

## Confidences

**C**age on jobs: "Instead of being seen as the nature of the future, unemployment is seen as some horror. None of the jobs that anyone is offered are of any interest. No one wants a job.

What everyone needs in order to do his best work is . . . self-employment. Here we are almost halfway toward self-employment, and all we do is complain . . . that we have this big unemployment problem. It's stupid."

**Meredith Monk on her singing:** "[O]ne of the early influences was Janis Joplin . . . around '68 . . . [T]here was something about . . . that kind of gut, primal quality of hers (juicy, I could say) that made me really want to start working again. And I realized why: she did not have any preconceived sense of beauty."

**Babbitt on composing:** "I become impossibly consumed with it, let everything go by, let the letters pile up, and get very irritable. I'll discuss this with you because you're a fellow composer, but I hate to say these things because then it sounds like the creative genius posture. But it's a very simple fact of life."

—K. G.

**A**re composers brilliant conversationalists, that people love to interview them so much? Certainly not in all cases, but we've had enough books of composer interviews in the last couple of decades to suggest they must be. I figure, since neither musicology nor theory has made any headway at grasping new music's luxuriant diversity, we have no place to get information except from the horses' mouths. While the quality of interview books doesn't tend to vary tremendously, the latest one, *Talking Music* by William Duckworth (Schirmer, \$30), stands out. Since Duckworth is a composer himself, familiar with the ins and outs of the profession, and since he has long been close friends with some of his interviewees, he gets several of them speaking on more intimate terms than they have before publicly, beyond the usual party lines and influence recitations.

It isn't uniformly true; the interview with Conlon Nancarrow remains stiff (I don't think anyone's drawn a satisfying interview from the reticent Nancarrow since Roger Reynolds in the '70s, and I've tried), while Laurie Anderson stays guarded, never slipping into the surrealism her private conversation can enter. But Duckworth goes after 17 artists from five

# Horses' Mouths

## William Duckworth's Talking Music

BY KYLE GANN

generations, and John Cage, Milton Babbitt, Ben Johnston, La Monte Young, Philip Glass, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny in particular vouchsafe him information I've never read elsewhere. To Duckworth, Cage will admit that the "New York School" (Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown) might have expanded to include Philip Corner, Malcolm Goldstein, and James Tenney, except that Feldman was too intensely jealous to let anyone else in. Glass explains a source of his pragmatism that will comfort his enemies: because as a kid he worked in his father's record store, "The first thing I knew about music was that you sold it; in other words, people paid for it."

Duckworth's gentle but relentless insistence wrings admissions from composers that you wonder if they've since regretted. John Zorn confesses that he added to his collection of 13,000 records by extensive shoplifting in his earlier years; Young attributes his fanatical sense of discipline to his Mor-

monism; Johnston sharply criticizes the operas of his teacher Harry Partch: "I didn't feel that what he was doing was valid, because he didn't know enough about dance. He didn't know enough

about theater. And he wouldn't learn because he wouldn't listen to anyone else." We learn a lot about the families composers come from. Wolff's father mer Brahm's funeral. Glass grew up with an odd record collection because his father would bring home the discs that didn't sell to find out why people didn't like them. Meredith Monk's mother sang commercials for Muriel Cigars

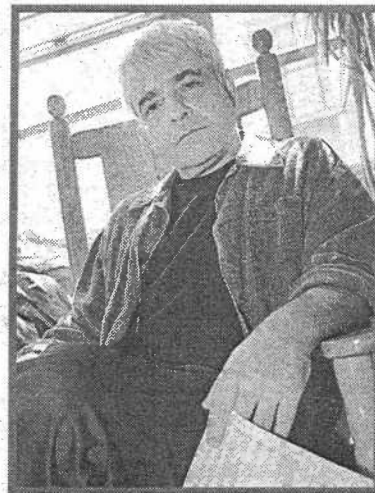
and Bluebonnet Margarine. Even Duckworth, though, can't cajole from Babbitt what his government work was during the war. "[W]e signed a secrecy agreement by Act of Congress," Babbitt explains, "whereby we're not even al-

lowed to use certain words, such as 'intelligence,' in public."

Because all the interviewees can talk shop to Duckworth, they get into some enlightening technical detail.

Steve Reich (coming across as the most classical music-oriented of the bunch, Babbitt included) explains how his reharmonizations over a changing bass line relate more to Debussy than to anything more recent. Johnston offers the clearest statement I've seen of his Confucian and Platonic thesis that our current tuning systems are poisonous to society, analogous to the misuse of DDT and nuclear energy.

Perhaps there's nothing a group this diverse has in common, but together they give a lively picture of new music drawing its materials omnivorously from the outer world, with the potential of returning them to us in sharper focus. ♦



MICHAEL SOFRONSKY

Duckworth: getting fellow composers to speak on intimate terms

JOHN  
PRINE



THE LOST  
DOG

APPEARING AT THE LIMELIGHT WITH  
REVEREND HORTON HEAT ON 9/24

THE  
GUIDED SQUAVES