

Milton Babbitt

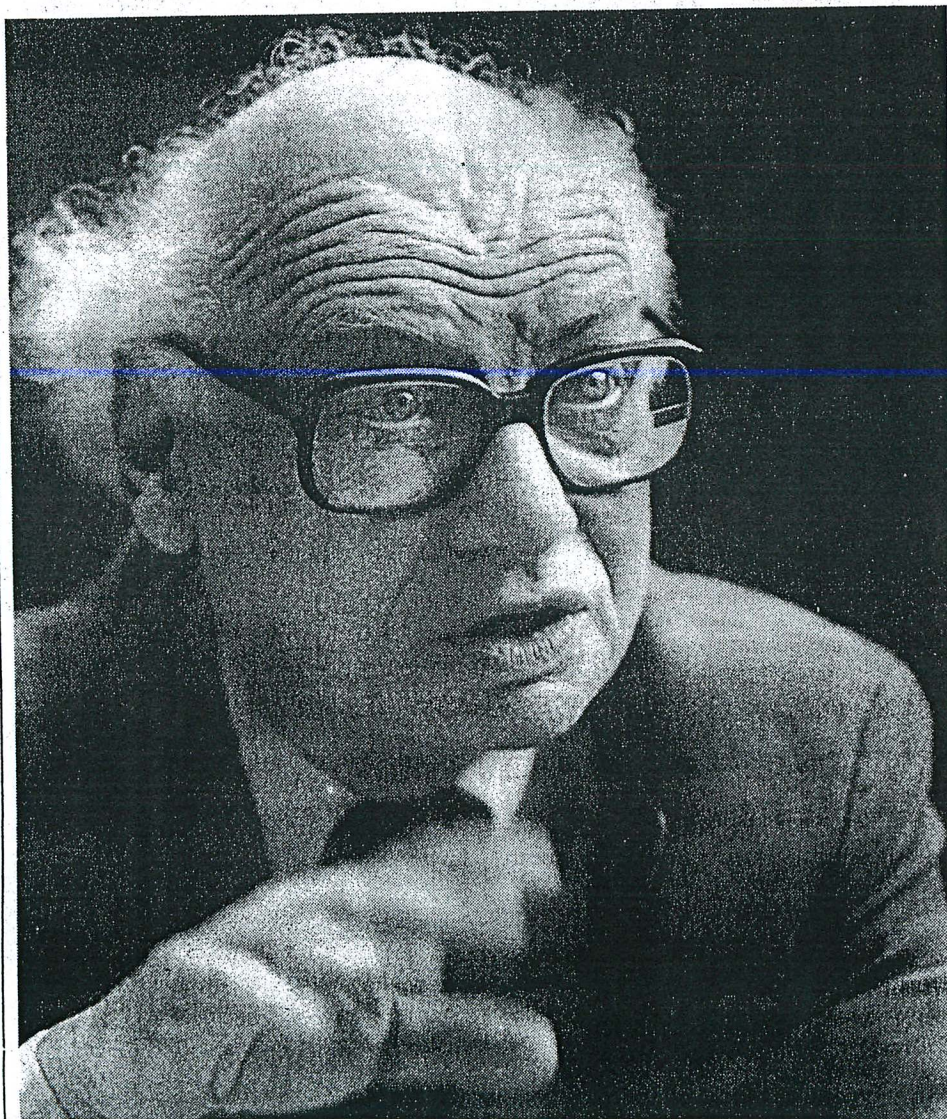
Rising to the Surface

BY KYLE GANN

Since spring I had been looking forward to reviewing Milton Babbitt's new book *Words About Music* (University of Wisconsin Press). When the time came, though, I did something I've never done before. After weeks of jotting down paragraphs, I wrote a long, damning article, in the heat of inspiration. Then, hours before deadline, on the point of modeming in my column, the epiphany came, and I realized I had erred. I wish you could see that column. Elegant, forceful, polished, it accessed Plato, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein with disarming ingenuity. Only fault was that it was wrong. I think I finally understand Milton Babbitt.

