

# Contoured Sheets

BY KYLE GANN

Sometimes when you play a Philip Glass record for someone, they complain that it sounds the same no matter where you drop the needle, as though that brilliant observation should damn the music forever. I swear the same can be said for Mendelssohn's "Italian Symphony." Hearing the latter piecemeal on a recent flight to New York made me wonder if Mendelssohn wasn't responsible for the stultification of everything "official" in American music—the way Mark Twain claimed Sir Walter Scott was in American literature. Mendelssohn, after all, was practically worshipped among 19th century American musicians, as much for his alleged piety as for his music.

Such long-standing affinities may explain why our musical establishment so prefers to champion dull composers like Piston, Sessions, and Carter rather than exciting ones like Ruggles, Partch, and Johnston. Certainly we inherit this trait from the English, but the English are less hypocritical; they perform their Elgar and Delius and seem to enjoy it, while we grant our "official" composers awards and fellowships in hopes of avoiding actually having to listen to their music. There might not be such a chasm between high and low culture in America did not the power brokers of musical society seem to feel that blandness and tediousness were prerequisites to greatness, and as though orchestral concerts were a kind of penance for being rich. If classical music is reputedly dull, it's because the establishment won't take a

chance with anything interesting. Think how much more colorfully American aesthetics might have developed if, instead of Mendelssohn, Berlioz had been held up as a model! But Berlioz was an opium-user, and impious.

Within hours of deplaning I had this theory confirmed when Krzysztof Penderecki conducted the New York Philharmonic in his *De Natura Sonoris No. 2* and the New York premiere of his 1983 Viola Concerto. Both a Yale professor and a European, Penderecki is doubly, nay, triply qualified to be an "official" composer. His early reputation rests, of course, on the use of thick orchestral clusters, instruments playing each a half step apart. With such broad or narrow swaths of white noise he creates sweeping shapes that follow an audibly visual analogue. This trend, exemplified in *De Natura Sonoris*, reminds me of the process whereby your grade school art teacher made you smear paint in response to a piece of classical music—only in reverse. Such aural smudges allow for little inner subtlety; harmonic definition is obliterated by the generic quality of the even, chromatic spread, and the effect is that an important aspect of the music has been left unstructured.

Some years ago Penderecki left the world of sound effects and joined the "back to Romanticism" movement

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(which has further endeared him to the establishment). If this Viola Concerto was any indication, though, he did not leave behind the cluster chord, but only learned to arpeggiate it. Here was a virtual Hymn to the Half Step, a Paean to the Chromatic Scale. Every theme, every episode, every cadenza, every climax, was built of half-step units, with only a little variety afforded by a Bach-like alternation of lines. Even its rhythms often seemed borrowed from Mendelssohn,



SATORU IGARASHI

frolicking in generic triplet motives.

Violist Paul Neubauer played the solo part from memory (a few more hearings and I could have memorized it myself) with admirable control and bravura. The composer drew a beautiful, precision-tuned performance from the orchestra—hardly a surprise, since every musician practices the chromatic scale from childhood up. The piece went through all the heroic motions of an impassioned, romantic concerto, but the facade was too thin. Twenty-odd minutes of generic material, with no variety or significant development, made for one of the most predictable atonal works ever written, and for the dullest concerto I've ever heard. The box seat crowd chalked up another act of smiling contrition, and Mendelssohn's ghost was undoubtedly pleased.

The next day's semiofficial "Meet the Moderns" concert at Queens College threatened a similar tedium, but there

were telling exceptions. Oddest was the ingratiating excitement of Joan Tower's *Noon Dance*; odd because her aesthetic of contour, drawn from an analogy with physical nature, is not far removed from Penderecki's. What elevated *Noon Dance* was that there was nothing generic about Tower's materials. Amid scurrying alternations of notes and chords, several strong motives led the ear and unified the melodic contour. Too, the whirling of the texture around the six-member ensemble (ably led by Lukas Foss's assistant Steven J. Mercurio) provided an engaging sense of melody on a different level. The piece broke down momentarily in two interval-repetitive cadenzas for cello and percussion; but while Penderecki's contours were bland and undifferentiated, Tower's felt like a richly patterned fabric.

It took George Perle's *Serenade No. 2*, though, to put the shape-aesthetic of both Penderecki and Tower into perspective. As little as Perle's music sounds like Berg's in other respects (Perle is famous as a Berg scholar), he does exhibit Berg's ability to integrate melodic shape into syntax. Among the *Serenade's* mercurial melodic fragments were many nice contour effects resulting from a serendipitous-sounding confluence of pitch and rhythm. The shape of a bright trumpet line seemed to hang corporeally in the air for moments, and a soft drum roll coincident with a dying flute line gave a tactile sense of closure. Among nominally academic composers, Perle is almost unique in having sublimated his technique to the point that it disappears into a wonderfully sensuous texture.

The lesson? That contour is not an aurally significant enough aspect of music to successfully predominate over the syntax of pitch and rhythm; that analogies with visual art fail the composer to this extent. Or, more catchily: good shape in music is like happiness; it won't come when you're looking for it, but it will sneak in when your attention is where it should be. ■

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