in an ensemble timbre modeled after "colonial Mexican Indian baroque," with harpsichord, harp, and recorder playing alongside Aztec percussion. Two of his most beautiful essays are piano cycles, *Jornada del Muerto* (1987) and *Walk in Beauty* (1989). The "Turquoise Trail" movement of the latter piece is interrupted by a tune in 6/8 meter that represents the ghost of Satie, and in another movement—"A Pitch-Pine Basket"—the pianist builds an intimate melody by pressing tone clusters and releasing certain notes to leave ringing triads. Example 13.6 from *Walk in Beauty* demonstrates Garland's tendency to form gentle contrapuntal lines from only a few repeated notes.



EXAMPLE 13.6 Peter Garland, *Walk in Beauty*.

The Roque Dalton Songs (1988), based on poems of an assassinated Salvadoran poet, are grounded in percussion with triads in the harp and piano, with long rhythmic patterns repeated over and over. This and other works like his String Quartet No. 1, "In Praise of Poor Scholars" (1986), give an impression of only a few notes used over and over in recurring rhythms, but with nothing ever happening the same way twice. No other young American composer writes music of such heartfelt simplicity, a delicate music of the desert that seems too quiet for the hectic 1990s.

John Luther Adams

In 1976, John Adams met John Adams. The former didn't give the coincidence much thought until the latter's *Nixon in China* appeared in 1987,

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making him something of a household name (by contemporary opera standards, anyway). At that point the John Adams who *didn't* write *Nixon* had to do something to distinguish himself from his older and better-known colleague, so he began using his middle name professionally. John Luther Adams, however, has his own distinctive features, notable among them that he is the only well-known composer associated with Alaska and that he has been as active as an environmentalist as a composer, a fact that has had an impact on his music as well. The evocative power of his musical landscapes has become so attractive to audiences that, for many fans of American music, he has become the more important Adams to keep an ear on.

J. L. Adams was born in 1953 in Mississippi but grew up in many locations. His early passion for rock was given expression by the formation of a garage band, which he led from the drum set. His hero was the eccentric rocker Frank Zappa (1940–1994), whom Adams calls “a major influence in my musical education, not so much for his own music as for the music he directed us kids to.”⁵ Reading the back of Zappa’s records, Adams became curious about Varèse, Webern, and Feldman, and when he heard Feldman’s *Piece for Four Pianos* on an early recording, he says, “I thought I had died and gone to heaven. That piece changed my life.”⁶ Under this new influence the fascination with rock dissolved, and Adams headed for brand-new, freewheeling CalArts.

Here he received a Germanic style of rigor from Leonard Stein and a more persuasive American rigor from James Tenney. His hatred of Los Angeles, though, turned him into an environmentalist (he spent his free time outside the city searching for condors), and he moved to Alaska in 1975, playing timpani with the Fairbanks Symphony from 1982 to 1992. All this time he lived as rugged an outdoor life as he could manage; not until 1989 did he have running water. That was also the year he became successful enough with commissions to quit his jobs and become a full-time composer.

Adams’s music can be superficially described as the intersection of two diverse influences: Feldman and Cowell. He discovered *New Musical Resources* in 1970, and his scores bear the ubiquitous marks of Cowell’s multitempoed rhythmic structures, with each measure divided into three, four, five, seven beats at once. The Feldman influence manifests as a delight in delicately balanced sonorities used as recurring images, although Adams’s sonorities are generally more diatonic, or “tonal,” than Feldman’s. From his earliest mature composition—*Songbirdsongs* (1974)—Adams’s music has consciously evoked nature and particularly the wintry landscapes of his adopted state, with sparse textures, colorful timbres, and feelings of stillness or at least rough-hewn naturalness. In early works like *Night Peace* (1977) this evocation mimics Feldman’s quietness without matching his mystery or subtlety. From the late eighties on, however, Adams’s style has deepened into a beautiful language of bitter-

sweet chords and cyclic rhythms, complemented by joyously totalist tempo superimpositions in his percussion music.

Adams's largest works to date are an opera, *Earth and the Great Weather* (1993), and a huge, seventy-five-minute orchestra piece on which he worked from 1990 to 1995, *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing*. The former isn't an opera in the sense of having a plot; it is rather a celebration of Alaskan geography, complete with recorded environmental sounds and recitation of Eskimo place names. The ocean roars and delicate harmonics are interrupted by ferocious and rhythmically complex drum quartets that themselves sound like thunderous natural phenomena.

