

Genius Flops

By Kyle Gann

Essential Music Continuum

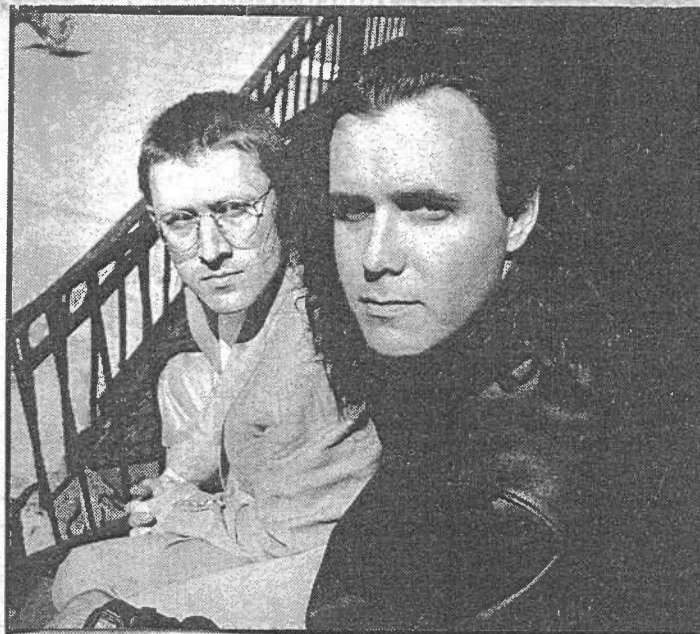
Nothing else in music is as instructive as the bad, young works of great composers. You can listen in awe to the masterpieces for a lifetime and grasp nothing, but sit once through the experiments that flopped, and the light will flash on how genius evolves. On April 11 Continuum played a Stefan Wolpe retrospective at Alice Tully Hall, and five days later Essential Music offered a "Rare Cage" concert at Greenwich House. Both groups dipped into the bottom of their respective barrels, but "greatest hits" selections couldn't have been more illuminating.

I'm overstating: It wasn't that the early, obscure Cage works failed, or were tedious to sit through. Quite the contrary. Songs Cage wrote at 20—*A Greek Ode* after Aeschylus and *The Preacher* from Ecclesiastes, sung with powerful intensity by Thomas Buckner—were dour, chromatic, and slow, but they simmered with rebellion. Each measure avoided the step its predecessor led you to expect. Freshly disillusioned with college, Cage was already original to the bone, with an incredible capacity to ignore the music around him and find his own path. It was clear, however, that he had no idea where that path led.

Starting with these strange early efforts, the concert was a psycho-

analytic history, in which Cage's detractors could have read proof that his chance methods grew from personality dislocation. Next stop was the early '40s, the time when Cage was considering finding a shrink, but turned to Eastern philosophy instead. Four Dances revealed Cage's 30-year-old ego in drop-the-needle schizophrenia. Pianist Joseph Kubera interrupted chirpy preminimalist patterns and folk tunes to slap the piano's sides manically, Buckner crooned an expansive vocalise (these were dances?), and John Kennedy alternately hit drums, beat the inside of the piano, and clapped his hands. This Cage knew that his teacher Schoenberg's 12-tone dogma was a dead end, but he didn't know whether to turn to folk, jazz, collage, or noise for the answer. The confusion was entertaining but surreal.

In *Ophelia* for piano from 1946, Cage squarely tried to capture mental illness in sound, as Diamanda Galas would 40 years later. Dynamic pianist Margaret Leng Tan ricocheted between obsessively repeated cadences and sharp dissonances, Satie-like calm and Viennese angst. The post-*I Ching* breakthrough came in *Sounds of Venice*, a theater piece Cage assembled for Italian TV when he was a game-show guest in 1959. (He won \$6000 answering questions about mushrooms.) Here was a protohappening: Charles Wood smoked a cigarette, swept the stage, played tapes of Third World chanting, dropped a



Smoking and clapping: Chuck Wood and John Kennedy

JOYCE GEORGE

Slinky on the piano strings, and uncovered a parakeet that, by design or from shyness, performed 4'33". *Venice* was bonkers too, but by now Cage had learned how to create a space empty enough to absorb anything, in which no activity felt out of place. The late theater and chance methods may not have been so much a breaking away from restrictions as an attempt to fuse all the styles, gestures, and methods Cage's all-embracing sensibility felt compelled to explore.

Continuum's Wolpe celebration aimed more at range than rarity, and traced a development geographical rather than psychological. Wolpe, the most underknown and greatest of America's atonalists, began in Germany as a writer of Hindemithian *gebrauchsmusik*, dense with counterpoint but

rhythmically alive; like Cage, he abhorred the predictable. When he was forced to flee to Israel, his music blossomed into passionate lyricism. Then, once in America, like Stravinsky, Wolpe lightened up and wrote transparent gems.

Some of the German works Continuum rescued from obscurity can safely go back, especially the leaden, square-rhythmed *Blues*; German jazz can be flat-footed enough now, let alone in 1929. The pretensions of the 1945 Hebrew cantata *Yigdal* kept it close to the German period in its thick, near-atonal, and monotonous counterpoint interrupted by athletic organ interludes. Joann Rice's *Florilegium* Chamber Choir and organist Walter Hilse made laudable efforts to lighten the gloom. Wolpe's sensuous Hebrew songs, though (once avail-

able on an old Columbia disc), burst into luminosity. Cheryl Marshall, a fiery dramatic soprano with beautiful senses of pitch and line, brought these to life and also made the more turgid German songs worth hearing.

It was in the late works that Wolpe began to give rein to his gentle sense of humor. A former Wolpe student (Charlie Morrow) told me that Wolpe watched the fish in his aquarium for inspiration: the late works dart, freeze, and glide with a playfulness and rhythmic elasticity that academics resent him for to this day. Wolpe's late technique could loosely be called 12-tone, but his rows (when he used them) tended to contain more than 12 notes, and his preferred method was to flit between static groups of pitches that he scattered across the range with ever-surprising liveliness. *Form* for piano (1959), Mozartean in its clarity, is one of the best examples. I'd never heard it performed better than here by Cheryl Seltzer, whose steely, impassive reading brought out the hidden pitch symmetries.

Continuum also did justice to another tiny masterpiece, *From Here on Farther*, for mixed quartet. The piece's gestures were jaunty if disjunct, and broke near the end into a tonal, innocent violin theme. Though too heavy on the German end, the evening gave the impression that the difficulties of Wolpe's life turned him from a stodgy contrapuntalist into a miniaturist of heavenly textures. That's how genius evolves: it hits immovable resistance, cries out in rage and pain, transforms itself, sheds whatever doesn't truly belong to it, then crushes the barrier and keeps moving. ■

TOWER RECORDS | VIDEO

NEW OLD DEAD!

TOWER RECORDS | VIDEO

A  t E  n  t  i  E