Killers in the Audience

By Kyle Gann

I get the feeling that if J. S. Bach were around today writing the Goldberg Variations, audience members would tell him, "Jo, don't you think you're limiting yourself, writing harpsichord pieces to put Count Keyserlingk to sleep? Where is the grand statement? Where is the universality? Don't you want to be as profound as the masters were?" I like to think J.S. would be very Downtown in his reply: "Look, man, I had a gig."

Ten years ago, in the composer/audience split, my sympathies were with the latter. I felt that most composers had sold out to aurally irrelevant theories, and that the few interesting ones were failing to make their ideas clear enough for nonmusicians to perceive. Credo: I believe in a nonmusician audience, as an ultimate goal for both criticism and composing. The blame-the-audience gambit, fair or not, had failed in six decades to advance musical culture one iota in any direction.

Then in 1987 I got a rude shock when a NY Phil audience walked out en masse on John Adams's accessible and cogent Harmonielehre, after warmly receiving a tepid Anton Rubinstein concerto. That was too revealing. And lately, after lectures, I've been attacked for liking new music, with the naysayers facing their comments with platitudes about universality and claiming Shostakovich (that mediocrity!) as the Last Great Composer.

Whether composing has seen better days or not, listening is a lost art.

Composer Stuart Smith reports that a few years ago he came across the international statistics on musical literacy. In Great Britain 55 per cent of the population could read music, in France and Germany 60 per cent could, and in eastern Europe and Scandinavia the figures approached 90 per cent. The musical literacy rate in the U.S. was .3 per cent—one-fourth of one percent. Now, many passionate and intelligent music lovers can't read notation, and you can't draw a one-to-one correspondence between literacy and sophisticated listening. Nevertheless, the figures say something about what the American composer is up against.

Those numbers suggest why the best American composers (most spectacularly, Feldman and Nancarrow) are hailed as titans in Europe before they're heard of here. Since even young Americans play more in Europe than here, they have to keep a double standard. They're as subtle as, and more original than, European composers, but here, unless they shut themselves up in the university (which demands kissing a particular set of asses), they play to an audience unwilling to follow anything it hasn't heard before.

Smith, gigging in American jazz clubs, grew contemptuous of "accessibility" when he noticed the better he played, the colder the audience became. No wonder composers give up on the audience.

Literacy isn't the whole story, for classical buffs are absolutely, absolutely the worst. The industry has made them consumers and destroyed any feeling for music as a historical process. They want masterpieces signed, framed, and delivered. They recognize a masterpiece not by its internal logic—that would require listening—but by its similarity to previous masterpieces. They treat universality as though it were an overcoat a composer must put on to appear in public and talk about feeling as though the model for all feeling were Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet. Dislike of dissonance and discontinuity was their old excuse, but suave and pretty Harmonielehre showed that that was a red herring. What they wanted was the ego-reinforcement of refined Culture, and no living composer can give them that.

Compositively, we do not live in a bad time. As I hear them, Carl Stone's Shing Kee, Nic Collins's Dark and Stormy Night, Larry Polansky's 51 Melodies could go down in the books as paradigms for new aesthetics, like Piano Phase or Le Marteur of Pierré Lunaire. I listen to Laurie Spiegel's Sound Zones, "Blue" Gene Tyranny's The Intermediary, Rhys Chatham's An Angel Move Too Fast To See, and I think, wow, what a great time to follow music. The Downtown scene bubbles with hotter ideas right now than it has in 12 years. So why are public and critical interest deader than ever?

The real history of American music remains a secret. The reason is simple: History is made mostly by nonacademics, and written by academics. The latter market their textbooks to other academics who buy them only if their own name's in the index. In a recent Times think piece, David Schiff (author of a worshipfully uncritical book on Elliott Carter), divided the 20th century into pop and 12-tone music. That's like calling the 19th century an era of parlor songs and pomposy symphonies, and leaving out Wagner and Schumann. When the Newspaper of Record (deadeningly conservative now that John Rockwell's on the sidelines) denies that the hundreds of new pieces I dearly love exist, how do I escape critical solipsism?

Perhaps the problem is the composer and audience blaming each other. Say they don't owe each other anything. Psychologist James Hillman insists that, instead of the other way around, "man is a function of psyche and his job is to serve it." Music is part of psyche; it exists not for either audiences' pleasure or composers' vanity, but both exist to serve Music. And what they owe Music is to keep it alive, in themselves, in public, and in history. Bad pieces exist, but listening happens one performance at a time, without comparison. The audience member who says that great music is dead is its murderer.