Listening Example: *Dream in White on White* (1992)

The title of *Dream in White on White* is in one sense quite literal: the score, for string quartet, harp, and string orchestra, is entirely in what would be "white" notes on the piano, for there are neither accidentals nor a key signature. At first the string orchestra plays widespread sustained chords (called "clouds," La Monte Young-style) over which the harp plucks poignantly rising four-note motifs. After awhile the string quartet breaks into the "Lost Chorales," simple chord progressions based on a phasing process of, for example, five repeating beats in the violins against four in the viola and cello (example 13.7). After these have been heard unaccompanied, the orchestral chords return in quietest harmonics, and the

Lost Chorales
♩ = 50 *Cantabile*

The musical score is titled "Lost Chorales" with a tempo marking of "♩ = 50 Cantabile". It is arranged for Violins, Viola/Cello, Harp, and String Orchestra. The Violins part shows a rising four-note motif. The Viola and Cello parts play sustained chords. The Harp part features a rising four-note motif. The String Orchestra part features sustained chords. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 5/4.

EXAMPLE 13.7 Caption?

harp and quartet pluck patterns of rising or falling fourths and fifths, the harp at a tempo 5/4 as fast as the quartet.

The penultimate texture is a lush polyrhythm, with the orchestra playing a slow three beats to the measure, the harp five, and the quartet four. Finally, the opening texture returns with the harp's lovely four-note motifs. The variety of dreamy textures Adams achieves with a few simple materials is lovely.

David First

Among the totalists, David First is the composer most analogous to Alvin Lucier or La Monte Young in an earlier generation, in that he works most directly with unpredictable sonic phenomena. His music is microtonal, but rather than work with precise tunings, he works with the beats caused by notes slightly out of tune, especially the accelerating and decelerating beats that come from imperceptibly slow glissandos. Difficult to fully capture on recording, his music is more focused on acoustic phenomena than Glenn Branca's, more dynamically active than La Monte Young's, much louder than Alvin Lucier's, and powerful in the way its acoustic patterns viscerally absorb the listener.

First (born in 1953) grew up in Philadelphia as an aspiring rock guitarist with little formal training, though he learned about oscillators, sum and difference tones, and acoustical phenomena from his father, an electrical engineer. Involved early in free jazz, he started his professional career playing in Cecil Taylor's band at Carnegie Hall in 1974. Soon afterward he formed an instrumental trio called the Note Killers, which he describes as "free jazz meets Steve Reich meets Jimi Hendrix"; in the group's 1980 New York premiere they shared a bill with Glenn Branca. Torn like so many New York musicians of his generation between notated and improvised music, First embodies that dichotomy with particular clarity. As he puts it,

It has always been a standing offer on my part to give up improvising on the day someone plays for me a piece of composed music that has the energy, passion, and rhythmic/melodic subtlety and complexity represented in the best improvised musics. Conversely, one could play spontaneously with others from now till the end of time and never create the powerfully magical effects available through a simple set of agreements that are possible through the language of notation. It is at the intersection of each axis, for me, that the most profound results exist.⁷

Few composer-improvisers have reached such delicately balanced solutions.

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Moving to New York in 1984, First began a series of groups that ran concurrently: the World Casio Quartet, Echoes of God, the Joy Buzzers. Much of these groups' music centered around free improvisation, but the World Casio Quartet experimented with changing beats caused by the friction between slowly glissandoing drones. Interestingly, given First's rock background, he is one of the few New York totalists to avoid using explicit rock materials—most specifically, a backbeat—in his music. Most of his pieces from the late eighties take the form of sound continuums, slowly changing streams of drones whose acoustic beating grows more active during the slow slides from one consonant sonority to another.

In the early 1990s, though, he began adding drumbeats to his continuums in arithmetical ratios analogous to those of his harmonic consonances. A beautiful milestone in this respect was *Jade Screen Test Dreams of Renting Wings* (1993)—First has a wry penchant for circuitous titles, and this one refers to a mythical figure who wishes she could fly. The work's drummer sets the rhythmic pace by listening to a clicktrack over headphones against which two more drummers play complex cross-rhythms. Meanwhile, violin, cello, English horn, bassoon, and no fewer than five electric guitars slide their pitches through tones emitted by a computer module. The resulting buzz glows and sizzles with acoustic phenomena, and the listener can't identify where the pitches are coming from.

First's most ambitious work to date has been *The Manhattan Book of the Dead* (1995), an opera with solo vocalist, dancers, video, and his own idiosyncratic orchestra with electronic keyboards and guitar. Conceived as a response to the AIDS epidemic, this was the first work in which all sides of his music converged smoothly, including massive drone textures, some free improvisation, and even a couple of pop songs in a fairly minimalist rock style. Despite such diversity, the work grows from a drone and dissolves back into it, with all style changes smooth and gradual.

Bernadette Speech

Morton Feldman was one of the late century's best composition teachers, and his concern for timbre, for the physical immediacy of the way each note breathes, left its mark on a whole school of composers. There are many composers touched by the Feldman heritage—besides Peter Gena, Nils Vigeland, Bunita Marcus, Barbara Monk—but the most visible (or audible) has been Bernadette Speech. Though a little older than the other composers here, Speech got off to a late start as a composer, and one aspect of her music is typical of the nineties: with one foot in the classical avant-garde and the other in jazz, Speech has led a split career of string quartets on one hand and improvisations on the other, often fusing the two.



