

# Boundary Busters

*How To Tell New Music From Music That Happens to Be New*

By Kyle Gann

**Consider the following:** A friend puts John Cage's *Concerto for Prepared Piano* on the record player at a crowded party. Within minutes someone replaces it with Pink Floyd.

Ben Neill's quiet trumpet-and-computer piece is drowned out at a 49th Street bar.

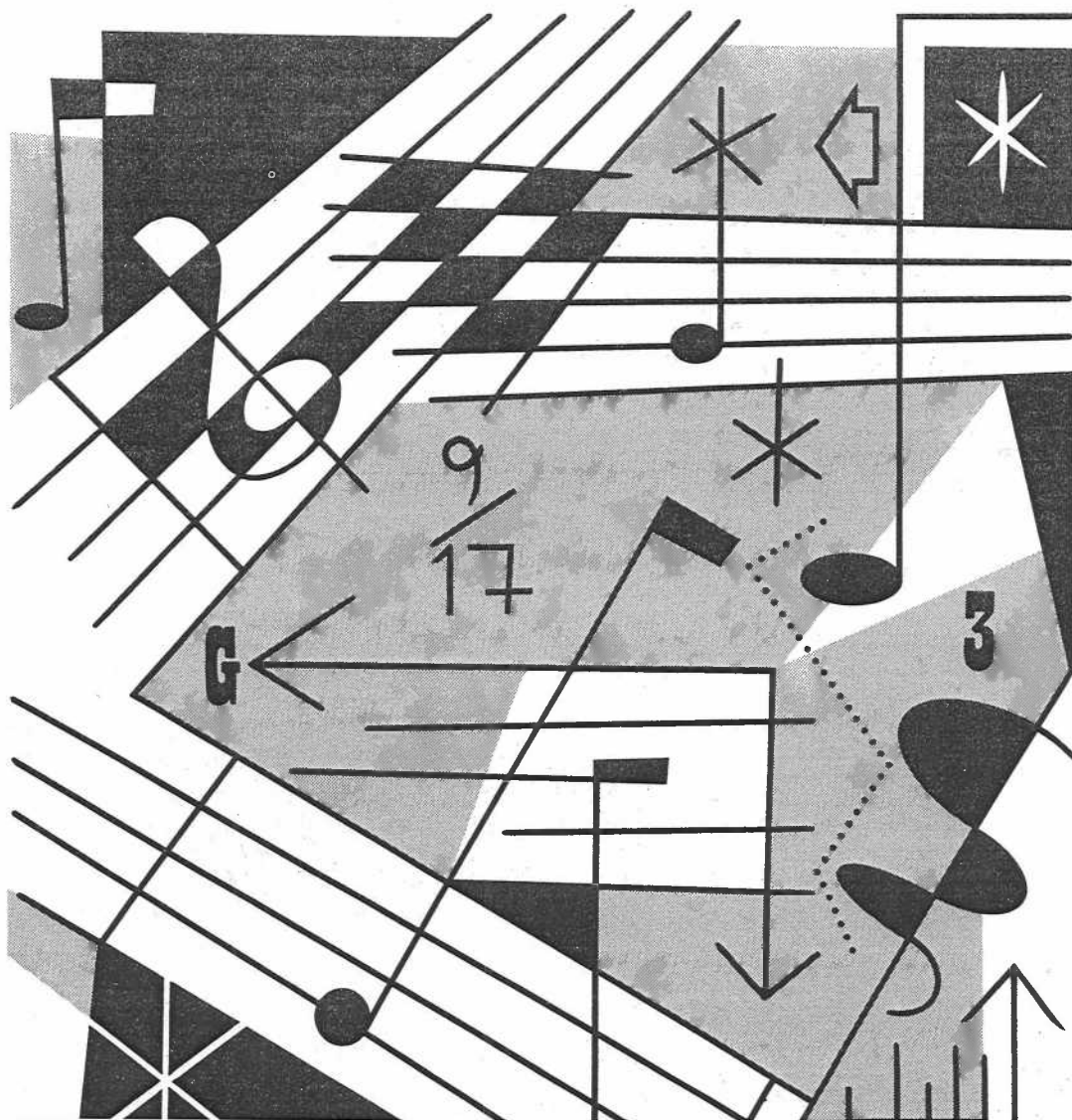
Composer Bernadette Speach and improviser Jeffrey Schanzer's San Francisco concert is listed in the local paper as "New Age." New Age fans crowd the hall and are fascinated that the music is so much more complex than they expected.

John Zorn plays his bar band music at Town Hall. Uncomfortable with the audience's passivity, he begs them to "make some noise."

Harold Budd finds his latest CD in the "New Age" bin at Tower Records. Furious, and not liking the "avant-garde/electronic" category any better, he slams it in "rock."

For a three-hour drone piece, La Monte Young puts chairs in the gallery. Sitting in one, staring at motionless brass players, I realize why you can't do Young in a concert hall: it's music you have to close your eyes and lie on the floor to hear.

Genre confusion. It happens all the time. It hasn't always. We used to know what rock was, what jazz was, what classical music



have this concept that if you have any classical background, you can't do real rock music. That's the romantic cliché. It's usually the rock people who are trying to show they're open-minded, saying, 'What we do is just as serious as jazz or classical music.' At the same time, they're entrenched in their own ideas.

