

## Bouncing Czechs

**T**he most refreshing thing about Agon, the Czech group that played Roulette May 18 on their American tour, was their devil-may-care panache. So many new-music ensembles play with a kind of delicate preciousness, as though every fluttersong were fraught with meaning and you'd miss the whole essence if your attention wandered during a double-bass harmonic. Not these guys. These wind players, guitarists, keyboardists, and drummers slapped and tooted the music out as though they'd been playing these pieces all their lives, as comfortably loose as big-band jazzers. As a result, the music seemed sturdy, broad-shouldered, unflappable.

And what music! Much of it sounded like someone had shattered a marching band and then glued the shards back together blindfolded. Milan Knizak's *9 Architectural Scores* was a poker-faced succession of clichés—outbursts of glissandi, triumphant cadences—separated by portentous rests. Martin Smolka's *Euphorium* echoed jaunty motives from octave to octave, from prepared piano to baritone sax to banjo, through repetitions inspiring in their cheerful pointlessness. A few works had intuitive harmonies and static textures that called Morton Feldman to mind, especially Milan Crygar's *Linear Score* with its soft-moving chords over a steady plunk of prepared-piano quarter notes. (Crygar and Feldman were born the same year.

# Master of the Universe

## Johnny Reinhard Solves the Puzzle of Charles Ives's Symphony

BY KYLE GANN

"I'm not sure I can answer the question," Reinhard says in his tiny Upper East Side apartment, which overflows with Ives materials. "Why did it make sense to me and not to someone else? I've heard mystical statements that

the sketches, plus a painstaking transcription of Ives's scratchy handwriting by John Mauceri. Even then there were delays, for composer Larry Austin was also working on a completed version of the *Universe*, filled in with materials he composed himself. "I had an attorney tell me, 'You don't own it, you don't have the right, stop work.' Which I did for six months. I felt I was asked to wait until Larry Austin came out with his version."

Austin's *Universe* appeared in 1994. Stiff and conceptualist, empha-

cutting out each passage and marking its length in beats. He found little symbols Ives drew—a triangle with an inscribed circle, concentric circles with a dot—and started linking them as keys to the continuity. Where Ives marked one isolated passage "sky" and another "rainbow," Reinhard reasoned that the sky must come before the rainbow. Everything was then correlated to what Ives called Basic Units, 16-second periods that run through the work, each divided by the percussion into from two to 43 equal beats. "You don't want

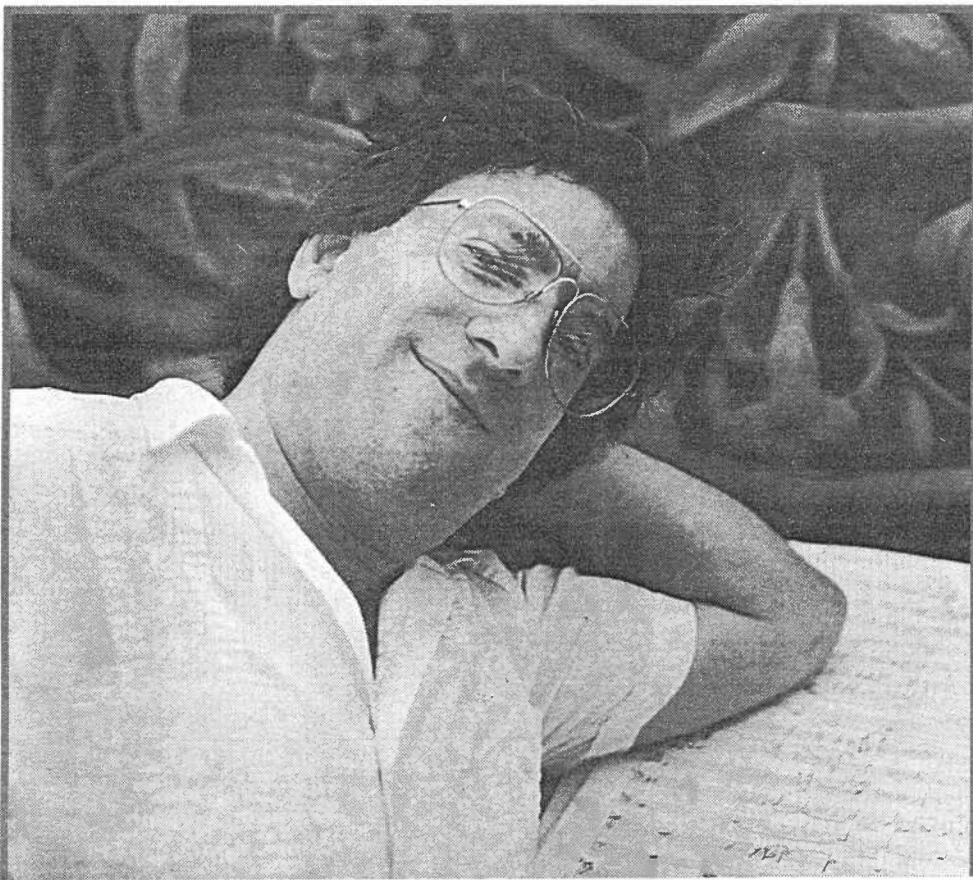
anyone to hear that this is a digital piece, put together algorithmically. We're all dealing with the inside brain of Ives. This is a brain, left and right. Two hemispheres, earth and heaven, with the pulse of the cosmos going throughout. It's a paradigm for a brain." Reinhard also found three clearly marked sections, each with a prelude. Austin's version consisted mostly of the prelude to Section A, called "Pulse of the Cosmos."