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Bernadette Speech.

Speech was born on New Year's Day, 1948, and at her first piano recital four years later she refused to play the classical piece she had prepared unless she could also play a work of her own. Despite such early musical determination, at the age of eighteen she joined the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Corondelet, and she was a nun until 1977. As such, she taught music at parochial schools and continued to write music, some of it religious, much of it folk music for voice and guitar. In 1977 she left the order and enrolled at Columbia University. She met Feldman on a summer session in Siena, Italy. She found his concern for sonic physicality more inviting than the religion of pitch complexity at Columbia, so she went to SUNY at Buffalo to study with him and Lejaren Hiller. In Buffalo Speech met and married Jeffrey Schanzer (b. 1954), a composer and jazz guitarist whose political music is marked by Marxist sympathies. In 1984 the two returned to New York, where Speech has since been active as a new-music administrator and presenter.

While Speech's music doesn't sound like Feldman's, it is reminiscent of his in a couple of important respects: she tends to limit some aspect of her materials such as dynamics or rhythm (a Feldmanesque tendency that has crept into much postminimalism as well), and she relies on musical images, note complexes that return over and over without being literally repeated. A good example is the series of waves built up over and over again, from the cello to the viola to the second violin

to the first violin, in the opening measures of her string quartet *Les Ondes pour Quatre* (Waves for Four, 1988, example 13.8).

As a presenter of such A.A.C.M. figures as Cecil Taylor and Muhal Richard Abrams, as well as through her marriage to Schanzer, Speech became greatly affected by free jazz and incorporates some improvisation into almost all her music, at least at a detail level. The level to which Speech can erase the lines between improvisation and composition is brilliantly demonstrated in her piano concerto *Within* (1990). Near the end, the pianist improvises a cadenza, which flows smoothly into notated but still free-sounding material. The orchestra then starts echoing the notated gestures and sounds as though they are freely riffing off of the pianist's improvisation, a theatrical achievement Mozart might have envied.

Among Speech's finest works have been her collaborations with the poet and novelist Thulani Davis, especially *Telepathy Suite* (1987), in which Davis reads her vernacular poems about black life in her own inimitable rhythm while Speech's ensemble provides a notated but jazzy background. Though Speech's nonverbal works tend toward postminimalism, they are almost always complex in pitch; her piano piece *When It Rains, Llueve* (1995), for example, intercuts from one image to another in an accessible but cinematic strategy rare among postminimalists.

EXAMPLE 13.8 Bernadette Speech, *Les Ondes pour Quatre*.

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Larry Polansky

If Peter Garland embodies the melodic and rhythmic side of American experimentalism for his generation, then Larry Polansky does the same for the intellectual and mathematical side. Like James Tenney, Polansky is a composer fascinated by musical form and process, and many of his works set up a gradual transformation through which an initial musical image metamorphoses into something very different. Of the composers highlighted in this chapter, he is the least concerned with audience response or accessibility, but his overtone-based processes nevertheless often result in forms of ravishing beauty.

Polansky (born 1954, in New York City) grew up playing jazz, bluegrass, and rock guitar, and he nearly became a professional jazz guitarist. A wandering academic career took him to the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he took composition and electronic music with Tenney and Mumma, while becoming friends with Lou Harrison; all three became important personal influences. When Tenney took a job at York University, Polansky followed and worked there with David Rosenboom. He left to get his masters at the University of Illinois, studying with Johnston, Martirano, and Herbert Brün and working with the Partch archives there. Subsequently, Polansky taught at Mills College from 1980 to 1990, and more recently at Dartmouth.

Polansky's interest in computer-controlled formal process found its initial expression in the first of his *Four Voice Canons* from 1975–1976. The *Four Voice Canons* are Nancarrowian-style tempo canons; No. 5 (1983) is a two-against-three-against-five-against-eight canon for percussion sounds and is performable live, and No. 6 (1986) uses four different timbres, including a Javanese *rebab* and croaking frogs. Much of Polansky's work is concerned with pure tunings, and his tuning pieces are based on overtone series in various relationships. For instance, *Psaltery (for Lou Harrison)* (1978–1979) runs a bowed psaltery sample through a transformation from one harmonic series to another. Transformation—or, as he puts it, mutation—is a seminal Polansky idea, given perhaps its clearest form in *51 Melodies* for two guitars (1990–1991), in which an energetic, rock-style melody is repeated with cumulative variations that gradually transform it into a very different melody. Like Tenney's works, Polansky's invite the ear to follow complex gradual processes.

