

## TELLURIDE

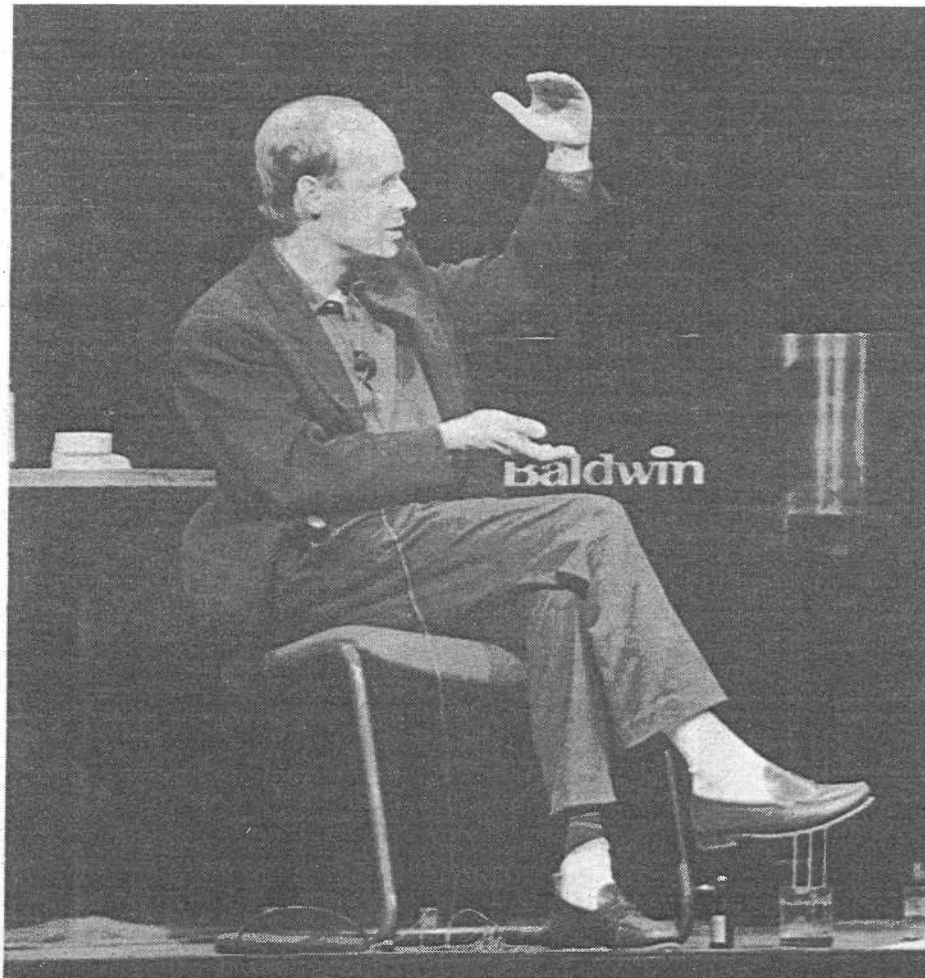
It all started with John Lifton's perception that composers in America no longer talk to each other—at least not about music. Lifton, an architect/composer/computer artist, got together with Charles Amirkhanian, composer and music director of Berkeley's rabble-rousing KPFA, to knock some heads together. The result, the Telluride Institute's first Composer-to-Composer festival, was as different from Germany's Darmstadt gathering as a Bierstadt landscape is from a crowded Klimt portrait. Environment was the key. Behind each of the 15 composers who met August 16 to 21 to banter philosophies rose the Rocky Mountains' pine-covered slopes, which were a sanctuary and a reminder that the plans of men don't necessarily count for much. Lifton and Amirkhanian wisely gauged the intimate connection between altitude and attitude; in this exhilaratingly thin air, ideas and intoxicants had the same effect.