How much did Reinhard fiddle with Ives's notes? In the prelude to Section C, there is a series of quarter-tone chords that Ives left unscored; Reinhard orchestrated them. In another place, Ives has a flute line with chords underneath the first six notes; each chord is marked with a letter, A through F, and the letters continue, suggesting that the chords needed to be filled in according to a pattern, which Reinhard has done. In response to a vague comment in Ives's scrawly handwriting, Reinhard has added a fragment of "Earth"

**M**ythical die hard. In the life story of Charles Ives, America's most visionary composer and insurance executive, myths grow like weeds. Some concern his *Universe* Symphony, which he described as a "contemplation in tones, rather than in music as such, of the mysterious creation of the earth and firmament." Henry Cowell wrote that Ives had never intended to finish the *Universe*. John Kirkpatrick called the work's sketches "tragically fragmentary."

Now, Manhattan's Johnny Reinhard claims that Ives did essentially finish the work in 1915, but was so pessimistic about realizing its grandiose scheme that he never admitted it. On June 6 at Alice Tully Hall, Reinhard will conduct a 71-piece orchestra in the world premiere of his 65-minute completed version of *Universe* Symphony, which contains not a single note that isn't by Ives. The concert will celebrate two impressive achievements: one, the deciphering of Ives's tortuously disordered sketches; the other, a deft end-run around the scholars keeping jealous guard over the Ives legacy.

Whoa, who is this Reinhard? the Ives mavens are asking, for if he's right, this is a classic case of the outsider figuring out what the experts could only scratch their heads over. Reinhard is a bassoonist, a composer, a leading expert on microtonal theory and performance, and the director of the 14-year-old American Festival of Microtonal Music, a free-floating entity that turns up in odd corners of Manhattan at ir-



was a poker-faced succession of clichés—outbursts of glissandi, triumphant cadences—separated by portentous rests. Martin Smolka's *Euphorium* echoed jaunty motives from octave to octave, from prepared piano to baritone sax to banjo, through repetitions inspiring in their cheerful pointlessness. A few works had intuitive harmonies and static textures that called Morton Feldman to mind, especially Milan Grygar's *Linear Score* with its soft-moving chords over a steady plunk of prepared-piano quarter notes. (Grygar and Feldman were born the same year, however.) And *Abram*, by ensemble conductor Petr Kofron, rollicked with raucous single notes and humping repeated chords, as though the band were trying to blast out "Stars and Stripes Forever" but couldn't manage to link two notes together.

