

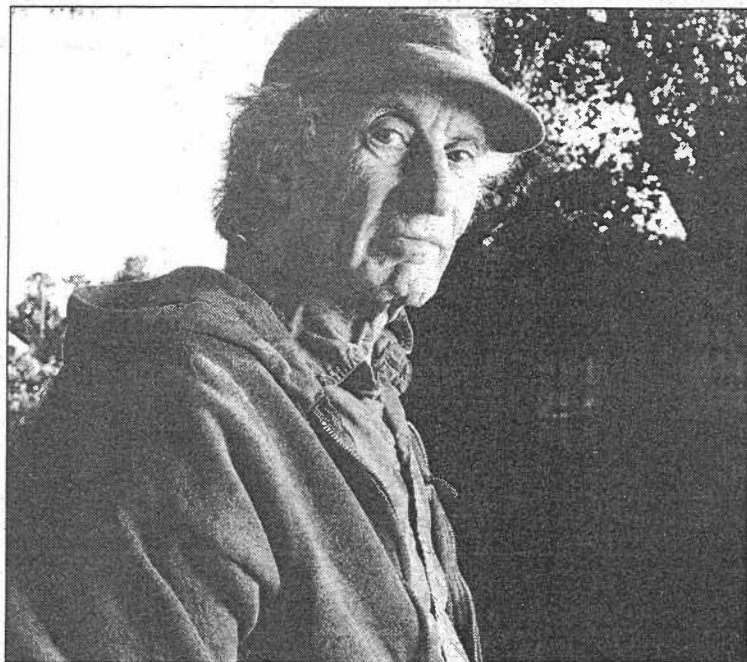
By Kyle Gann

Henry Brant

**Visionary music** can be difficult to discover. Trimpin's computer-run acoustic orchestras, La Monte Young's sine-tone assemblages, I. A. MacKenzie's musical sculptures—few get to experience these live, and recordings, when possible, are unrepresentative. Likewise, one of the century's most Promethean composers has remained a shadowy figure because his works are too mammoth to capture on disc. Henry Brant, who turns 82 next month, was last heard here in 1994 with *Desert Forests* for Philharmonic musicians scattered around the balconies, and two years earlier with his *500: Hidden Hemisphere* for four bands in Lincoln Center's North Plaza. And Lincoln Center continues being generous to Brant: his *Dormant Craters*, composed specifically for Damrosch Park, will premiere there August 13 at 6 as part of the free Out-of-Doors series.

I first ran across Brant's name 25 years ago in Virgil Thomson's *American Music Since 1910*, where he's casually referred to as "our most brilliant (by far) orchestrator." In part this has to do with Brant's penchant for odd instruments, such as the kitchen utensils in his 1932 *Music for a Five and Dime*, and his offbeat ensembles such as differentiated flutes or specially constructed violins. He also led a successful career as a film orchestrator, though he won't mention which films he worked on because he resents the musician's subservient role in Hollywood. "Mention you've orchestrated a film," he growls from his home in Santa Barbara, "and everyone bites the dust, but a composer bleeding to death writing the world's

# Space Master



Supreme pioneer of spatial music Henry Brant

greatest symphony wouldn't arouse a flicker of interest. I worked for Benny Goodman and André Kostelanetz at one time. Next year I'm writing my book on orchestration, based entirely on what I've done myself." That authoritative tome should prove as enduring in interest as the similar text of Berlioz.

As if he couldn't resist posing himself the ultimate challenge, Brant last month unveiled his orchestral version—the imagination boggles—of Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata*, a densely craggy monument of pianistic complexity. Already conducted by the composer in Ottawa, the version

will receive its U.S. premiere next February 25 with the American Composers Orchestra.

But first we'll hear *Dormant Craters* for 16 percussionists, including two jazz drummers, five steel drum players, and four Balinese gamelan members. Starting with his *Antiphony One* of 1953, Brant has been the supreme pioneer of spatial music, made by widely separated groups of instruments. He originally started moving musicians around not to get antiphonal effects such as those of late-Renaissance Venice, but for contrapuntal reasons. When he would write 10 lines at once (he

inherited the angular, dissonant melodic style of his mentor Carl Ruggles), they kept bumping into each other's registers too thickly to be intelligible. Spatial separation was a way to preserve the heard integrity of melodies in the same range. At 25 minutes and 16 players, *Dormant Craters* is a comparatively modest example (next to, say, his *Orbits* for 80 trombones in quarter tones), but with players 15 to 20 feet away from each other surrounded by the audience, it promises enough noise bouncing to stretch your ears.

It also offers an aspect of Brant's recent work that seems, in hindsight, amazingly timely. In 1982, before *cultural* had acquired its *multi-*prefix, Brant wrote *Meteor Farm* for orchestra, jazz band, Indonesian gamelan ensemble, African drummers, and Indian soloists. A few years later, lots of thirtysomething Downtowners started investigating similar culture-clash collages. Brant's music is usually notated and synchronized, but he allows for a modicum of Cagean randomness when working with musicians outside European tradition: "I listen to their repertory and ask if I can have this piece or that, and they play at a certain point in their usual manner. I prefer to do that than modify the traditional music these people are accustomed to. With jazz improvisers I would do the same, simply indicate the places where they are to improvise in their own style." In *Dormant Craters*, the gamelan players strike Western instruments as well, and everyone involved reads notes.

Each outdoor Brant performance

is planned with a prayer. In 1972 his *The Immortal Combat* for two bands was obliterated by traffic noise, the Lincoln Center fountain, and a thunderstorm, and although I was thrilled by *Hidden Hemisphere*, he felt partly defeated by traffic then, too. He categorically rejects amplification. "I consider the loudspeaker a musical instrument, and a very unsatisfactory one. I know from talking to some of the boys who build instruments that it's possible to design much louder instruments than are currently in use." (He won't even use microphones to speak in public.) He dreams of eventually having instruments on the order of foghorns. Another demurred desire is his concert hall with movable walls, in which the acoustic space can be altered to fit the needs of each work. "I made what I thought was an announcement to all composers in the music world, but I haven't gotten any interest from any composer living or dead."

Given the current milieu of lowered expectations, such quests inevitably earn the label "eccentric," which follows Brant like the tail on a coonskin cap. He claims it's not the music, though: "It's got to do with the fact that I have a mild case of cataracts, and I wear hats and visors to protect me against overhead glare. My music isn't eccentric, it's just what I do anyway." Brant is famous for his ever-present poker player's visor, and for his youthful nervous energy: at a panel discussion here last year, he refused to sit with the other composers, and spoke while moving around. His conducting continues unabated, and he'll lead *Dormant Craters* live. You've got to hear it, for recordings miss Brant's music's spatial essence, and after *Hidden Hemispheres*, New York itself sounded different to me. ■



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