

Cage's Choice

By Kyle Gann

James Tenney

At the 1989 Telluride Institute, someone asked John Cage (once a student of Schönberg) whom he would study with if he were a young composer today. Cage said: James Tenney.

"Who?" was probably the resounding response. Tenney, the most famous unknown composer in America, as he's been called, is admired by colleagues, but otherwise nearly unknown. Of his recorded works, one (*Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow* on Cold Blue) is out of print, another (*Koan on Non Sequitur*) is hard to find, and the other (*Critical Band on Mode*) came out just a few weeks ago. Though his theoretical treatise *Meta-Hodos* (published by Frog Peak Music) has been influential, its elegant definitions of "resonant clangs" and "monomorphic sequences" make tough reading. But *Essential Music* is giving a rare retrospective of Tenney's works Thursday night, so I thought an advance guide to his musical concerns might inspire a small change in the situation.

Directors John Kennedy and Charles Wood have programmed five pieces, ranging from 1969 to 1988. The earliest is *Three Rags* for piano, written when Tenney was involved in Scott Joplin's music. "I got to a point," Tenney says from his home in Toronto, "where I said, 'That's what I'm doing as a performer, but is it

possible for me to write one of these things?' I decided to try it without doing anything to the style, in straight Joplin tradition." Soon afterward, Tenney moved from the East Coast to California, and began a new phase in his composing. His pieces since have often exhibited a consistent perceptual curve from beginning to end, in terms of range, tempo, density of information, or whatever. The first in that mode was *Quiet Fan for Erik Satie*.

"I can hardly conceive of a piece," Tenney explains, "without knowing its overall shape. It's the way I start composing. After I've made the precompositional decisions about instrumentation, notation, and tuning, the next job is working on graph paper laying out these large formal shapes. Then I fill them in." In *Quiet Fan*, the process takes the form of chromatically expanding a small, repeated, Satie-ish motive over 15 minutes, in terms of melodic range and speed of transformation. In the middle—a rare whimsical gesture—sits a four-measure quotation from Satie's *Trois Morceaux en forme de poire*.

Such procedures lead to strict forms, and Tenney loves canons: *Glissade* for string trio has canons as first and last movements, echoed with another favorite device, a five-second tape delay. ("I call it the poor man's orchestra, because it lets me build up thicker textures than I could with a small number of instruments.") In the second movement, that delay extends

glissandos further than the strings could alone. The third movement is "an explosive, exuberant bunch of glissandos following curves taken from engineering books called Bessel functions. They look like damp sinusoids. They start with larger oscillations and quickly die down. I remember seeing them years ago and thinking, gee, that would be beautiful to hear as pitch variation."

Even when they don't stem from algorithms, Tenney's pieces can literally translate something else. *Three Indigenous Songs* (1978) takes texts by Jaybird Coleman, Walt Whitman, and an Iroquois chant and, rather than set them, turns their phonetic content into music. The consonants K, T, and P are taken by wood blocks, Th, F, and H by wire brushes, and vowels are played by winds shaping various harmonics. "If you know the text," Kennedy claims, "you can almost understand it." *Rune* (1988), a percussion extravaganza, may be more difficult, for it combines two computer-derived streams, sometimes parallel, sometimes opposing, into a beautiful visual score. *Rune* is "an anomaly," Tenney says, for "it's the only piece that's anti-dramatic. The normal dramatic thing is to start softly and build up, and maybe die down again. I'm doing just the opposite here, with a perverse interest in what would happen when you do the opposite of what you know works. I think it works, but you have to have a different attitude about it."

Right attitude in an audience is something Tenney yearns for almost wistfully. "At New Music America in Hartford, someone complained that too much of the audience was composers. But I



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Tenney, America's most famous unknown composer

like composers in the audience, because they have a kind of preparation, not specific to the piece, but to the things that have shaped me, that is useful." Still, what requires listener experience in Tenney's music isn't perception of the form or logic, for they're quite audible. It's the patience to allow music to issue information at varying rates, from almost none in one period to great density in another; and the recognition that an algorithmic form can be as expressive as any other. *Glissade's* fourth movement runs through endless permutations of pitch ratios, and only at certain "points of apparent rationality" are the ratio numbers small enough for the ear to perceive as harmonic. The line between the perceptible and the imperceptible is one Tenney loves

to skate across back and forth, and unlike a lot of theory-swamped composers, he always knows when he's crossing it.

So far, Tenney says, no one has yet gone to Toronto's York University to study with him on the basis of Cage's remark. "It's incredibly gratifying," he says of the compliment, "so much so that it's embarrassing." But rewards differ depending on what your music achieves, and if John Williams isn't embarrassed to cash his paychecks, Tenney shouldn't blush to be considered one of the century's great musical thinkers. ■

Essential Music will play James Tenney's music May 2 at 8, Greenwich House Music School, 27 Barrow Street, 226-5169.

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