John Becker

In From the Outback

BY KYLE GANN

Michigan painter John Link once wrote a humorous, resentful, and perceptive essay about what it means to be a regional artist. It means, he argued, living outside New York. New York has its ways of keeping regional artists regional. We run articles on "Chicago Painting," or "The Art of New Mexico," and nobody remembers the artists, just the locale. We posit a double standard, denigrating bad artists from the provinces while holding our bad artists as prophets. Occasionally New York elevates a regional artist to minor stardom, as long as his or her work involves native materials or indigenous quirks. This keeps the others on their toes, each hoping to be the next one called. Work that too closely resembles art being made in New York doesn't have a chance.

Having spent some years in Chicago, the city that artist Buzz Spector called "the Potemkin village of America," I'm painfully aware of the symbiotic relationship. New York proclaims that there is no important music in Chicago, and Chicago, intoxicated with the attention, wags its drooling head and begs for more abuse. So bewitched is the local establishment by these reassurances that, when a truly phenomenal artist arises in Chicago, Chicago stares blankly and sniffs, "Impossible."

MUSIC

It's always been this way. That's why few people have heard of John Becker, who by rights should be regarded as a groundbreaker in American music. Becker (1886-1961) was a friend and colleague of Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, and Wallingford Riegger, a group that has earned the posthumous sobriquet "The American Five." But while the others lived in or near New York, Becker divided his career among South Bend, Columbus, St. Paul, and Chicago. Encouraged and published by Cowell, he tried to insinuate himself into New York society; he failed, as his biographer Don Gillespie speculates, due to his blunt manner, sharp tongue, and intransigently modernist opinions. As late as 1957 Becker wrote to Riegger in New York, "I am not too pleased with my complete isolation in a desert of musical stupidity, disloyalty, and expediency." Some would apply similar words to the Midwest today.

On November 23 New York awarded Becker a tribute that the Midwest continues to withhold: a one-man concert in honor of his centennial. Presented at Gustavus Adolphus Church by the Alliance for American Song, the program boasted three world premieres, and perhaps more (definitive documentation not having survived). The audience was less impressive for its size than for the long-standing commitment of its members (John Cage included) to the progress of American music. No major works were offered (Becker wrote seven symphonies, six concerti, and some of the first multimedia pieces, the majority unperformed), but the portrait that emerged was lively.

Becker's musical personality was well-defined and most easily characterized by his ubiquitous use of dissonance. Ives used dissonance to help separate perceptual levels; Ruggles, as an aspect of contrapuntal independence; Varèse, as a component of timbre. In Becker's music, dissonance is used, most commonly in the form of half-steps, as a sharp edge tending towards percussiveness—to create not tension but a sense of sturdiness. The songs chosen for this concert (in which genre Becker was almost as prolific as Ives) illustrated that principle well. Though grounded in the parlor-song tradition, they lent an attractive toughness to the stylized piano figures, whether the steely chords of "Open Your Arms to Me," the complex arpeggios of "A Song," or the pentatonic orientalism of his settings of the Japanese poet Rihaku.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF DON C. GILLESPIE

John Becker: farmbelt experimentalist

Becker's dualistically violent instrumental music, the bulk of his output, was represented only by the *Soundpiece No. 6*, a lengthy sonata for flute and clarinet, in an overdeliberate reading. *The Abongo*, a 1933 proto-minimalist experiment for 13 percussionists, received a much more rousing—even church-shaking—rendition led by Dominic Donato. Most exciting, though, were the unknown pieces. Organist Walter Hilse played a beautiful *Improvisation* from 1960, a restlessly mystical melody floating above parallel dissonant chords. Five excerpts from the vaudeville *Privilege and Privation* (text partially by the playwright Alfred Kreymborg) were savagely satirical, pitting pompous Privilege against a group of bums in a scabrous economic criticism of the Depression that applies equally well to Reagonomics.

The *Missa Symphonica* from 1933 deservedly drew the warmest response. As an avant-garde Catholic composer, Becker was America's answer to Olivier Messiaen (or rather vice versa, since Becker was earlier). The flowing, chant-like melismas of each male singer of the Choir of Corpus Christi Church commingled in an unearthly chromaticism: dark, writhing, and absolutely unique. This was probably the one work that most justified Becker's early reputation as advanced by Cowell, that of an atonal practitioner of Palestrina-style polyphony.

Altogether, the music in this tribute was undeniably vital. One reason why Becker has never taken his rightful place among the precursors of the avant-garde was the Depression, which diverted funds away from experimental work in favor of the populist conservatism led by Copland—a regressive movement from whose influence American music still hasn't fully recovered. (Even Becker felt forced, in 1942, to do his bit with a populist *Symphony of Democracy*.) But above all, Becker is the classic example of an American composer caught in the double-bind of regionalism: that New York will not grant its blessing to a regional artist with major league ambitions, and that the provinces refuse to recognize an artist whom New York has not blessed. Now that New York has taken the first step, perhaps Becker's star will finally rise. How many regional composers, living and dead, await a similar dispensation? ■