

Stephen Scott / Todd Winkler

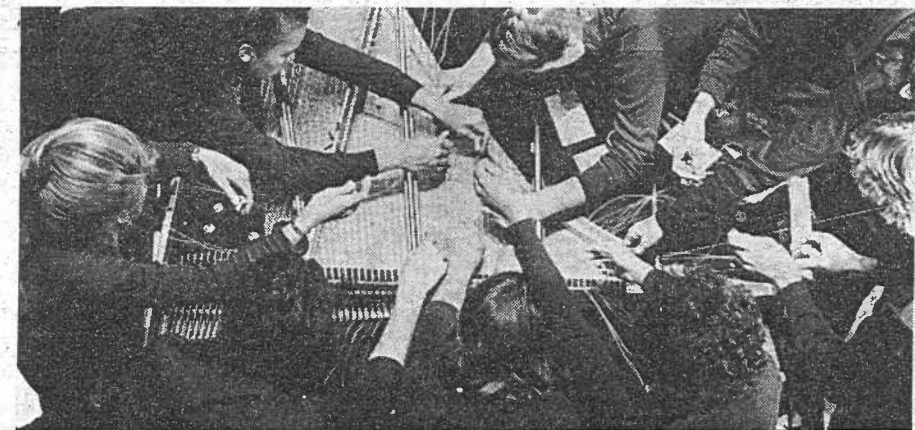
Know Your Limits

BY KYLE GANN

The value of limitations is greatly underappreciated. Stephen Scott, associate professor at Colorado College, composes under some of the strictest self-imposed restrictions since the '50s, when Christian Wolff wrote pieces for three pitches. Scott's music, performed by his Colorado College New Music Ensemble March 16 at Town Hall, is written for the inside of the piano. It's labor-intensive; 10 people crowd around and reach into the piano, bowing its strings with long nylon threads, brushing them with horsehairs glued to small sticks, and occasionally plucking them for surprising contrast. The logistics are tricky. Rarely can any player sound more than two notes at once, quick changes between notes are awkward, and every major harmonic or textural shift requires someone to maneuver into a new position. The process is bedeviled by inertia, yet because of or despite it, Scott's made some of the most engaging new music around.

The new tone poems he's touring with, *Minerva's Web* and *The Tears of Niobe*, were both drawn from mythology, and the former's reference to the weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne offered an analogy to the players' interlocked sewing movements. Scott has to pace his materials, and *Minerva* began with merely a dronelike half-step alternation; brushed chords, both staccato and tremolo, came later, and some deftly plucked pizzicato patterns gave the music a Coplandy edge it hasn't had before. *Tears* was more extroverted in its virtuosic plucking, and its ravishing rising-sixth melodies drew dissonant lines from consonant but distantly related harmonies, a trick that seems to have entered the repertoire via *Einstein on the Beach's* "Bed" scene.

Unlike so many who have torn the lid off the piano, Scott never forces the medium, but makes an asset out of its obligatory slow harmonic rhythm. That half-step in *Minerva's Web* ran through both



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warp and weft, expanding into ninth chords from distant tonalities that blurred with radiant leisureliness. Equally economical, *Tears* grew from a two-note (C sharp to A sharp) motive that served as melody and bass. The piece's course reduced that minor third to a half-step, then ended—you could hear it com-

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ing, but couldn't believe it—by bringing both forms together at once, a boldly naive move that turned dissonance into structural consonance. The biggest problem with Scott's bowed piano gimmick is that it distracts you from noticing that he's a damn good tunesmith (the fact's more obvious in his album *New Music for Bowed Piano* on New Albion).

The mind races to alternatives that would free Scott from such a complicated

setup. He could sample his bowed sounds and play them back via digital keyboard, but he'd lose the tiny variations between successive sounds, the delicacy of the tones that don't quite speak; not to mention the sheen such vibrations have live that no circuitry could transmit. He could write for string orchestra, but a violin pizzicato doesn't hover in the air the way a piano pizz does, and no bow stroke, however slow, could prolong a drone as well as those six-foot threads. To make his music sound as vibrant as it does, Scott's stuck with his present format, which at least illustrates the fact that music into which considerable care (as distinguished from work) has been poured always projects better energy than music put together conveniently.

Todd Winkler's April 5 concert at the Alternative Museum offered a complementary moral, that having everything at your disposal isn't necessarily enough.

Winkler works at Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, and his integration of live performers with tape and/or computer was flawless. In *Cascade*, harpist Susan Jolles plinked a loud chord and the tape unobtrusively sustained its after-ring; that's a cliché, but Winkler's motivic echoes, unity of pulse, and timbral similarity fused harp and electronics as though they belonged together. (Incredible that it took the genre's technicians 25 years to come up with such patent strategies.) The Macintosh in *Three Oboes*, an *Afternoon of a Faunish* pastorella, transformed Libby Van Cleve's oboe into piano- and malletlike tones whose understated timbral variety was subtly unified by hue. Best of all, fabulous dramatic soprano Deirdre Kingsbury finessed a split-second interaction with melodramatic taped electronics in *Looking Into a Face*, a cycle based on Denise Levertov, Dylan Thomas, and others.

But while Winkler's melodic ideas were catchy, they were diffusely organized. Every piece was through-composed, and one yearned for structural articulation; following one motive to another to another, you quickly lost the path (and the point). His 1979 String Quartet sounded like a piece by a talented 20-year-old, which is what it was, and even the song cycle remained monochromatic. Technically sophisticated, Winkler needs to go back and remember how to arrange ideas in memorable, punchline-delivering shapes. Scott's got 14 years on him, which makes the comparison unfair. Yet the contrast reminded me that it's more fruitful to envision the music and then do what's necessary to make it happen than to have a world of technology at your fingertips and be forced to figure out what to do with it.

Last week's column on Charles Wood originally made sense. Confused readers should transpose the third and fourth paragraphs. ■

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