

Music in Time of War

Composer-to-Composer

By Kyle Gann

TELLURIDE—The mountains that surround this 9000-foot-high Colorado town form a physical barrier to the larger world, but not a psychological one. The censorship of 2 Live Crew became the focus of the Telluride Institute's Composer-to-Composer symposium (July 8 to 15), even though only one of the participants—Laurie Anderson—had pop music connections. The festival, directed by composers Charles Amirkhanian and John Lifton, is a think tank at which, for three years now, composers from diverse countries and aesthetic camps have met to chew over each other's philosophies. The first year, the big issue was intonation. Nobody cried. This year, things got more emotional, and this sleepy ski retreat became, for one week, the hottest political music scene in America.

Two issues provided the impetus: 2 Live Crew's recent legal troubles over the raunchy, women-demeaning lyrics of their album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* and the NEA's inclusion of the "obscenity clause" in their grant acceptance letters, requiring each funded artist to promise that grant money will not be used for that oxymoron "obscene art." During the week, before the public was invited, the composers—Anderson, Gerri Allen, Leo Smith, Ge Gan-ru, Pauline Oliveros (all New Yorkers), Amirkhanian, Lifton, Henry Brant, Roger Reynolds, Larry Polansky, Robert Morris (all Americans), Germany's Gerhard Staebler, England's Hugh Davies, Canada's James Tenney, and I Wayan Sa-

surface, she said, "To me, it's stretching it to think that 'Make that pussy splat' is code for anything." She added, though, "On another level this is a song about incredible anger. And I think if we don't listen to that aspect of the song we're really missing it."

It was a highly politicized group. Anderson had the pop perspective, but others had had face-to-face experience with censorship. Polansky is a former chairman of the Oakland ACLU; Staebler has been barred from East Germany for his musicopolitical activities. Entering the U.S. under a Third World passport, I Wayan Sadra (Indonesia's leading composer) was detained at Los Angeles Airport for five hours, where authorities wouldn't allow

important. We agree that there's a problem of censorship, but sometimes it's important to have some limits." The answer didn't go over well. As one audience member responded, "My limits may be different from your limits, and your government's limits are very different from your own. If every time you get stomped on one side you have to choose a new path, don't you end up running a maze rather than being direct?"

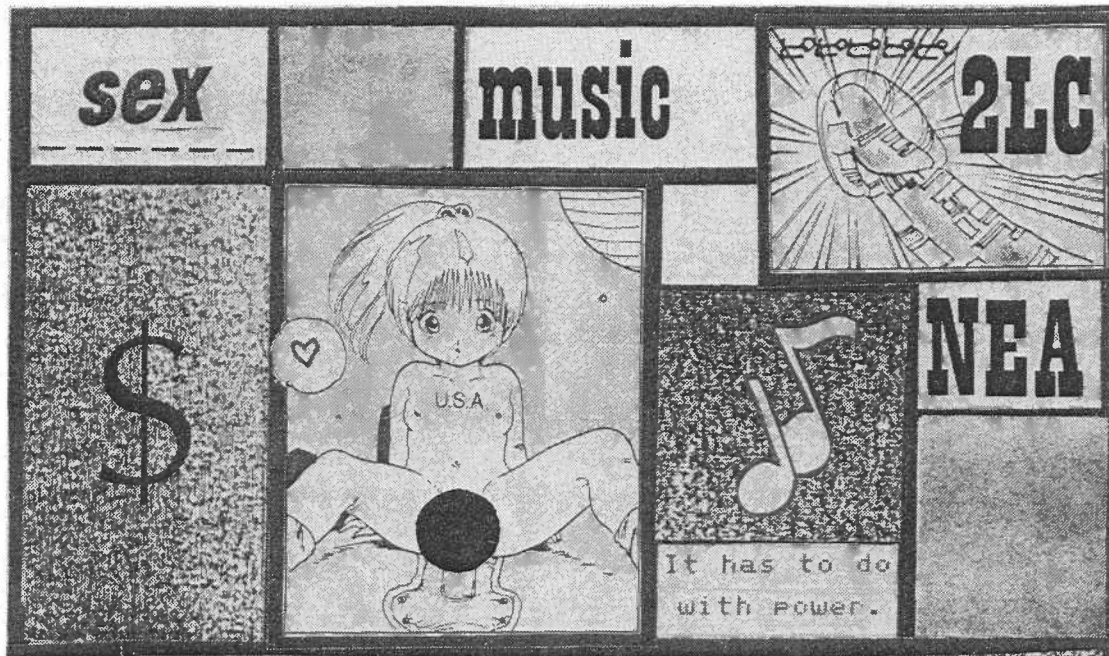
Ge Gan-ru, who escaped China to become a music faculty member at Columbia University, spoke in stronger terms. Following the Cultural Revolution, he had been interned in a state farm on an island north of Shanghai, working in the fields 14 hours a day, along with 40,000 other