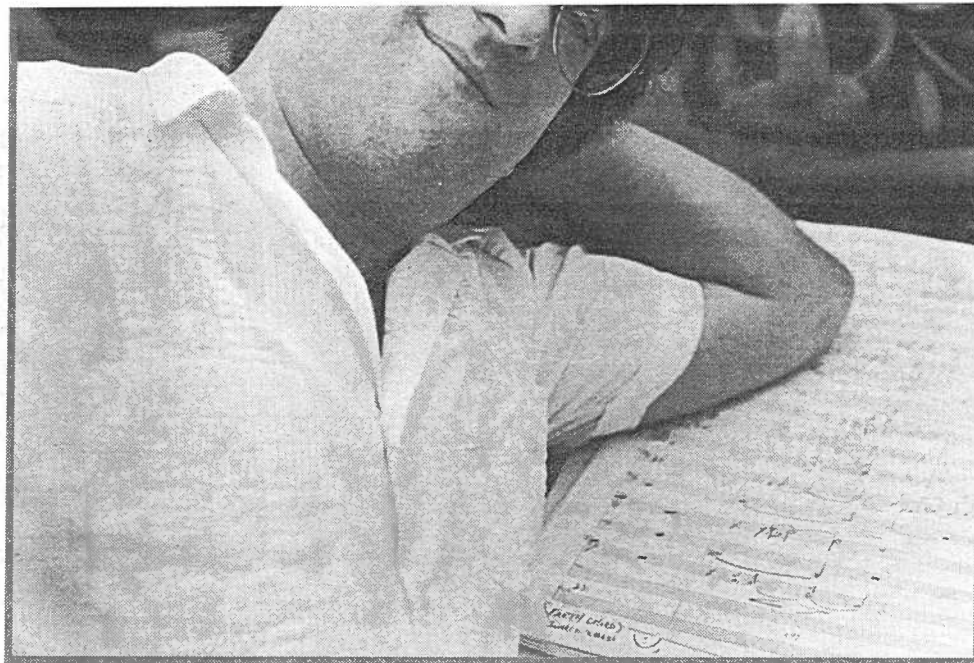
To claim that these Czechs have discovered their own, non-American brand of postminimalism would be too artsy, and wouldn't do justice to their music's comical irreverence. More pertinent to say that they've succeeded where all the young French, Germans, and English I've heard have failed: they've walked away from the oppressive serialism of the Darmstadt generation as though it never happened. You can hear similarities to some of the younger New York composers, but the aesthetic is earthier and less self-consciously macho, more at home where angels fear to tread. We too easily assume that the future of music lies only in two or three circumscribed directions; *Agon* revealed a wide-open playing field.

—K.G.

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Now, he pursues his vision of making America multicultural in terms of tuning: his festival perennially ventures beyond the 12 equally spaced pitches per octave toward quarter-tones, pure tunings, and historically correct intonations. With an amazing sense of pitch, he sings me quarter-tones and equal-spaced pentatonic scales as casually as you can whistle "Dixie." He may be best known to the public through his "Microtonal Bach" program, a Christmas show on WKCR radio in which he plays Bach recordings in 18th-century tunings. But what are his credentials for taking on Ives's hitherto undeciphered magnum opus?



LINDA HARRIS

**Johnny Reinhard's specialty is works forgotten because of their impracticality.**

John Kirkpatrick made about Ives entering his body when he worked. I don't want to get close to that. But somehow, I feel like I'm following a musical floor plan—a life-insurance plan, in fact, that someone would finish *Universe* after he died. It's not so strange a thought for him." Also, this isn't Reinhard's first resurrection. In pursuit of alternate tunings, he's made a specialty of works forgotten because of their impracticality. One of his most spectacular successes was a revival of *Graphs and Time*, a late work by Edgard Varèse that had never before been publicly performed.

Reinhard ran across the sketches of *Universe* in 1986 at the California home of Lou Harrison, a seminal microtonal composer and an early restorer of Ives's music. After writing to Ives's publisher, Peermusic, Reinhard received a curt note to the effect that there was no performable score. He dropped the idea for two years but later became convinced he could finish the work. He approached the Charles Ives Society and got reduced xeroxes of

sizing Ives's clocklike polyrhythms, it's intriguing but not emotional enough to satisfy the true Ives fan. The mistake Austin made, says Reinhard, is that "he didn't believe Ives knew what he was doing. Ives wrote a tempo marking of 30 beats a minute, and Larry didn't think he could possibly mean for it to be that slow. But he did." One myth says that Ives continued adding to the *Universe* until 1951, long after diabetes, heart attacks, and nervous disorders had clouded his judgment. The sketches, however, are almost all dated 1915, a year in which he was at the height of his creative powers. It was also the year he completed his Fourth Symphony, a work he assumed would never see the light of day because of its monumental complexity. The *Universe* is considerably more ambitious. Ives, already ridiculed in the press for such innovations as giant tone clusters, may have feared no one would take the work seriously.

Like Bach and so many others, Ives often combined unrelated sketches on the same page, so Reinhard began by

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rocker Jon Catler play the overtones on a 13-limit just-intonation electric guitar. One fascinating aspect of the work is its exploration of different microtonal systems: it contains quarter-tones, an indication for a note vaguely marked "between A and A-sharp," even a harp in just intonation.

While there are undeniably gaps in Ives's plan for the *Universe*, Reinhard has me convinced that his arrangements are all backed by common sense, and that the moments that seem most surprising for Ives (at one point the harpist is told to improvise) are clearly spelled out in the sketches. He seems to have also impressed, if not convinced, the Ives Society, which has authorized this performance, though still insisting that he call the work his "version." Carol Baron, a musicologist who is writing a book on Ives, has been sitting in on rehearsals and tells me, "It is definitely Ives. It sounds like no one else but Ives. Only Ives would have created sounds that are so pictorially expressive of the ideas he's trying to get across. This is a culmination of his work, like the Fourth Symphony." ❖