

Wendy Chambers / Carman Moore

A Cosmic Crowd Pleaser

BY KYLE GANN



The Queen of Redundancy, Wendy Chambers.

Like every composer of his day, Beethoven understood the difference between writing for musicians and writing for the public. Consider the surface differences between his late symphonies and late string quartets. The latter passes the themes from player to player, to ensure each musician's enjoyment. The symphonies are *less* contrapuntal, enlisting every player in group support of a theme drawn clearly in the foreground. He surely enjoyed weaving the counterpoint of Op. 130, but when he had to justify the cost of orchestra, chorus, and large auditorium for the Ninth Symphony, he put "Freude, schöner Götterfunken" in spare, major-scale quarter-notes.

The way notes are put together in a piece always stems from the piece's intended function. Chamber music, from the beginning, was written for musicians to enjoy playing. In the 17th and 18th centuries, that wasn't an elitist idea, since so many European families contained a few musical amateurs. To keep from getting bored, each player needed a crack at the theme, or at least an active harmony line unduplicated elsewhere. A piece written to be played in front of a paying audience (the subscription concert series was invented in England, circa 1750) required different strategies. In a symphony, the cellists could be paid to saw out boring whole notes; what was important was that every idea be spelled out often enough for the audience to catch. Beethoven, as Ives remarked, "had to pull the ear, hard," and in the same place and several times, for the 1790 ear was tougher than the 1890 one."

Capitalist consumerism wiped out home performance; try to persuade a stockbroker with a CD player that he should take up the viola in his spare time. Adorno noted that when the chamber music impulse died, its aesthetics—contrapuntal saturation, maximum nonredundancy—became the standard, even in symphonies. In this century, almost all "art music" (that term never has enough quote marks) is chamber music. Forget ensemble size: today I'm defining chamber music as music in which each player plays something different, in which no person or line is redundant, in which repetition, either in time or space,

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five bass drums, spread the length of St. John's with a circular concentration in the middle. Listening to a click track that

the climax, just prior to the drums' last goosebump-raising outburst, the audience joined in with a beautiful melody (though no cinch to sing) welcoming whatever beings share the universe with us.

Despite the click track, there were coordination problems inevitable with such far-flung forces, but the larger-than-life echoes of the cathedral's distant ceiling more than compensated. There wasn't much to listen to beneath the surface because, as in Beethoven's variations on the "Ode to Joy," intricacy would have only distracted. Chambers's Scriabin-esque paean to not only human but extraterrestrial universal brotherhood probably didn't achieve total heaviosity for everyone present, but that didn't matter. Like great choral works from Handel through Holst, *Symphony of the Universe* gathered a large audience into contemplation of a single thought, not via rock's effortless amplification, but through melody, harmony, repetition, and a magnificent deployment of space. Whatever you thought about Chambers's starry-eyed New Age spirituality, you walked out of St. John's with a sense of having participated in a communal experience. That's something new music doesn't give us very often.

Like Chambers, Carman Moore tends to work outside the usual new music circles, often in churches. His gentle, jazz-flavored harmonies are akin to Chambers's, and also like her, he's attracted a large, loyal following of nonmusicians with little help from new music institutions. His aims are more modest (at least he keeps to his own planet), yet he'll resort to spectacle to get audiences involved; at his May 5 Skymusic Ensemble concert at Judson Memorial Church, the climactic work was Concerto for Tap and Chamber Ensemble, a collaboration with the American Tap Dance Orchestra. Pure showbiz, it was musically inconsequential, though you could still make out the hints of polytonality Moore uses to stretch his easy chords into brittle dissonance.

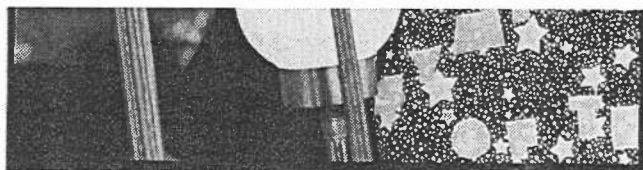
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Adorno noted that when the chamber music impulse died, its aesthetics—contrapuntal saturation, maximum nonredundancy—became the standard, even in symphonies. In this century, almost all “art music” (that term never has enough quote marks) is chamber music. Forget ensemble size: today I’m defining chamber music as music in which each player plays something different, in which no person or line is redundant, in which repetition, either in time or space, is virtually absent. Almost all current serious work, from Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra* to Cage’s *Apartment House 1776* to Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* to Robert Ashley’s video operas to John Zorn’s collages to Jim Staley’s *Mumbo Jumbo* improvisations, is chamber music.

To continue to call the opposite type of music *symphonic* leads to odd associations. In symphonic music, many people play the same melody for emphasis and projection, and musical ideas return with an insistence intended to drum them into a lay audience’s mind. In the 20th century, the symphony’s original purpose—to unite a large group of people in a single emotion (see Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?*)—has been abandoned to pop music. Let Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel spell out their messages in letters large enough for the masses to read; *we* find such pandering gauche. “The consequence of the chamber music principle,” wrote Adorno, “was to stop paying any attention to the listeners’ receptivity.”

