

# Institute for Studies In American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

**N E W S L E T T E R**

Volume XXVII, No. 1

Fall 1997

## Remapping the Landscape: 19th-Century Music and the Uses of History

by Karen Ahlquist



*A "highbrow" view of nineteenth-century American music*

It's Inauguration Day and I'm staying home. Four years ago, new to Washington and surprised to find my classes canceled for the event, I went. It was hard to see much through the people. But it was worth being there, if only to hear the crowd shush a heckler during Marilyn Horne's performance. The musician in me was gratified.

This year I'm content with the local television news, full of interviews with visitors. Why are they here?, the reporters ask. "We want our kids to see history being made," asserts a young couple. History, something we're supposed to be at the end of, is alive in the minds of Americans, at least when they come to the nation's political center. It even seems to be a source of pride.

Professional history—including music history—is in a more complex, even precarious, position. Beneath the seemingly naive celebration of a national political heritage lie issues of ownership, power, and representation that have occupied not only professional historians but also members of the public as well. Who decides which individuals or groups merit inclusion in our national story? Who teaches what about, say, Hiroshima or the Holocaust? The idea of history as a source of national identity and pride, celebrated by Inauguration Day revelers, has fallen out of favor in the face of increased focus on its use as a vehicle of power, on the controversies rather than the triumphs of the past, and on the self-serving uses to which historical information has been put. Scholars in history departments have recognized that the value of their field can no longer be taken for granted. As writers dealing with the give and take between continuity and change, they question whether the long-accepted narrative approach can accommodate new information

## Inside This Issue

- New Music Notes**  
by Carol J. Oja ..... 6
- Country Biographies**  
by Charles Wolfe .... 8
- Behind the Beat**  
by Mark Tucker ..... 10
- Winslow Remembers**  
Cage ..... 12

## Remapping the Landscape (continued)

from seemingly incompatible points of view.<sup>1</sup> They want to answer charges on the one hand that history merely serves the individual or group that creates it and on the other that the discipline has become irrelevant to anything that matters today. Finally, with the growth of cultural history, they have expressed increasing interest in topics studied by literary and other scholars, which gives rise to the irony that, as historian Sarah Mazza puts it, "in most cases our training and methods continue to differ, even as our objects of study become increasingly similar."<sup>2</sup>

These questions are appropriate for musicologists too. Borrowing Richard Crawford's metaphor of a landscape, I will survey a few landmarks that have lately dotted the territory of nineteenth-century music in America.<sup>3</sup> In 1985, Crawford noted a shift in American musical scholarship away from individual works toward the act of music-making itself.<sup>4</sup> Like historians, musicologists had begun charting territory formerly unknown or ignored. Some of the newfound landmarks take the form of controversies that, as in public history and life, refuse to go away. And well they should not. Many have led to thoughtful, nuanced interpretations of music embedded in, and important to, the society of its time.

A case in point concerns the institutionalization of western art music (primarily, but not exclusively, European music) in the nineteenth century. Here the question of social class comes to the fore. Few commentators today would assert with John Sullivan Dwight and Frédéric Louis Ritter that "classical" music's establishment was, or would be, a sign of social, cultural, and even moral progress. Instead, the opposite view persists, with two major variants: one, that elite groups excluded the general public from western art music in order to enhance their distance from other segments of society; the other, that elites took their own repertory and served it back to broader audiences to assert their control over public culture. In both cases, institutional motives, including philanthropy, are suspect at best. At worst, they are condemned simply for coming from the wealthy. As sociologist Paul DiMaggio says of the Boston Symphony's nineteenth-century Brahmins, "[They] were a status group, and as such they strove towards exclusivity, towards the definition of a prestigious culture that they could monopolize as their own. Yet they were also a social class, and they were concerned, as is any dominant social class, with establishing hegemony over those they dominated."<sup>5</sup>

No one would dispute DiMaggio's well-documented contention that Brahmins founded the Boston Symphony. And undoubtedly one could derive a desired social status from a high position in a cultural organization. But imputing motives simply from an individual's social standing is an oversimplification—a case of the intellectual, ostensibly on behalf of the general population, branding rich people bad no matter what "good" they do.<sup>6</sup> The assertion's problems for music scholars are obvious, for it suggests that fixed social structures determine musical organization and practice without taking musical content into account. And in fact, the structures can seem so inevitable that explanations of their function or origin appear to belabor the obvious.

New scholarly models, however, have shown the boundaries of social class to be more fluid than they may seem. By including documentation from a variety of sources and often considering the musical content itself, recent studies have presented a picture of western art music and social class in nineteenth-century America that is complex, subtle, and varied over time and place. Historian Lawrence Levine was a pioneer in this movement. Now ten years old, his influential *Highbrow/Lowbrow* argues that a process he calls the "sacralization of culture" created a canon of musical works and genres associated with aesthetic, social, and moral superiority. More recently, Michael Broyles details this process in DiMaggio's Boston in the years prior to the Symphony's founding, explicating in detail the social, intellectual, aesthetic, and religious forces underpinning the shift in musical life, as he puts it, "from psalmody to symphony." Katherine Preston amply documents the drawing power of opera in many guises (including the Italian original) from the east coast to the Mississippi. In his study of Wagner in America, Joseph Horowitz emphasizes both the breadth of the composer's appeal and his role in the idealization of music, while providing links with nineteenth-century attitudes toward democracy and Christianity—hardly the property of elites alone.<sup>7</sup> All of these studies deal at least in part with interactions between the intellectual and social spheres and help clarify the discontinuities between events or structures and their depiction. Equally important, they allow us to rethink not only some of the old saws common in discussions of the western canon in social life, but also the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy on which they are based.

