

Honesty Before Weirdness

By Kyle Gann

Peter Garland

Two composers in my generation are the lighthouses I use to navigate through the volatile waters of fashion. The Atlantic one is Rhys Chatham. The Pacific is lit by Peter Garland of Santa Fe, publisher of *Soundings* and self-appointed guardian of the American Experimental Tradition. Garland's been A Name for so long that his combination of youth and longevity works against him. I bought my first Garland record—*Apple Blossom*, on Opus One—when I was 18 and he was 21. Garland became famous not for his music, but for securing the reputations of anti-establishment pioneers: Nancarrow, Rudhyar, Harrison, Partch, Tenney. Being an intransigent rabble-rouser in an isolated place, he hasn't had the support systems that the self-disenfranchised can turn to in New York. The upshot is, it's taken a long time for anyone to ask what the composer Peter Garland is all about.

And what is he about? The question finally got asked by Essential Music, Charles Wood and John Kennedy's intrepid ensemble that, like Garland in *Soundings*, has set out to single-handedly right the wrongs of American music. Essential Music gave Gar-

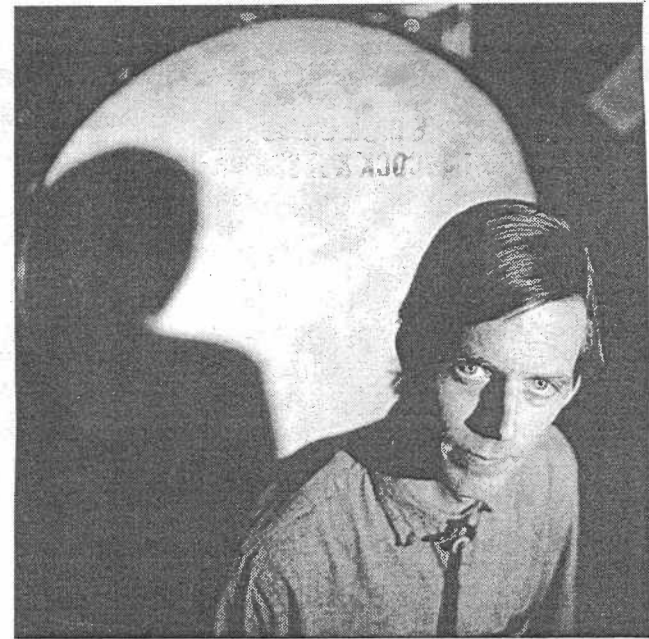
land his first New York one-man show February 7 at Greenwich House, in front of an audience swelling with the composers *Soundings* has championed over the years. The music ranged from hair-raising to tuneful, and, since Garland is so identified with the experimental tradition, it suggested some surprising things about what that tradition means.

The two 1973 works were pure noise-sculpture. *Three Songs of Mad Coyote* began with drummers in fierce unison, like an American Indian beat but with energizing rhythmic shifts. *Coyote's* second "song" involved the whirs and growls of bull-roarers (flat pieces of wood whirled on strings) and lion's roars (twine scraped through a hole in a drumhead), and the third song used piano clusters that boomed like distant thunder. *Obstacles of Sleep*, aptly titled, revved up a pair of sirens to the highest pitch, then damped them with a yelp. As the piece continued, slowly turned ratchets made a commotion like the explosion of baseball-sized popcorn kernels, and sweeping glissandos threatened to take the black keys off the pianos. (Essential Music's percussionists produce the loudest unamplified concerts in New York.) These pieces might be the last stern classics of pure modernism, all remnants of classical resolution removed, and

not yet infected by any trace of postmodern irony.

The later works, 1988–90, were less abstract, melodic and even gentle. Garland's recent style is a nonrepetitive minimalism, each contrapuntal line shaved down to only three or four notes, yet still full of unexpected twists. *Drinking Wine*, whose translated-from-Chinese text Dora Ohrenstein sang in dark, ghostly tones, featured the Roy Harris-like octaves and wide consonances of Garland's piano style (Philip Bush on piano). *A Green Pine*, another Ohrenstein vehicle, had accordionist Guy Klucevsek rocking endlessly between triads on C, B-flat, and G. A fabulous pianist, Judith Gordon (a Yo Yo Ma accompanist), brought delicacy and color to *Walk in Beauty*, a multi-movement piece based on the Navajo peyote ceremony. It began with, and finally returned to, a hesitant repeated-note melody over a pair of chords a whole-step apart.

Essential Music's most ambitious coup was the world premiere of Garland's Roque Dalton Songs, with Nils Vigeland conducting an 11-piece ensemble. The drum blasts, slapstick, maracas, and sharp harp pizzicatos that differentiated the songs timbrally were as powerful as the violent political poems they accompanied, written by short-lived Salvadoran guerrilla/poet Dalton (1935–75). As strings and percussion hammered out blunt isorhythms, David Fry's distinctly annunciated tenor pierced through the ensemble, but his chantlike line, often limited to four notes, wasn't written to underscore the poetry's drama. Not a touch of tone-painting did Gar-



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It's taken a long time to ask what this guy's all about.

land indulge in, yet the tense emotionality of the whole gave Dalton's indictment a stern authority. The songs were as hard-edged, uniform, impassive, and vivid as a panel of Mayan hieroglyphics.

Rough and bristling, the Dalton Songs showed the influence of the Latin American composers Garland has often championed, as well as his political concern for Central America. But some of the music, at least in surface respects, was nearly the most conventional I've reviewed in this column. In Garland's music—as in that of Nancarrow, Cowell, Harrison, and Ives—bizarre noises coexist happily with major triads. The American experimentalists never fell for the anti-consonance exclusionism that cut serialism (and more recently, free improv) into a one-dimensional aesthetic. Music, in

the Am Ex Trad, doesn't have to be weird, simply honest. Honest music will sometimes sound weird—everyone has a few thoughts and feelings outside the experience of others—but the honesty comes first, not the weirdness. In the second movement of *Walk in Beauty*, Gordon played soft clusters from which she sustained triads; the shimmering effect added, not shock value, but a purity the cleanest consonance couldn't have equaled.

Or, as Garland put it to me after the concert, "I was afraid my music would be eaten alive in New York. It has a sentimental side to it. New York music is about proving you're the most baaaad-arsed composer in town." Garland's not a very baaaad-arsed composer, but he's one of the best. ■

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