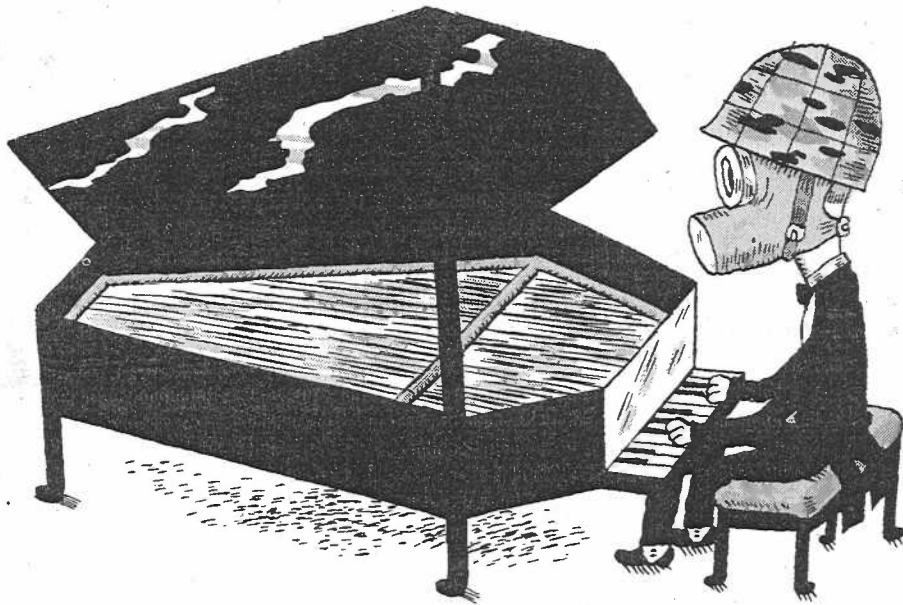


Music, Interrupted by War, Changes

MUSICO-COLLATERAL DAMAGE

BY KYLE GANN



PAUL CORIO

The Vietnam War left subtle traces on American music, but did not interrupt it or change its direction. Desert Storm had even less impact. But the current conflict seems different. For one thing, the WTC disaster did cause a brief interruption in the Downtown concert season, and even elsewhere: Concerts were canceled in shock and sympathy in cities far from ground zero. In the long run, the economic resources that might have been committed to the arts probably will not be. No one suggests that composers might be drafted (there were many such cases in World War II), but the country's attention seems to be preoccupied in a way that it hasn't been since 1945.

Music, interrupted by war, changes. We have to look to the world wars to find parallels. Before World War I, music had reached an almost hallucinogenic massiveness and violence: the overwhelming orchestration of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, the pounding dissonances of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, the fevered incoherence of Schoenberg's *Erwartung*. After the war interrupted European performance, music thinned down, became sleek, lean, and controlled. Stravinsky turned to an ironic neoclassicism in *Pulcinella*, and Schoenberg invented the 12-tone row to impose order where there had been psychosis. Since the U.S.A. was less touched by that war, only American music, stodgy and imitatively romantic beforehand, broke out into a heyday of fearless avant-gardism.

World War II brought an even sharper right turn. Under the influence of the Depression, music had become populist but still big and flashy; during the war, composers as diverse as Antheil and Barber wrote big, patriotic symphonies. Once the smoke cleared, however, the quest for quasi-scientific order came quickly. The 12-tone technique that had been abandoned as old-fashioned in the '30s was reborn as serialism in the works of Messiaen, Babbitt, Boulez, and Stockhausen. Germany, shaken, tried to rebuild its glory through all-encompassing musical systems. Despite tremendous resistance from musical organizations for a decade or so, composers rushed to create an objective, scientific, internationalist music that could be proved to work on paper.

Each war also produced its "lost generation," composers too young when the war started to have established careers and too old when it ended to switch to the new style. Romantic symphonists Franz Schmidt (1874-1939), Ernst von Dohnanyi (1877-

1960), and even the old-fashioned Richard Strauss (1864-1949) were career casualties of World War I, while promising composers like Boris Blacher (1903-1975) and Wolfgang Fortner (1907-1987) fell into oblivion when they couldn't make the post-World War II switch to serialism. Cage's quiet music of the 1940s seemed utterly irrelevant to the war years, and it took a philosophical revolution in his work to make him hip in the late '50s. Even Leonard Bernstein's composing career seems to have been cut down prematurely.

Based on such patterns, some generic predictions about music's immediate future become possible. It may be that Downtown improvisation's chaos will come to seem like a luxury we can't afford, and more orderly principles will reassert themselves. Perhaps my own generation will be the next lost one, having brought totalism almost to a peak just as everyone quit caring. Already it is apparent that younger composers, prevented from discovering Downtown music by their professors, are not merging into the Downtown tradition, and the new-music stream that flowed from Cage's '33" through minimalism may face a foreseeable dead end. At the same time, Uptown—despite the endless flow of its financial support—seems exhausted and out of ideas, and the hipper young neoromantic composers are swarming Downtown to perform music that has nothing to do with Downtown.

I find two types of younger composers around today. One is the ambitious Eurocentric who writes symphonies and piano quintets in hopes of fitting smoothly into the classical establishment. The other starts from two places, pop music and technology, wanting to do something more interesting than the pop market will allow, and finding that something not in the influence of any past music, but in recorded samples and unusual sequencing techniques. Both have in common that, as an artist friend of mine describes them, they "have no idea of discovering their inner style and following it through to the bitter end; instead, they find out where the paying niche is and go do what it takes to fit in." These are the composers likely to inherit whatever's left when the war ends.

In any case, our culture is being shaken; whatever was fragile is likely to fall, and only what is built on a firm foundation will stand. We can only have faith in what Confucius said: "The solid cannot be swept away as trivial, nor can trash be established as solid. It just does not happen." Hope so, Confucius. ▣

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