"For the longest time I tried to merge rock and new music, like a lot of people are doing. I found that even when the music was interesting, it either fell short of being interesting composition or invigorating pop music. What I discovered after 10 or 15 years is that there are intrinsic differences between the genres that make them unique. That doesn't mean you can't bring a little bit from one into the other."

Rhys Chatham was one of the primary line-blurbers in the late '70s and early '80s, both as composer and as the programmer who brought rock into the previously sacrosanct art-space, the Kitchen. Yet his diagnosis is the harshest: "Almost every crossover piece I've heard—by classical composers claiming to be doing rock, by rock composers attempting to work in a classical context—has been a failure, not as a thing-in-itself, but a failure when judged against the prevailing issues in the composer's secondary context. That's why I have *never* called myself a rock composer. . . . Each of these genres has its own formal

For a three-hour drone piece, La Monte Young puts chairs in the gallery. Sitting in one, staring at motionless brass players, I realize why you can't do Young in a concert hall: it's music you have to close your eyes and lie on the floor to hear.

Genre confusion. It happens all the time. It hasn't always. We used to know what rock was, what jazz was, what classical music was, and we knew where and when they were played. But in the '80s, genres were busted up and recombined in every possible permutation—all for our own good. Now, our post-genre sensibility assumes that any music can be played anywhere, despite occasional snafus like the ones described above. Now that our "cultural wife-swapping," as one composer calls it, has discredited the superficial definitions, what distinctions are left?

I called up some composers and asked them. All of them were "new music" composers—whatever that is—who denied (with one exception) that their music belonged in rock, jazz, or New Age categories. Yet all had been involved at some time in rock or jazz, and several had gotten categorized as New Age at some time or another, usually to their chagrin. Opinions varied on whether the distinctions were merely conventional, but no one wanted to talk definitions. For a decade determined to blur boundaries, the '80s seemed strangely reluctant to talk about where they were. No one commented on the commercial advantages of labels: that minimalism was the largest audience success of any recent art-music movement partly because it had a readily identifiable term; that New Age music has racked up more popular success than new music, thanks partly to a catchword that makes it easy to identify. At the same time, few accepted

at face value the boundary-blurring clichés that the '80s blithely tossed around.

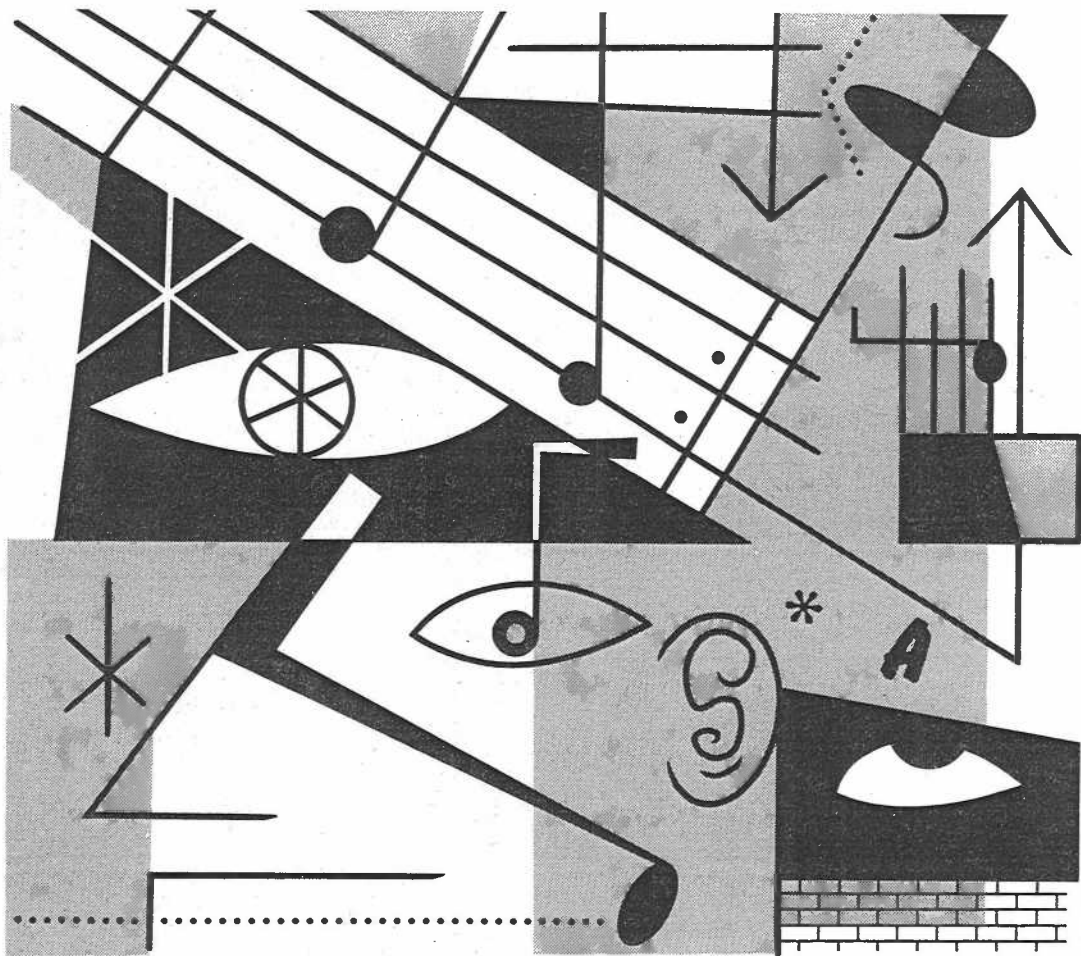
"We invent these categories as a kind of protection," says Michael Gordon, a Yalie whose Michael Gordon Philharmonic has played at CBGB as well as more staid venues. "They don't really exist. And, on the other hand, they do. When we say, this is a concert of new music, we're advertising, saying, everyone who likes new music might like this event. To say that it's all the same is like saying that a newspaper cartoon is the same as a Gauguin painting, is

