

The Party's Over

By Kyle Gann

Uptown/Midtown

Wow. The Soviet junta: a ready-made libretto for a grand opera in a one-half act. But 12-tone music is communism's sonic analogue, with its theoretical equality of all pitches and satisfaction of none, its specious mandates, its covert elitism, its tautological jargon, its party ranks, its nourishment deliberately withheld, its gray, faceless officialness. When will musical America free itself from its own totalitarian party?

A Boston composer friend, Scott Wheeler, calls me after my feistier columns to let me know, jovially and with meticulous accuracy, what nuances I missed. After my "Pulitzer Hacks" piece on the mediocrity of America's musical prizewinners, he reminded me that, as before, I had glossed over distinctions between Uptown and Midtown; I had lumped Babbitt and the 12-toners in with Neo-Romantics that they would be embarrassed to share a stage with.

True enough, Scott. From down here in the Village, Juilliard and Columbia sort of blur together.

But the corrected interpretation doesn't alter the situation. It seems to me that the Midtown "New Romanticism" of Druckman, Harbison, Del Tredici et al. is a reaction entirely conditioned by Uptown's 12-tone dead end. Twelve-tone music was the ultimate egotism of tunnel-visioned, Europe-worshipping testosterone; New Romanticism is the reverse-gear result, equally tunnel-visioned, of its failure. Both are based in a Schenkerian, pitch-oriented theoretical take on 18th and 19th century music. One subcamp wants to splinter the European tradition into dyadic smithereens, the other more "humanly" retreats (if sans melody) into imitations of Romantic symphonies. But both rely on pitch-centered extensions of classical models, and neither offers an open-ended future.

The alternative to both is the 1917 revolution Henry Cowell started in *New Musical Resources*. Cowell's book negated European music's claim to be the only fertile path. It returned to the physical and acoustic basis of sound as a broader, less constricting starting point, and it brought in ideas from other cultures as a way to see

around Euro-traditional blinders. The widespread influence of Cowell's revolution was soon squelched by Schoenberg's Stalinist recoil from the freedom his atonality had opened up. But innovators from Ives to Cage to Lockwood to Branca and beyond carried it on underground, and it's that eclectic, experimentalist tradition that Midtowners and Uptowners band together to disacknowledge.

Is it too optimistic to find parallels between the breakup of communism and of our official musical academy, whether hardline or "humanized"? It's true that 12-toners no longer run things (except the MacArthur "genius" awards). But is it better to be ruled by conservatives who've lost their nerve and retreated into nostalgia than by conservatives who at least had a fanatical vision? The recent outpouring of CDs by Feldman, Nancarrow, Young, Oliveros, Ashley, Tenney, Polansky, and others may signal the public reemergence of Cowell's revolution as a more potent (and indigenously American) alternative. After 74 years, it's time to blast the whole stultifying structure to hell, and enjoy the freedom Cowell offered us.

The hardliners recently lost a natural ally, albeit one who despised them: Donal Henahan, who re-

tired this summer from the *Times*'s weekly think-piece post. In Henahan's final months, his insistence that no good music had been written since 1950 took on a tone of desperation. He clearly wanted new music to go out before he did. The crisis peaked in his May 5 column. He had asked readers to name pieces written after 1950 that they loved. A futile gesture that, but several complied, and Henahan printed a long list of their responses, contrasting it with a lineup of alleged 1940s masterpieces. Then he asserted, in a jarring dismissal of his readership's enthusiasms, that the lists suggested that "the flow of high-quality pieces has diminished drastically in the last 40 years."

The lists—unless you automatically grant that Messiaen's *St. Francis* and Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* are vastly inferior to Britten's *Albert Herring* and Bernstein's *Fancy Free*—suggested nothing of the sort. But Henahan had long ago assumed what he was determined to prove.

His most damning, he thought, way of phrasing the question was, why haven't new works entered the repertoire? But to answer him on his own terms (though out of chagrin I once did it in a lengthy letter) was already to concede ground pointlessly. The Repertoire was a Music Appreciation illusion, a graveyard for predigested pieces whose greatness is no

longer open to question, and that have ceased to provoke thought. *By definition*, no new music can enter it, because music's greatness is always open to question when it's new. Art doesn't enter the world with its authenticity pre-proved, nor even provable: only conferable by generations of audiences. The Repertoire is a stamp of authority, and the essence of honest new art is vulnerability.

The 12-toners and Neo-Romantics want to enter the Repertoire, which is why their symphonies dare not depart from tested European precepts. But new music is a rebellion against, not only the Repertoire, but against the reified, culture-conservative mindset that finds itself flattered by the Repertoire's existence. That new music doesn't enter the Repertoire is its *success*; and when the Repertoire ceases to exist, when people re-learn to use their ears instead of their memories and program notes, the victory will be complete.

In 1944 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer collaborated on a study of the protofascist personality, the type likely to identify with authority and follow it unquestioningly. One behavior they found typical was the tendency to dismiss all new art as worthless instead of reviewing it on a case-by-case basis. I'm looking forward to a season enlivened by Henahan's absence. ■

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