The themes of these studies, however, are not the whole story of music in nineteenth-century America, even where social class is concerned. In his discussion of the minstrel character Jim Crow as "demon of disorder," Dale Cockrell throws out an interpretative challenge by quoting Jacques Attali on the relationship between "music" and "noise": "More than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies."<sup>8</sup> Then he elaborates: "'Music' is a metaphor for the official social code; 'noise' is implicit violence, a challenge to law's authority, as carnival is a challenge to Lent. . . . This music ['Jim Crow'] assaulted sensibilities, challenged the roots of respectability, and promised subversion, a world undone, and concomitantly, a new set of codes."<sup>8</sup>

The quotation and Cockrell's interpretation are particularly apt for a discussion of minstrelsy. But the challenge is appropriate to the western art tradition as well. What did it mean to

(continued on page 4)

I.S.A.M. Newsletter Vol. XXVII, No. 1 / ISSN: 0145-8396

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The I.S.A.M. Newsletter is published in the Fall and Spring. Copyright 1997 by the Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Brooklyn, NY 11210.

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## ISAM Matters

ISAM is in the midst of transition, with a search underway for a new director. As our readers are aware, **Carol J. Oja** held that post for nearly five years after the retirement of H. Wiley Hitchcock. She has now moved on to the College of William and Mary in Virginia, where she and Mark Tucker share the David N. and Margaret C. Bottoms Professorship in Music. To capture this moment in ISAM's history, we asked Carol to muse about her tenure at the Institute. The statement below builds on her letter last spring to readers of the *ISAM Newsletter*:

*In some seventeen years at Brooklyn College, working both in the classroom and at ISAM, I witnessed radical fiscal and demographic changes. Always a haven for new immigrants and children of working-class homes, Brooklyn College shifted from serving predominantly Jewish, Italian, and Irish families to also attracting West Indian, African-American, Asian, and Eastern European students. So that ISAM's programs might embrace this richly complex environment, I focused its initiatives on urban ethnic traditions and contemporary composers. This provided a unique opportunity to highlight issues resonating through American culture at large. In addition, I sought to reach out not only to scholars but also to students, lovers of music, and practitioners of the traditions being studied.*

*Ray Allen, ISAM's Research Associate, proved to be an ideal collaborator in achieving these goals. Together, we hosted a series of events, ranging from a conference on Caribbean music in New York City, to symposiums assessing the current scene for African-American composers and the boom in opera composition, to a centennial celebration for composer Henry Cowell and concerts for school children. We worked closely with local arts organizations, including the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the Trinidad and Tobago Folk Arts Institute. Perhaps this fusion of the missions of musicology and ethnomusicology, realized through the combined efforts of scholars and community-based musicians, will inspire others to connect academic research with community resources.*

The ISAM staff and Brooklyn College faculty wish Carol and Mark well in their new positions and thank them for their thoughtful contributions to this and future newsletters. **Ray Allen** is serving as acting director of the Institute and co-editor of the newsletter during the 1997-98 academic year. **Jeff Taylor** joins Ray as co-editor for this issue, and **Philip Rupprecht** will work with him on the Spring 1998 issue. Congratulations, incidentally, to Jeff and Phil for receiving year-long fellowships at the Wolfe Institute for the Humanities at Brooklyn College. Jeff will be working on a book on early jazz pianists, and Phil will be writing a volume on the operas of Benjamin Britten.

## Cowell Coda

After every party, there is tidying up to be done. So it is that six months after "Henry Cowell's Musical Worlds"—the centennial festival co-produced by ISAM, the New School, the World Music Institute, the 92nd Street Y, and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts—I find myself reflecting not only on the achievements of the conference, but also the broader issues it raised regarding Cowell in particular and contemporary music in general.

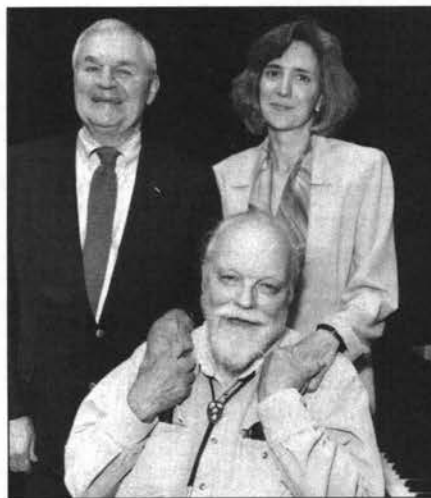
The achievements were manifest: the festival committee produced a varied and stimulating program of events that brought Cowell to national and international attention. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani declared 10-16 March 1997 "Henry Cowell Week" in New York City, and on 16 March, Kofi A. Annan, secretary-general of the United Nations, paid tribute to Cowell's "contributions to intercultural music" in a special address. The festival concerts and conference sessions, as well as the New York Public Library's revelatory exhibit, provided ample evidence of Cowell's involvement in the whole world of music. Finally, Lou Harrison's moving keynote reminiscences reminded us all of Cowell's extraordinary generosity of character.