If the mountains walled the group in from the outside, the festival opened up America's perspective on the world, for the sharpest interchanges took place between our composers and those of other shores. Traveling abroad to trumpet their country's bicentennial, Peter Sculthorpe, Vincent Plush, and Sarah Hopkins gave evidence that Australia (like Canada) is enjoying a vigorous, native musical health that tired America would love to recapture. Lepo Sumera of Estonia provided a Soviet viewpoint, partly shared by Virko Baley, a Ukrainian "displaced person" who now conducts the Las Vegas Symphony. Representing Europe (dubbed "Northwest Asia" by Lou Harrison and so called all week), Denys Bouliane, a French Canadian living in Cologne, brought with him enough Darmstadtian friction to keep the talk spinning, and British rock impresario Brian Eno elicited welcome last-minute controversy. The American contingent was noticeably West Coast: Harrison (the festival's grand old man), Terry Riley, electronics wizard Paul De Marinis, and Amirkhanian, with Lifton (originally English) and Stephen Scott (known for his voluptuous works for bowed piano) repre-

## Composer-to-Composer

# Ideas out of Thin Air

BY KYLE GANN



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work-in-progress he performed Saturday night with Riley, Hopkins, and a crew quickly trained to bow the strings of a retuned piano with nylon thread. The advantage of just intonation, Riley and Harrison averred, is its sweet purity of sound, which produces the profound, ecstatic effect on the listener that one reads about in Plato, but rarely finds in modern performance. Their taped illustrations, Harrison's First Piano Concerto and Riley's *Salome Dances for Peace*, bore out those claims. Admittedly, such discrimination takes practice, but Harrison boasted of a gamelan master who found widely differing moods in two tunings identical except for a 55 to 54 ratio between two corresponding pitch steps.

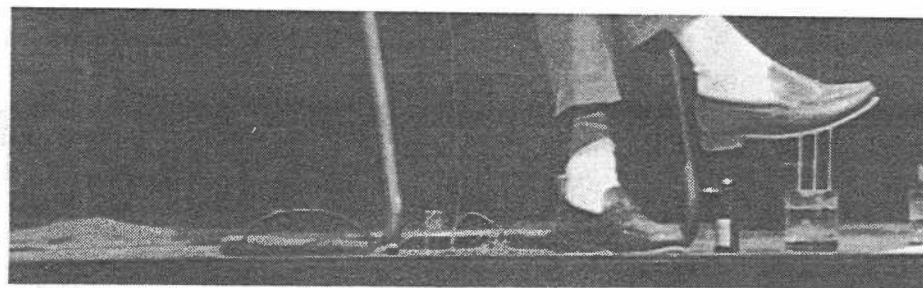
Following these polite intricacies, Brian Eno, who didn't arrive until Saturday night, dropped a bomb Sunday morning by announcing that just intonation had "produced a very interesting body of theory and a very uninteresting body of music." Riley flashed a look at Harrison, and a strange electricity filled the hall. Patiently, Riley pointed out that just intonation was natural and difficult to avoid, that Lennon, McCartney, and Dylan all sang in it. What finally emerged, though, from the common sense and conservatism of Eno's rock viewpoint, was a notion that had previously remained untouched: that too much music today is produced according to theory, and "one often forgets to listen." Audiences, Eno continued, "are expected to hear music in two different ways, conceptual and sensual," and he seemed to think the former mode was too much to ask of most listeners. Harrison and Riley are the last composers in America one could accuse of overtheorizing, but I did find it odd that this was the *first* time in the week anyone had brought the audience into the equation.

Perhaps the thin air kept Composer-to-Composer a little in a vacuum. Still, us-poor-composers talk was scarce. Most substantively, Virko Baley griped that Meet the Composer's orchestra residency program was merely a means of buying off a few composers to stop complaints; a handful of name composers rotate the same positions, and the \$250,000 the NEA gives the New York Phil could be spread among a number of regional or-

liane, a French Canadian living in Cologne, brought with him enough Darmstadtian friction to keep the talk spinning, and British rock impresario Brian Eno elicited welcome last-minute controversy. The American contingent was noticeably West Coast: Harrison (the festival's grand old man), Terry Riley, electronics wizard Paul De Marinis, and Amirkhanian, with Lifton (originally English) and Stephen Scott (known for his voluptuous works for bowed piano) representing Colorado. Only software-composer Laurie Spiegel provided a New York viewpoint.

Diversity without antagonism was the aim, and Amirkhanian's primary criterion was that each composer be open-minded enough to engage in real discussion. The last thing needed was another chance for Charles Wuorinen to throw rocks at minimalists or John Zorn to harangue academics. Unfortunately, this year's budget didn't include performers (as next year's hopes to), and the public had to form its impressions from what music the composers could perform themselves and from tapes played during the panel discussions. The concerts didn't always match the excitement of music the composers had played for each other earlier in the week, but they did reveal a group unmoved by New York- or Eurocentrism, a point Plush drove home by cupping his hand to his ear and asking, "Where?" after every mention of Darmstadt. A common denominator was difficult to find, but Spiegel made the best attempt by saying these were composers who had "rejected overintellectualization and oversimplification both." It was a euphemism for the fact that the works played were consistently listenable and surprisingly beautiful.