the same as your wallpaper, is the same as the muck on the sidewalk. Postmodernism is dead. It sucked. And yet, nobody likes to feel that only certain people will like their music. The labels are useful, but they box you in."

"I get annoyed," says Joshua Fried, who performs his music for tape loops and mixers at both rock clubs and art-music venues, "at people who use rock instrumentation and then hype themselves as combining rock structures with art music. Using an electric guitar doesn't make rock any more than Rimsky-Korsakov

using a gong made him Chinese. And when people really do use popular dance forms or dance rhythms—me, for instance—we get chucked in this category of, 'that isn't a hybrid, that's just pop music.'"

Says Mikel Rouse, who uses Schillinger method and 12-tone techniques in his rock quartet music: "There are people who say there's no difference, which is absurd. They're wearing their liberalism on their sleeve. There are inherent and deep differences. They're not qualitative, but they're real. Many rock people



J.D. KING

**So how do audiences tell** these days whether a composer is making rock, jazz, or new music? In 1982, Robert Ashley offered me a simple criterion I've never forgotten. Anything over five minutes, he said, is classical music, anything under that is rock.

That's deeper than it sounds. Somewhere between three and five minutes there may be a threshold in the human attention span. Generally speaking, a piece under five minutes can be composed without structural repetition or simply structured—like a Schubert lied, Liszt bagatelle, or pop song—and be easy to assimilate. Over five minutes, a piece begins to need a structural foundation to hold together on a deeper-than-surface level. In the early '70s, Yes was doing pieces that sounded remarkably like Philip Glass, but while Glass's pieces were 20 to 90 minutes long, Yes's were three to four. The riffs were similar, but Glass was doing classical music, Yes was doing rock.

"Rock is a form that gives you everything instantly," Gordon offers. "In a three- or four-minute rock song, you don't even need the fourth minute; in a minute you can get everything. There's something satisfying about it right away, and you don't need to pay more attention for more than that brief period of time. I don't feel that the kind of raw, direct ex-

pression in rock is different from the raw, direct expression in Beethoven. But Beethoven uses it to tell you something over a period of time that you want to listen to again and again to figure out. In rock music you get it right away."

Whether a piece unfolds its meaning with the passage of time or presents it virtually at once remains a fundamental musical distinction. That's no reason to label the music on either side, but the interviewees tended to place new music, classical music, and jazz on the time-passage side of that line, with rock, pop, and New Age on the other. It's common for rockers, when they try their hands at longer works, to jump from idea to idea in continual exposition, rather than develop or sustain an idea. Everything in a classical education, on the other hand, is geared toward extending an idea in time, developing and reworking a bit of material to draw variety from it. Brian Eno put out record after record of exquisite three-minute inspirations, and faded out on each one because he had no interest in developing them. It's why fade-outs are standard in rock, almost unheard of in classical music.

On the other hand, classically trained composers, when they try to do rock, tend to excessive detail and waste attention on interesting formal tricks rather than polishing up the immediate image to make it catchy and timbrally unique. As Rouse admitted: "In the beginning, in my own music, I tried to put as much information as Webern did in a three-minute pop tune. It was interesting to hear, but it didn't hold up. You're setting people up for a different kind of experience, and suddenly there's all this information. Maybe your idea is that you're going to open up people's minds, make them think differently. But that's not what happens."

millennium B.C.) in terms applicable today: one quiet and traditional, the other noisy and imported by Asiatic invaders: "the upper-class native conservatives of the New Age, finding that—then, as now—noisy music won more general popularity than quiet music... retired into their shell, artificially prolonged the life of the old Egyptian music in temple and school, and left the foreign novelties to the possession of the masses." Popular and classical musics have coexisted in nearly every major culture—Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet, India—for over 4000 years. If the pop/classical distinction collapses in the 1990s, it will virtually be a historical first.

In fact, the perception that music's boundaries are being broken down for the first time is the illusion of a short cultural memory. Pop and concert music have invigorated each other for at least 800 years. As far back as European dance music was notated (12th century), there have been func-

tional differences between dance music and court music, and the two have stolen from each other. One of the earliest court songs we know, Raimbaut de Vaqueiras's *Kalenda Maya*, borrows its form from a 13th century popular dance, the *estampie*. 17th century composers made suites from dances, and Chopin and Brahms wrote "art-waltzes" unsuitable for dancing. Joshua Fried points to these as precedents for the dance rhythms in his electronic music. Now only the cultural distances are greater; Bach wrestled Italian pop melodies into German structures, but today the attempt may involve reggae and a string quartet.