The extreme and multidimensional literalness of some of Polansky's mutations often requires a computer, and he was one of the designers, along with Burke and Rosenboom, of the computer-music language HMSL. *B'rey'sheet (Cantillation Study No. 1)* (1985) uses HMSL to transform a sung Hebrew cantillation (sung by Jody Diamond, Polansky's wife and one of America's leading gamelan musicians) into a complex texture in seventeen-limit tuning, slowly moving from disorder to

greater order as the computerized melodies become more clearly related to the singer's line.

One of Polansky's most extraordinary works is atypical: *Lonesome Road* (*The Crawford Variations*) (1988–1989). Written while he was on leave in Surakarta, Java, it is a sprawling, ninety-minute set of fifty-one variations on Ruth Crawford's arrangement of the folk song "Lonesome Road," dazzling in its pianistic complexity and kaleidoscopic variety. After a gentle opening, the theme disappears into myriad complexities that bring together serial technique, jazz, blues, and Ivesian sound-layering, the theme occasionally reappearing, splendidly and suddenly, like a sunset glimpsed after rounding a mountain curve. Example 13.9 gives

EXAMPLE 13.9 Larry Polansky, *Lonesome Road*, Variation III.

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Variation VI:
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Variation XXXVIII:

EXAMPLE 13.10 Larry Polansky, *Lonesome Road*, beginnings of Variations VI and XXXVIII.

most of Variation III, one of the simplest variations by far and the first point at which the swirls of arpeggios subside to allow the theme (present in the top notes) to be heard. Example 13.10 gives the more typically virtuosic openings of Variations VI and XXXVIII. The piece is an even larger and worthy successor to that other great set of American piano variations, Rzewski's *The People United*.

Other Totalists

For all the dazzling variety of the current music scene, the most typical manifestations of 1990s activity fall into two broadly defined trends. One is the tendency toward ensemble music, usually for groups of from five to twenty players, often rhythmically complex. Many composers of such music have been associated with the Bang on a Can festival: Evan Ziporyn, Art Jarvinen, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang. This music differs from the older style of classical chamber music in that it is usually not soloistically written, but written to achieve powerful ensemble effects, and with a steady, articulated beat. In effect, the mixed ensemble of eight to twelve players has replaced the conventional orchestra, both for economic reasons and internal reasons of musical style. Furthermore, this music has been a needed release from the limitations of the seventies conceptualist school, who out of economic necessity had concentrated on solo performance. The other major trend, discussed below, is still mostly solo: a tendency toward performance art incorporating music and multimedia into a theatrical setting.

To list composers who have borrowed techniques from some brand of non-Western music would virtually be to name every young composer active in the 1990s. Evan Ziporyn (b. 1959 in Chicago) is a particularly intense case, since he is active both as a jazz clarinetist and director of Balinese-style ensemble, Gamelan Galactica, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Between attending Yale and Berkeley he studied in Bali with Made Lebah, the same teacher Colin McPhee had studied with five decades earlier. As a result, his music unapologetically inhabits two worlds at once, though his rhythms still possess a totalist tendency of shifting back and forth between tempos. His first piece in this style to receive wide public attention was *Luv Time* (1984), whose piano chords and nipple gong, marking out clocklike beats at different tempos, have a Balinese flavor, even as its saxophones shifting among different pentatonic scales bring John Coltrane to mind.

Though more episodic than Gordon's, Ziporyn's works similarly contain long passages based on different tempos marked off by different instruments; *Tree Frog* (1990) is a particularly ambitious example, its mellow beginning of ornate, elaborately ornamented wind solos over a shimmering synthesizer chord giving way to energetically pounding tempo clashes and wild solos. Ziporyn has written music for gamelan (*Aneh Tapi Nyata* of 1992, for example), and in *Tire Fire* (1994) he took the audacious step of combining gamelan and electric guitars in one large, sprawling work, each playing in more or less their accustomed styles.

Julia Wolfe (born 1958 in Philadelphia) started out writing theater music for the Wild Swan Theater she helped found in Ann Arbor, Michigan; when she met Michael Gordon in 1982, he persuaded her to study with Bresnick at Yale, and in 1987 they founded Bang on a Can. Her music emerges organically from irregular repetition; "I'll just sit and play one chord until I start to hear a melody come from it," she has explained,⁸ and you can almost hear this process occur at the beginning of a piece like *Tell Me Everything* (1994) for chamber orchestra. Much of Wolfe's music has an impulse of rock energy behind it, evinced through relentless reiteration of sonorities. This is obvious in a work like *Lick* (1994), with its rock riffs irregularly repeated and built up additively, but also true of her calmer orchestra work *Windows of Vulnerability* (1991), with its interplay of rich, colorful chords. Her music is among the most coloristic of her generation, moving from lush consonance to harsh dissonance but within a postminimally circumscribed set of harmonies.

