

**W**ith all the flag-waving going on, the most red, white, and blue event I know of was at Merkin Hall September 17 and 18. Kudos to the Hebrew Arts School for naming their four-concert marathon merely Pianorama, as though the fact that Americans composed all the 50-odd works was coincidental and unsurprising; as if to imply, correctly, that enough great American music exists to fill dozens of such programs. Some 24 of 20th century music's best pianists, living and dead (explanations in a minute), painted a vivid landscape using the works of almost 30 composers, from the irrepressible Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-69) to Minnesota's James Lovendusky (b. 1957). It made for warm thoughts, among them that classical-music lovers, and even composers, are Americans too.

The parade of pianistic personalities was entertainment enough, but more interesting was the way in which contrasts defined the exact size and shape of American music. Representing America's sentimental side, Alan Feinberg played atypically tender works by Gottschalk (*La Chute des Feuilles*) and Amy Beach (*Dreaming*) that arpeggiated dark, Lisztian moods. De Mare's Preludes, written by Charles Tomlinson Griffes, flowed in waves of emotion, while his *Extensions 3* and *Intermission V* of Morton Feldman were riveting in their near-inaudible delicacy. De Mare's antipode was Bennett Lerner, who punched out a sturdy, unhurried, very nonimpressionist First Sonata by Charles Ives; his body nearly immobile, Lerner projected a hard-headed momentum in revival hymn quotations that the composer would have found congenial.

Somewhere in between, Ursula Oppens splashed gobs of mercurial colors over Elliott Carter's *Night Fantasies*, a work of aurally baffling form. Copland's *Piano Fantasy*, knocked off by Randall Hodgkinson with harsh tone but consummate clarity, gave the comparison we needed. Even after many listenings, Carter's lus-

trous textures run together generically, but Copland's *Fantasy*, equally abstract, has a top-notch sonic design, and expertly led the ear through perfectly discreet variations. The comparison lent weight to Feldman's comment that Carter became famous "because America needed a WASP Copland."

Treatments of jazz were equally instructive. Fats Waller and Duke Ellington performed via film clips, music videos 40 years before the fact. Brash, foot-stomping Judy Carmichael whipped off stride standards like "Squeeze Me" and "Alliga-

## MUSIC

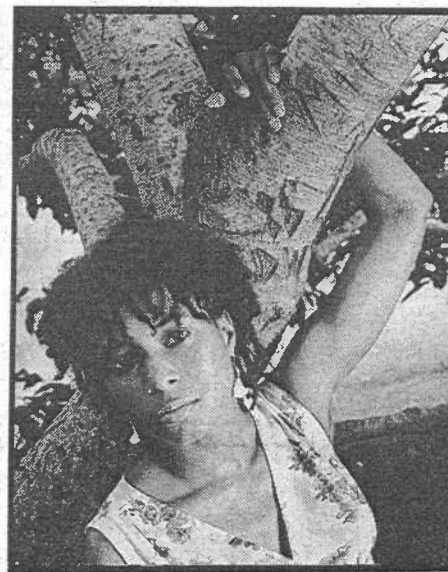
tor Crawl." Her energy, fierce if muddy, could hardly compete when Tommy Flanagan walked on and reminisced about Ellington. In a smooth, mellow cocktail medley of his songs, Flanagan accented those substitution chords as if he *felt* what dissonance means in that vocabulary; not a note was unnecessary, nor one present that wouldn't have sounded perfect in 1947. (Regrettably, I missed Barry Harris's Thelonious Monk set, likely of equal interest.)

Among younger composers, the most exciting were those who played their own work. Anthony Davis's opening piece (from his next opera *Under the Double Moon*) unleashed a torrent of repeated notes and complex, well-directed runs, in his gutsiest and best-focused performance I've heard. Geri Allen, less modernist and a little bluesier, spread the wildest arpeggios over virtuosic ostinatos, wandering in and out of an attractive bitonality with amazing mental and digi-

## Pianorama

# Hear America First

BY KYLE GANN



KRISTINE LARSEN

Gerri Allen: the wildest arpeggios

tal coordination. As too often at Merkin, the classically oriented players were caught in the throes of academia; Allen Anderson's Carterish *Solfeggietti* was lyrical but not terribly distinctive, and Lovendusky's Sonata, in a whirlwind premier by Rebecca La Brecque, badly needed some soft moments to balance its barrage of harsh textures.

Only Margaret Leng Tan extended the festival's implicit limitations, jolting eye and ear by working into and around the instrument. Ever controlled, she banged out Henry Cowell's wry *Advertisement* of 1914 with her fists, then screwed bolts to the strings for an obscure 1942 John Cage work, presciently titled *In the Name of the Holocaust*, in which the unusual technique of *plucking* the bolted strings creat-

ed pitches *below* the note plucked; the low ringing had the mournful calm of a Buddhist temple. The weekend's one disappointment was the unexpected absence of Yvar Mikhashoff, his plane grounded by Buffalo weather. Among other things, he was to have given a rare *live* performance of one of Conlon Nancarrow's fiendishly difficult works for player piano.

At some point in this panorama, the classical, jazz, and avant-garde began to merge; Geri Allen was chockablock with the railroad rhythms of Rzewski's *Winnsboro cotton mill blues* (played by Aleck Karis), La Brecque's impressively theatrical Sessions First Sonata matched Davis's hectic energy, and Flanagan's sonorities overlapped Copland's. To describe the music as nervously rhythmic, nontonal yet hardly dissonant in its open sonorities, and marked by breezy syncopations would be to take in Ives, Gottschalk, Bernstein, Ellington, John Adams' *Phrygian Gates*, Lou Harrison's granitic Third Sonata, and several others. In short, one got a sense of an American music whose circumference was finite and whose center was definably *some-where*; diversity aside, we do have a national musical identity.

It's an identity we might feel more intuitively if other institutions would make the same commitment to American music as the Hebrew Arts School has. If the GOP had as much patriotism collectively as Charles Ives did in his little finger, they'd send the NEA Music Program a directive to set quotas, to make funding dependent on a certain percentage of works being by native composers (as almost every other country in the Western world does). Here's a litmus test, Mr. Bush: let no person be called patriotic who does not know and love his country's music. Better yet, let's plaster banners across the back of every concert hall in the country, with the slogan: "American music: Play it or get your [picture of a donkey] out." The look on Georg Solti's face alone, when he turns around to bow, will be priceless. ■