Words About Music transcribes six lectures that Babbitt gave at Madison. Being a transcription, the book makes easier reading than the journal articles Babbitt has written in his perverse academe. Now, if you're unfamiliar with terms like "aggregate" and "all-combinatoriality" (explained in a glossary) you're still going to have a difficult time. Hexachords—groups of six pitches—are Babbitt's building blocks, and he spends a lot of words distinguishing the properties of those that are self-inversional from those that are inversions of their complements. If this is way over your head, think twice before you snuggle up to Babbitt on a rainy evening. But editors Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Strauss have done a superb job of capturing Babbitt's classroom style and clarifying his musical examples, and the result is the frankest and most conversational Babbitt in print.

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Babbitt is that his field of discourse is hermetically sealed. Like the positivist philosophers he quotes (usually Carnap), he lives in an abridged universe that acknowledges neither metaphysics nor the possibility of a relationship between music and life. To ask what music "expresses," he implies (not here, but in an earlier article "The Structure and Function of Music Theory"), is as nonsensical as to assert with Heidegger that "The Nothing itself nothings," the phrase Carnap so viciously derided. That a music's internal mechanisms can be both crucial and inaudible entails counterintuitive philosophical implications that Babbitt ignores, either because he finds them too obvious, or because his anticritical stance denies their relevance. His note-attentive analysis of a Bach chorale in Chapter Five reveals that he sees his music as an unproblematic, linear projection of classical tradition.

What turned me around, I think, was the Piano Concerto. It had perplexed me why, since I couldn't hear in it a single example of the technical desiderata Babbitt expounds so urgently, I still enjoyed listening to it. I finally realized that the elegance I admired so much, the textural nonrepetition despite extreme limitations of gesture, were not merely by-products of Babbitt's theoretical arsenal, but its implicit aim. And the Concerto is unique within Babbitt's output for the qualities that enabled me to make that realization. For one thing, events happen slowly enough (especially in the orchestra) that one can leisurely revel in the music's *grain*; for another, as Babbitt's only orchestral work available on record, the concerto allows his structures to operate in the area of tone color, where they are more obvious than in the logic-oriented fields of pitch and rhythm. If that accursed sprite changed the intervals in my CD, I *would* notice: probably not consciously, but as a vague disillusionment with the piece's diminished sparkling surface.

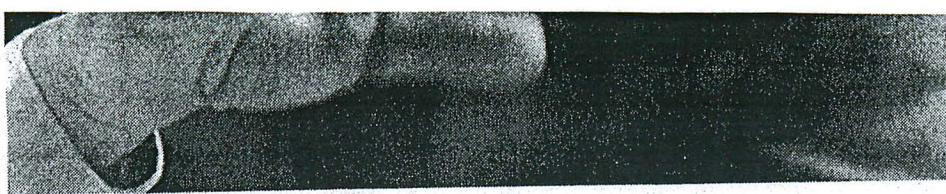
My present grip of Babbitt's aesthetic, putting it in a terminology congenial to me and quite foreign to him, is this: Musical perception, like spatial perception, is largely a function of the right side of

examples, and the result is the frankest and most conversational Babbitt in print.

It's not that I hadn't liked Babbitt's music before; on the contrary, among American composers of rigorous, serial-based music, he has always been my favorite. Genius tends to extremity, and Babbitt is one of the most extreme composers living. The stringency of his serial technique creates an incomparable elegance, if primarily on a microstructural level. His Piano Concerto, recorded by Alan Feinberg, Charles Wuorinen, and the American Composers Orchestra on New World Records, is his most voluptuous piece yet. Its restrained sostenuto of orchestral tones and *almost* melodic piano writing make it both colorful and listenable.

But I had never understood what Babbitt wanted us to *hear* in his music (and I'm not positive I do now). To borrow his analogy, it was like a Tibetan speaker whose diction and cadence are charming enough to make me wonder what he's saying. If a malevolent sprite, I argued, crept into my CD collection with some kind of laser pencil and changed most of the Piano Concerto's intervals and rhythms every night, I doubt that I'd ever notice. I never minded that aspect of Cage's music, because Cage graciously reassures the listener that what he hears is more, not less, than what was intended. Babbitt, by contrast, claims that he never puts a note on paper until he has several reasons why that and only that note is the correct one.

