

'Soundings'

Time out of Joint

BY KYLE GANN

There's nothing wrong with American music that a few well-aimed Stalinist purges wouldn't cure.

—Peter Garland

Summer has brought sad tidings. Among them was the August 9 death, at age 83, of reclusive Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi. The first Italian to embrace 12-tone music and the first to reject it as a dead end—both acts command respect—Scelsi traveled the Middle East as a young man and eventually evolved a meditative, microtone-inflected idiom inspired by Coptic chant and Sufi music. The unearthly, ear-arresting sound of his work was widely celebrated in Europe the last few years of his life; American performances remain rare, and his few recordings, mostly on FY records, a French label, aren't easily found.

Equally sad news: Peter Garland has announced the end of publication of *Soundings* (POB 8319, Sante Fe, New Mexico 87504). Garland founded the magazine in 1972, the same year in which the avant-garde extravaganza *Source* closed shop. After finishing issues currently in production, Garland plans to call it quits and devote more time to his own music. A self-appointed musicologist of experimental music, Garland abjured *Source's* far-out conceptual aesthetic and grounded *Soundings* in a sense of history that assumed there was an indigenous,

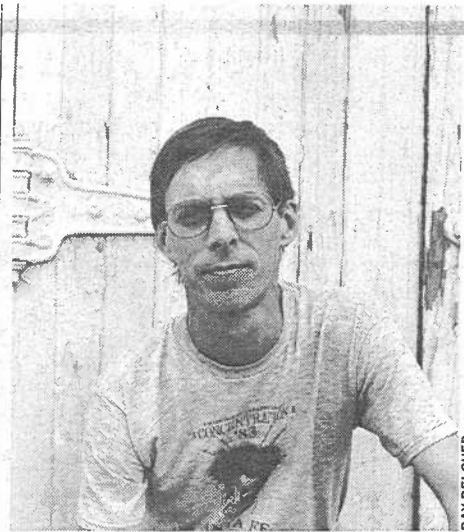
continuous, American experimental tradition. Many seminal scores by Harry Partch, Dane Rudhyar, Conlon Nanarrow, and Lou Harrison exist only in *Soundings*, which has provided a publishing venue for composers the musical establishment has refused to take seriously. More than any other journal, *Soundings* has taken "the time is out of joint" as its motto and has set out to right the wrongs of a musical society turned on its head.

For the history of music according to Garland states that America's real avant-garde—the "ultramodernists" active in the '20s and '30s, and their spiritual heirs—were cheated of recognition by European-influenced conservatives, first the Copland/Sessions crowd, later devotees of Babbitt, Carter, and Wuorinen. It's a view shared by, of all people, Pierre Boulez, who celebrated Ives's centenary by conducting the music by ultramodernists like Rudhyar and Ruth Crawford, the only school of American composers he'll concede is worth attention. For Boulez, the end of significant American music came with Aaron Copland's 1942 *Rodeo*, which ushered in an era of conserva-

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tism—nearly the same year, he likes to point out, that the Soviet Union denounced Western music's "decadent formalism" and demanded a return to "art for the people." Soon afterward, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Hindemith arrived on these shores, exerting a hegemony that we've never fully overcome.

By the time the avant-garde began to regain momentum in the early '60s, the then nascent NEA music program had already fallen to ultraconservatives like Ezra Laderman, with the result that the program (save for Pauline Oliveros's occasional influence) has remained virtually irrelevant to progressive music. (Most composers of experimental persuasion learned long ago to draw their federal



Peter Garland: *Soundings* founder calls it quits.

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money from the Interarts program, thus creating an artificially induced body of multimedia work.) Against this background, Garland has fought uphill in championing the ultramodernists alongside early articles and scores by Guy Klucsevsek, Richard Teitelbaum, Phil Corner, Charles Amirkhanian, Dary John Mizelle, Daniel Lentz, Ingram Marshall, and many others. Lou Harrison personally provided the journal's early funding, after which it was saved from extinction by West Coast new-music patron Betty Freeman. Garland still records around a \$5000 personal loss with each issue.

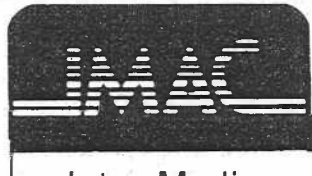
Perhaps even more important than its political correctives, though, is *Soundings's* role in providing composers with a place to argue in plain English. The remainder of American new music writing generally falls into two categories: one, the light criticism of the music rags, whether it's the status-quo-preserving faint praise given famous men by *Musical America*, or *Ear* magazine's self-congratulatory rant about whose music seems particularly "kickass" this week; the oth-

er, academic journals whose statistical analyses of pitches and rhythms mean almost as little to those few who understand them as they do to anyone else. *Perspectives of New Music*, long a Babbitt-worshipping bastion of analytic jargon filched from the philosophy of science, has been liberalized in the last three years, but even its articles about Cage are too dry to appeal to readers not at work on a doctorate.

In *Soundings*, Rudhyar's historic essays on tuning, Partch's comparison of composers to show horses, Ingram Marshall's questioning of the premises of modernism, and premier musicological articles on Partch, Revueletas, Varèse, and others filled the gigantic gap in between and provided almost the only new music writing an intelligent nonmusician could reasonably be expected to take an interest in. The continued need for such an outlet can be seen in the manuscripts on aesthetics I regularly receive from composers who complain that academic journals are uninterested, that they have no outlet for their most urgent thoughts. Words often bring understanding where sounds fail, and a music scene stuck without a serious organ of discourse is in trouble.

Garland will finish up a few ambitious projects before packing it in: a volume of Henry Cowell songs, some long-lost instrumental works of Paul Bowles, a Silvestre Revueletas reader, and a final anthology of younger composers. A small part of *Soundings's* function has been taken over by microtonalist journals like *Pitch* and the Just Intonation Network's *1/1*, while *Tellus*, an innovative cassette "magazine," distributes on tape a bit of the work *Soundings* might have put into print. But the link *Soundings* drew between the major composers of our time and their audience will be missed, and it's a sad irony that the journal is scheduled to outlast by only a few months the Reagan Era in which it functioned as one of the few oases. ■

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