

Metallica and Ives

By Kyle Gann

Music 100

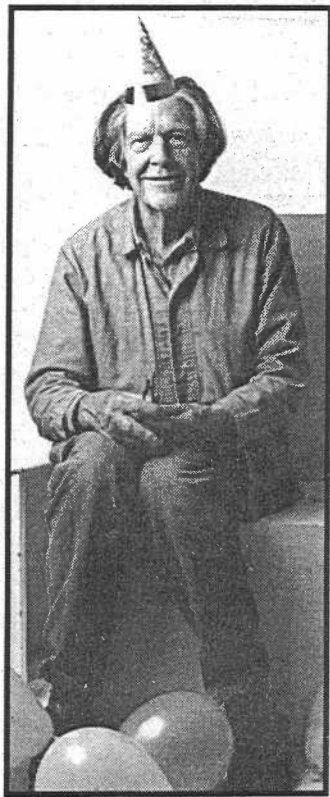
As an on-call adjunct professor, I'm sometimes asked to teach Music 100, Intro to Western music for non-majors. The students think it's a cake course, but it's the last thing many of them will learn about classical music, so I take it seriously. Last semester, I played music from the ancient Greeks up through some postminimal rock by Todd Levin that premiered during the semester. For the final exam I asked them to write an essay on the one composer whose work they especially enjoyed. Four picked Bach, three Mozart, three Stravinsky, two Beethoven, and two Berlioz, while Haydn, Mahler, Satie, and Debussy got one vote each. To my satisfaction, John Cage tied Bach's total, three people chose Charles Ives, and Partch and Varèse got listed as favorites once each.

Why was I surprised? Because a classical-music truism says new music scatters nonmusicians. Surely it had something to do with the way I presented those composers. Maybe the Cage- and Ives-pickers were brownnosing. But I had also raved inordinately about Ciconia, Ockeghem, and Monteverdi, and nobody chose them. And since the essay was prepared beforehand, the textbook made it easier to write at length about the old, dead Ger-

mans. Comments indicated that what the students liked about Ives and Cage music was their independence from tradition and aggressive relevance to everyday life. Apparently, placed on an equal footing and sympathetically explained, American experimental composers can be as popular with nonmusicians as the three Bs.

I had begun the semester by having the class sit silently for four minutes and 33 seconds, then describe in detail what they'd heard. The music building turned out to be a raucous symphony of footsteps, air conditioners, keys turning in locks, and random piano practice. One young woman enthused, "I never realized there was so much to hear!" Then I informed them that they had just performed one of the seminal works of 20th-century music. Later, I played Cage's *Tossed as It Is Untroubled*, Williams' *Mix, Variations IV*, and *Music of Changes* (Bach got equal time). One engineering major who favored Cage wrote that the *I Ching* "added a great deal to his pieces. . . . It's enjoyable to listen to, and the method he uses to compose is fascinating."

It was easier to make the recent American music relevant. (One woman liked Ives partly because she, too, was from Connecticut.) The students understood better why Robert Ashley writes his operas for TV than why Bach had to improvise on a theme by



Students appreciate Cage's relevance to everyday life.

Frederick the Great. They appreciated Monteverdi's *Nero* less than Ashley's *Buddy*. John Oswald's *Plunderphonics* (which sampler-scrambles Michael Jackson and others) impressed them by linking the music they hear in their dorms and the avant-garde's latest technology. And, because it

was easier to distinguish Glass from Partch or Laurie Spiegel than to tell Beethoven from Haydn, they did better on the 20th-century exam than on earlier periods. That isn't supposed to happen in Mus. 100.

I played them music made on the same computers they work with in their math and engineering classes. I played them good music by living women, in lieu of the drab Clara Schumann piano vignette the textbook provided (which could have only confirmed women's inferiority in the field). I played them art-music (Levin, for one) influenced by the rock they listen to on their Walkmans (for this class, Metallica). And that music, the music that reflects their own lives back to them in a classical mirror the way *Don Giovanni* did for 18th-century Viennese, is the music the textbooks don't discuss (sometimes for copyright reasons as well as pedagogical ones).

I could have followed the textbook: use Vaughan Williams as the "safe" modernist, pass off Bernstein as a major American composer, insist that Carter's music is better than it sounds. (My text was Machlis's *The Enjoyment of Music*, more sympathetic to the new than most.) The kids, then, might have found security in the bourgeois notion that classical music is—and by extension has always been—something elevated and distant, made by people utterly unlike them. Even so, I couldn't sell them Webern at any price, though I did teach them to recognize Babbitt's *Philomel*. Twelve-tone music required advanced ter-

minology and special pleading, whereas the cacophonies of Ives and Cage were drawn from life. I steered toward American experimentalism, and they responded beautifully.

At the bottom of the music-appreciation racket lies a nasty self-fulfilling prophecy: "Audiences hate contemporary music, ergo only music that audiences hate must be truly contemporary." The usual Music 100 pattern is to cover the entire century in the last week. You couldn't interest college students in sex if you presented it as unrewardingly as modern music is generally taught. The audience for new music doesn't exist because it's stifled at birth.

I'm not claiming wild success. The gap between me and the MTV generation is immense. Lots of things misfired. (Halfway through Ives, I realized none of them had ever heard "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean.") But the fact that 33 per cent could come back preferring recent American music to Bach says something about what impact the music can make given a fair chance. Even if inconclusive, my experiences resoundingly contradict the bullshit that the classical music industry exports by the truckload. If we could bypass the professors and textbooks, new music could prove to be as attractive as, and more thought-provoking than, the old German stuff. We can create a new audience. Working American experimentalism (and with it, great women composers) into the curriculum is easy. Students eat it up. It's the classical music snobs who are stupid. ■

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