But the festival also generated food for further thought. The huge stylistic gap between the *Quartet for Flute, Oboe, Cello [and] Harp* (L802a, 1962) and the *26 Simultaneous Mosaics* (L923, 1963)—juxtaposed on a program at the New School performed by the Colorado String Quartet and Musicians' Accord—came as something of a shock, even to those who thought they were fully *au fait* with the inclusivity of Cowell's compositional aesthetic. The panel session on *New Musical Resources* demonstrated how very far we have to go in placing Cowell, his music, and his ideas in a proper cultural and historical context, while also developing some of those ideas beyond their most rudimentary applications. And for me, the most challenging thought to emerge from the festival was that we can only quantify

Cowell's achievements adequately if we reject the prevailing view of the composer as "sublime master" (to use E. T. A. Hoffman's phrase) and return instead to earlier, pre-Romantic conceptions of music and musicians.

While significant new ground has been broken, there is still much to be done. True, two books—Dick Higgins's edited collection of Cowell's writings, and a collection of essays on the composer's music and writings edited by myself—are imminent, as are several new scores and recordings. But Joel Sach's authorized and eagerly awaited biography is some way from completion. Meanwhile live performances and recordings continue to emphasize Cowell's experimental piano pieces rather than his chamber music, songs, or symphonies. The troubling result is a somewhat skewed vision of his output. Consequently, it may yet be some time before the stereotypical image of Cowell the modernist maverick is replaced by a more accurate and rounded picture of Cowell the postmodern prophet.

—David Nicholls, Keele University



H. Wiley Hitchcock and Carol J. Oja  
(standing) with Lou Harrison  
Photo by Jack Vartoogian

establish at the top of the aesthetic hierarchy an increasingly rationalized repertory, in which even the limited "disorder" of an opera aria is first carefully "framed" (as Susan McClary says) and finally eliminated?<sup>9</sup> The claim that specific social codes are embedded in musical sound itself lies on a different interpretative plane from the sociology of elites or other accounts of the western art tradition and its reception. And the metaphors of music and noise are precisely that. Yet for Americanists in particular, who have studied and valued non-canonic repertoires, these metaphors ring true. Moreover, they gain credibility and power when linked with historical explanations that take into account the full spectrum of nineteenth-century music making.

Other parts of the American musical landscape bring additional issues to the fore, as some areas are being explored for the first time. In musical theater, for example, the work of Susan Porter, Katherine Preston, George Martin, Deane Root, and Thomas Riis has told us about repertory, genre, economics, performance practice, aesthetics, and reception. These scholars also introduce a host of composers, performers, promoters, critics, and audience members now accepted as actors on the historical stage.<sup>10</sup> Such topics reflect an interest in currency rather than canon, a willingness to plumb a wide variety of primary sources, and a focus on cultural embeddedness and contextualism. They also lead to new, sometimes difficult issues involving race and gender, as well as class. For example, in *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott uses his title as an elaborate metaphor for minstrelsy's multifaceted impact on antebellum white America, even as he acknowledges the genre's racism. And Susan Cook, in her essay on a popular ballad, "Fuller and Warren" (1820), treats the ballad as a story designed to "teach codes of behavior," reminding us that the guise of entertainment or communal music-making can allow misogynist messages to be communicated unobserved. Her study is in the important collection *Cecilia Reclaimed*, which includes seven out of ten essays entirely or in part about American music.<sup>11</sup>

The variety of knowledge required by a thoroughly contextualist approach, along with a willingness to face important, if uncomfortable, issues, gives much recent work credibility, interpretative depth, and contemporary relevance. It also encourages music's inclusion in an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the past. In *Telling the Truth About History*, historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob argue that the shift in focus toward cultural history can "challenge the virtually commonsensical assumption that there is a clear hierarchy of explanation in history . . . running from biology and topography through demography and economics up to social structure and finally to politics and its poor cousins, cultural and intellectual life." This is a change they favor: "Leaving the history of specialized bodies of knowledge to a variety of subdisciplines may work for the history of music or art . . . , although there too, general historical knowledge loses a vital piece of the human spirit."<sup>12</sup>

I hear this last sentence as an invitation for music scholars to contribute to the ongoing debates. While issues of race, class, and gender endure, recent studies show that there are many ways to deal with them. "History" is indeed a problem today; its normative aspects are recognized, and the underlying myth of scientific

objectivity is gone forever.<sup>13</sup> But the "history without heroes" model, prominent in the study of music in nineteenth-century America, enhances the historian's ability to check rhetorical or interpretative excess, thus helping to restore a confidence in historical work undermined by recent controversies. Awareness of the potential for reductionism, one-sided explanations, uncontextualized assumptions, and unsupported interpretations helps history writing assert its utility at a time of challenge. The new debates bring an important theoretical awareness and timeliness to our work. Indeed, they may make epistemologists of us all. Coupled with the scholar's quest for new knowledge, these debates forge needed links among disciplines and between the past and the present. In so doing, they assert the significance of music to the society that created and supported it, and the importance of historical knowledge to a useful and creative understanding of the world.

