

# American Romanticism



Photo/Lisa Ebricht

## WILLIAM FERRIS CHORALE

at Our Lady of Mount Carmel  
Church  
May 17, 1985

By Kyle Gann

In a way, the status of Howard Hanson, that grand old dean of

American romanticism, is to some extent an embarrassment to the structure of the professional music community: it shows up the huge discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative influence in the arts. Composers of abstruse dodecaphony, academics all, condescend to Hanson; his music is not inter-

esting to analyze. Composers of "new music," what used to be called the avant-garde, scoff at him because he made no attempt to keep pace with the times. The professional orchestra circuit ignores him because he is American (horrors!), and the general public is hardly aware of his name. But composers

like Hanson find their place in the concept of community ensembles, wherever (mostly) nonprofessional groups play for neighborhood, not metropolitan, audiences—often the same audiences who like medieval music without understanding it, who consider Hindemith too demanding and Tchaikovsky a little

too risqué. It's an honorable niche. In fact, the influence and extent of the subprofessional music community, which used to be extreme in Germany, is still too little taken into account in America. If every self-styled "serious" composer received an equal vote, including band directors, high-school orchestra leaders, writers of religious music, and weekend composers, Hanson's neoromanticism would probably be revealed as America's prevalent musical style, making him secretly one of America's most influential composers.

The recent concert of the William Ferris Chorale, then, was welcome as a rare, well-deserved, evening-long tribute to Hanson in the more professional realm, if still

## MUSIC

presented in a church to a presumably local audience. The program was well chosen, ranging from the famous *Lament for Beowulf* from Hanson's early years, to *A Sea Symphony*, written four years before his death. Variations in style along that 52-year stretch of career were well-nigh imperceptible. In both works, slow-rolling oceans of sound, carrying mild polychords in their wake, swelled gradually into climaxes whose nobility derived from their very predictability. Emotion there was aplenty, but of a calm, rational kind that would hardly have scandalized the most bourgeois paterfamilias. Hanson's

## Summer Hair





## WILLIAM FERRIS CHORALE

at Our Lady of Mount Carmel  
Church  
May 17, 1985

By Kyle Gann

In a way, the status of Howard  
Hanson, that grand old dean of

American romanticism, is to some  
extent an embarrassment to the  
structure of the professional music  
community: it shows up the huge  
discrepancy between quantitative  
and qualitative influence in the arts.  
Composers of abstruse dodeca-  
phony, academics all, condescend  
to Hanson; his music is not inter-

esting to analyze. Composers of  
"new music," what used to be called  
the avant-garde, scoff at him be-  
cause he made no attempt to keep  
pace with the times. The profes-  
sional orchestra circuit ignores him  
because he is American (horrors!),  
and the general public is hardly  
aware of his name. But composers

like Hanson find their place in the  
concept of community ensembles,  
wherever (mostly) nonprofessional  
groups play for neighborhood, not  
metropolitan, audiences—often the  
same audiences who like medieval  
music without understanding it,  
who consider Hindemith too de-  
manding and Tchaikovsky a little

