

Audible Numbers

By Kyle Gann

Glenn Branca

Symphonies are different from other pieces. The word's vague Greek roots sprouted a Platonic form. The nine symphonies of Beethoven, Bruckner, or Mahler aren't separate pieces in the same sense as *Wellington's Victory* or *Kindertotenlieder*; they're nine different definitions of the word, nine attempts to make the symphonic idea audible. The only recent composer to develop symphonies in this incremental way is Glenn Branca, which is why I'm excited that his are finally making it to CD. Atavistic (P.O. Box 578266, Chicago, Illinois 60657) has released his Symphony No. 2, rereleased his No. 3, and plans to bring out nos. 6 and 8. Meanwhile, the French Crepuscule label has recorded Branca's orchestral ballet *The World Upside Down*, and Branca is just back from Berlin, where the Moravian Philharmonic of Czechoslovakia performed his Symphony No. 9. Like Beethoven's, it includes chorus.

If the symphony began as a string of themes, it matured into a battle of tonalities. According to the influential German theorist Heinrich Schenker, a (good) symphony structurally descends from an overtone back to the fundamental pitch from which it derives (say, from G or E down to C). Branca's symphonies are almost skeletal parodies of such reductive analyses, Schenker diagrams come to life. His Second

(*The Peak of the Sacred*) is a massive hymn to the E-major scale. Over and over, his guitars add up that scale note by note, climaxing when a totality is reached. The second movement draws its climax from the chaos of percussionist Z'ev's fanatical metallic noises. In the third movement, which serves as adagio, pulsing crescendos propel us from sonority to sonority, but while the key-center seems to shift, the scale never changes.

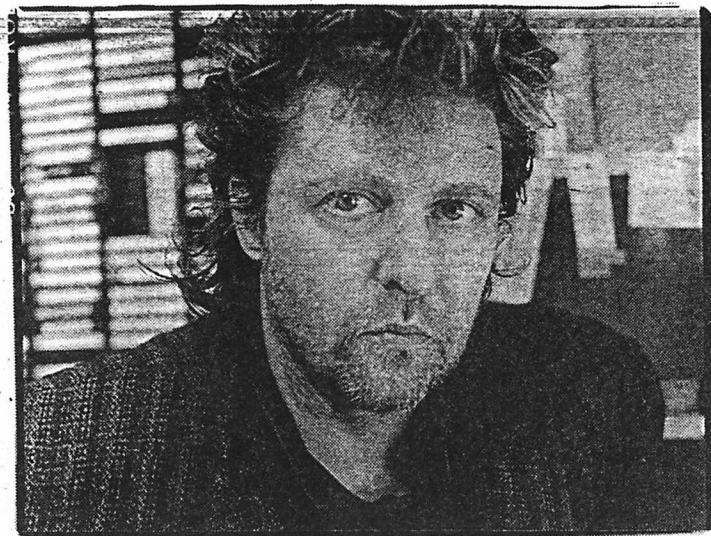
The live recording from the May 1982 performance at St. Mark's Church includes the fifth movement only in excerpt, because it fell apart in performance. Branca doesn't expect the piece to ever be performed again. If hardly pristine, it's a telling document of an electric moment in Downtown history.

The Third Symphony, *Gloria*, a focal point in Branca's output, inverts the Schenkerian process: it begins with a fundamental and builds up 15 octaves' worth of overtones. (An overtone is a multiple of a basic frequency, so that 50 Hz, 70 Hz, and 1280 Hz are all overtones of 10 Hz.) After six random introductory chords, the piece climbs the overtone ladder, reaching a delicate crisscross of overtone melodies at the plateau of the 32nd overtone. The brief third movement nods back and forth between consonant and complex sonorities, in which upper overtones mingle with a noisy calm similar in atmosphere to Charles Ives's "The Housatonic at Stockbridge." Such delicacy un-

derlines the amazing thing about Branca's guitar music: how far it transcends the club scene that nurtured it to intersect the interests of both heavy metal fans and lovers of austere spiritual music.

American experimentalists from Cowell to Lucier and beyond have drawn their aesthetic from natural acoustic materials, notably the overtone series. The Third combines tones in a geometric, naturally asymmetric pattern Branca calls the divisible series: "I was calculating the chords based on the numbers that could be divided into higher numbers. In the case of 34, you've got 17 and 2. In the case of 36, you've got 18, 9, 6, back down again. These pitches reinforce the higher harmonics." That is, the prime-numbered overtones are heard as single notes and the more divisible ones as chords. The piece is a hymn to the mysteries of the number series; one could imagine it played as a kind of Pythagorean prayer to open mathematical conferences, an audible demonstration of Gödel's proof. And yet, in opposition to the recent music we think of as mathematical, the piece is absurdly simple, an oxymoronic midpoint between conceptualism and high Romanticism.

After basing Symphonies nos. 3, 4, and 5 on the harmonic series, Branca says, "I returned to reality. I figured if I didn't, I was going to have no career. You can only go so far with overtones, because the instruments aren't tuned properly. I felt it was necessary for me to deal with composition rather



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than tuning systems." The Sixth, *Devil Choirs at the Gates of Heaven* (briefly available on Blast First, now without U.S. distribution), is for equal-tempered guitars, but with microtones imitating the overtone scale. For the Seventh and now the Ninth symphonies, Branca turned to the conventional orchestra.

The World Upside Down is the first recorded example of Branca's recent orchestral style. Sans guitars, some of the movements sound purely minimalist, like Steve Reich's *Different Trains* fuzzed out of focus. The third and sixth movements (of seven) return somewhat to the Third Symphony's overtone technique, writhing in ecstatic bubbles of exotic harmony. The textures are more fluent, less conceptualistic, in a way hinted at in the Third Symphony's finale, exuding the deep optimism of the best American orchestral music without any melodic definition. It's as if

Branca had performed a themectomy on the Ives Fourth and stuffed it with Roy Harris harmonies.

Branca has one more electric guitar commission—a Symphony No. 10, putting him one up on Beethoven, Dvořák, et al.—but his interest has narrowed to the orchestra. He has no doubt about where his music fits in: "Mahler and Bruckner. That's the tradition I'm working on. I'm trying to do some kind of 21st-century Mahler. It's probably going to take me another 20 years to figure out." The guitar pieces, however, are easier to record. "Union fees are outrageously extravagant. It makes it impossible for American composers to release records here. We can't afford American orchestras. The only way we can record our music is to go to Europe." It's why we in New York haven't heard much lately from our only remaining important symphonist. ■

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