### NOTES

1. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), Chapter 4, 289, 291-302, and passim; Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *American Historical Review* 100/3 (June 1995): 651-677.

2. Sarah Mazza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101/5 (December 1996): 1514. Despite her title, Mazza includes commentary on British and American history.

3. Richard Crawford, *The American Musical Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

4. Richard Crawford, *Studying American Music* (New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1985): 2.

5. Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America" (1982), in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 392.

6. For a nineteenth-century example of this phenomenon, see Karen Ahlquist, "Mrs. Potiphar at the Opera: Satire, Idealism, and Cultural Authority in Post-Civil War New York," in *Music and Culture in America, 1861-1918*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Garland, in press).

7. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Michael Broyles, "Music of the Highest Class": *Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

8. Dale Cockrell, "Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder," *American Music* 14/2 (Summer 1996): 174. The Attali quotation is from *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985): 6. When I wrote this essay, Cockrell's book on the same theme, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), was not yet available.

9. Susan McClary, "Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen," *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 80-111.

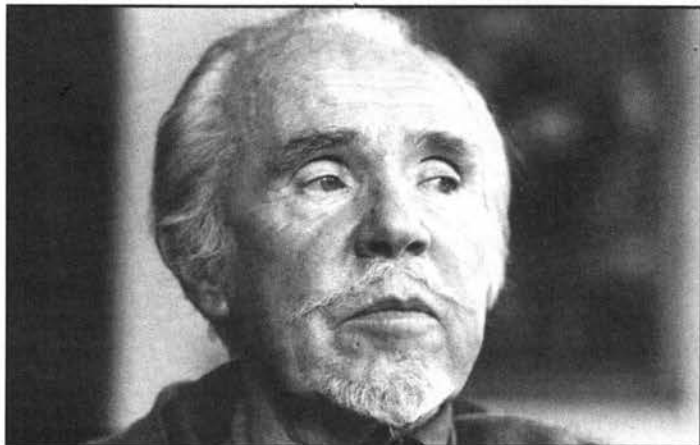
10. Susan L. Porter, "With an Air Debonair": *Musical Theatre in America 1785-1815* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Preston, *Opera on the Road*; George Martin, *Verdi at the Golden Gate: Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Deane L. Root, *American Popular Stage Music, 1860-1880* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1981); Thomas L. Riis, *Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). See also Karen Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera: Music, Theater, and Culture in New York City, 1815-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

11. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Susan C. Cook, "'Cursed Was She': Gender and Power in American Balladry," in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 202-224.

12. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 230, 283.

13. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, Chapter 5.

# Punching Piano Scores



Conlon Nancarrow in Mexico City, 1983  
Photo by Betty Freeman

With the death of Conlon Nancarrow on 10 August 1997, American music loses a major voice in the experimental tradition of Ives, Cowell, and Cage. It is exactly fifty years since Nancarrow arrived in New York City to find a player piano, and a machine to punch the holes in its thick paper rolls. The trip was prompted both by frustration with inadequate performances of his rhythmically complex music and a 1939 reading of Cowell's *New Musical Resources*, with its prescient comments on mechanical instruments. If players can't realize the notes, Nancarrow felt, why not dispense with human performers altogether? So began his most important work: the series of over fifty *Studies* for player piano completed after 1948, a body of music unprecedented in its rhythmic invention, exuberant vitality, and rare elegance.

Kyle Gann's brilliant and authoritative study, *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press, 1995; \$49.95), is based on a bold premise: that by his achievements in tempo organization, isorhythm, texture, and form, Nancarrow has "re-defined in a technical sense what the act of musical composition can be." Paradoxically, it is by an ago-old means, the strictly canonic overlay of voices, that Nancarrow's studies transcend a traditional, note-against-note concept of counterpoint. In his later studies, especially, the complex layering of strands of various tempi—or, in the acceleration studies, *changing tempi*—results in aggregates of sound comparable to Ligeti's micropolyphony and Xenakis's statistical sound galaxies.

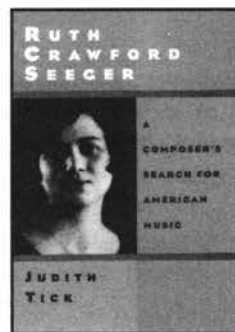
Nancarrow's is music of daunting structural intricacy, and Gann's book is a tour de force of analytic insight. The main phases of Nancarrow's output, from the early blues-inflected ostinato works, through the studies in isorhythm and acceleration, to the novel sound-world of the later studies, are traced in work-by-work discussion. Gann provides an overview of a piece's rhythmic skeleton (often in effective diagrams) and a vivid description of its main events. He writes with infectious enthusiasm and a gift for explaining formidable numerical schemes in lively analogic terms: describing Study No. 36 (a canon in the tempo proportion 17:18:19:20), for instance, Gann compares its symmetrically arranged glissandi to "windows in an ancient temple placed to point to the solstice and equinoctial positions of the sun." His

(continued on page 7)

## RUTH CRAWFORD SEEGER

### A Composer's Search For American Music

JUDITH TICK



"A wonderful book, which will be an inspiration to women musicians in many countries and languages. It will be of interest to many—not just women, and not just musicians or teachers or collectors of folk music."—Pete Seeger.