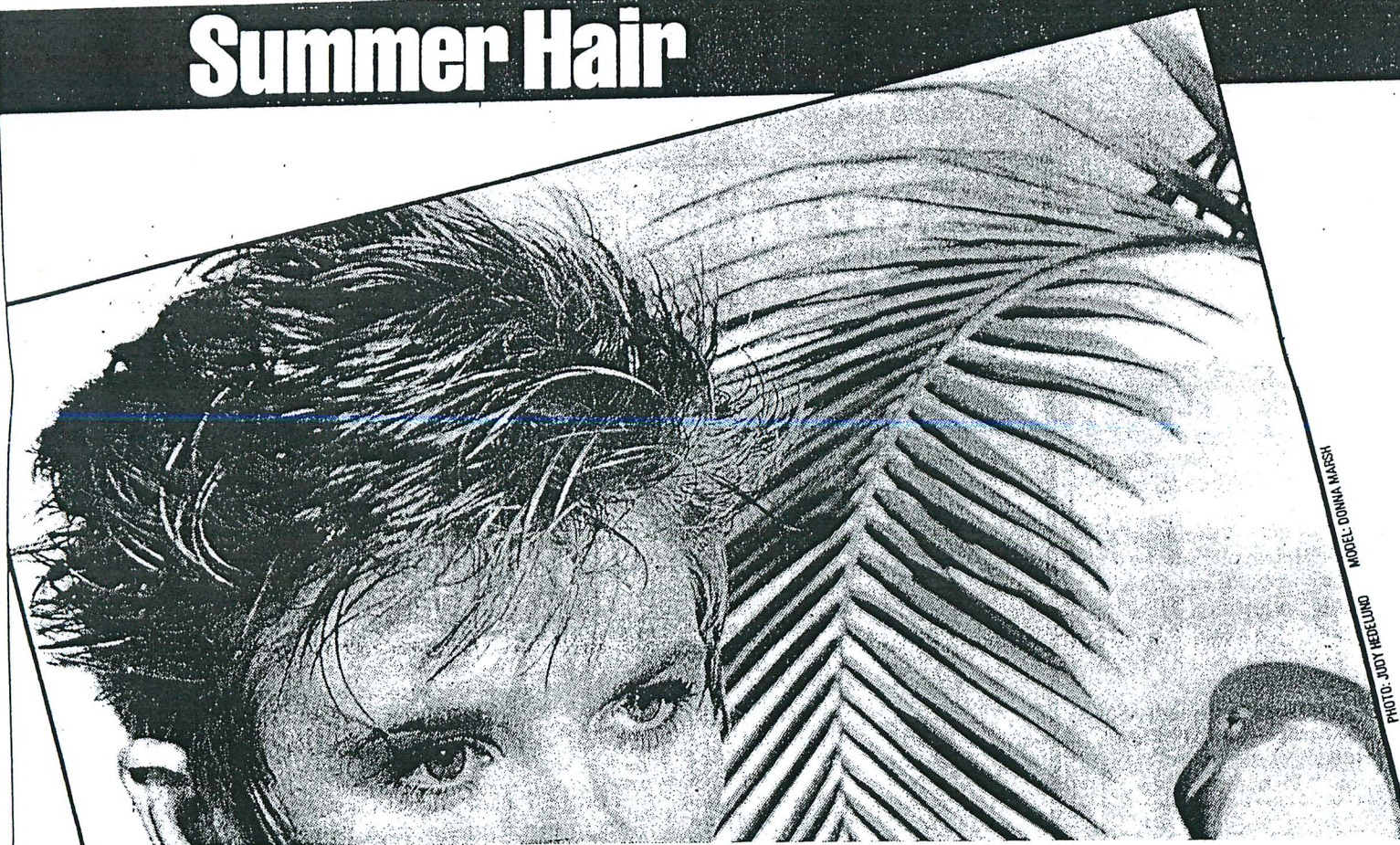
## MUSIC

presented in a church to a presum-  
ably local audience. The program  
was well chosen, ranging from the  
famous *Lament for Beowulf* from  
Hanson's early years, to *A Sea  
Symphony*, written four years be-  
fore his death. Variations in style  
along that 52-year stretch of career  
were well-nigh imperceptible. In  
both works, slow-rolling oceans of  
sound, carrying mild polychords in  
their wake, swelled gradually into  
climaxes whose nobility derived  
from their very predictability.  
Emotion there was aplenty, but of  
a calm, rational kind that would  
hardly have scandalized the most  
bourgeois paterfamilias. Hanson's  
only musical crime, after all, was  
that he never strayed very far from  
his models, who were primarily  
Charles Tomlinson Griffes (color-  
ful, airy orchestration, expectant  
harmonies) and Edward Elgar (re-  
petitive accompaniment structures,  
refusal to indulge in excess of any  
kind).

Griffes, a genius who died from  
overwork at the tragically young  
age of 36, was by far the better  
influence. Hanson's *Serenade for  
Flute, Harp, and Strings* owed to  
that influence its brilliant orches-  
tration. This, in this performance  
at least, was an electrically intense  
work, creating an irresistible air of  
expectancy to which the fluid glis-

continued on page 46

# Summer Hair



MODEL: DONNA MARSH  
PHOTO: JUDY HEFLUND



# MUSIC

continued from page 44

sandi of solo flutist Donald Peck contributed generously. The work's impressionist harmonies, as often plucked as bowed, were enlivened by mercurial major-minor shifts, and conductor Ferris brought an exciting rhythmic momentum to the whole. The Serenade was the one work on the program that could unequivocally be called well written, a tiny American classic unbesmirched by Hanson's conservative

reputation.

