

# Bitter Chords

By Kyle Gann

*The unrecognized continue to die of striving...*

Robert Ashley, *Improvement*  
(Don Leaves Linda)

The only fundamental compositional problem for the American composer is how to avoid bitterness.

My education in that, like everything else, began with John Cage. Cage had as much justification for becoming bitter as anyone. In 1941, *Life* magazine made his career, he thought, with a two-page spread. Years later he was painting walls and washing dishes for a living. At the 1975 June in Buffalo festival, I saw Cage graciously defer even to people who had earned no right to criticize him. I realized that, in life as in his music, he had devoted himself to *listening*, to taking in as much as he could, and putting out only when the opportunity arose naturally. It's not what you take in that makes you bitter, but what you produce without being recognized for it.

At that festival Cage related how, seeing a stack of unperformed scores on the desk of a very bitter composer, he made a decision never to write without a specific performance in mind. That, children, was the origin of the Downtown attitude. Uptowners may wait to be justified by a chimerical posterity, but Downtowners create out of and for the immediate situation (just

as did Mozart, whom Uptown now claims for its own). Downtown itself is a strategy for avoiding bitterness.

I've always admired Charles Ives's insistence on keeping his music untainted by money, but perhaps Betsy McClelland is right when she says that Ives set a bad example: now people expect innovative American composers to finance their own music and do something besides compose for a living. But the worst example, surely, was Arnold Schoenberg, who in the '50s drove Stravinsky's influence from American universities. Since then, most American composers have taken as their creative model the Schoenbergian self-pity that takes refuge in being misunderstood, rather than the Stravinskian arrogance that prides itself on being able to dazzle an audience.

Bitterness is a compositional problem, because your relation to it determines your music technique. For example, you can, like so many Schoenbergites, write music in such a way that you can *prove* its validity through charts and diagrams, and thus prove that audiences are to blame for not responding. That's a documented, surefire route to bitterness. Or, like Cage, you can keep your ego safe by not letting it seep into the notes, a guaranteed route in the other direction.

Aside from Cage, the paradigms for unbitterness are Robert Ashley and Conlon Nancarrow. I once nearly published a poignant comment about Morton Feldman

working in his uncle's dry cleaning business all through the '50s and '60s, till Ashley told me I missed the point. Ashley himself was working in the Ann Arbor post office, and both felt lucky just to have jobs. The only other thing to do was teach, and back then, the university wasn't considered an option for a *serious* composer. What *does* seem tragic is the appearance, within four years after Feldman's death, of more than 12 compact discs of his music. Had he lived to be 66, would he have heard them or delayed them? I'm told that Feldman thought that if he could only win the Pulitzer, he could have convinced his mother that he had been a success. (It would have convinced me that he had sold out.)

Nancarrow's wife once told me that, before his music became widely available, she used to ask what she should do with his piano rolls if anything happened to him; he'd shrug and say, "Burn 'em." Is that a defense mechanism of mythic proportions, or the non-balance of the truest experimentalist, one who wrote his music only so *he* could hear what it sounds like? Evidence for the former is the bottle of Scotch he kept under his roll-punching table. Harry Partch figured out a revolutionary way to get his music performed by the gangs of half-naked young men he wanted around him, but it wasn't enough to make the Scotch bottle superfluous. In 1934, he received a \$1500 grant to research his proposed musical instruments in Europe. Though helped and encouraged by Yeats, Partch spent the year riding the California rails, begging, living one night at a time in federal shel-



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ters, hoeing weeds in work camps. His frank, unromanticized diary of the experience inspires joy, but it's titled *Bitter Music*.

Composers over 50 are easy to divide between bitter and unbitter, and every musician has a story about one of the latter. I'd like to think that only the mediocre composers are bitter, that bitterness is the psyche's revenge for dishonest art, or at least that the consciousness of having made great art becomes its own reward; but it's not that simple. Ralph Shapey has written some great, underrated music. I once interviewed him, and to do so had to let him curse everybody in the business for an hour and a half until his spleen was spent, after which he made some trenchant

musical comments. His *contemptus mundi* has mellowed since his MacArthur Award.

Success can wash away bitterness, but not always. Charles Wuorinen is one of the country's most widely performed, published, and honored composers, but it hasn't kept him from touring the country blaming minimalists, in his lectures and interviews, for the decline of American musical literacy. (It's true, of course: Terry Riley and Steve Reich go around begging public school districts to cut music from the budget.)

Maybe the world is as it has to be, and Partch, in *Bitter Music*, gave the formula: "He does not know ecstasy who does not also know bitterness." ■

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