

Parnassus

# Atomic Energy

BY KYLE GANN

Interpretation" has dropped from the vocabulary of contemporary music. The composer is partly to blame, because most recent ensemble music is so thoroughly ambiguous that the performer can no longer trust his or her interpretive instincts. The '60s saw the rise of score worship, but it was eventually realized that dryly note-perfect performances did a disservice to the music and drove audiences away. Today the most highly esteemed contemporary ensembles, Parnassus and Speculum Musicae foremost among them, have pioneered a style in which extremes of precision are overlaid with a note-by-note veneer of emotional expression. It works, to a large extent: the composers are happy because their quintuplets have been accurately placed, while the audience is satisfied that they have been catered to. Where this noninterpretive stance fails is in the discrimination of works that are superficially similar, as happened during Parnassus's May 21 Merkin Hall concert.

Within what we downtown types call the academy, there are a variety of styles and aesthetic assumptions. The predominant one is what I call musical atomism, by analogy with the logical atomism of Russell and Carnap. Those two philosophers assumed that logical thought (the only worthy kind, of course) was composed of logical atoms, bits of meaning that remain constant from one context to

another. Musical atomism makes a similar assumption: that a 4 interval—that is, four half-steps, as from C to E—maintains the same value regardless of transpositions, added dissonances, timbral changes, or whatever other operations the composer can think of. Phenomenology and gestalt theory eroded philosophical atomism by showing how dependent perception is on context. European musical atomism underwent a similar overhaul in the '70s, but I don't see any such revolution beginning in the American university. Academic music is a prime example of the American resistance to holistic thinking.

The noninterpretive, expressive-precision approach works best with the products of musical atomism, and served very well indeed for Parnassus's performance of *Salvos* by Mario Davidovsky, the Moritz Schlick of music. (This followed Edmund Niemann's stirring rendition of a sonata by St. Roger of Sessions; even uptowners feel it wise to begin by propitiating the local deity.) Conductor Anthony Korf drew, in *Salvos's* unison marimba, harp, and pizzicato string attacks, more exquisite timbral illusions than any Davidovsky has achieved in his celebrated instrument-and-tape pieces, which always seem to require wishful thinking. Such effects, set off by solos for each of the six instruments, made for fleeting moments of beauty whose mutual rela-

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tion, in this overdetermined context, ultimately remained quantitative and generic.

To *Byzantium* by assistant professor at Columbia Susan Blaustein, here in its world premier, was less atomist than pointillist, its emphasis more on texture and collective effects than on individual notes. Blaustein grouped similar figures into recognizable sections, much as have Boulez (in *Repons*), Michel Decoust, and



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other recent French composers. It's a smart strategy that grants serialism a formal clarity not inherent in the technique. Unfortunately, Blaustein's treatment of Yeats's poem was ludicrous even by American academic standards. The word "birds" was stretched into a three-note melisma, "caught" exploded into no less than five quick syllables (try it); worse, pauses between phrases were arbitrary and unrelated to the text, showing an unease with language matched in the near-indecipherable first sentence of Blaustein's program notes. Soprano Barbara Ann Martin's velvet-throated attempt to cover such faux pas could only go so far. Patrons of academic music have been bullied into accepting such English-mauling as progress, but if Blaustein wants to set poetry in a manner that will not elicit laughter from the unprejudiced, she might find instruction in the operas of Virgil Thomson.

It was in *Night Owl Variations* by Bos-

ton composer Scott Wheeler that Korf and his estimable players hit the limitations of their approach. The frequent use of a major-seventh motive in this thorny quartet might have initially looked like atomism, but it was actually an essay in honest-to-God counterpoint, related more to Ruggles than Babbitt. The opening's *misterioso* (delicately beautiful in an earlier performance I'd heard) was dispelled by mismatched dynamics, from the habit of treating each note as *sui generis*. Wheeler's music tends to move Ives-like, though, from complexity to simplicity, rewarding the listener who sticks it out. Unison crescendo gestures in the second half brought the performance into focus, though the Wolpian joke of a concluding cymbal tap was tossed off without humor.

Parnassus saved their best performance for Stefan Wolpe himself: his *Piece for Two Instrumental Units*, which the group had just recorded. The static pitch complexes in this classic of Wolpe's mercurial late style lead the ear sufficiently without much interpretive effort, and in this energetic reading the piece sparkled and darted like the goldfish Wolpe was so fond of watching. It's telling that, after years of infinitesimal refinements in American serial technique, hardly a piece has appeared that can match the perceptual subtlety of this 1962 work.

Performers of this music are in a difficult spot. Each piece to be played must be analyzed, which these days is a tougher job than simply charting first and second themes. Personally, I'd like to hear contemporary performance become more creative, to hear Korf's Wolpe intriguingly distinguished from, say, Arthur Weisberg's Wolpe. I assume that interesting pitch maneuvers were going on within Blaustein's opaque surface, and I'd like to have heard the ensemble *force* them into audibility. But until composers return to making their aesthetic intentions clear in the score, energy and accuracy are likely to remain the only criteria we have. ■



# THE DEVILS IN CHIEF