

Samuel Beckett so scorns the cult of personality, insisting that the public pay attention only to the work of art, that he refuses to allow his voice to be recorded. Charles Amirkhanian, San Francisco composer of text pieces and tape collages, was asked to contribute a work for a Los Angeles concert of Beckett homages. Denied an interview, unable to trace across Europe the elusive recordings rumored to exist, Amirkhanian went to Beckett's apartment building, helplessly watched the playwright working at his window, and recorded the noises of his environment. Since the resulting collage lacked the yearned-for voice, Amirkhanian entitled it *Pas de voix*. It's available, not in stores, but with your subscription to *Perspectives of New Music*; the journal has published cassettes before, but the latest issue includes their first CD.

Music director of Berkeley's KPFA-FM, Amirkhanian ranks with Franz Liszt and Henry Cowell as the great composer/benefactor of his era, having unstintingly promoted the work of hundreds of his fellow composers. That activity has overshadowed his own music, which shifted a few years ago from clever minimalist text pieces to panoramic tone poems of natural sounds underpainted with musical tones. Besides Paris traffic, *Pas de voix*'s sources include two French girls asking what he's doing (to parallel Beckett, Amirkhanian refuses to answer), the noontime bell of Notre Dame Cathedral, guitar samples by Henry Kaiser, and intimate body sounds, such as farts. A dinner party story about a woman who falls asleep on the toilet, beer can in hand, is followed by the vivid roar of pissing. The piece ends in breathing, not only balancing the farts at the beginning, but weaving in Beckett's obsession with breathing as minimalist expression (one of his bleakest plays is called *Breath*). The most intense noise is a megaflush: Amirkhanian sampled a flushing toilet and, using a two-arm cluster on a Synclavier synthe-

Charles Amirkhanian Wind-Breaking Suite

BY KYLE GANN

sizer, played it back magnified some 30-odd times.

Sound puerile? Think again about Amirkhanian's subject. Deirdre Bair, in her absorbing biography of the playwright, relates that Beckett's earliest aural memory is of a long, slow fart (Amirkhanian overlays the first farts with a

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baby's cry). In *Krapp's Last Tape* Beckett directs the performer to urinate onstage, and the unforgettable antihero of *Molloy* carries a piece of newspaper on his bicycling trips in case he has a stool. Beckett was adamant about including in art the things we all do every day, and *Pas de voix* honors that proposition with unpretentious frankness. The farts—never trumpety, just circumspect rushes of air sounding more like quick breaths—are far prettier, after all, than the synthesized fartlike sounds we heard in thousands of bloop-bleeppy '60s tape pieces.

Aside from its intrinsic narrative interest, *Pas de voix* provides music's closest analogy to Andres Serrano's urine-clouded crucifix that has Washington in such an uproar, though the pissing sound would have to be overdubbed with hymns to make the analogy exact. The list of arguably obscene avant-garde compositions that use text for their effect is probably longer than any official text would disclose: Ralph Shapey's *Songs of Eros* (locked up beyond public access in the University of Chicago library), Kenneth Gaburo's *Maladetto*, and Robert Ashley's



Amirkhanian: flushing for Godot?

Danger Music No. 5, "Creep into the vagina of a living female whale."

Without text or visible action, though, it's difficult to approach pure audio obscenity in music: only the orgasmic vocalise of Sylvano Bussotti's *Passion According to Sade*, the creaking bedsprings (at least that's what they sound like to me) of Ashley's *Automatic Writing*, and Tristan's unambiguous climaxes come to mind. It's a paradox, for because of its actual contact with the eardrum and its extension in time, sound may be the most intimate artistic medium, and I doubt that Serrano's photo has the same potential for embarrassment as listening publicly to sounds, like that of pissing, we usually hear privately. (Smell is another matter, but outlaw the odor of urine and you'd have to close down New York for the summer.)

Pas de voix isn't "'60s-ish"; it sounds as if it's meant, not to shock anyone, but to draw you into a very personal noise-world via a thoughtful, French cinematic sensibility, by modulating gently from one timbre-complex to another. The only jarring noises are the automobile horns. Unlike most of the works listed above, Amirkhanian *de-charges* his everyday noises until they seem as innocent as the amplified footsteps on gravel of his homage to Percy Grainger, *Walking Tune*. You could conceivably have listened without becoming aware of how the sounds were produced had not some rabble-rouser in *The Village Voice* pointed a finger (you're welcome, Charles). Jesse Helms might have a fit, but Beckett, I think, would only laugh in thoughtful admiration of a kindred spirit.

You can get the disc without a subscription by sending \$15 to *Perspectives of New Music*, School of Music DN-10, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195. It also contains a cute text piece by Randolph Hostetler, and instrumental works by Richard Swift and Milton Babbitt, who I'm sure is tickled pink to appear in this context. ■



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