The idea that classical music is somehow "higher" than popular and shouldn't be sullied by contact with it was a Victorian-era aberration. From that viewpoint, current genre-busting attitudes represent a return swing toward normalcy so violent that it threatens to discredit the idea of a "classical" music. Otherwise, genre-

borrowing has been commonplace in music for so long that it can't be cited as a symptom of "post-modernism."

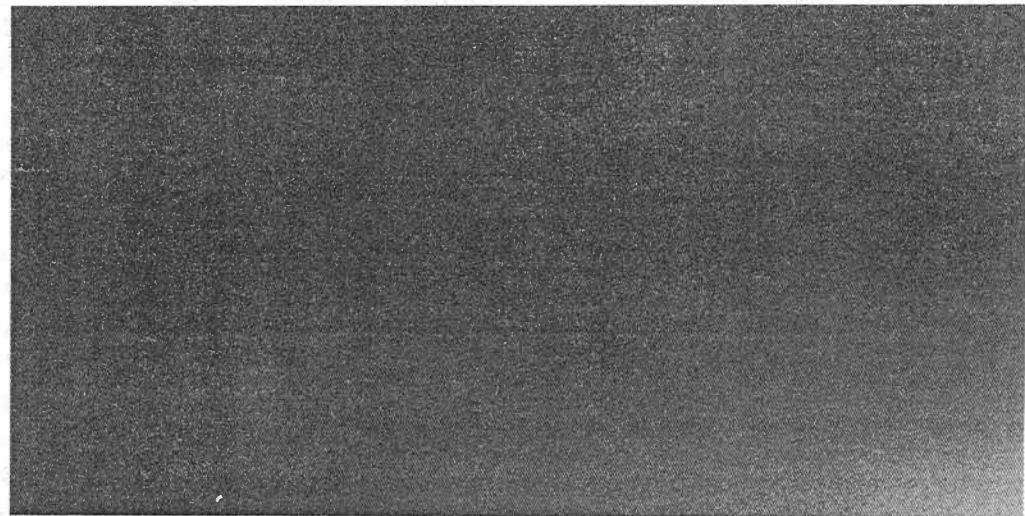
**One aspect that** several composers said separated the genres was that each has had its own history. A musician, critic, or listener may not be able to fully participate in the music without familiarity with that history. The histories of rock, jazz, and classical music have paralleled and intersected, but they don't proceed at the same rate, and when they fall in sync it may be only for a moment.

Alvin Curran, a founding member of the live-improv group *Musica Elettronica Viva*, was involved in the first jazz/avant-garde flirtations. "In the '70s," he recalls, "the black improvisational community flipped out over Stockhausen. They forgot Coltrane and discovered Darmstadt. The Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Anthony Braxton's work, came from an unusual marriage between jazz roots and, I wouldn't

say dead, but sort of tiresome post-Viennese music. That marriage is having its own cycle and coming back in the work of the downtown improvisers. I'm a great fan of rock video and music, and more and more hearing things coming back at that we heard in the past: loops, the fragmentation, drones."

A history is what critics bring a performance, and composed by a genre-antipathetic critic can cuddle up to labels quick. Even those staunchly "the cracks" felt that one genre critic was more relevant to music than another. "General wouldn't trust a jazz critic know what I was doing," Carman Moore, surprising since his *Skymusic Ensemble* taints well-known jazz music: "Classical critics would be preferable. You need somebody with a lot of references in order to appreciate the way two worlds talk each other. If I write something that's like Gregorian chant