The third composer in the Bang on a Can trio, David Lang was born in 1957 in Los Angeles and studied with Lou Harrison, Jacob Druckman, and the German symphonist Hans Werner Henze. Lang's music is less systematic and rhythmically complex than that of his totalist colleagues; he opts instead for a sense of theatrical gesture. Perhaps more than anyone else he straddles the uptown and downtown worlds of New York music. A few of his works evince minimalist roots, notably

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Orpheus Over and Under (1989), for two pianos, a poignant meditation first in quickly repeated single notes, then in minor-key tremolos. Many are notable for disconcerting titles, such as *Spud* (1986) and *Eating Living Monkeys* (1985) for orchestra. *Are You Experienced?* (1987) for narrator, tuba, and ensemble, its title taken from a Jimi Hendrix song, begins with Lang as narrator dealing one of the more effective sucker punches in recent music:

"Hello. I'm David Lang. I know you were looking forward to hearing this piece, but something terrible has just happened. While we were busy setting up, someone crept up silently behind you and dealt a quick blow to the side of your head. As you fell towards the floor and began losing consciousness, a number of disconnected thoughts crowded into your head. Here are a few of them. . . ."

The music then launches into rhythmically punchy sonorities that could indeed sound like something throbbing inside your head. The Hendrix connection is cleverly driven home by the amplified tuba achieving the same sort of feedback that Hendrix popularized on guitar.

While totalism has been mostly an East Coast phenomenon, the music of Arthur Jarvinen of Los Angeles (b. 1956, a student of Subotnick at CalArts) has a totalist rhythmic complexity, combined with a whimsical sonic imagination. Like Rouse and Gordon, Jarvinen phase-shifts loops of different durations. A delightful example is his *Murphy-Nights* (1989), based on the philosophical idea that a lecturer who spoke every night for infinity would eventually have nights in which every member of the audience was coincidentally named Murphy. The idea is carried out by an electric bass playing in 33/16 meter and an electric keyboard in 8/2 (32/16), so that the bass gets a sixteenth-note behind the keyboard with each measure. Most striking is Jarvinen's uninhibited timbral imagination: his *Egyptian Two-Step* (1986) is punctuated by the hissing of aerosol spray cans. The textures of his *The Paces of Yu* (1990) emanate from flicked window shutters, grinding pencil sharpeners, a reeling fishing reel, and eight mousetraps snapped at once, deployed in subtle tempo shifts and with an elegant sense of composition.

Ben Neill (born 1957 in North Carolina) is the leading composer among those who have moved in the direction of ambient music. A trumpet player and Rhys Chatham protégé, Neill studied, like Chatham, with La Monte Young, and in 1992 he took up Chatham's old job as music director of the Kitchen. Neill nurtures a totalist fascination for complex rhythms, but instead of synchronizing them in ensemble performance like Rouse or Gordon he sets them loose in computerized sound-fields that operate as ambient sound installations. His *678 Streams* (1993) allows him a solo on his mutantrumpet—a three-belled trumpet attached to a computer, whose valves signal changes in computer logic somewhat as in

David Berhman's music—over rhythms spelling out tempos of 6 against 7 against 8. *Green Machine* (1994) is a larger installation based on the numbers 6, 7, 8, and 9, a verdant aural jungle of drumbeats, atmospheric chords, and sampled thunder. Neill has also written less rock-oriented pieces such as *Money Talk* (1987), in which he cleverly plays trumpet over the incessant patter of an auctioneer used as a drone. As an ambient rocker who sometimes works with disc-spinning DJs like DJ Spooky (Paul D. Miller), Neill has become something of a crossover artist with a rock following.

Jerome Kitzke exemplifies the young composers so immersed in both jazz and classical worlds that they cease to make a distinction. A virtuoso pianist, Kitzke (born 1955 in Wisconsin) incorporates elements of American Indian chanting into his music, often playing the piano with one hand while chanting vocally and shaking a rattle with the other. He performs his works with his group Mad Coyote, who play both improvised and notated music that is sometimes atonal, often jazzy, but always rooted in an earthy, tribal aesthetic. His works such as *We Need to Dream All This Again* (1992–1993) weave narration into the music, often with Native American or political texts. Kitzke's major work to date has been *The Paha Sapa Give-back* (1995), a huge theatrical piece for thirteen instrumentalists (including six percussionists), four singers, and actor narrator. In a drumming ritual with the players moving among different positions in the space, the piece urges a restoration of the Black Hills to the Sioux people.

Another composer heavily influenced by American Indian music is Kyle Gann (the author, born 1955 in Dallas, Texas), whose works are also drum-driven; specifically, he has developed a rhythmic language of changing tempos from the beat-shifting music of the Hopi, Zuni, and Pueblo Indians. In this respect his ensemble music (such as *Astrological Studies*, 1994) is similar to Michael Gordon's, but smoother, more consonant, and more melodic, in a style once referred to by the *New York Times* as "naive pictorialism." Oddly (since postminimalism provides such a clear context for microtonal perception), Gann is the only totalist or post-minimal composer working in just-intonation tuning; his electronic works use purely tuned pitch systems of up to thirty-seven pitches per octave. An example is *Custer's Ghost to Sitting Bull* (1995), on a text imagined as spoken by General George Custer after the Little Bighorn debacle.