The remaining works, being choral, brought Hanson's stodgy British side to the fore with its blandly inoffensive professionalism; particularly the two religious pieces, settings of Psalm 121 and most of Psalm 8. Composers of church music in America toil under a debilitating set of criteria as it is: their music is not allowed to be austere and meditative, which would suggest the pagan chanting of cults (Buddhism and early Christianity, for example), nor is it permitted to be *too* interesting—a lukewarm, sentimental drama is the most that can be expected, and not too many chromatics, *please*. Amer-

ican congregations are all too easily offended, even with Hanson's mild style. These two settings went as far harmonically as they could get away with, moving very slowly to avoid shocking anyone. Often chromatic touches such as the major-minor ambiguity were relegated to the organ part, played by Thomas Weisflog on the beautiful old E.M. Skinner organ. Though hardly full of personality, the two works expressed their texts warmly and with polite understatement, while Julie Johnson exhibited a lovely, dark tone in her too brief solo in *Psalm 121*.

It's easy to understand the modest vogue once enjoyed by the

*Lament for Beowulf*: the work's insistent major ninth chord repeated in alternating quarters and eighths keeps its audience involved without becoming tiresome. As the work slowly swelled and as slowly died away, horn calls and effective (though never jarring) key changes added spice to what is basically potatoes-and-cabbage music. *A Sea Symphony*, based on three fragments of Whitman's poetry, was quite similar, if a *little* more dissonant and with a fiery third movement that provided some welcome but superficial contrast. Both pieces were prevented from ever descending to the level of film music by an air of introversion and restraint, and both followed Elgar's maxim that if an effect sounds good—repeat it. In fact, a number of Hanson clichés emerged in the five works, especially cadential formulas: a dying line at the end of a movement would often end with a loud, punctuating pizzicato, or else a second of silence would precede a sharp attack by the unaccompanied choir. The effective use and reuse of such formulas give Hanson's music its polish, and are the mark of a competent, professional composer—as distinct from a composer of genius.

The William Ferris Chorale fully did justice to the swelling, majestic side of this music, but never went very far in the direction of airy delicacy, obliterating the mystery of which such pieces as *Psalm 121* occasionally seemed capable. Otherwise, though, these were such loving, sincerely felt performances that it's a shame the old man himself wasn't alive to hear them. Ferris was a good conductor for this music, working in large, phlegmatic gestures, emotive without ever being extroverted. The orchestral playing too was vivid and full of admirable solo playing.

Hanson's music is too limited in its emotional spectrum, too obvious in its technical devices, to ever become really popular; but its affinity for spirits too mild for the

standing ovation at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church showed that for at least once in its life, Hanson's music had found its performers and its audience.

## ALFRED BRENDDEL

at Orchestra Hall  
May 5, 1985

By Kyle Gann

*Content is a glimpse of something ... it's very tiny—very tiny, content.*

— Willem de Kooning

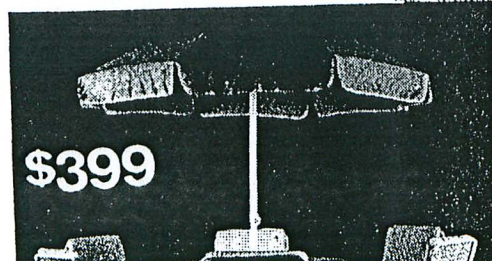
Pianist Alfred Brendel is a paradigm for what musicians mean when they call someone "musical." In his playing there is no emotional, intellectual, or even spiritual point being made. He does not swoon at the keyboard, he does not publish learned analyses, he does not exaggerate to give us "his view" of a composer, and he certainly does not play to the audience either through wild gesturing or inordinate immobility. As an interpreter, his personality is transparent—or more accurately, its influence is almost impossible to notice, so directly does the music express itself. Everything flows from the music's content: that inner core which is so difficult to describe verbally, which has been a stumbling block throughout the history of aesthetics, but which immediately becomes clear merely when a simple phrase is played correctly. Given this, all emotional, intellectual, and spiritual meanings fall neatly into their subsidiary positions. Though content may be the tiniest part of a piece of music—a pair of chords, a gradually rising line—it is the nugget that justifies all more superficial phenomena, and Brendel will not allow anything to obscure our perception of it.

A number of extraordinary features combine to effect this transparency. One is Brendel's Zen-like ability to dissolve individual notes into a seamless line that is not perceived as a series of successive attacks. Another is his slight phrase-by-phrase tempo fluctuations: not a rubato at all, but merely the slight

We're celebrating our 5th birthday with a giant sale thru Mon., June 3. There's terrific values throughout our supermarket of home furnishings ... and accessories ...

