

# Yearning for Ismism

BY KYLE GANN

**L**a Monte Young's recent retrospective concerts filled me with nostalgia. Young's music is unusual today in that it is an idea music: not that it is composed of ideas (a condition that would be fatal to its meditative purpose), but that ideas are still important to its understanding and creation. His is an *epistemological* music, if you will, based on an intellectual conception of reality rather than on the day-to-day compromises of performance practice. I ironically called that the "Darmstadt mindset," as though it were something special, but Young's music is conceived the way I secretly think all music should be.

My nostalgia stems from the fact that we are in a period in which ideas have little collective influence. Older composers rhapsodize about the '50s, when ideas of mathematical structure and flat, unclimaxed form were "in the air." Schoenberg, Webern, and Hauer share credit for the first 12-tone row because the idea was "in the air." In the '60s, theater music was "in the air." Check the air in 1987: there are no ideas, at least none threatening to gain common currency. Instead we have careers. Older composers talk to younger ones about, not where music is going, but how to organize an impressive portfolio. In program notes, budding creators detail grants and awards, but as to the *purpose* of their musical constructions they are mute.

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Artists fight for ideas, but nobody except PR people fights for a style. John Adams's music has style to the gills, but listen to his last six pieces and tell me what his *idea* is. If minimalism remains an idea anywhere, it's in eastern Europe, where composers like Laszlo Sary, Zoltan Jeney, Janos Decsenyi, and Zygmunt Krauze are bringing to it a subtlety and chromatic complexity it never knew in America.

Some might consider serial music epistemological, but its theory is merely tech-

mal" vacuum.

But composers feel the absence of isms and ideas too, in the form of isolation, an inability to communicate, a frustration at failing to stir support or controversy in the general public. Two composers meet: Hi, I use this set of materials, devices, and techniques. Oh really, I use *this* set. How interesting. Reach for the menu. Worse, there's no passion, no urgent criterion for using one set over another, and that lack of urgency eventually shows up in the music. Some of the best work I've

played in) was a vast emptiness in which all could fit simultaneously or by turns; sounds were enticingly sophisticated, semblances of ideas dissipated like coy phantoms, and only an insider could tell one artist's contribution from another's.

Occasionally technology begets a true idea. It happened April 26 in a fabulous concert at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation by Los Angeles computer composer Carl Stone. Stone's *Shing Kee* took as its source a recording of a Japanese pop entertainer singing a Schubert lied. Pecking away at his Macintosh keyboard, Stone repeated little bits of the song over and over, changing tempo with fascinating gradualness; his postmodern abstraction created an enchanting texture, exotic and oddly familiar. (Another work, *Hop Ken*, put a phrase from *Pictures at an Exhibition* through a similar process.) Stone's idea—tempo as a fluidly determinable structural element—is one that Stockhausen tried to manifest in his 1957 *Zeitmasse*, but only recently has the technology arrived to use it discretely. It's a small idea, but ideas are small things; anything that can't be stated in less than 15 words isn't an idea, but an idiosyncratic conception.

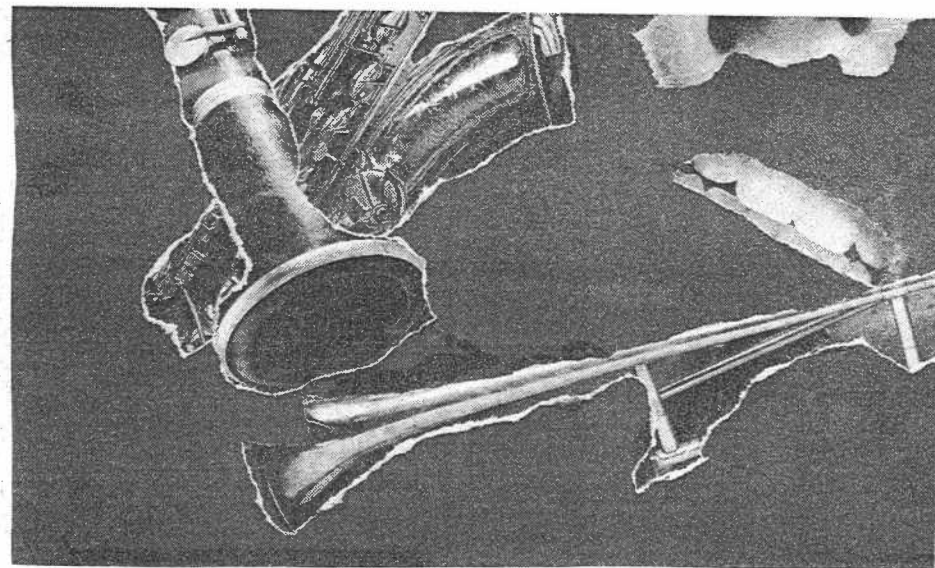
It's impossible to guess whether a piece like Stone's might furnish *the* idea for the next wave of ismic creation, but one proto-idea is so attractive at the moment that it seems destined to play a larger role: the harmonic series (another Stockhausen brainstorm, tried in *Stimmung*). Pursued by younger figures as diverse as Glenn Branca, Elliott Sharp, Fullman, and Arnold Dreyblatt, it is a material waiting to become an idea. Problem is, as a static acoustical datum, it gives little hint as to how it can effectively unfold in time, and while Branca's theories are structurally impressive, I haven't yet heard a use of the harmonic series that wasn't overwhelmed by more obvious