Nick Didkovsky is one of the most unusual composers of his generation, with a computer-generated complexity to his ensemble music that goes beyond totalism. Though Didkovsky (born 1958), a virtuoso guitarist, studied with Christian Wolff at Dartmouth, he took his degree in mathematics and until recently made his living teaching math and computer science. Didkovsky composes most of his music via computer, setting up probabilities and letting the software compose according to Myhill distributions, Markoff chains, recursive systems, and other math-

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emational algorithms. This all sounds very complex and cerebral; what makes it astonishing is that Didkovsky's ensemble since 1984, Doctor Nerve, is a jazz-rock band with a hard-hitting beat, blaring brass, and the ability to turn on a dime. As a result, Doctor Nerve's music sounds like big-band jazz from Mars, with odd-shaped phrases repeated over and over and peculiarly off-balance rhythmic phrases. Didkovsky generates his titles via some of the same software processes he uses on notes, so that his pieces include *Take Your Ears As the Bones of Their Queen*, *Their Eyes Bulged with Sparkling Pockets*, and *Don't Call Too Late My Husband's a Baker*.

Like Didkovsky, Diana Meckley (born 1954 in Denver) uses algorithms to write ensemble music, derived in her case from fractals. In *Strange Attractors* (1989) for string quartet, percussion, and sampler keyboard and *The Evolving Artifact* (1991–1992) for brass and keyboard sampler, she has made forms in which the same material gets presented both acoustically and electronically, played live and then stretched and folded by the sampler for challenging perceptual effects. By contrast, Bunita Marcus, a Feldman protégé, writes quintessentially intuitive music of reiterated sonorities. Her *Adam and Eve* (1989) is a gorgeous continuum of recurring chromatic motifs, with a lithe sense of angularly leaping melody. A new breed of ensemble composers is represented by the composers of the bicoastal collective Common Sense, including Dan Becker, Belinda Reynolds, Carolyn Yarnell, John Halle, Ed Harsh, Randall Woolf, and Marc Mellits. Becker's chamber works such as *Gridlock* and *S.T.I.C.* are marked by a playful postminimal rigor, while Woolf uses vernacular elements to comment on society. Yarnell's music is more highly emotive, typified by her piano concerto *Arrow through Heart* (1996), whose relentless textures of running eighth-notes accumulate in cathartic energy.

Performance Artists

While many young composers have turned to rock sources and rhythmic complexity, others experiment instead with unusual modes of performance, working with low-tech performance systems or moving in the direction of theater. Examples are Brenda Hutchinson, Laetitia de Compiegne Sonami, Linda Fisher, Joshua Fried, and Phil Kline.

Like Janice Giteck, Brenda Hutchinson (born 1954 in Trenton, New Jersey) has worked with mental patients, and she uses their stories in her music. In *EEYAH!* (1989), a sampled recording of a Thai farmer's pig call (transcribed in the title) becomes the frame for a meditation on the names of people who have died of AIDS, punctuated by the beat of a bass drum. In her *Apple Etudes*, Hutchinson overlays the recorded stories of mental asylum patients with the tinkle of a giant, three-foot-diameter music box she built. The personal intensity of

Hutchinson's pieces can be eerily compelling; in *Every Dream Has Its Number* (1996) she interviewed her dying mother about her gambling compulsion. Hutchinson's strategy is often to focus our attention on some aspect of the acoustics or physics of a performance, meanwhile slipping in a real-life monologue by some unfortunate victim whose story hits us all the harder for catching us off guard.

Laetitia de Compiègne Sonami (born 1957) is a French-born composer of interactive electronic music who has lived in San Francisco since 1978. Her early works, written while studying at Mills with Ashley, Behrman, and Terry Riley, were mostly for tape with simple, homemade electronics, but she has increasingly turned toward live theatrical work. In pieces such as *What Happened* (1987), she tells a story by the brilliant West Coast novelist Melody Sumner Carnahan, as her voice triggers the electronic environment around her. In *Pie Jesu—Sounds from Empty Spaces* (1990), that environment includes sound samples such as Moslem songs and a section of the Fauré Requiem. Sonami performs more recent pieces such as . . . *and she keeps coming back for more* (1995–1996) with her invention the Lady's Glove, a pressure- and direction-sensitive glove with which she can control sixteen computerized functions at once. Her work is always mysterious, inscrutable as to electronic process, but seductive in its emotional narrative.