## MAXELL RELEASES A NEW

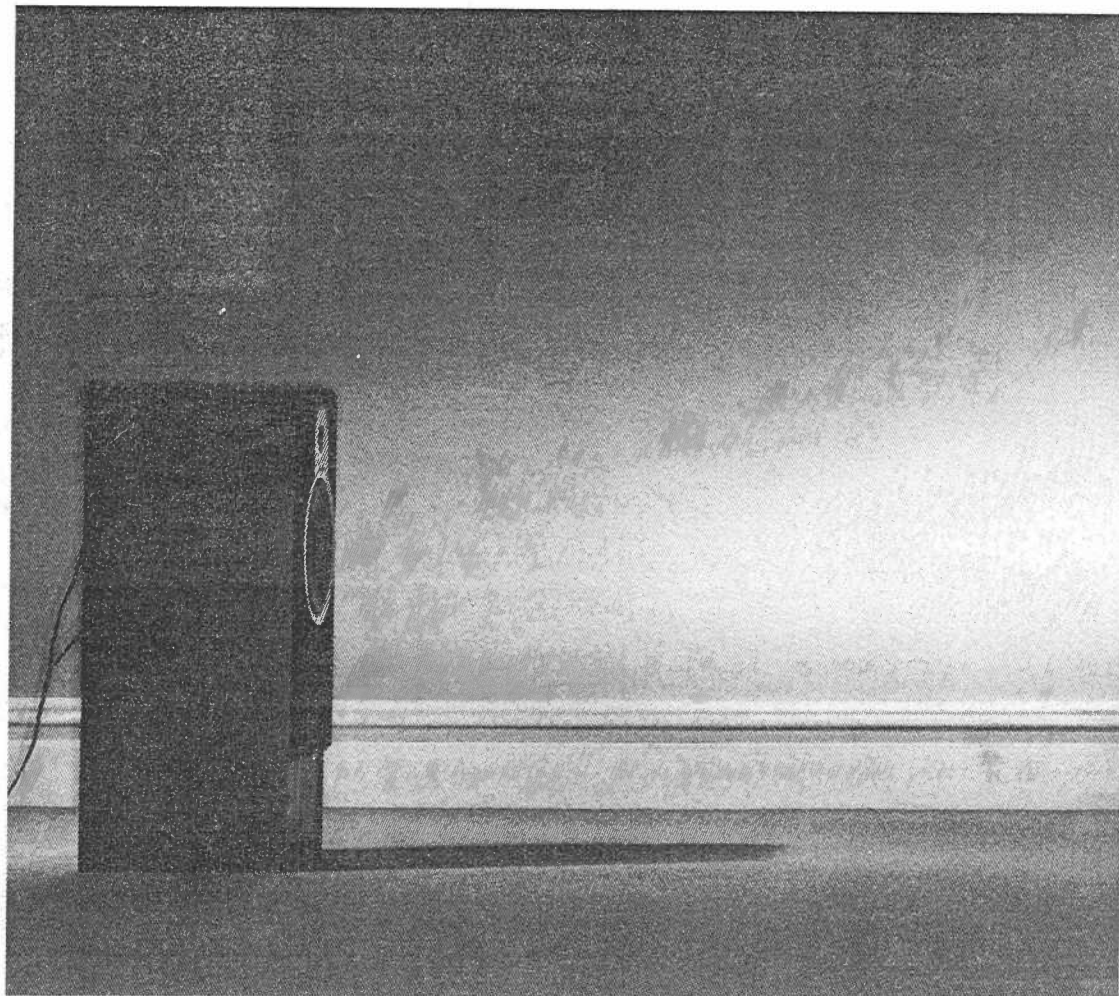


the beginning, in my own music, I tried to put as much information as Webern did in a three-minute pop tune. It was interesting to hear, but it didn't hold up. You're setting people up for a different kind of experience, and suddenly there's all this information. Maybe your idea is that you're going to open up people's minds, make them think differently. But that's not what happens."

"Blue" Gene Tyranny's time criterion was less quantitative. "In pop music you're working through characters that are commonly understood. It can have many different kinds of structure: song form with a chorus, or pattern music in the same mode all the way through. But a song tries to promote only one kind of modal feeling. It's about situation-alism, the maintenance of an attitude for a certain amount of time. Art music is more expansive; it may stay in the same mode for hours, but it has a sense of unfolding. People who do longer works are saying, 'Look, the music is beautiful in a formal way, and even in a spiritual way.' Because most spiritual music around the world is very formal, no matter what culture you're talking about. But I don't think a simple pop gesture is necessarily less of an experience, or less sophisticated."

After a point, cautions Tyranny, the distinction is subjective, because how you *hear* the meaning unfold depends on the listener. "So-called classical music, when it's played over PBS or some other cultural institution, is really more about the maintenance of a certain character or even lifestyle than anything else. It's being used for something it isn't."

The **pop/classical** distinction is probably prehistoric in origin. Musicologist Gustave Reese describes two musics that flourished in fourth-dynasty Egypt (third



Since its introduction a few weeks ago, Maxell's new XLII-S has been blowing away critical listeners.

It has also had a major impact on listening critics.

In a recent analysis of 27 tapes conducted by *CD Review* magazine, they named Maxell XLII-S first

choice in the Type II high bias category, placing it, in the words of their reviewer, "Head, shoulders and torso above the rest."

"Bass response that doesn't stop, staggering dynamics, real music," is how *CD Review* described the listening experience. But don't take *their*

has a blues color, I appreciate it when somebody knows both worlds." Moore finds audiences less history-bound than critics. "The general public is so eclectic. Very often, they're right with what I'm doing, but don't know why. If I put rap rhythms in a section that's basically 12-tone, critics tend to think, 'I don't listen to that stuff,' so they miss the mix."

**In terms of raw materials,** you can combine 43-tones-to-the-octave scales with a backbeat, dance forms with 12-tone rows—name the mix and it's yours. What musicians *can't* change by themselves are the various functions that listeners want music to fulfill. For an increasing number of composers, those are the barriers. Music doesn't exist in a vacuum, and no matter where it's used—dance club, bar, concert hall, church, wedding, polka party, beer party, video game—the venue makes demands on the music. There are cultural, not musical, reasons no

one plays free jazz at funerals or string quartets at dance clubs, and several composers found those barriers immovable enough to render theoretical questions moot.

Since the concert hall is where fullest attention is on the music and none is on anything else, it's the freest in terms of the materials it allows—rhythms, tempi, volume—which is why some of the composers I interviewed started in rock and got pushed into the concert hall despite themselves: it's the last refuge of those who won't submit to the demands of the commercial music business.