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In the in-between-idea periods, musicians explore rather than envision, relying on whatever practical performance habits they have available. These periods have advantages. Ideas are notorious for inciting ego clashes, because when they fall from the air, they settle on the one or two people who pursue them most aggressively. Then the winners inevitably perform the comical song-and-dance of claiming that they're not part of the ism, all the while insisting that they discovered it first. In the case of serialism, for example, Boulez and Stockhausen won, even though Maderna, Zimmermann, and Pousseur were more interesting composers. Maybe the rush to grab good ideas, like pigeons fighting over a handful of crumbs, is too exhausting to pursue for long, and we need our duller halcyon days to rest up.

The critical enigma of recent decades has been minimalism's failure to remain an idea. Certainly it was in the air, and half a dozen composers have fallen over themselves claiming priority. But in 1973 minimalism vanished as an idea and re-emerged as a style, which, as Schoenberg tried to teach us, is something very different. Styles are neutralized, impotent.



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nical, not intellectual; it hasn't been subjected to a stringent hermeneutical self-critique for three decades now. (That academics pretend not to be able to distinguish between technical and intellectual discussion points to a grave self-deception.) Rather than downgrade into a style, serialism has calcified into a sacred litany of localized techniques, preserved in an endless array of badly written articles on the marvelous properties of all-combinatorial sets, questionable at the cost of one's tenure. In Europe, the serial influence is moribund, and only Brian Ferneyhough propounds it with a semblance of its earlier fanatical conviction.

Perhaps critics need isms the most. Isms provide context, a sense of history caught in motion. "Within an ism" (Adorno again) "it is possible to distinguish clearly between good and bad artists." Abstract expressionism *made* Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg (if not vice versa), Hanslick's name survives only as a foil for Wagnerism, and several critical remoras (myself included, though a little late) have scavenged a career from attaching to the shark of minimalism. Sorting out a network of ideas makes the critic feel socially useful, while commenting only on individuals brings a gnawing fear that everything will be taken ad hominem (and possibly should). It would be an interesting study to see whether a famous critic has *ever* arisen in an "is-

heard recently was by Ellen Fullman, who performs on 50-foot bronze wires. But her concert elicited no intellectual excitement, because no one entertains the thought that, because of her, soon everyone may be using 50-foot bronze wires. I apologize for singling her out, for there are hundreds of other good composers whose careers rest on some personal, equally ungeneralizable tick. Careers to-

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day are made by specializing, finding a gimmick with which your name can be quickly associated. It is the sad fact of the 1980s that exceptions to that rule, laudable as they are, rarely escape anonymity.

What composers *do* share these days is software, which may be why the three best concerts I heard this season—Carl Stone, Michel Waisvisc, and the Hub—were of computer music. Normally too neutral to generate ideas, software has given rise to an odd possibility, an *idealess* communality, much in evidence at the summer solstice concert given June 21 on Staten Island by Phill Niblock, Ron Kuivila, and Phil Edelstein. Improvisation was not quite the right word for their loose, low-intensity, eight-hour collaboration. Their computer linkup (like the Snug Harbor Cultural Center hall they

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This trend suggests a key to the late 20th century as a counterparallel to the late 17th. In both periods major figures had recently died, others were not yet producing their most important work. Both were rife with technological experimentation and evolution. Corelli was as eager to test the aesthetic preconditions of the violin as today's composers are the DX-7. Mid-Baroque developments demanded the creation of equal temperament; today's necessitate a return to pure ratios. Both periods boasted dozens of serviceable composers whose very names merge indistinguishably: Corelli, Torelli, Locatelli, Reich, Glass, Zorn, Stone, Lentz. From our vantage point, music of the 1690s appears as a faceless blur, and I fear that (except for *Shing Kee* and the Babbitt Piano Concerto) the 1980s will soon look the same way.

My foolhardy attempt to historicize the present may prove misguided. The concern here is twofold—that we neither overrate the 1980s (little chance) nor expect too much from them. This is hardly the best of times, and yet, as Dame Julian of Norwich promised, all shall be well. Robert Ashley thinks that the idea periods come in cycles of 30 or 40 years, and he's afraid he'll be too old to be active in the next one. (Ashley's operas, by the way, are packed with ideas, some of which no one's figured out yet.) Counting the '60s as the last idea-period, another is due around the turn of the century, if we can get through this uncomfortable period of chaotic performance customs. In the meantime, we idea-loving critics may have to lay low and wait. ■