Now in Technicolor

American Composers Orchestra
Carnegie Hall
February 25

BY KYLE GANN

Surround Sound

Brant's own *Plowshares and Swords* turned Carnegie Hall into a surround-sound theater. Strings, two pianos, a solo tuba, and lots of percussion (including large metal drums) occupied the stage. Then, moments into the raucous piece, flutes emerged from the left lower balcony, oboes from the right, clarinets and bassoons separated between them, and brass choirs overhead in the dress circle. Rumbling tone clusters shot across the hall, periodically brought to a halt by one of the drummers. An expert at spatial tessitura, Brant so carefully sculpted the role of each group that not a note ever got lost in the melee. And in Carnegie's resounding acoustics, the sonorities seemed not distant but nuzzling up to you from all sides. —K.G.

No other project of recent years has fascinated me so much as Henry Brant's orchestration of Charles Ives's "Concord" piano sonata, which had its American premiere at Carnegie Hall last week. Since the piece first bewildered me when I was 13, I've come to love every note, and to hear those familiar crashing chords and writhing lines transformed by a new set of timbres and hues was irresistible. Brant's project sounded impossible, though, for Ives's massive tone clusters and fluid contrapuntal textures seemed married to the piano. Had some amateur fan, or, worse, a slick professional with no affinity for Ives, made the arrangement, I would have been apprehensive, fearing a kind of old-movie-colorization fiasco. But Brant's career as a deployer of spatial musical groups was sparked by his exposure to Ives; he loved the "Concord" before I was born, and spent 30 years on the orchestration. And his reputation, through film scores, big-band arrangements, and experimental works, is that he's the world's greatest orchestrator. The match was heaven-made.

JACK VARTOOGIAN

Henry Brant gives the world a brand-new Charles Ives symphony.

Inspired by New England's Transcendentalist thinkers of the 1840s and '50s, the *Concord*'s four movements portray the thought of, respectively, Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts (Bronson and Louisa May), and Thoreau, each in a different pianistic idiom. Brant put the opening dissonant lines in the trombones, bringing Carl Ruggles to mind, and the following famous Beethoven's Fifth motive in the timpani. The lovely Emersonian "poetry" melody that spread out in a wide range of octaves began in the oboe, then spilled into the strings, split between violins and violas when the jumps became too wide. "Hawthorne"'s utterly pianistic, dissonant arpeggios were divided among violins, winds, and xylophone according to register, and the large clusters (played with a stick of wood in the original) were heard in masses of delicate string harmonics, a stunning effect. Brant (whose credits include arrangements for Benny Goodman) played up "Hawthorne"'s ragtime sources with hot theater-band instrumentation to the point that I didn't recognize certain moments, yet, orchestrationally, these sounded more Ivesian than anything else.

The parlor-style sentimental melody in "Alcotts" went to trumpet, a touch Ives's bandmaster father would have liked, and the pianissimo overtone notes to harp and mallet percussion. Misty "Thoreau" was the movement I could least imagine in color, but the opening flute arpeggios were bubbly; the A-C-G ostinato surfaced in the timpani and low strings, and the four final questioning notes were smoothly whispered by a French horn. The orchestration erred, if at all, on the side of thickness, with few chamber moments. Yet, while Brant's choices were often not the most obvious ones, I was nearly always struck by the soundness of his logic.

Had Dennis Russell Davies conducted (as he did the other works on the program) instead of Brant himself, heaven would have been close at hand. Perhaps because of the frailty of his age, though, Brant's tempos in "Emerson" and "Hawthorne" loped lethargically. Since he had to bar long "prose" passages that were originally rhythmically free, the metric bounce was often too audible, and he led the sentimental "Alcotts" movement metronomically, sans rubato (has any other generation so revolted against romanticism, expressivity, symbolism, and emotionality as the Brant-Cage-Babbit-Nancarrow generation?). Small matter, though; the orchestral playing was extremely clean, and Brant proved the impossible can be done. He's given the world a brand-new Charles Ives symphony. ❖