"When I had a rock band in the early '70s," recalls Linda Fisher, composer of *Big Mouth, Girl Devil Dancing*, and other electronic theater pieces, "we were doing out-there stuff: Hendrix, the Mothers of Invention, our own music. I was always pushing my band to do weird stuff, and the band broke up because some of the members didn't want to. The reason I write the kind of music I do now is that I have the illusion that

I'm continuing to experiment, and don't have to follow particular strictures. It's a laboratory. I can be free from the guidelines that are either obviously required or implied in the other genres. A lot of rock is synonymous with the music industry, which puts me off."

Lately, Joshua Fried has been in transition from places like King Tut's Wah Wah Hut to the more sedate La Mama, a move concurrent with changes in his music. For him, autonomy is the primary issue. "Although I'm drawing heavily on popular music forms and rhythms, it's still art. And by that I mean, art is when you borrow from whatever you like without your work being subsumed in a particular genre. I'm putting pop dance rhythms together in a way where the ultimate judge of each decision is me, and not, is this a rock record? When I play nightclubs I emphasize the heavy rhythms. But ultimately my decisions are not governed by the same concerns as someone who's

thinking in terms of songs."

The concert hall is hardly neutral. It may be freer in terms of materials, but it's more demanding in terms of moment-to-moment attention. The concert hall appeared concurrently with the symphony and the novel, and its listening metaphor is *reading*, with the connotation of interpreting each musical event in light of the events that have passed by and what is implied for the future. Ultimately, the distinction between new music and rock has to do with form, not beat, volume, or instruments. What distinguishes Moore's music from New Age, he says, is that "New Age music is basically formless. It's meant to destroy your sense of time, which is a beautiful thing. But you need your sense of time in order to know where you are in a form. And I write music about knowing where you are in a form."

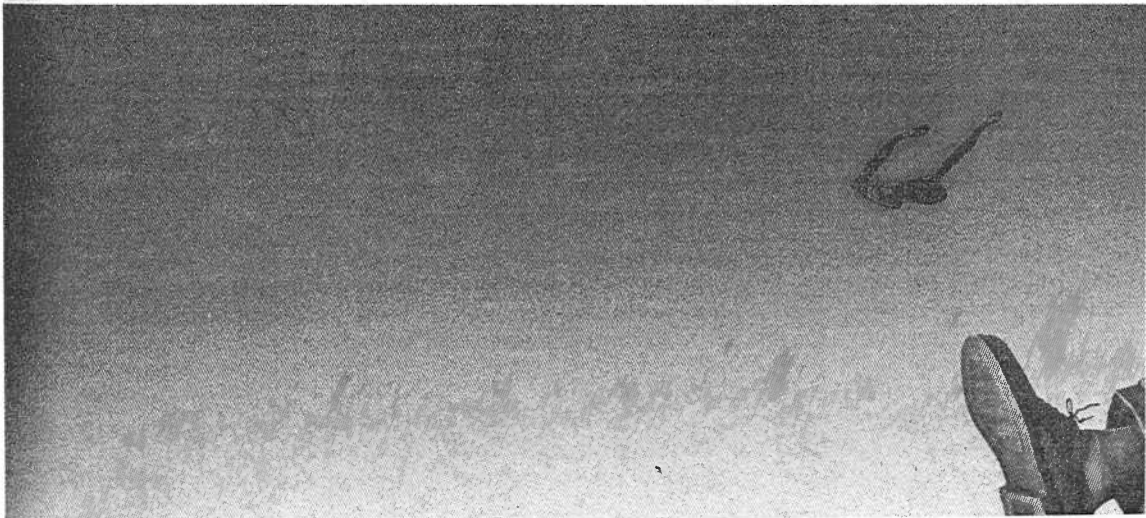
The decline in musical-form literacy, which parallels the decline in book literacy, weights the fu-