"This long-awaited book is more than a biography of a neglected American musician. It is an eloquent and subtle portrait of music and culture in twentieth-century America. It is a beautifully written, exemplary work of scholarship and biography."—Leon Botstein, President, *Bard College*, and Editor of *The Musical Quarterly*.

"This brilliant and lyrically written biography confronts the question that has long perplexed Ruth Crawford Seeger's admirers: why did such a gifted twentieth-century American composer produce so few works? Judith Tick...reconstructs a complex life—illuminating not only the creative artist but also the folksong scholar, teacher, wife, and mother."—Carol J. Oja, Director, Institute for Studies in American Music, *Brooklyn College*.

"A stunning achievement...restoring this important but unfortunately rather neglected composer to her rightful place in the American musical firmament."—Gunther Schuller, composer/conductor.

"This important biography vividly presents Ruth Crawford Seeger caught between the conflicting demands of composing, folksong collecting, and her responsibilities as wife and mother. Without these conflicts she no doubt would have produced even more masterpieces."—Elliott Carter, composer.

"Fascinating."—*Los Angeles Times*

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## New Music Notes by Carol J. Oja

Contemporary music commands high visibility these days. In New York, for example, small concerts still continue to be given in alternative spaces, but alongside them there are highly popular extravaganzas in major venues, such as the "Next Wave" festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music or "Bang on a Can" at Lincoln Center. At the same time, the quantity of new music on CDs continues to rise. Suddenly, a category of creative work that was long seen as having little commercial potential can, on occasion, become marketable.

Two prominent examples are *Symphony 1997* by **Tan Dun** (Sony Classical SK 63368) and *Steve Reich: Works, 1965-1995* (Nonesuch 79451-2), both of which have been promoted heavily. Tan Dun is omnipresent at the moment. Like a latter-day incarnation of Leonard Bernstein or Aaron Copland, he aims for a broad, international audience. Tan's *Symphony 1997* was commissioned to commemorate the reunification of Hong Kong with China. When it was released on CD in July, it immediately placed fifth on *Billboard's* classical chart. There are other markers of success for this young composer. His *Marco Polo* received its American premiere at the New York City Opera this fall; the Metropolitan Opera and New York Philharmonic have both awarded him commissions; he has written the soundtrack for Denzel Washington's next film; and the popular press has taken notice—most strikingly in a full-page feature in *Time* on 11 August.

*Symphony 1997* aims for epic statement. It is 72 minutes long, filling a CD, and its performers include Yo-Yo Ma, the Yip's Children's Choir, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Imperial Bells Ensemble of China. Despite the thorny issues raised by reunification, Tan makes no direct political statement. Yet it's hard not to wonder what this native of mainland China, now living in New York City, thinks of the event. His music seems to transcend—or circumvent—politics. *Symphony 1997* crosses just about every boundary imaginable, whether of artistic category, geographic location, or historical viewpoint. It is, both literally and figuratively, all over the map. In sections where the orchestra and children's choir dominate, the mode is tuneful and majestic, inhabiting terrain that at some moments suggests the middle-American melodic breadth of Randall Thompson and at others the space-age brass of John Williams ("Dragon Dance," movement three, is such a case). "Opera in Temple Street" (movement six) switches the scenario to China, with the dominance of indigenous melodies and instruments. The most challenging section of the work, "Earth" (encompassing

movements seven to ten), features an angular yet sumptuous cello line, fusing Chinese string techniques with Western gestures. Resonating throughout is the glorious sound of *bianzhong*—a set of tuned bells dating back more than 2,400 years that was unearthed two decades ago in a Chinese tomb.

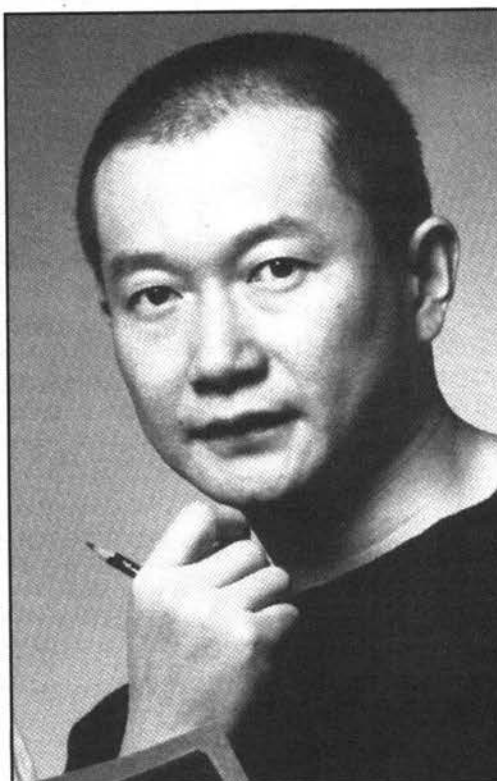
A skillful navigator of present-day audiences, Tan daringly reignites questions of popular appeal and commercial success. Can a composer write for the masses and retain his standing in the new-music community? He adds to this a rich new stage of transnational expression. The musical traditions of China and the West—whether Beethoven or Meredith Monk—coexist in this symphony. Tan has stationed himself at a cultural sampling board. But what term is appropriate to this process? "Integration"? "Cross-Over"? "Hybridization"? Tan himself avers, "No East anymore, no West anymore," suggesting that not only must our language change but also our geographic perception. And he puts a late-century spin on a fundamental modernist credo: "My purpose is to be flexible and freely flying around among all kinds of experience. Not to be driven by the wave of culture—fashion, trends, isms, schools—but to create my own unity."

