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Are Notes Enough?

'Continuum: Remembering Conlon Nancarrow'

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It irritated Bernard Shaw when actors "interpreted" his lines. "If they will simply pronounce the words correctly," he once fumed, "I will vouch for the rest." One assumes that Conlon Nancarrow (1912–97), who wrote three-fourths of his music for player piano, felt the same way about notes. He hated European classical music for its rhythmic squareness, and felt that attempts to make it more supple through rubato simply piled one error on another. He was of a generation—Cage and Babbitt are others—that distrusted the idea of music as emotional expression, believing in it only as patterns of sound, a kind of time-released, incorporeal geometry. Why should a piece of music differ from performance to performance, he liked arguing, when a Shakespeare sonnet or Picasso painting remains the same every time you look at it? That aesthetic fit neatly with the mechanical perfection of the player piano.

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Continuum's Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs: How do you interpret a composer who preferred the player piano?

But how, then, do you approach his dozen-odd works for live instruments? Is it enough merely to play the right notes at the right time? Or should you try to bring out the music's inner emotional content, no matter whether Nancarrow believed it existed or not? In a birthday celebration turned memorial concert, the Continuum ensemble valiantly attacked such questions by playing almost all the live works, everything except the two orchestra pieces. Refreshingly, they hewed to no one strategy. Continuum's pianist-directors, Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs, generally took a dry, noninterpretive approach, while the ensemble's string quartet infused the music with joyous energy. Yet Nancarrow's intentions in his non-player-piano works are so divided against themselves that neither solution felt comfortable.

Seltzer played the *Prelude* and *Blues,* the lately discovered *Two Part Studies,* and the *Tango?* abstractly, without emphasizing melodic connections, somewhat as though they were Elliott Carter. Although the *Prelude* and *Blues* are more akin to Copland, the approach showed them in a new light and spotlighted their rhythmic intricacies. The same approach, though, blurred the jaunty *Tango?*, whose unifying melody disappeared in the chaos. Sachs played the *Three Canons for Ursula* more atmospherically, with brooding thoughtfulness. Nancarrow had told me, before he died, that he hadn't finished the second canon, whose complexities require the pianist to play in four tempos at once, but it has surfaced, and this was its American premiere. You could see why he considered it unfinished; the density of tempos tied him in a compositional knot, and it fails to match the fireworks of the outer movements.

Nancarrow's Septet, which for decades he claimed he had thrown away before Jürgen Hocker discovered it under piles of dust in his studio, seems an insoluble performance problem. Typical of his early style, the work's echoing brief motives blip by so quickly that the ear barely has time to register them, even though this was probably the ensemble's finest performance, with a soulful bassoon solo by Jennifer Rhodes. Ironically, it wasn't until Nancarrow started punching every note himself that he created large enough cascades of notes to get his ideas across. Continuum's string quartet, headed by violinists Renée Jolles and Tom Chiu, bravely tackled the difficulties of both of Nancarrow's quartets, Nos. 1 and 3 (2 was never finished)—probably his best works for live instruments. Continuum's players are not the Arditti, though, and they succeeded neither in making plucked harmonics expressive nor in crescendoing the Third's final canon to its climax.

And what is one to make of the Trio No. 2 for oboe, bassoon, and piano, Nancarrow's final composition? (One nominally later work, a Quintet written for a commission from Parnassus, is a rewriting of an early player piano roll, reportedly ill-arranged and unplayable.) Nancarrow's widow tells me that she made him write the Trio No. 2 as a kind of occupational therapy while recovering from his 1990 stroke, when his short-term memory was shot. It is nearly the only Nancarrow work that contains not a single rhythmic complication, just measures of 3/4 in barely inflected C major. We can hardly consider the piece real Nancarrow, yet it is charming, pointillistically tonal, and as jumpy as a Pekinese puppy. Here, a mere spirited playing of the notes was enough.

New York needed a memorial concert for Nancarrow, and though not planned as such, this one played its purpose warmly; Nancarrow's widow and son came from Mexico City, and his patron Betty Freeman showed up. Shouldn't we, though, treat ourselves to a memorial that includes Nancarrow's most exciting works, his Player Piano Studies Nos. 24, 36, 37, 41, and 48? With today's MIDI and Disklavier technology, the absence of the original player pianos—now safely ensconced in Basel, Switzerland—needn't be an obstacle. We need a chance to revel collectively in not only Nancarrow's time-curving tempo clashes, but also his unprecedented self-reliance as a composer. As a final tribute, live performance didn't strike the right note. V