sign the obscenity clause, Pauline Oliveros was called upon to explain why she accepted \$25,000 for what she termed "a potentially offensive project": "I called all my advisers. They begged me to take the money, and asked me to consider what the issues really were here. First of all, the NEA itself is under attack. The right wing has had an agenda for some time to destroy it, to take control of art and culture to use it for their own purposes. Howard Fine asked me, what was the effective action? Was it *effective* to send the money back? The answer to that seems to be 'no.' It doesn't help the NEA, it doesn't help the artist either. They said, take the money and do your art. You've worked for it, you deserve it. But what is

er to attack artists who are making images of this kind of suffering."

Obscenity has become an issue, so the discussion led, because the right is losing control. "Those who are in power in this country," continued Anderson, "are the same people who were in power when John Jay, the first Supreme Court justice, said, 'Those who own this country ought to rule it.' Those who own this country now are the same people as they were then: white men." Gan-ru backed up the opinion with his homeland experience. "In China, the political movement is a circle. You have depression, then you have bad times. Whenever the government feels like it's losing control, they start some political campaign. Just like here. If it weren't the flag issue, or 2 Live Crew, they'd pick somebody else."

Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary wasn't an invited participant, but he stood from the audience to remind us that "Puff the Magic Dragon" was forbidden in the '60s because of fears that its lyrics were about drugs. He was told by the FCC, in conjunction with Spiro Agnew and the FBI, that if a radio station played his songs along with other songs that *might* be interpreted as drug songs, those stations could lose their licenses. "It's like saying you'll be arrested for going over the speed limit and we're not going to tell you what the limit is. What is frightening is the leap from this 'protection' of society from drugs, in a completely fallacious fashion, to the potential protection of society from ideas that might potentially be inimical to



grant money will not be used for that oxymoron "obscene art." During the week, before the public was invited, the composers—Anderson, Gerri Allen, Leo Smith, Ge Gan-ru, Pauline Oliveros (all New Yorkers), Amirkhanian, Lifton, Henry Brant, Roger Reynolds, Larry Polansky, Robert Morris (all Americans), Germany's Gerhard Staebler, England's Hugh Davies, Canada's James Tenney, and I Wayan Sadra from Java—issued a brief, vague manifesto condemning censorship, which was carried by some of the AP wires. In part, it read:

We affirm the obligation of all artists to make the art they believe in,

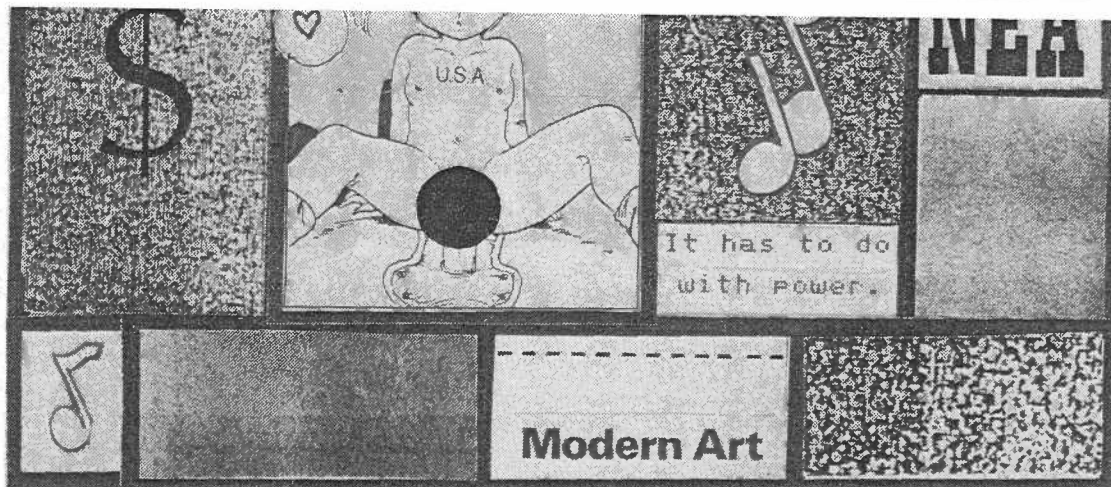
*whatever its style,
whatever its message.*

Therefore we abhor censorship in all forms...

In articulating the sensibilities of a battered world, artists require complete freedom.