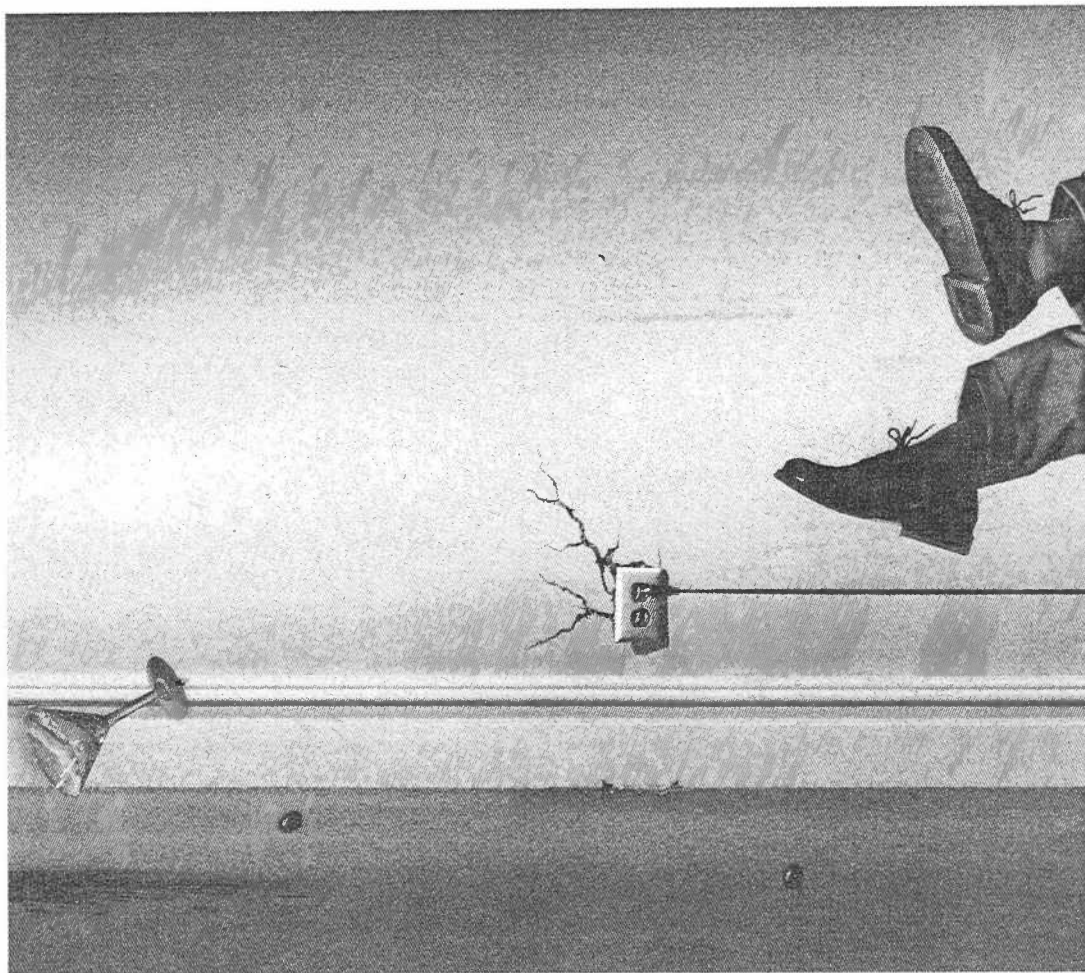
ture in favor of pop music. Rouse is pessimistic about how little of his clearly-drawn structures even his fans pick up on. "I can't tell, when I play my music for friends sometimes, that they're uncomfortable because I'm asking them to listen. Apparently, that's an awful lot to do."

One of the effects of genre-busting has been that—in fact, here's a one-sentence history of new music in the '80s—the concert hall has become a dumping ground for music that was too out-there for the clubs, bars, and dance halls. But a performance that thrills in a club atmosphere may not stand up under the meticulous scrutiny of concert listening. And a band whose dynamic feeds off a give-and-take with the audience may find itself lacking a necessary resource in front of an audience locked into rows of chairs. If club patrons can complain that an art-composer's song can't be danced to, then concertgoers have an equal right to object when a pop composer's music isn't formally interesting enough to sit still through: the recent David Byrne/John Cale orchestra concert at Town Hall is a case in point. As Chatham says, "If musicians are going to put themselves in an art-music situation, they'd better know the formal issues that were addressed 30 years, 60 years, or even 200 years ago, because they're going to get judged by those standards."

Some spaces try to bridge the gap. The Knitting Factory's quasi-concert seating allows for people whose music would get lost at the World. Roulette's a casual atmosphere for music that doesn't have (or want) a concert hall polish. Even the wine and chairs at Phill Niblock's Experimental Intermedia are calculated to kick back for longer, experimental works that may or may not get off the ground. But while these spaces

# HIGHER PERFORMANCE TAPE.





© 1991 Maxell Corporation of America

rd for it. Don't take *our* word for it. Pick up a Maxell XLII-S cassette and try recording your most challenging CD. One you thought was uncapturable by any cassette tape.

See if you don't find your ears picking up things you never noticed before. Like plaster dust.



**TAKE YOUR MUSIC  
TO THE MAX.**

sep. The Knitting Factory's quasi-concert seating allows for people whose music would get lost at the World. Roulette's a casual atmosphere for music that doesn't have (or want) a concert hall polish. Even the wine and chairs at Phill Niblock's Experimental Intermedia are calculated to kick back for longer, experimental works that may or may not get off the ground. But while these spaces overlap in programming, they haven't killed the distinction. The Knitting Factory (whose latest newsletter defines it as a jazz club) plays taped music immediately before, after, and during intermission of performances, and serves drinks while the musicians are playing, giving atmosphere equal billing with the music. It's open and experimental enough for some new-music composers to play there, but many can't or won't because their music is too quiet or needs closer attention. Chatham will play his guitar music there, but not his piano music. There's no exact midpoint between concert hall and club, because there's no midpoint between having a waitress take your order during the music and *not* having her do that.

"You can't describe dance music just in terms of music theory," says Fried. "It has to do with a social dynamic, which includes an audience. When I started, there were clubs like the Pyramid and Tier 3 where people would pay intense attention to experimental music. That context was the model for my music, but it doesn't happen anymore. In the rock club, and in the concert hall, where everyone's facing the same direction, my music's slightly off. I'm pushing people toward a third thing. And what's closer to it now is really the concert hall."

