

# Enigma Revived

## Trying To Know Johanna Beyer

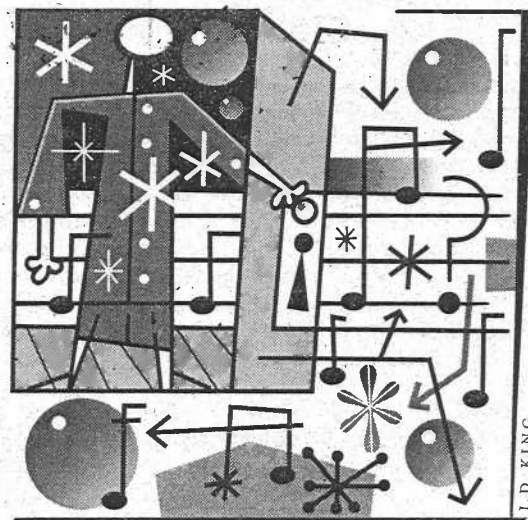
BY KYLE GANN

**T**he music is eerie, static, electronic, minimalist, process-oriented, noisy but meditative. Date of composition? Oh, 1970s, you'd say, certainly post-Cage, in that fusion of minimalism and conceptualism that followed the early Reich and Glass recordings. Maybe it's by Pauline Oliveros, or Larry Austin. Fooled you, for the piece—aptly named *Music of the Spheres*—comes from the 1930s, and the composer's name is one you won't find in any music dictionary: Johanna Magdalena Beyer.

That was a name almost lost to history, but in recent weeks it's floated through New York music circles like a dim memory. Double bassist Robert Black premiered a Beyer piece at Roulette in December, and last month Sarah Cahill played two of Beyer's piano works at Bloomingdale House. A new article by composers Larry Polansky and John Kennedy will appear in the upcoming *Musical Quarterly*, making public the known facts of Beyer's life and output for the first time. She was first rediscovered by Charles Amirkhanian, who included *Music of the Spheres* on his first disc for the 1750 Arch label in 1977. In 1988, Kennedy's group Essential Music gave the next push by premiering sever-

al Beyer compositions in New York. Now, Essential Music's recording a disc, and Frog Peak Music has released 10 scores in the *Johanna Beyer Project*, painstakingly reconstructed from manuscripts in disarray.

So who was Johanna Beyer? The short answer is, she was right-hand woman to seminal American composer Henry Cowell, the assistant who took over his work (running New Music Editions, programming concerts, letter writing) while he was incarcerated at San Quentin, on a hyped-up homosexual morals charge, from 1936 to 1940. Beyond that, scholarly light hardly penetrates the mist of her life. Born in Leipzig in 1888, she came to America at 35 and studied with the best local minds of her day: Cowell, Dane Rudhyar, Charles Seeger, Ruth Crawford (all younger than she was). She is described as a good pianist, but "tall, angular, awkward, and self-conscious, as well as painfully shy." Her rapid decline in later years was attributed to alcoholism, but it is now known she died in 1944 (in the Bronx)



of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, which was more likely the cause of her slurred speech and difficulties in walking. No photo is known to survive. She had no family she acknowledged, few friends, and was, Polansky and Kennedy say, "an enigma to those who knew her."

But the biggest enigma is her music. She was charged with being primitive and lacking technique, and at first hearing it seems true. She was fond of

huge tone clusters, textures of electronic and string glissandi, long rushes of noise, gradual processes that work themselves out with hard-headed literalness. Her String Quartet No. 2 weaves weird dissonant counterpoint above as the cello plays Papageno's song from *The Magic Flute*—strange idea. Yet her soundworld has a natural originality to it, marked by an amazing timelessness not explored by others until decades later. Her rhythms hammer incessantly, her mel-

odies hover without a goal, but today, after minimalism, it's easy to hear her lengthy accelerations and glissandi cumulatively as a kind of textural meditation, an empty space opened in a field of time. We have yet to decide whether her radical originality was the result of naïveté or an almost mystical personal vision. The amazing thing is that, thanks to the efforts of Kennedy, Polansky, and others, the decision will be ours to make.

## Endless Time

**B**eyer's shyness concealed a mordant political outlook. Her magnum opus, a few parts of which have been performed, was an opera pointedly titled *Status Quo*, which criticized society in sardonic terms. Polansky and Kennedy take the title of their article from a Beyer song with clarinet—"Total Eclipse," which seemed to describe her posthumous career. As with other songs, she wrote the poem herself: "But behold the heavens/ Phenomenous climax!/ Bursting the shielding surface,/ The fiery glow of the corona/Circles its dance of life. . . . But though men try,/ Time and again,/ These longing elements flee back. . . ." And in another song, sustained whole-notes in the voice: "Stars, stars, stars, moons, suns,/ Penetrating love—/ Endless time, infinite space—Forever—/ Boundless beauty." The music, dissonant but still, matches the words.

—K.G.

# TOUGHER THAN TOUGH



# RICHARD O'BRIEN

in *Disgracefully Yours*

CREATOR OF THE  
**ROCKY**  
HARRBO

Sometimes  
the best  
thing to  
wear is  
nothing  
at all.