

William Duckworth

# Caught by the Undertow

By Kyle Gann

The logic is inscrutable, the way those melodic formulas recur unpredictably in William Duckworth's music. That's one feature common to his mature work, from the celebrated *Time Curve Preludes* of 1978-79 through the new works performed March 24 at Roulette. Another is his weaving of pop forms, minimalist modalities, bluegrass figures, and simple number systems into an indissoluble fusion. Blocked in grad school by the serialist impasse, he synthesized a very personal yet communicative language. Still another thread is his technique, rare in our time, of building each piece from brief movements, so alike on the surface that they blur into a single impression. In his art songs and piano cycles, he's the 20th century Schumann.

The *Time Curve Preludes* get played all over, but the rest of Duckworth's output is rarely heard in New York; though he's a friend of mine, I still only know a handful of his 80-odd works. So a capacity crowd gathered to hear *Slow Dancing in Yugoslavia*, written in January for accordionist Guy Klucvsek; *Simple Songs*

*About Sex and War*, which had received its New York premiere a week earlier with Relache; *Imaginary Dances*, newly expanded (and improved) to nine movements and played by Pennsylvania pianist Lois Svard; and a 1990 improv piece entitled *12 Words*, starring saxist Michael Swartz.

Duckworth sculpts pieces to performer personalities. *Slow Dancing*, deceptively simple, fit Klucvsek beautifully, setting off chromatic tunes with *pahs* and occasionally *ooms*. It took its opening phrase from the pop song "It's All in the Game" ("Many a tear has to fall..."), though the song was so transmogrified by an exotic mode you'd never recognize it: an in-joke, not a quote. Likewise, Barbara Noska was the sultry siren needed for "Dance, dance, my snake-hipped Aphrodite of Bedford Hills," the fourth of the *Simple Songs* Duckworth wrote with poet Hayden Carruth. The collaborators aimed at a midpoint between art song and pop music and actually hit it: you could imagine Barbra Streisand doing them, yet the chromatic appoggiaturas of the synthesizer accompaniment (superbly "orchestrated" by keyboardist John Dulik) were almost

Chopinesque.

The same adjective was suggested by the fluid piano technique in *Imaginary Dances*. (Romantic references are ironic, for Duckworth scorns the 19th century.) These dances were built by expanding quasiminimalist patterns, like the *Time Curve Preludes*, but the sonorities were richer, pattern subsumed in atmosphere. Dance No. 3 blended major and minor in uncountable meters, No. 4 shifted gears with dramatic silences, No. 5 sounded relaxed and Southern (the composer's from North Carolina), and No. 8 created an illusion of a three-handed pianist, octave melodies in bass and treble around a midregister roar. Perhaps partly due to the smoldering passion of Svard's performance, *Imaginary Dances* melted into a more deeply felt unity than *Time Curve*, and may be Duckworth's best piece yet.

Duckworth trademarks ran through all three pieces: the expressive appoggiaturas, the rhythmic figures that neither quite repeat nor change, the accompaniment lines whose 16th-note figures articulate the hidden structure. Variety in his music comes from the underside, the varying moods through which he diffracts his structural tricks. Every movement is carefully proportioned: add a beat, take one away, you'd ruin everything. But the best moments—say, *Imaginary Dances* Nos. 3, 5, 7, and 8 and Nos. 1, 3, and 5 of the *Simple Songs*—defeat that perfect control, and burst beneath the structure to graze a deeper emotional surface.

Take *Simple Song* No. 3. Dulik plays its opening stately, Lydian-



LONA FOOTE

A smooth tonal composer

mode measure five times. Then, on the sixth, the bottom falls out: the key suddenly drops a half-step as Noska erupts into "When I was a girl..." (That sharpened fourth scale step in the Lydian becoming five in the new key takes your breath away.) Duckworth's music exists for such magic moments, and sets up a neutral surface that lets them happen. You're sitting there admiring his note-finesse, and then, zoom!, you're caught by surprise in an emotional undertow, and spend 20 measures wondering where your goosebumps came from. Control becomes so tight that it snaps into letting go. It's hard to do.

A final Duckworth/Carruth col-

laboration, *12 Words*, threw a weird spin. This graphic score limited a star supporting cast—Klucvsek, Dulik, pianist Anthony Coleman, marimbist Bill Ruyle—in its responses to Swartz's suave arabesques. It opened with one of the best improv effects I've heard: as Swartz crooned, his pitches gradually bled into the other instruments. Each movement's scale was specified, so every response had an audible pitch relation to Swartz's solo; Coleman and Klucvsek in particular bounced into a fluid, electric accompaniment. Within the limitations, the style ranged from a melee of polka riffs to a mellow, Arnold Bax-ian impressionism to tense, Stockhausenish abstraction. The reed-soloist/group duality brought Boulez's *Domaines* to mind, but *12 Words* was more coherent because of the pitch constraints and Swartz's natural lyric sense of limitation. His graceful spirals around various scale points ran like a gold thread through the whole, tying it into a recognizable Duckworth composition: one structural idea colored by exotic modes into a variety of moods.

I hope Duckworth won't object to my giving away the soloist's secret instructions (by Carruth) for two of the movements: "Easy, meditative. The problem of actual life with the actual woman. Crisis is perennially useless. Make it ironic sincerity." And, "This is the job. Play the fucker straight. Such trite melodic lines. What do you expect from Schubert?" From such cryptic metaphysics Swartz fashioned a paradox: a rough-edged, intense, *Kurzweilen/Ascension* by the smoothest of new tonal composers. ■

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