Susan Stenger, guitarist and composer for Band of Susans, has

**Continued on page 83**

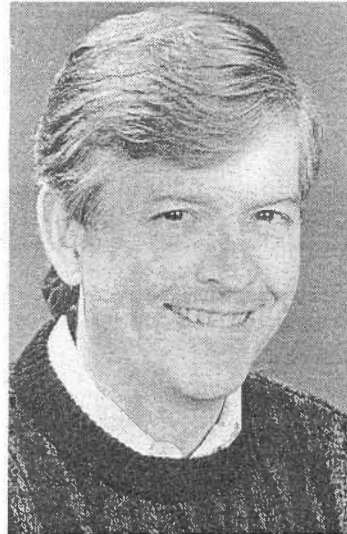
# Soldiers of Misfortune

## *A Prophecy of the New World Order*

By Leighton Kerner

New York City Opera is in the throes (what a gentle word for the circumstances!) of rehearsing for the October 8 New York premiere of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* (1965). What else could Christopher Keene's company do to follow up its surprise success last year of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, a 12-tone opera that the Met didn't dare attempt? Well, why not another atonal opera that one of the world's richest houses has avoided, this 1965 musical Godzilla, this nuclear explosion of Jakob Lenz's 1775 tragicomedy?

Some background is in order. Lenz's play, using certain incidents and people from his own young life in Strasbourg, is set in Flanders and tells mainly of Marie, a bourgeois romantic who jilts the honorable Stolzius to be seduced and "ruined" by Desportes, the first of a series of army officers who drive her to prostitution and starvation. An old man she begs from turns out to be her father, also cheated into poverty by Desportes. Father and daughter are reconciled, and the play ends with a revolting scene of two aristocratic officers deciding that, if prostitution were legalized, women could earn a living wage and



CAROL ROSEGG/MARTHA SWOPE ASSOC.



F. LAVERY

Conducted by Christopher Keene (left), *Die Soldaten* strives for scenic simplicity amid musical intricacy, says City Opera's director, Rhoda Levine.

they could screw with a clear conscience and concentrate on saving the country. New world order and all that.

I burden you with this to show you what Zimmermann, a child of Weimar Germany, did with Lenz's work before he killed himself in 1970 at the age of 52. The composer freed the play from its original time frame and set the action for "yesterday, today, and tomorrow." Near the end, when Marie and her father meet, they

don't recognize each other and go their separate ways. The aristocrats' final scene is replaced by a nuclear holocaust, with lots of screaming and corpses everywhere.

Zimmermann first envisioned the work performed on 12 stages surrounding a swivel-seated audience, but someone evidently convinced him to retreat to a more normal format, albeit with multi-level staging and three movie screens. One German critic, Horst

Kögler, reported at the 1965 Cologne premiere that even the revised version had been "written, ideally, for an opera house yet to be built." That premiere, coincidentally, was staged by Hans Neugebauer, who also directed the Cologne *Moses und Aron* that went to City Opera last year.

Neugebauer's *Moses* was rightly praised for its visual simplicity and economy, and—in spite of Zimmermann's production intentions and the staggering intricacy of the music—scenic simplicity is what City Opera's director, Rhoda Levine, and scene designer, John Conklin, are after. Levine told me that realistic walls would gradually become skewed and acquire graffiti and that the concluding whirl of short scenes should be "a nightmare." (Conklin works all over the place these days, including the Met's upcoming *The Ghosts of Versailles*.) Levine also pointed out that the title of the play and opera really should be *Die Offizierinnen*. We think of soldiers as unprivileged, whereas Marie is destroyed by a bunch of upper-class lechers with high rank.

Keene, who conducted *Moses* so securely last year, seems raring to get at *Die Soldaten*—even the first coffeehouse scene, where the sound of cups and glasses on the tables builds an unprecedented web of cross-rhythms. He admitted that the principal singers in a last-act nightmare sequence, who must take dizzying musical flights, would have to follow precedent and be prerecorded. "Otherwise, their careers would be over that night." ■

**Gann**

Continued from page 87

no plans to abandon clubs, but she's run up against similar limitations. "We have pieces we don't play in the U.S.; we play them in Europe, where the audience is less stuck in a rut. They're longer and more monotonous, or that's the way rock audiences look at them here. People here who go to rock clubs have trouble with music not based on familiar progressions. The general attitude is, you must have a verse/chorus structure or it's not interesting. We're put as a minimalist band in a Glenn Branca context by critics, but we still play in clubs. You'll never see us on MTV. But it hasn't made me want to change what we do."

New musics imply new venues, and in that respect, perhaps music is ahead of society. We've proven the barriers are arbitrary, but a lot's invested in them, and they won't melt overnight. You can combine musics into any kind of hybrid, but the audience and critics may not follow you, so what's the point? For Stenger, the point is to continue following her ear despite being a square peg: "In my mind there are no boundaries. But I realize that the way the industry works, and the way people's ears work, there are boundaries, and I try to adjust to that. But when I sit down to write, I don't think about it." Rouse sums up the attitude of the post-genre-busting composers: "There don't have to be differences between the types of music. But there are, and I'm interested in why it is that way. If it's been that way for so long, there must be a reason." ■