

Uptown Dropout

Joan Tower

BY KYLE GANN

In the battle of musical politics, Joan Tower calls herself a Midtowner. "I hate to admit that," she says with her usual earthy modesty, "because I was such a rebel when I was growing up, and now all of a sudden I'm this old fart." Well, old fart must not preclude pioneer, for as she turns 60 this month, Tower finds herself arguably the country's most respected and widely celebrated woman composer, and a leading role model for younger women musicians. Not only has she excelled in the male world of orchestral composition, she has done so as an apostate working quietly against the establishment that created her, spreading a "just say no" approach to musical over-intellectualization and complexity. In return, no fewer than 20 cities from Toronto to Santa Cruz are feting her birthday, including last week's concert at Merkin Hall.

I've gotten to know Tower at my Bard College gig, where she's taught since 1972, so if you want to sneer that that's the only reason I'm writing about such an establishment figure, insert

Claudio Spies, Mario Davidovsky, and other people she calls "very mental and very, very smart." But she refers to that period now as a 10-year detour. Though born in New Rochelle, she grew up in La Paz, Bolivia, surrounded by local hot Latin music that she fell in love with. She became a percussionist (though also a virtuoso pianist) and is still fascinated by drums; her major recent work, and one of her best, is *Tambour*, an orchestra piece driven by a massively expanded percussion section. Much more than any analyzable pitch shenanigans, her music is driven by rhythmic gesture.

And so her sojourn with the Uptowners was, in retrospect, doomed to failure. "My little sidetrack with 12-tone music and all the brains I hung out with in the '60s was definitely uncomfortable," she admits. "I was impressed with them, but then I grew up. And divorced them." The piece with which she "came out," expressing her musical physicality and turning her back on rigorous atonality, was *Black Topaz* of 1976. The premiere was one of the great trials of her life: sitting amidst Wuorinen, Davidovsky, et al., she could sense their growing disapproval, and "wished I had a hole in the ground I could disappear into." I tell Tower that

she's a closet Downtowner, and that if the Downtown route had been a visible career option in the '60s, she would have gone that way instead. She agrees.

"From the Downtown point of view, it looks like the Uptown people are controlling everything. In a way, that's true structurally. But it's changing. The Pulitzer Prizes have got a lot more interesting. That they would step out as far as Wynton Marsalis is a sign that some elitist there has relinquished control." She hates elitism, she claims, more than anything, and means by it not only the 12-tone variety but anyone who will dismiss a piece on stylistic grounds after hearing only the first three notes. To bring Uptown and Downtown music into a dialogue, she feels, will take more than good intentions, and she waxes nostalgic for the days when visionary John Duffy ran Meet the Composer. "We would all sit together in the same room: La Monte Young, Ned Rorem, Charles Wuorinen, Leroy Jenkins, Bernard



Closet Downtowner Joan Tower

that comment here. But she and I have had a lot of opportunity to constructively discuss Uptown and Downtown differences, and she's surprised me with her wide-ranging sympathies and deep knowledge of the scene. She's fascinated by the MIDI-instrument-inventor Trimpin, and she was on the three-person committee that handed this year's Herb Alpert Award to rock-influenced performance artist Pamela Z. Working at the Norfolk Chamber Festival with ensembles from each extreme, Speculum Musicae and the Bang on a Can All-Stars, she enjoyed both and was frustrated that they couldn't find any common ground for a dialogue.

Tower's status as one of the orchestra-league hard hitters also seems as much a matter of historical accident as personality. During the '70s she was part of the 12-tone crowd dominated by Charles Wuorinen, Milton Babbitt,

Rands, all because John Duffy had this incredible vision and breadth. Unfortunately, when he left, the whole thing fell apart."

The Merkin Hall concert included chamber works: Tower's well-known Stravinsky homage *Petroushkates*, a beautiful Messiaen homage called simply *Tres lent*, the Muir String Quartet playing her tensely expressionistic *Night Fields*, and a trio titled *And . . . They're Off*, a humorous reference to her husband's skill at playing the horse races. Although in her Uptown days she composed with precompositional pitch maps, she now works completely intuitively, trying to let each piece veer in the direction it wants, resulting in a wide range of consonance and dissonance. "It's hard," she says. "You're the composer, you're supposed to be in charge of the piece. But in actuality, you're not." □

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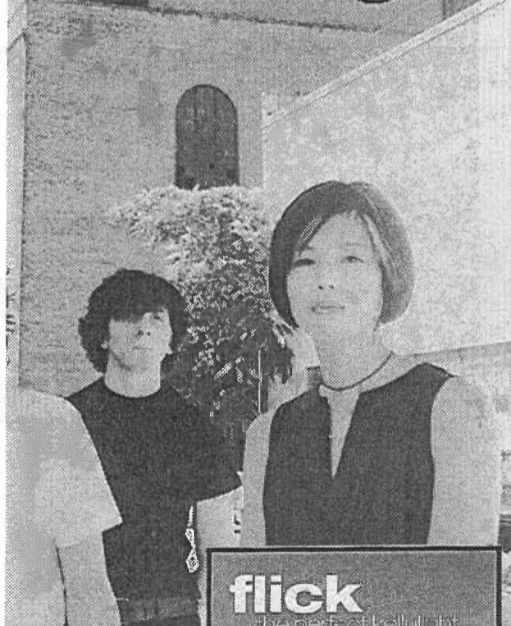
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