# OUR 5TH BIRTHDAY SALE!

from around the world! See, for instance, our complete collection of summer furniture, the largest ever in EMU from Italy. Visit today while supplies are complete! Park free.



10-PIECE CAFE SET—White 36" round or 33" sq. table with 70" colorful umbrella, 4 Rio chairs, and 4 double cushions in red, blue, or yellow stripes. Regular \$223.50, SALE \$199 set.



We're celebrating our 5th birthday with a giant sale thru Mon., June 3. There's terrific values throughout our supermarket of home furnishings... and accessories...

# OUR 5TH BIRTHDAY SALE!

from around the world! See, for instance, our complete collection of summer furniture, the largest ever in EMU from Italy. Visit today while supplies are complete! Park free.



**\$199**

10-PIECE CAFE SET—White 36" round or 33" sq. table with 70" colorful umbrella, 4 Rio chairs, and 4 double cushions in red, blue, or yellow stripes. Regular \$223.50, SALE \$199 set.



**\$399**

14-PIECE TERRACE SET—Our top-of-the-line set includes a 48" white round table, a large 78" umbrella, 6 Roma hi-back chairs, and 6 hi-back double cushions, reg. \$453.30, SALE \$399.00.



**\$249**

5-PIECE GARDEN SET—Sturdy white umbrella table with 4 solid white plastic Vegas chairs, reg. \$279.75, SALE \$249 set.



3-PIECE BISTRO SET—Our 24" round stack table set in white includes 2 smart Vienna chairs, reg. \$119.85, SALE \$99.

**\$99**

repeat it. In fact, a number of Hanson cliches emerged in the five works, especially cadential formulas: a dying line at the end of a movement would often end with a loud, punctuating pizzicato, or else a second of silence would precede a sharp attack by the unaccompanied choir. The effective use and reuse of such formulas give Hanson's music its polish, and are the mark of a competent, professional composer—as distinct from a composer of genius.

The William Ferris Chorale fully did justice to the swelling, majestic side of this music, but never went very far in the direction of airy delicacy, obliterating the mystery of which such pieces as *Psalm 121* occasionally seemed capable. Otherwise, though, these were such loving, sincerely felt performances that it's a shame the old man himself wasn't alive to hear them. Ferris was a good conductor for this music, working in large, phlegmatic gestures, emotive without ever being extroverted. The orchestral playing too was vivid and full of admirable solo playing.

Hanson's music is too limited in its emotional spectrum, too obvious in its technical devices, to ever become really popular; but its affinity for spirits too mild for the 20th century will ensure that it will never be completely forgotten, either. The spontaneity of the

exaggerate to give us "his view" of a composer, and he certainly does not play to the audience either through wild gesturing or inordinate immobility. As an interpreter, his personality is transparent—or more accurately, its influence is almost impossible to notice, so directly does the music express itself. Everything flows from the music's content: that inner core which is so difficult to describe verbally, which has been a stumbling block throughout the history of aesthetics, but which immediately becomes clear merely when a simple phrase is played correctly. Given this, all emotional, intellectual, and spiritual meanings fall neatly into their subsidiary positions. Though content may be the tiniest part of a piece of music—a pair of chords, a gradually rising line—it is the nugget that justifies all more superficial phenomena, and Brendel will not allow anything to obscure our perception of it.

A number of extraordinary features combine to effect this transparency. One is Brendel's Zen-like ability to dissolve individual notes into a seamless line that is not perceived as a series of successive attacks. Another is his slight phrase-by-phrase tempo fluctuations: not a rubato at all, but merely the slight shifts in intensity even a fast talker will naturally make in conversation. But perhaps the most dumbfounding is his ability to keep several (five? six?) different simultaneous lines separate, each with its own tone color, dynamic, and level of intensity. Not only does his left hand not know what his right hand doeth, but adjacent fingers seem to bid a mutual adieu and go their separate ways. It is this ability that makes him the interpreter par excellence of Schubert, who thinks very much in terms of contrasting lines. It also transfigured two works by Haydn in Brendel's recital in Orchestra Hall.

So many think of Haydn in dull tones of gray and beige that it was refreshing to hear Brendel make a bright rainbow out of the Variations

## NEED HELP?

Learn how to help yourself at a workshop by the  
**Chicago Institute  
For Rational  
Living, Ltd.**

June 2, 30. Call Dr. Ken Peiser, 649-9392, for details or to be on our mailing list.