

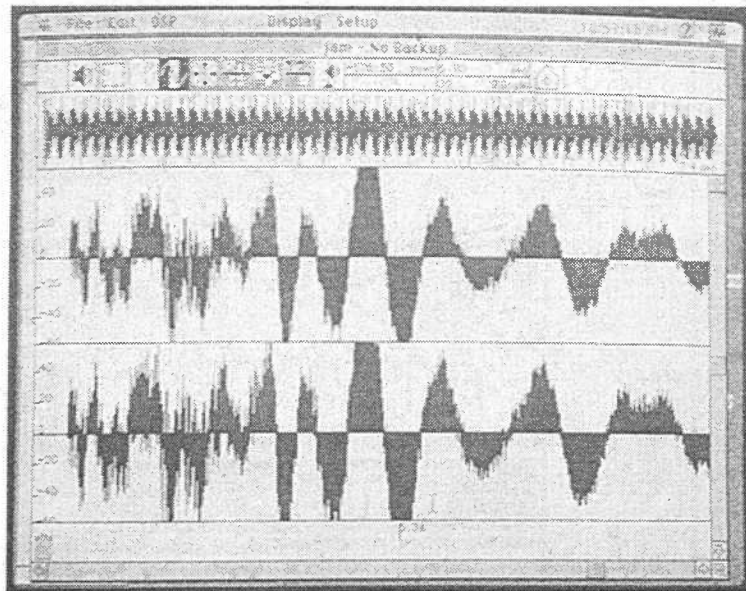
End of the Paper Trail

By Kyle Gann

Scores

Way back when I was a teenage Cage fanatic eager to up the ante on avant-gardism, I collected, as everyone did, records. At the time, Deutsche Grammophon sold the best possible recording for four dollars, unsurpassed by today's \$18 CDs. But more important, I collected scores. I felt a recording would give me superficial familiarity with a work, a live performance some intimacy, but if I wanted to know the piece in the biblical sense I had to study it on the printed page. Music is more multidimensional and full of technical detail than a novel or a painting, and often, the more dazzling the masterpiece, the more you need a score to figure out how the composer did it.

Then I moved to Manhattan, and scores pretty much ceased to be part of my life. For one thing, after 1970 publishers lapsed into utter ignorance of new music, publishing only those Americans who write in the most conventional European genres. Even then they barely distribute the music, using modern works primarily as tax write-offs, so that many composers refuse to deal with them. Boosey & Hawkes got hip (or venal) enough to sign up Steve Reich, but aside from that one exception it is laughable to imagine going into venerable Paterson's Music to catch up on recent trends, as one might easily have done 30 years ago. I don't own a



Keeping score with software instead of staff paper

STEVE WALTERS

single score for a work written after 1980 that wasn't self-published and given to me by the composer. Aside from a few artist-run mail-order concerns like Frog Peak Music and Deep Listening, that's the only meaningful way today's scores circulate.

On top of that, Downtown composers don't always make scores, at least not ones suitable for public consumption. As busy, practical, and unconcerned for posterity as Mozart was, they write parts for their players, or simply computer-sequence the music, punching it in to be played on MIDI synthesizers without ever touching paper. When I need hard copy from them, as when I lecture or write analytical articles

for academic journals, I have a hell of a time getting it. One prominent composer gave me xeroxes of his players' parts so I could assemble my own score; no one had ever asked him for one before. I have sometimes transcribed music from recordings, taping it for half-speed playback when it's too complex.

Granted, the decline of music's paper culture has a bigger upside than down. A kind of religious faith in the score as being more essential than the sound was responsible for the cerebral dead end that 12-tone music brought us to. When I first became a critic, I would follow the score at performances, as I often had before and as Uptown critics routinely do. But I soon found that

while I ended up with lots of technical trivia to write about, I had nothing to say about how the piece sounded, how it worked psychologically, what impression it created on the audience. What looks wimpy on the page can sound spectacular, and vice versa. I think the basis for the reputation of stuffed shirts like Elliott Carter and Mario Davidovsky is that Uptown critics follow their scores during concerts and find impressive devices, whereas if they relied on their ears they would draw a blank like everyone else. In the 10 years since I learned that, I have never followed a score at a live performance unless I was already familiar with the music. One Downtown composer sends me his scores before concerts, and I ignore them until afterward.

The disappearance of the score accompanies a drastic upswing in the quality of new music over the last seven years, particularly among the young. Now that composers computer-sequence their music, the time lag between writing a passage and hearing it played has narrowed from several months to a few minutes. Revising a melody or rhythmic device that didn't work the way you thought it would is a quick, private transaction with no paper trail. By the time a composer goes public with a work, she's heard it 750 times instead of twice, and the wrinkles have been ironed out. As a result, 22-year-old technonerd routinely turn out pieces more sophisticated and engaging than those of your average 50-ish pencil pusher. Afterward, they have little incentive

to write down what they did.

I wouldn't go back to the bad old days for love or liquor, but I miss scores anyway. For while new music's listenability is way up, the quality and density of intellectual discourse have hit bottom. You don't need printed notes to enjoy new music, but you sometimes need them to communicate, critic to critic, how intricate and radically new the music's methods are. What sounds like a vigorous and unrepeatably free-for-all onstage may be a well-contrived 27-against-32 polyrhythm with structural implications for the rest of the piece. I can play CDs at lectures and vaguely impress musicians, but if I can show them *how* Eve Beglarian weaves vocal improv into her music, *how* Nick Didkovsky creates his rhythmic structures, or *how* La Monte Young tunes his piano, they get excited. The beautiful effects in the music have become theirs to re-create. Hard copy by itself is sterile, music can be mystifying, but when you put the two together, sparks fly in between.

After one talk I participated in, composer Roger Reynolds lamented to me, "Students no longer know how music is made." The scarcity of paper means scarcity of community, of mutual development of ideas, since no one's quite sure what anyone else is doing. The problem is keeping a healthy balance of means and ends. Let us have print, but never again delude ourselves that an interestingly made score can ever justify music that doesn't sound good. As Peter Gena says, "Analysis is the cigarette after"; meaning, first you fall in love with a work, and then, only because it fascinates you, you look underneath the hood and figure out how it works. Without a score, there's no hood to open. ■

DEEP SPACE DUB

COME MEET BETTY BUCKLEY
at HMV 72ND + Broadway