Linda Fisher (born 1949) has also moved from homemade electronics into a theatrical direction; she started out as a David Tudor protégé, performing in his *Rainforest*. Her *Girlfriends* (1990) for keyboard sampler offers a different sound complex on each note; *Big Mouth* (1991) employs samples from a Porky Pig cartoon for a witty satire on Freudian psychoanalysis. Her more ambitious recent works, though, are a series of electronic pieces about women scientists, in which Fisher sings over her live electronics in textures alternately noisy and postminimal. In this series, *The Scientist* (1990) alludes to the life of Margaret Mead, and *Girl Devil Dancing* to that of Alexandra David-Neel.

One of the most inventive performance-artist-type composers is Joshua Fried (born 1959 in Los Angeles), a rock-influenced postconceptualist with a steady stream of startling ideas. In 1981 he started performing in New York clubs with an act in which he would run several tape loops at a time and control which ones were heard through a mixer. After awhile he implanted piezoelectric discs in everyday objects (usually old shoes) and drummed them with drumsticks to trigger noise from the loops, so that while the content was prerecorded, he could control the results improvisatorily. Next, in 1991 he started an ongoing work called *Travelogue*, in which he made tape collages of pop songs, noises, and poetry and asked various singers and actors to listen to the tape over headphones and imitate it as closely and as quickly as possible. The audience hears not the tape the singer hears, but a different background

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tape, plus the singer's hysterical attempt. *Travelogue* became so successful that Fried expanded the technique to a chorus of six singer-actors at once in *Headset Sextet* (1995), employing complex tempo canons and stunning effects of theatrical simultaneity.

Equally inventive is Pamela Z, a San Francisco performance artist and songwriter. Born Pamela Ruth Brooks in Buffalo in 1956, she went from playing guitar and singing her songs in clubs and coffee houses to being one of San Francisco's most inventive and popular performance artists. She frequently performs solo with a large rack of electronic equipment used to make loops of her voice and to create digital delays. Her pieces are as delightful as Laurie Anderson's and have the same irreverent, technological spirit. In "Cultured Pearls," her sampled voice repeats on the sliding word "pearl" as she details their activities: "They go to the opera, they support the ballet." In "You," Z uses as lyrics a long list of phrases all beginning with the word "you"; it turns out to be a page from a catalogue of popular song titles. Since 1991 Z has performed with her trio The Qube Chix in songs such as "I Want a Bald Boyfriend," a rock song with only drums and clarinet as accompaniment: "I want a man who's well-behaved / Who's neat and clean, whose head is shaved."

Phil Kline, a guitarist in Glenn Branca's symphonic ensemble, has delighted New York audiences with his performance pieces for multiple ghetto blasters or boom boxes (cheap tape recorders). In works such as *Bachman's Warbler* (1990), he plays a harmonica tone into a recording tape loop, plays it back and records the loop with a new tone on another loop, and so on for twelve tape players, gradually building up impressive masses of sound. He has also, as a Christmas season tradition since 1991, enacted living sound sculptures in which a large number of people carry ghetto blasters through the streets, all playing tapes that have been computer-sequenced to create echoes and scintillating quasi-minimalist phase patterns.

Another of the fastest-growing movements among younger composers is the movement toward alternative tunings. Whereas, earlier in the century, alternate tunings generally meant quarter-tones, sixth-tones, or some other equal-tempered system of more than twelve, for the current generation it more often means just-intonation systems of pure tuning. Often these composers do not receive much exposure, because of both the difficulty of getting their microtonal music performed well and, in many cases, their tendency to emphasize theory over performance. On the East Coast, the leader of this movement is Johnny Reinhart, composer, bassoonist, and director of the perennial American Festival of Microtonal Music. Skip LaPlante, another microtonalist active in New York, specializes in home-made instruments fashioned from cast-off objects. Dean Drummond is well-known for directing the Newband Ensemble, which plays and maintains some of Harry Partch's original

instruments as well as a few replicas. And Erling Wold of San Francisco is a microtonal composer of brief, enigmatic works, who has also had some success with scores for independent films.

Postlude: The Road from 4'33"

So many music writers today are pessimistic about the future and present state of music. Does this chapter sound pessimistic? It is true that the audiences for classical music are falling off, that more and more young people don't attend live concerts, that symphony orchestras are folding, that university departments are increasingly forced to cater to rock and commercial music to attract students. But such oft-quoted statistics have primarily to do with the decline of interest in *European* music. How about *American* music? Are the fates of the two continents chained together? Or does the death of the prestige of European music offer American music an opportunity it has been yearning for since the influx of immigrants before World War II?

If it were possible to kill off American music through lack of audience, lack of funding, and lack of institutional support, American music would have died a thousand deaths over the last 150 years. American composers are accustomed to surviving on virtually nothing. One European's book of interviews with American composers was entitled *Desert Plants*, acknowledging that they can get by on infinitesimal amounts of support that European artists would consider starvation rations. Our educational institutions have barely tried to expose students to American music to find whether they are attracted to it or not. How can the impending death of European music's support system in America possibly hurt any American composers except those tied in to European performance practice? Aside from their constitutional rights as citizens and the occasional small grant, what do most American composers possess that can be taken away?