Given the anticentrism, world music was an unavoidable topic, and no one lacked input. Sumera called himself "a composer who happened to be Estonian"; his music has been compared to that of John Adams, and the piano pieces he played—*Pardon Fryderyc* after Chopin and a piece from which his First Symphony had developed—spun a lovely web of ever longer repeated figures. On a panel, though, he described the endless repetitions of Estonian epic poetry, and it



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became clear that his dark melodic continuity was related not to American minimalism, but to folk sources very close to home. Similarly, Sculthorpe's moody, rhythmic tone poems introduced aboriginal melody in a European context. Even the pretty computer algorithms Spiegel demonstrated have a basis in folk music, while De Marinis's computer-sampled songs took records by salesmen and self-help experts ("the more enthusiastic members of our society," he said) as source material. The last example raised discussion of copyright problems in a computer-sampling age, but Harrison offered a quick fix to doubts about cultural borrowings: "If it's pretty, use it."

Plush, composing on a continent (as he put it) "12,000 miles from Europe, 150 miles from Indonesia, and still dominated by colonialism," evidenced the only overtly political use of native music. His orchestral song cycle *Pacifica* used mariachi elements and Chilean folk songs to protest political developments around the Pacific rim, and he quoted with pride the increasing list of South American governments that have warned him not to return. The piece sparked an almost heated debate as to whether music could convey political meaning in itself, devoid of text or context. Only Bouliane took the Cage/Adorno line that the very structure of a work implies political content. De Marinis raised a specific complaint: that Plush had compromised his politics by writing for an upper-class medium (the orchestra). Plush's defense, well-applauded, was that he was subverting the medium in using it, and that *Pacifica* had forced thousands of comfortable listeners to confront uncomfortable issues.

Given this concern, I was surprised that the week's most effective political

work was never touted as such: Hopkins's *Cello Chi*. Hopkins, a former orchestral cellist, lives in Darwin, isolated in northern Australia, and travels among Aborigines and local youth groups, holding workshops. In *Cello Chi*, accompanying herself with the elaborate hand gestures of Tai Chi, she sang overtones above a drone, Tibetan Buddhist style, and played the cello the same way, slowly drawing har-

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monic-series double stops from a single string. This kind of reverse virtuosity posits the cello not as a tool to be mastered, but as a natural resource to be developed in accord with its own potentiality; a model for an ecology, in other words. Like Pauline Oliveros, to whom she is inevitably compared, Hopkins vividly communicates a holistic, non-European worldview and gave fuel to Bouliane's argument. Audiences might willfully disregard Plush's anti-imperialist program notes, but it was impossible to watch *Cello Chi* without entertaining an alternate approach to the physical world.

Intonation, or tuning, was the week's most recurrent topic, and one with both technical and spiritual aspects; no fewer than 10 present had written music in just, Pythagorean, or some other unconventional tuning. In this area lay the only shop talk that might have left the public nonplussed: a frequency ratio of 11 to 6, noted Riley, makes a better seventh than 15/8, 8/7 is a sweeter second than the more traditional 9/8. Some were glad to take his word for it; others rushed to incorporate such hints into their music, as Scott did in the moving, collaborative

equation.

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But the closing comments of Composer-to-Composer bode well. Several participants spoke of a tolerance they had unexpectedly developed over the week for other kinds of music; New Tonality types were getting advice from postserialists and taking it thoughtfully. At Darmstadt, booing is de rigueur and everyone goes away unhappy about *something*; but here, musical lions and lambs ate together, drank together, decided they could learn from one another, and made plans to keep in touch. Now Lifton and Amirkhanian face a tremendous challenge: to expand Composer-to-Composer, include a wider range of artists (Cage, Adams, Xenakis, and Nancarrow are under consideration but were unavailable this year), gear the event more to the public for funding's sake, and yet preserve its camaraderie. Darmstadt's competitive spirit, it was frequently urged, must be kept thousands of miles away. The mountains should help ensure that. ■

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