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Equally epic, although for entirely different reasons, is Nonesuch's **Steve Reich** retrospective. A massive *gesamtausgabe* with many of the performances produced by the composer, the set of ten discs includes twenty-two works and is packaged in a three-and-a-half-inch black box with a sleek design. Many performances are reissues from earlier releases, and there are newly recorded versions for four pieces. That of *Music for 18 Musicians*, performed by Steve Reich and Musicians, is the most breathtaking of the new batch, both for its high virtuosity and the work's intrinsic beauty. Pulsating waves of sound at the opening are produced to perfection, and

they give way to exceptionally lithe renderings of the rapid vocal and mallet-instrument patterns. *Four Organs*—with Michael Gordon, Lisa Moore, Mark Stewart, and Evan Ziporyn on keyboards and James Preiss on maracas (all associated with Bang on a Can)—has a similarly stunning sound presence. The shift of its phases occurs so slowly as to be barely audible. Another virtuosic display—this one of canons—comes in *New York Counterpoint*, featuring Ziporyn on clarinet with pre-recorded tracks. The substantial notes include essays by John Adams (highly recommended), Michael Tilson Thomas, and Michael Hurwitz of Nonesuch Records, also an interview with Reich himself.

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Composer Tan Dun  
Photo by Steve Zoho

## New Music Notes (continued)

**Noted in Brief.** The new CRI, under the creative leadership of Joseph Dalton, continues to be a marvel. Its catalogue grows evermore diverse, and the packaging of its discs—both in design and thematic thrust—has become increasingly appealing without compromising quality. *To the Spirit Unconquered* by **Sheila Silver** is one recent CRI release that is well worth sampling. With a musical language hovering between tonality and atonality, Silver's music resonates with a traditional sense of beauty. It builds on the European past—Bartók at one moment, Debussy at another—yet it does so imaginatively. *To the Spirit Unconquered*, performed here by The Guild Trio, has a hair-raising intensity, inspired by Primo Levi's writings about the Holocaust. By contrast, *Six préludes pour piano, d'après poèmes de Baudelaire*, performed by Gilbert Kalish, are ruminating and ethereal, with sudden flashes of turbulence. . . . Bridge Records, another mainstay for new music, has just released a new performance of *for Philip Guston* by **Morton Feldman**—a four-hour-plus sonic rumination performed by members of the California EAR Unit (Dorothy Stone, flutes; Arthur Jarvinen, percussion; Gloria Cheng-Cochran, piano/celeste). Its glowing timbres and meditative aura yield a sublime sonic bath. . . . Another new Bridge release is *Elliott Carter: The Complete Music for Piano*, recorded by Charles Rosen. His performances of the *Piano Sonata* and *Night Fantasies* date from 1982 (they were previously issued on Etcetera); *90+*, a work written in 1994 for Goffredo Petrassi's ninetieth birthday, was recorded in 1996. This is a CD to explore with other tools at hand. Start by reading Rosen's analysis of the Sonata, which he calls "the great pianistic achievement of the 1940s" (this comes from a lecture published in Charles Rosen, *Elliott Carter: The Musical Language of Elliott Carter*, The Music Division of the Library of Congress, 1984). Then compare Rosen's interpretation of the Sonata, as well as of *Night Fantasies*, with that of Paul Jacobs, as released on Nonesuch in 1983. While Jacobs's Sonata is crisp and cerebral, with a strong sense of linearity, Rosen's is lush and expressive. Both are compelling, yet they reveal entirely different facets of the piece.

## Punching Piano Scores (continued)

refreshingly conversational tone is apt for music of colloquial melodic ease. There probably *isn't* a better word for those anarchic multi-register arpeggio strings than Gann's—"Nancarrow licks."

For all its gestural extravagance, the formal rigor of Nancarrow's experimentalism demands a precise technical vocabulary, and Gann provides an approachable introduction to concepts such as convergence period, and arithmetic and geometric acceleration. Readers will welcome too the parallels drawn between Nancarrow's idiom and facets of other composers' styles. Josquin's tempo canons are reviewed, and the integration of pitch and rhythm in Study No. 23 is compared to similar schemes in Stockhausen and Messiaen.