Were I forced to choose the decades that I thought were the most fertile in American music, in terms of excellence and beauty, I would quickly pick the 1920s and 1990s, less certainly the 1930s and 1980s. John Cage himself named 1952 as the low point in American culture⁹—significantly, the year he composed 4'33". Since that year—if 4'33" can be considered a kind of death of music that renders a rebirth possible—American music has been reforming itself, building up a new, firmer, more solidly indigenous tradition. That frustrating gap between composers and audiences? It's gone, or else kept alive only by virtue of an artificial life support system that our institutions keep it on. There is nothing complicated or off-putting or opaque about the musics of Eve Beglarian, Mikel Rouse, Glenn Branca, John Luther Adams, Peter Garland, William Duckworth, Pamela Z, Joshua Fried. Anyone who's

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It is true that, as the classical music establishment sinks, American composers will have to fight in order not to sink with it. But the fight cannot be more difficult than the struggle already has been to be included and well represented within the Euro-classical world in the first place. The battleground is shifting—American composers have established a much stronger foothold on the Internet than they possessed in orchestra programs or classical record stores, and much of their music is more easily available via the Web than it has been through standard retail outlets. In order to survive, composers and their slim support system will have to create a public perception that classical (European) music is one thing, and the world of American composition something else altogether, unhampered by the elitist and class associations that make Mozart and Brahms seem more irrelevant with each passing year.

The problem is that, as the theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written,¹⁰ a creative culture is a triangle requiring three points: individual artists, a tradition to work within and against, and a public with an adequate amount of disposable attention. The third variable is what is lacking today. As corporate control over the economy necessitates ever more work and income to keep up with technology and ahead of inflation, people have less time than ever to explore the art springing up around them. And, paradoxically, just as disposable attention plummets toward zero, there has never been so much exciting music, there have never been so many imaginative composers. Our music scene is collapsing under the weight of more good work than our current stressed-out and distracted audiences can assimilate.

Art cannot solve the problems of society—at least, most of us reflexively assume that it can't. In recent years, politicians and administrators have attempted to use art to ameliorate social ills, mostly by increasing the programming of art by members of designated minorities so that those minorities will feel included by our cultural institutions. Whether this strategy really does improve collective self-esteem, or whether it is a sop thrown to minorities in lieu of political change that would materially benefit them, remains to be decided. But can't Thelonious Monk's music uplift and inspire a white person, and couldn't Copland's music have the same effect on an African- or Asian-American? Doesn't the enormous impact of gamelan and Indian ragas on late twentieth-century American music prove that art's meaning isn't limited by ethnic categories?

Say for a minute that artists are, as they have so often been described, the antennae of the race, the first people to register and reflect undercurrents of collective psychological change. If so, then the composers of the 1990s, in once again creating music in which intellectual, physical, and emotional appeal are no longer separated, may be pointing toward an upcoming rebirth in American society. Perhaps the

road from 4'33" to Monk's *Atlas* and Rouse's *Dennis Cleveland* and Adams's *Dream of White on White* is a road that society itself is slowly and belatedly traversing, a road that starts with the simple, egoless act of stopping to listen, and that points toward a reintegration of personality, toward restoring playfulness and emotiveness to creativity. If any of this is true, isn't it possible that the music of these 1990s might be indeed supremely useful, if nothing more, as a psychological model, operating on deeper terms than any orchestra-sponsored questionnaire would be able to measure?

I believe so. I further believe that composers and audiences alike have forgotten how crucially important music can be to nonmusicians and that they, composers and audiences both, are resisting remembering because of the tremendous responsibility that importance entails on both sides. However, every few years bring a new crop of composers whose music has wide and lasting appeal, each crop larger than the last. As Cage said so often, "We need not fear for the future of music." This book ends in the middle of a crescendo. And if the music described here falls into disuse in the twenty-first century, it will be because twenty-first-century composers stood on our shoulders to create a music so heavenly that there was no longer any need for the past.

Notes

1. John Cage, "Overpopulation and Art," in *John Cage: Composed in America*, Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 14–17.
2. Robert Ashley, "Just One Complaint," in the program catalogue for New Music American '82.
3. Quoted in Kyle Gann, "Shadowing Capote," *Village Voice*, February 7, 1995, p. 63.
4. Interview with the author, October 15, 1996.
5. Interview with the author, July 22, 1996.
6. Ibid.
7. David First, liner notes for *The Good Book's (Accurate) Jail of Escape Dust Coordinates Part 2*, O.O. Discs 0023, 1995.
8. Interview with the author, October 15, 1996.
9. Quoted in *Conversing with Cage*, Richard Kostelanetz, ed. (New York: Lime-light Editions, 1988), p. 206.
10. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, culture, and person: a systems view of creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*, Robert J. Sternberg, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 325.

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