Hoping to take more potent action, they also opened the Telluride Composers' Defense Fund at the Telluride Bank, money designated to aid oppressed and silenced composers anywhere in the world. These were symbolic measures. But the festival's focus was the heated discussion generated at the censorship panel.

It began much as the private sessions had, with the playing of one and a half cuts from *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. Laurie Anderson's initial response seemed to speak for the entire crowd: "For me this isn't a First Amendment issue whatsoever. These guys have absolutely every right to sing whatever they want. And I have absolutely every right to make their lives as miserable as I can." Asked by an audience member whether she thought there might be more sociological meaning to the words than appeared on the



JOHN DE FAZIO

him to get to his bag containing the Telluride Institute poster, which showed that he was an invited artist. It wasn't his first run-in with higher-ups; in 1979, a theater production in Java for which he wrote the music was delayed when tanks and soldiers surrounded the theater. The production indeed criticized the government, but in such veiled terms that the military didn't catch on, and eventually left. In Java, Sadra explained, an artist who creates a work that offends the government can be put in jail with no legal process. Nevertheless, he talked about censorship more as a challenge than an evil. "As artists," he said, "we have to know what to do to not be caught by the censors. This takes far more creativity than just thinking about what we would do if we were free."

For Sadra, the 2 Live Crew issue seemed simple. "If you're worried about wanting to talk about sex and it's forbidden, and that upsets you, why don't you just take a different path? Why don't you get involved with people who are economically disadvantaged? How can artists help the situation of poor and disadvantaged people? This is what's

young people, to "reform his thoughts through manual labor." In China, he said, "they not only control your thoughts, but everything: where you should live, how you should eat, what kind of job you're going to do." Gan-ru studied violin secretly, by candlelight, with a mute, in a barn with the windows closed. Had he been heard practicing scales, he recalled, he would have gotten in trouble with the authorities, for the major scale was a foreign, Western influence. Finally allowed to study at Shanghai Conservatory, he began composing, and said he was asked, "Why do you write this kind of music? This kind of music is not understood by the audience." We have a slogan: Art is for people. You are supported by the people. So if you write something they don't like, they have no reason to support you. If you want to express your own feeling, they don't allow you."

Via the NEA's obscenity clause, that same argument is now coming from the U.S. government. Because several highly visible arts figures—Leonard Bernstein, Joseph Papp, Bella Lowitsky—have returned NEA checks rather than

the effective action? Write to your senator, call the White House. On the basis of the information I collected, I signed the check, and sent a letter to Frohnmeyer expressing my terror at the fact that I had signed a contract with the obscenity clause in it." For context, consider that the years Oliveros sat on the NEA Music Panel, 1975-79, were the only years in which that panel was friendly to new music.

According to Oliveros, artists who returned the money fell for the right wing's trap. "I think the clause is a virus shrewdly calculated to cause confusion," she said. "It caught the arts community off-balance." Anderson agreed. "This [2 Live Crew issue] has nothing to do with pornography. It has to do with power. It's a smokescreen so we don't look to see how much suffering there is in this country, and at how much spiritual and emotional upheaval is in process. Jesse Helms says this is to protect women and children. As a woman I deeply resent this. I can protect myself. We have many laws in this country about child abuse, rape, racism, and even homophobia. These laws are quite hard to enforce. It's not working. It's easi-

songs along with other songs that might be interpreted as drug songs, those stations could lose their licenses. "It's like saying you'll be arrested for going over the speed limit and we're not going to tell you what the limit is. What is frightening is the leap from this 'protection' of society from drugs, in a completely fallacious fashion, to the potential protection of society from ideas that might potentially be inimical to the power of the government. We are living in an era in which the arts have become the cutting edge of a call to sanity and another kind of dream. If we cut that language off, we have lost the control of the most powerful force for real change in this country."

By now the panel had taken on the emotional momentum of a Baptist revival service, and Yarrow led a song. Over and over, with a few people crying, a few dozen composers and new music fans sang:

Don't ever take away our freedom.

Don't ever take it away.

We must cherish and keep that one part of our lives.

And the rest we're going to find one of these days.

Anderson closed with a call to arms. "Jesse Helms and others have taken on this job of being judges of paintings, pieces of music, etc. No one gave them the right to take this. They took it. And I think that, in this time of war, we're being very stupid if we don't think we can take it back." But the final warning came from Gan-ru. "From my experience in China: Keep your eyes open. Be careful." ■

To contribute money to the Telluride Composers' Defense Fund, send a check c/o the Telluride Institute, P.O. Box 1770, Telluride, Colorado 81435.