An important source of analytic insight is Gann's first-hand knowledge of Nancarrow's working habits, based on interviews conducted at the composer's studio in Mexico City in 1988 and 1989, and on inspection of his manuscripts, in particular the punching scores, with their numbered beats in each voice. Especially in the sixteen studies without barline notation, accurate structural interpretation requires sensitivity to occasional minute imperfections in the hand-made roll.

Besides the player-piano studies themselves, Gann examines ten early scores and five recent works for human performers, enhancing our view of their place in Nancarrow's entire oeuvre. Gann has also assembled the best-documented account of Nancarrow's life to date. That said, part of the book's value lies in questions it raises for future scholars. One looks forward, for instance, to in-depth explorations of the composer's knowledge of Indian classical music, and of his abandoned percussion-orchestra project. Even Nancarrow's dissatisfaction with live performance invites more discussion, especially recalling Yvar Mikhashoff's claim that Nancarrow planned many earlier studies "with instruments in mind" (note to the 1993 Ensemble Modern CD). Meanwhile, Gann's study convincingly defines the field of inquiry for a composer whose full stature is only now becoming clear.

—Philip Rupprecht  
Brooklyn College



Steve Reich, Los Angeles, 1983  
Photo by Betty Freeman

# Country and Gospel Notes

by Charles Wolfe

The country music biography is threatening to become a genre unto itself, with dozens of books crowding into a once unheralded field. Recent accounts of Ralph Emery and Reba McEntire have even nudged onto national bestseller lists. Yet the overall scope of country music biographies is oddly skewed, and concentrated mainly in two areas. One is the early days of the genre, with good books on artists like Jimmie Rodgers, Fiddlin' John Carson, Ernest Tubb, and Charlie Poole; these are often produced by academics, and published through university presses. The other is the current (post 1960s) country scene represented by books on George Jones, Tanya Tucker, and even the teen sensation Leanne Rimes. These works, often the slick products of journalists who aim for a general audience, do occasionally include the valuable information and insights demanded by the serious student. Poorly chronicled, until recently, is the "middle period" of the late 1940s and early 1950s—the era during which modern country music was born. This was a vital transitional period, both for the music (the adoption of electric instruments and the emergence of the honky-tonk style) and the business (the rise of BMI, the growth of Nashville, and the flowering of publishing). It deserves greater attention.

One step in this direction is Wade Hall's *Hell-Bent for Music: The Life of Pee Wee King* (University Press of Kentucky, 1996; \$19.95). King, best known for popularizing "The Tennessee Waltz," was one of the first major country performers from outside the South. Born into a Milwaukee family named Kuczynski, he grew up listening to polka music and playing the accordion. By the late 1930s he had formed a band called the Golden West Cowboys and landed a job on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. There he added a patina of professionalism to his act, requiring his band to dress in movie-type cowboy suits, choreographing his sets, using "play-off" and "play-on" music to introduce different members of his group, and contracting with father-in-law J. L. Frank to promote the band. In later years he moved to Louisville where he pioneered country music television, attracting a huge audience by merging country and pop styles.

Despite the title page, *Hell-Bent for Music* is essentially King's autobiography, "as told to" Wade Hall, an English professor at Bellarmine College. Generally, the compromise works well, and the result is a readable account of King's life, brimming with details about the 1940s and 1950s. Problems with such books arise when the subject remembers things one way and the writer has evidence to the contrary. For example, Hall fails to correct King

when he downplays the importance of Louisville songwriter Chilton Price (who helped author "Slow Poke" and "You Belong to Me"). The fact that Hall is not especially knowledgeable about country music does not help matters either. Still, the book is an important contribution, well indexed and festooned with historic photos.

Similar in many ways to the King book is Don Cusic's *Eddy Arnold: I'll Hold You in My Heart* (Rutledge Hill Press, 1997; \$19.95). Arnold, who pioneered the smooth, soft country ballad style with hits like "Bouquet of Roses" and "Cattle Call," was a native of west Tennessee whose first break came as a vocalist for King in 1939. During his peak years of 1947-49, Arnold sold

more records than the entire pop division of his company, RCA Victor, and appeared widely on network and syndicated radio. In the 1960s he made a spectacular comeback, recording with string orchestras and choruses and performing in supper clubs in a tuxedo. In the interim, Arnold's career dovetailed with the growth of Nashville.

Unlike King, Arnold has always been rather reclusive and reluctant to talk about his life; a 1969 autobiography, *It's a Long Way from Chester County*, was little more than an extended press release. But Arnold was impressed with Don Cusic, a professor in the Music Industry Program at Nashville's

Belmont College, and after a few meetings agreed to cooperate with him on a serious biography. The result is not a first-person narrative, but an "as told to" account written in Cusic's voice.

Though the book promises a discussion of Arnold as well as "an insider's view" of the rise of Nashville, it is far more effective as a biography. The story of Nashville's rise to fame is considerably more complex than Cusic's account suggests, and will require more historical inquiry to piece together. For example, there is nothing here about the early Nashville labels, such as Tennessee and Republic, or the city's live music scene. The book's index is superficial, and contains no references to songs; the "discography," the prime record of Arnold's work, is a simplistic list of hits ranked by year. This presents serious problems, for from the 1960s on most of Arnold's record sales were albums, not singles. A chronicle of Arnold's contributions based only on a string of chart-bottom singles yields a very distorted picture. But, like the King book, *I'll Hold You in My Heart* is rich in detail and fills many gaps in the historical map of country music.



