

Gold in That Thar Vacuum

By Kyle Gann

Aaron Jay Kernis
Michael Torke
Neil Haverstick

Listen to those string arpeggios over a drone: sounds like Wagner but unfamiliar, must be obscure Liszt. No wait, those horn calls are pure Richard Strauss. Well, the subsequent woodwind runs could be William Schuman, but the celeste-studded scales bring John Adams to mind, and the swells of impressionist harmony they lead to are definitely Ravel. But the next movement opens with some George Crumb/Penderecki scratchy sound effects, finally dating the work post-1965. These flow into some gestures from *L'Histoire*-period Stravinsky, and finally the lower woodwinds break into stilted jazz. Who the hell is this?

The disc I'm suing for ear-whiplash is *Symphony in Waves* by Aaron Jay Kernis (Argo). All by itself, it illustrates the plight the classical establishment gets into when it tries to modernize superficially while preserving the status quo. Kernis's style is pastiche for the same reason a politician's favorite color is plaid. The scratchy gestures attest to *Waves's* modernist credentials, but who could listen to a whole symphony of

them, right? So you give the classical listeners what they want to hear, spruced up with modernist (even minimalist!) touches. But what do they want to hear? Ravel? Wagner? Jazz? Better hit all the bases just in case. Then they can say they heard a new symphony and they haven't had to listen for more than 20 seconds to anything they haven't heard before.

In a similar category is Michael Torke's *Color Music* (also on Argo, which has a penchant for ambitiously imitative youngsters). His *Green*, for example, takes textures such as you might hear in Mendelssohn and Holst and runs them through unbelievably repetitious minimalist processes, but jumbled up to keep you from catching on. *Purple* sounds like a phrase from, oh, *An American in Paris*, played over and over with unpredictable interruptions, while *Ash*, even more blatant (if that's possible), could be bits of Brahms run through the food processor and served up again and again ad nauseam. It's a great strategy; minimalism is hip on the orchestral circuit these days, and Torke fuses it with the same tried-and-true orchestral textures that the blue-haired set already knows and loves. A lot of people have been taken in.

Orchestras have ignored living

composers for so long that now when they look for the next young genius they find only a repertoire vacuum. Almost no good young composers write for orchestra anymore, but others are glad to rush and fill that vacuum, and the general lack of knowledgeable minimalist and new-music criticism leaves the field wide open for exploitation. Kernis writes pompously, as though he sees himself as a genius in the grand manner; Torke more cynically cashes in on minimalism years after all the hard work is done. But both belong to a musical movement with a long pedigree: opportunism.

On the brighter side, one of the discs I've been playing for friends and lecture audiences lately has nothing to do with new or classical music. Neil Haverstick's *The Gate*, a self-produced disc out of Colorado, is pure blues-rock guitar. (Order it at P.O. Box 150271, Lakewood, Colorado 80215.) Haverstick does guitars and vocals, Marc Mariano drums. I don't know how it stacks up next to other blues guitar records; to me it sounds fine. The interesting wrinkle for me is that on six of the disc's 10 cuts, Haverstick plays a guitar with 19 equal steps to the octave. After 12, 19 is theoretically the next advance toward a scale that allows more variety while still preserving most of our common, consonant intervals.

In "Birdwalk" Haverstick plunks a typical blues line, a chromatic descent from D to B in the key of E; except, instead of four notes, it takes him six. Same thing from G-sharp up to B. Now, the clichés of blues developed around a certain synchronicity between the steps of the scale and the regu-



PETER JONES

Neil Haverstick, an alternative tuning rocker

larity of 4/4 or 12/8 meter. Change the number of steps in the scale, and suddenly you're pushing the meter around as well. Patterns that would occupy a predictable four beats for any other blues player, Haverstick needs five or six for. That IV or V chord comes in as expected, but always a beat or two late. And yet the integrity of the scale renders the musical logic seamless.

For those who want something more overtly weird, "Spider Chimes" runs through that 19-tone scale in chromatically atonal patterns, and "667 Shuffle" deploys it in a more subtle manner, inflecting a sinuous rock solo. "Birdwalk," though, remains my favorite because it shows the intricately symbiotic relationship between pitch and rhythm with a clarity that would have fascinated Henry Cowell or Harry Partch.

It's great news that rockers are turning to alternative tuning systems. And Haverstick isn't an isolated figure. May 20 at the NYU

Theater, as part of the American Festival of Microtonal Music, Jon Catler (La Monte Young's guitarist in his Forever Bad Blues Band) played three of his rock songs with his band Fracture using either just intonation or 31-pitch scales. Catler's pitch shifts on guitar had more microtonal interest than Meredith Borden's vocals, which were pretty standard. In the middle of one song, though, festival director Johnny Reinhard stormed through an incredible, ferocious, wailing, omnimicrotonal solo on the, Lord help us, amplified bassoon. What an instrument for Jimi Hendrix's reincarnation to turn up on.

Neither Haverstick nor Catler is just dabbling; they put microtones to more savvy uses than a lot of classical composers have. Rock musicians determine where the industry puts its money. If they're hearing just and microtonal tunings as the next logical move, then the 12-step scale's days are numbered. ■

volans
string quartet no. 2
"hunting: gathering"
string quartet no. 3
"the sonalines"



argo:
breaking



copland
rodeo
billy the kid
el salón méxico
danzón cubano