There’s something suspicious about the amount of effort composers since Schoenberg have spent defending their antiredundancy prejudice. After all, certain musicians’ ears may be tenderer than ever, but the 1989 ear has been so toughened by Muzak and top 40 that it’s in danger of becoming impenetrable. If you want to catch the eye of some yokel walking up Seventh Avenue, you don’t put up one poster, you put up 12; but the poster can have anything on it. Redundancy need not alter content. Yet one-poster chamber music has acquired an intellectual prestige few composers are brave enough to renounce. I’ve sat through many, many downtown gigs at which the musicians were clearly having the time of



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their lives but seemed largely unaware of the audience. Vicarious hipness was supposed to be heaven enough. This century has experimented with 40 views of the composer/performer relationship, but the composer/audience relationship has evolved haphazardly.

There are exceptions. Early minimalism was symphonic, which is why it was new music’s first media splash in decades. (The postminimal music at the Bang on a Can festival represents minimalism’s withdrawal into the chamber.) Philip Glass’s repeating harmonies are symphonic, which is why large audiences respond to them even when they suck. Ten guitarists strumming Glenn Branca’s symphonies in unison reach a public, and even his floor-shaking volume is a kind of redundancy. Perhaps New York’s queen of redundancy is Wendy Chambers, who wrote a piece for 10 grand pianos at Lincoln Center, 100 radios at Washington Square Park, and on May 19 brought 100 timpani, 49 handbells, and a cathedral-full of other paraphernalia to St. John the Divine for her *Symphony of the Universe*.

Chambers, I confess, is a friend of mine, but her achievements are objectively impressive. You can’t ignore her, which is what both the music establishment and downtown counterestablishment tend to do to women composers, and her high profile has nothing to do with the intellectual bullshit most composers use to bully people into paying attention. Chambers’s phenomenal organizational skills, her ability to get people behind her mammoth compositions, enable her to commandeer resources on a scale hitherto available only to men. Her music is very yin, but she has an incredible yang efficiency in putting it together.

Symphony of the Universe began with a pun: “The Big Bang,” a movement scored for 100 timpani (18 players) and

five bass drums, spread the length of St. John’s with a circular concentration in the middle. Listening to a click track that in soft passages became part of the piece, the players beat fauvist 4/4 patterns, animated by *Le Sacre*-like off-accents, sudden crescendos, and pounding climaxes. Much of the playing was in unison, and, since only 18 pitches were used, three players *could* have done the trick; but every now and then a fiery motive would burst out on one drum, then zip across

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the hall like sonic lightning. It was never simplistic, for like Peter Gordon, Chambers has a knack for doing simple things gracefully. But it was highly redundant, very un-20th century, and its energy shot through an audience of 800 to 1000 people as though they were wired together.

The other three movements, so the program notes reported, came from dreams. “Organism,” scored for the 17-piece Walter Thompson Big Band, was a wash of ninth chords and repeated note melodies with a couple of structured improv sections; static and ecstatic, it could have been a *Miami Vice* soundtrack or else a jazzed-up new movement to Holst’s *Planets*. In “Cosmos,” synthesizers and handbells chimed in with chromatically moving chords breaking against each other like waves, cymbals shimmering on one side of the cathedral and then the other, over which Stewart Rose followed the harmony with an introspectively Mahleresque French horn solo. “Evolution” pulled out all the stops, including those of Charles Banks’s organ. Conducted by Nelly Vuksic and Howard Van Hynning, a 65-voice chorus sang Willard Simms’s “Evolution Chorus,” full of invocations to Christ, Buddha, Elochim, and Wakan Tanka, the Sioux’s great spirit. At

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Moore interweaves improvisation and composition so fluently you’d think he’d be the darling of downtown. It’s a common aim, but Moore is one of the few who thinks with his ears, who doesn’t let theory lead him into awkward forms. The seams were audible in his *Concertos (The Theme Is Freedom)*, dating from 1965, but it showed how perfectly he balances jazz and classical influences. Each soloist—Kenneth Bichel on synthesizer, Leroy Jenkins on violin (whose scratchy tone puts the much-needed edge on this group), and Marianna Rosett on piano—played an extended cadenza, so well integrated with the work’s simple motives that the functions of jazz solo and classical cadenza merged. *Classical Dancing* (1986) took a ’60s-ish idea, an aleatory mix of two-, eight-, and 12-bar phrases, and turned the Skymusic Ensemble into a giant thumb piano. Its tinkling continuum, improv’s answer to Reich’s mallet music, steered around cadences so politely it could have gone on forever.

What Charles Rosen said of Mozart’s music is true of Moore’s: it’s so solidly tonal that it can absorb any amount of dissonance without losing its balance. When, as in the Tap Dance concerto, Moore moved through a Coplandy melody in sixths, but kept all the sixths major to stretch the key a bit—that was a nod to the musically sophisticated, but the foreground was still clear enough for a lay audience to catch the important parts. Musicians gripe because the NEA wants to know how many “art-consumers” will benefit from a certain program, and it’s a fair complaint. Art can’t be judged on a quantitative scale. But the flip side is that chamber music is a genre, not a mandate, and that, ultimately, *non*musicians are the people new music has to matter to. Moore and Chambers have an impact outside new music’s self-contained circles because they’re willing to paint their messages with a broad brush. ■