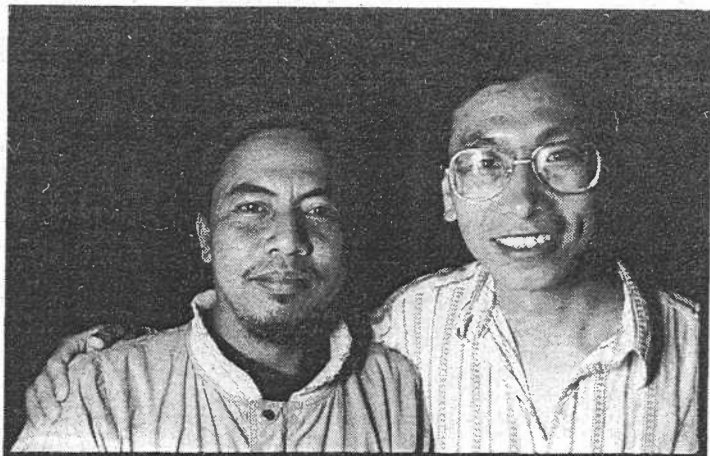


# A Liberal Balance

By Kyle Gann

**Musical liberalism** and political liberalism aren't reliable partners. Subscribing to both at once isn't as easy as it looks. Progressive or liberal music might be defined as that which leaves behind sounds and structures that have been used before, at the risk of leaving the audience behind as well. But leftist composers from Copland to Cornelius Cardew and beyond have called the avant-garde "elitist," and, at the risk of leaving new musical territory unexplored, have written "conservative" music that nonmusician audiences could connect with. Every composer must find his or her own balance between politics and aesthetics.

At the Telluride Institute's Composer-to-Composer symposium July 13 through 15, I sparked antagonism (seems to be my function at these affairs) by suggesting from the audience that a group of composers who would spend hours emotionally detailing what the government should do for them, yet wouldn't spend five minutes considering what they should do for the audience, left itself open to charges of elitism and hypocrisy. Earlier in the day, Roger Reynolds had cut off a question regarding the audience, saying that this symposium was an opportunity for composers to discuss compositional technique. I questioned whether the two could be separated, whether a compositional technique had any value



I Wayan Sadra and Ge Gan-Ru: accountable to the audience

whatsoever except as a means for communicating an idea to an audience. That beam of light diffracted into a rainbow of responses.

Gerhard Staebler, a German composer of Cardew's Marxist leanings who has been known to ask his garbage collector's opinion of his latest work, replied that he changed the style of each piece depending on what audience he intended it for. At Telluride's public concerts, his string quartet... *strike the ear*... was thorny, but contained enough references to tonal quartet writing to keep you centered in it. Britain's Hugh Davies said that he trusted his own ear to stand in for an audience member's, and his music proved him capable. His instrumental transcriptions of animal sounds could have charmed children, as they did me.

New York improviser Leo Smith provided the spectrum's other extreme in Cagean terms. "Whoever is present at a performance," he insisted, "and whoever performs at a performance—they have the same responsibility. If you don't like a piece of music, it is not the composer's fault. . . . The fault lies in the fact that you have a possibility of liking or disliking a piece. I am not interested in reactions. I want people to understand their responsibility to a performer." Sure enough, Smith's solo performance—a few squeaky trumpet notes, some percussion pings—was a private game that communicated nothing to my ears. In his scenario, that was my problem.

The screw-the-audience-I'm-doing-my-own-thing attitude strikes me as a macho phase that every type of music goes through. No-

tated music went through it in the '70s; improvisation is still wrestling with it (though Geri Allen's lithe piano improves at Telluride couldn't have been more lucid). The split seemed generational. Senior composers Reynolds, James Tenney, and Eastman's Robert Morris acted impatient with having to bring the Audience Thing into discussion. Morris's 12-tone electronic piece *Four or Five Mirrors* was probably full of the algorithms he described warmly onstage, but the music gave no hint of its ordering principle. On the other hand, younger composers like Ge Gan-ru and Henry Gwiazda spoke up passionately about their need for their music to reach a wide range of people.

I found myself most in sync with the Asian composers. Gan-ru railed against American composers' exaltation of form over feeling (he teaches at Columbia, where it's a religion), and insisted that music should communicate emotion. I Wayan Sadra, Indonesia's leading composer, spoke of his music's reaction to a totalitarian environment: "OK, we have oppression. What can we do in our art to raise the spirits of our people?" His theater piece *Daily* had Larry Polansky and Jody Diamond tapping a tabletop while Sadra breathed arabesques on a wooden flute. Then, after Diamond intoned an impassioned Indonesian text, the cast threw eggs at a heated, tilted metal plate: the eggs sizzled and slid to the floor like a breakfast made by Jackson Pollock. Had the text's translation been provided, the protest's subject might have been clearer, but the sonic and visual images could hardly have been more striking. My feeling was that statements

like Sadra's and Gan-ru's strengthened the argument that the government ought to support art through the NEA, while those who insisted on art's autonomy and lack of accountability weakened it. If artists don't have a responsibility to the public, why do politicians, or biogenetic engineers? Artists affect the overall psychic environment the way scientists affect the physical and politicians the social. The effective rhetoric for the left to use against Jesse Helms types is not, "The audience owes composers a living, they owe the audience nothing"; that puts artists in the sterile, useless position Republicans want them in. The *effective* rhetoric is: Yes, Mr. Helms, artists do have an obligation to the public, and they're fulfilling it in ways you simply haven't understood yet. Allow us to explain them to you.

The artists who are causing trouble are *not* the autonomous experimenters, but the ones who have the audience in mind. Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs are repugnant (to many) in description, but exquisitely innocent (to nearly all) in actual appearance, and that dissonance moves people—audiences—to begin changing their minds. Artists who say "I'm not interested in audience reactions," or "My technique has nothing to do with the audience" relinquish that kind of power. The most impressive music at Telluride was made not by those who were merely "expressing themselves" (the musical liberals), but by political liberals who had put their lives, freedom, and funding in danger for the sake of expressing social messages in their music that their governments didn't want to hear. ■

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