

Winding Down the Avant-Garde

BY KYLE GANN

Composer Arthur Berger wrote an essay in the April *Boston Review* entitled "Is There a Post-Modern Music?" His answer: no. With interests vested in serialism and neoclassicism, Berger looks for postmodernism in the most unlikely place imaginable, the postromanticism of George Rochberg and David Del Tredici. It's like lifting a few rocks and saying, "See? No birds." Then he uses the term as a stick to beat the academy's favorite scapegoat, John Cage, and to make the neat argument that not only does postmodern music not exist, its popularity is misguided. Nice trick. Beneath the surface, it's a bitter polemic by a good composer whose music has too often gotten lost in the battle of contemporary fashions.

Nevertheless, I'm almost inclined to agree with Berger. Certainly there is no postmodernism in the sense of a common school or style. Berger, though, equates modernism with atonality, which is far too restrictive. Modernism is the "next step" mind-set, the cutting-edge illusion, the assumption that new music will continually find something a little more complex, more far out. (PR tip: "cutting edge" and "postmodern" cannot be used in the same press release.) Cage is Berger's default postmodern bogie, but Cage was easily construed as a next step to serialism, achieving the same results with more up-to-date means. Reich and Glass threw the avant-garde the same kind of curve that Pop Art did, and in hindsight they look like the beginning of the end; but in 1973, minimalism was just

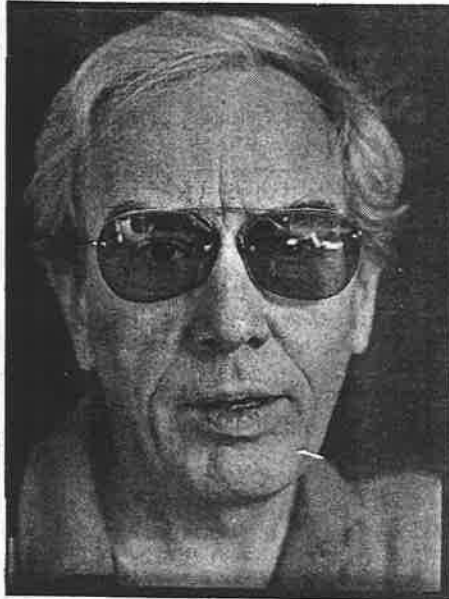
another next step, a shift of the battlefield to an aesthetic level that disdained the mere technical virtuosity of previous modernism.

The crisis precipitated by the "next step" mind-set's self-defeating premise is almost too familiar to outline: its leap-frogging styles accelerated to a logical impasse. Modernism didn't fail, as has been charged. I mean, what did you think it was going to do? It succeeded brilliantly, in the same way as John Cage's inventor father, who, hired to irrigate a field, came up with a self-automated irrigation system so superb that he put himself out of a job. From modernism's disappearance "up the fundamental aperture" (Tom Wolfe's felicitous phrase) emerged the essence of the avant-garde fallacy: that, while it is true that original art is always new, it does not follow that new art will necessarily be original. (As corrective we have Stravinsky's dictum: "Whatever does not stem from tradition is plagiarism.") Postmodernism, then, would be a Hegelian leap to a plane on which newness and the avoidance of the old would be irrelevant.

Irrelevant, not despaired of, which is why postromanticism is not postmodern, but a recoiling from the logical impasse back into the modern. Romanticism, the urge to break out of a confining context, is the precondition of modernism. Going back to it is like trying to assume the earth is flat after we already know better. This why every "new romantic" work sounds as though it's pervaded by bad faith. Expressionism? That's romanticism raised to fever pitch, and the neo-

expressionism currently so popular in both visual art and downtown improvisation is an attempt to freeze modernism's moment of greatest passion. George Rochberg and Elliott Sharp are strange bedfellows, but I hear in both a willingness to sustain a painful but familiar tension rather than face what lies beyond logic's vanishing point.

I often get the feeling that "postmodern" is a smoke screen, a justification for doing something ironically that has been done before seriously. I hear a little of that in the turntable solos and juxtaposed styles of John Zorn's music. Quotation has been, ever since *Petrouchka* and the *Concord* sonata, modernism's device for having it both ways, playing up to the listener while making fun of the outmod-



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Robert Ashley: he feels postmodern.

ed (and, by implication, the listener who enjoys it). Zorn's music is purely modern; its radical discontinuity, not only of syntax but of style, is yet another ingenious stratagem for forcing us past the boundaries of our previous modes of listening.

Neither do I hear a postmodern impulse in the music of Scott Johnson, whose rock/counterpoint creations seem like an '80s-updated (and far more intelligent) version of Gunther Schuller's old "Third

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Stream": the idea that the "next step" is not vertical (toward syntactic complexity) but horizontal, an appropriation of whatever vernacular is presently fashionable.

So is there any postmodern music? I'm tempted to explain Frederic Rzewski's music as such, but wary of his leftist tendency to use yesteryear's avant-garde as a political springboard. The musician whose music most feels postmodern to me is Robert Ashley, whose use of boogie-woogie equally avoids modernist irony or romantic necessity. Leo Steinberg's pernicious truism that "All great art is about art," became the modernist program; but Ashley's music isn't about music, it's about the world, without relapsing (as postromanticism does) into the ways in which the world has been depicted before. I could say the same of the musics of David Garland, Laurie Anderson, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and it's suspicious that all of them work in a literary vein, as though music had to borrow its postmodernism. It's not an evaluative comment, but I think if there is a musical postmodernism, these are the artists who manifest it the most clearly.

In the meantime, there are a few items left on modernism's musical agenda. The avant-garde was born in the chutzpah of Monteverdi's "secunda prattica," reached stormy adolescence in Beethoven's middle sonatas, and achieved self-knowledge in Cage's 4'33"; it isn't going to be overthrown in a season or two by a couple of aesthetic insights. A new dawn is approaching, but the party isn't over until the paper cups are thrown away and the ashtrays emptied. ■