I still quarrel with some of Babbitt's statements. He talks as though his music assumes the ability to recognize intervals as identical regardless of context, timbre, or octave displacement. He even states that "the notion of interval . . . is the fundamental scaling principle of all the music of the past." I find that a stunning misconception. Tonal music assumes recognition of not intervals, but scale degrees (relative distance from the tonic). The interval in a 12-tone sense is an abstraction that appeared relatively late in history, assuming importance only af-



A genius or a nut?

ter *Tristan*. Gestalt theory argues that the influence of context precludes perceptual constants, and there's no reason interval size should be exempt. In Babbitt's *Canonical Forms*, for instance, I can't hear the similarity between a quick E-flat/G-flat/D motive spread over a ninth and a rising F-sharp/G/A-sharp motive several octaves away, and *if*, according to Babbitt's theology, their near-equivalence is crucial to comprehension, then the piece is incomprehensible.

The weight of that little "if" crushed my lovely column. What I suddenly realized (or decided, anyway), as the meaning of Babbitt's words seeped in, was that I had mistaken the essence of his music. He had misled me to seek a reality *underneath* the reality I was so unabashedly enjoying. The beauty of Babbitt's music is where it seems to be—on the surface.

Babbitt rejects as ludicrous the notion that 12-tone music is a constant regurgitation of all 12 tones. On the contrary, his methods delay the entrance of various pitches, creating subconscious perceptual gaps and then slowly filling them with the remaining intervals. He manipulates hexachords to create auditory influences as subtle as underpainting in visual art. For instance, he notes that it is logically impossible to choose two sets of three different pitches in such a way that no intervals are repeated either within a set or between them. What that means for the listener is that the sound of the music will be conditioned by tendencies toward a certain interval; it doesn't matter whether he recognizes the interval as long as he's sensitive to the subtly *directed* quality of the music. If Babbitt's technique could be transferred to visual art, it would be like arranging molecules in a

systematic order to produce for the eye a certain infinitely subtle and nuanced overall color. There would be no image, no idea, nothing for the viewer to distinguish, only microevents arranged in inscrutable patterns.

I don't take all the blame for my initial misunderstanding. Babbitt, brilliantly articulate on a certain level, is not given to aesthetic speculation, though he seems to think he is. He delineates dozens of tiny, inaudible relationships in the first measures of Schoenberg's Fourth Quartet with exquisite precision, but when he talks about the process of listening he's vague, even contradictory. His repeated answer to charges that the intervallic structure of his music cannot be perceived is, in short, "It's not whether you *hear* it, it's how you *conceptualize* it."

That's a horrible way of putting it. "Conceptualize," in my dictionary, means

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to form a thought or abstract idea. The picture of an entire audience busily conceptualizing the set relationships during a performance of a Babbitt work makes me dizzy. Unless I misunderstand a second time, it's not a matter of conceptualization, but of sensitivity to extremely subtle colorization. It isn't important to be conscious of what pitches or intervals haven't been heard yet—in fact, it's impossible, which was the crux of my original argument—but only to realize how careful the musical fabric is not to repeat itself, how it exhausts every significant variation within each limit before going on to something else.

The frustrating thing about reading

putting it in a terminology congenial to me and quite foreign to him, is this: Musical perception, like spatial perception, is largely a function of the right side of the brain, just as logic and language are predominantly handled by the left side. Westerners are generally left-brain dominant, and classical music differs from other world musics by among other things how it occupies the left brain (fugue subjects and sonata form being the most familiar tactics). Babbitt views those left brain hooks the way T. S. Eliot described "content": as "the piece of meat the burglar brings along to keep the house dog quiet." Babbitt says to hell with content, let the dog bark. His technique is an intricate system for removing any surface distractions that might tempt the listener toward a nonmusical (read: left brain) mode of listening.

It's an austere strategy. The confusing part is that Babbitt spends 94 per cent of his book dealing with the million-odd left-brain logical controls he sets up to ensure that no inherently unmusical logic creeps in. And he sometimes talks as though he wants you to *hear* those controls. In Chapter Four, when asked to what extent he thinks the mechanics of a piece can be heard, he responds, "all the things that we have been talking about should be inferable from the surface." If he really thinks that even a superb musician can pick out the 0-3-4 trichords in *Canonical Forms* from the 0-1-3 trichords, he's nuts. But I remembered what he once said in another context, that it didn't matter whether a listener knew that the opening theme of the *Eroica* Symphony was a major triad. If Babbitt's aiming for a kind of subcognitive perception, a right-brain listening in which concepts are irrelevant, then I think he (like his antipodal twin John Cage) has stripped music down to its purest essence in as profound a way as any composer in history.

So there's an "if" for Babbitt to mull over. While not as fluent as the first column I wrote, this one has the advantage that I still believe it. ■