

The Uptown Continent

By Kyle Gann

Juilliard Ensemble
Double Edge

I'm not musically anti-European. I see why people get that impression, and correcting it is a low priority. I do oppose, ferociously, the imposition of European assumptions and expectations on music of other continents. More relevantly, though, most new European music I hear suggests that originality ended there with the arrival of Boulez, Stockhausen, & Co., and that subsequent generations are petrified of offending their teachers. The remainder is usually the "holy minimalism" of Pärt and Górecki, which seems sanctimonious and parallel to what Americans were doing 20 years ago. But then, I assume that European musical politics are no better than American; if you judged our music from the "official" young composers recommended by academicians like Jacob Druckman, Gunther Schuller, et al., you'd get a similarly jaundiced view. Europe may be bubbling with new ideas we never hear.

Astonishingly, most music by younger Europeans seems to flow into New York via one person: conductor Joel Sachs of Continuum and other ensembles. His April 23 program with the New Juilliard Ensemble at the Juilliard Theater offered premieres by two Europeans and two South Americans, only one of whom I had heard of before. Unlike the U.S.A. (Downtown, at least), South America has never declared musical independence, so all four works struck me as examples of



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Joel Sachs led a bravura Nancarrow premiere.

recent European thought. What Jan W. Morthenson of Sweden, Manuel Sosa of Venezuela, and Argentina's Osvaldo Golijov shared was a tendency to create richly detailed textures from which no memorable feature emerged. Syntax without images, total abstraction, nothing audibly repeated, and all rather tired sounding. (How absurdly ironic it is that Europe's great tradition has degenerated to mere texture-painting, leaving the American minimalists and their descendants to rediscover melody, rhythm, and harmony.)

There were momentary exceptions. At 28, Sosa was the youngest composer, and his *Contemplatio* tried in spots to go multicultural. There were about five measures of jazz solo for muted trumpet, another short passage had a Middle Eastern beat, the string players once sang softly while playing. Stylistically all over the

map, the piece reminded me of Mid-west American academic works from the '70s, but at least it acknowledged that the fragile, transcendent subjectivity of the aging European avant-garde is not the only possible mode of musical continuity.

The only European who escaped these traps was an Americanized one, for Virko Baley, Ukrainian-born, currently conducts the Nevada Symphony Orchestra in Las Vegas. (Strikes me one could run a successful contemporary series there with the slogan: "New music—it's a gamble!") Baley's Violin Concerto No. 1, with 17 players accompanying committed soloist Tom Chiu, had something of the same spirituality as Pärt and Górecki, but with more subtle complexity and less literal repetition. The opening movement's mournful violin melody kept bleeding into the

orchestra, whose delicate sonorities were dotted with vibraphone, marimba, harp, harpsichord, and piano. Baley conceived the work as a requiem, writing the second movement as a "Dies Irae" with galloping rhythms on unison bass drums setting an internal mood for trumpet fanfares and some devilish folk-style fiddling. Though European in its polish and complexity, the work provided the very feature that audiences listen for desperately and that the other composers so prudishly withheld: sonic images memorable enough to take home.

What enticed me into Juilliard's uncongenial territory in the first place was the chance to hear the world premiere of *Study for Orchestra* by Conlon Nancarrow; the expatriate genius of player piano rolls and unparalleled rhythmic complexity. Supreme new music patron Betty Freeman commissioned the work, and approached six conductors before finding one—Sachs—who would declare the score playable. The piece is an orchestration of movements B and C (not A and B as stated in the program) from Nancarrow's *Player Piano Study No. 49*, originally written with the intention of turning it into a concerto for player piano and orchestra. The concerto idea, though, survived in only one movement. The first movement was a relatively simple canon at tempo ratios of four against five against six, starting in the tuba and ending in the violins. The second bristled with idiomatic player-piano effects like dramatic glissandos (sometimes in

opposite directions at once) from which selected notes were sustained. The splashy effects were played by performerless MIDI piano while the strings, winds, and xylophone dotted out melodies in triads at different tempos at once.

The young Juilliard group negotiated those simultaneous tempos with heroic bravura. The first time through, in fact, they finished too quickly (I know the problem), and had to wait several moments in silence for the computerized piano's tumultuous climax. So they repeated the movement and got it perfect. By comparison with the Europeans, Nancarrow's triads and tonal motives sounded naive and awkward, but also refreshingly direct, outspoken, and unafraid, with contrapuntal impulses as honest as old Bach's.

The European-trained composer who has broken most originally with high modernism is South African-born Kevin Volans, whose *Cicada* was played April 12 at Merkin Hall by the piano duo Double Edge (on a program including such notable stiffies as Poulenc, Satie, and Brahms). Preceded by an awesome reputation, *Cicada* was audacious in its simplicity: nearly every moment involved the same 10-note phrase with the second and 10th notes held longer than the others, played in rhythmic unison by pianists Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann. Volans diffracted that simple phrase into thick chords, dissonances, bitonalities, yet never altered its rhythmic and contour identity. Occasionally it would evaporate long enough for either pianist to play a few hesitant notes, then begin again. The piece evoked Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral, the same misty image seen over and over in diverse angles and lights, and *Double Edge* gave it a soulful and reverent reading. ■

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