Pee Wee King and the Golden West Cowboys

Photo by Carl H. Jones



# Keeping the Wolves from the Door

A perceptive lyricist once warned entertainers: "you can charm the critics and have nothing to eat." Writers on popular music might bear this in mind as well. While readers need to discover a songwriter's charms, they should also learn how his or her work spoke to a wider public and kept the wolf from the door. Of the three books under review here—on Harold Arlen, Ira Gershwin, and Irving Berlin—only the last addresses this issue.

Edward Jablonski's *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Northeastern University Press, 1996; \$29.95) is a thorough, if sometimes excessively digressive, biography that traces Arlen's life from his birth into a Jewish cantor's family, through his first successes in roaring-twenties Harlem, to his subsequent career on Broadway and Hollywood. The sadder aspects of Arlen's life, such as his alcoholism and troubled marriage, are touched on in passing. Also incorporated are pocket biographies for the enormous cast of characters in Arlen's life, including lyricists Ted Koehler, Ira Gershwin, and Johnny Mercer. The songs, of course, are Arlen's main claim to fame and Jablonski provides background on their genesis as well as passable analyses. In addition he discusses the shows, revues, musicals, and films in which the songs were introduced.

Although he was a popular songwriter, we never learn why Arlen's songs were so appealing to so many listeners. Jablonski makes no distinction between the songs Arlen wrote for black performers in the risqué atmosphere of Cotton Club and those he composed for the white performers of the family-friendly *Wizard of Oz*. Jablonski's indiscriminating viewpoint is all the more frustrating when he records Arlen's tragi-comic imprecations against rock and roll. Arlen worked in a complex and rapidly changing market, and Jablonski might have put more effort into investigating how these shifting musical tastes affected Arlen's songs and his attitude toward popular music.

Philip Furia's *Ira Gershwin: the Art of the Lyricist* (Oxford University Press, 1996; cloth \$27.50, paper \$14.95) is much less elegiac in tone; he even suggests at one point that had Arlen and Gershwin collaborated more the split between old and new styles of popular music would have been less pronounced. Furia begins with the thesis that Gershwin's career was a quest to leave behind the merely popular and seek out the dramatically unified or "integrated" musical. Furia then traces out the steps of this journey, from Gershwin's early fascination with "society" verse, through his journeyman work as a Tin Pan Alley lyricist, to his successful musical theater collaborations with his brother George. Furia follows along the way with insightful discussions of the lyricist's craft, revealing Gershwin's brilliant marriage of words and music. Assuming only a smattering of notational literacy on the part of the reader, he manages to convey how Gershwin bent the rules of versification to the demands of the music, often using those very constraints to achieve his most inventive effects.

Furia illuminates the role of individual songs within the larger musical, deftly showing how rhythmic numbers and ballads, pater and sentiment, play off each other. Moreover, he provides a convincing reading of how *An American in Paris* stands as the culmination of Gershwin's search for the "perfectly integrated" musical. Unfortunately, like Jablonski, Furia leaves aside questions of audience reception, ignoring how and why listeners appreciated Gershwin's songs.

Charles Hamm's *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot* (Oxford University Press, 1997; \$35), in contrast to both the Jablonski and Furia books, is more concerned with social milieu than biographical details. Hamm's central thesis is that New York's "radically multicultural," turn-of-the-century population shaped Berlin's early work and provided him with an "apprenticeship" to develop the skills he would subsequently use as a composer for the musical stage.

Hamm's salient point is that all of Berlin's works were influenced by their audience and venue. His early numbers, lively "novelty" tunes that often poked hostile fun at the various ethnic groups of the city, were written for vaudeville's working-class immigrant patrons. And his ballad numbers, sentimental or "folkish," were directed to the genteel "home circle." Berlin's skill lay in his chameleon-like ability to write songs in all these genres, and in his talent for adapting characteristics from each to the other. His "rhythmic ballads," for instance, combined the syncopation of the ragtime song (itself an adaptation of the denigrating "coon" song) with the intimacy of the ballad. In fact, Hamm argues that the rhythmic flair of ragtime was the decisive influence on Berlin. By enlivening both the nineteenth-century ballad and the European operetta with syncopation, Berlin created a new form of musical, one in the style of "syncopated dance music" (222).

Although using concepts derived from Marxism, semiotics, and cultural studies, Hamm's prose remains refreshingly free of jargon. He presents a clear and nuanced picture of Berlin's development that acknowledges the songwriter's own skills, while never forgetting what puts the "popular" in popular music.

All three writers regard craft as paramount to the popular songwriting endeavor, implying that a song's appeal lies in the artful wedding of sophisticated lyrics and music. But only Hamm takes the next step by examining the intersection between the songwriter's art and the desires and expectations of his manifold audiences. Did talented songwriters like Arlen, Gershwin, and Berlin attain widespread popularity solely on the basis of their individual skills, or were broader cultural forces also at play? To be fair, neither Jablonski nor Furia set out to answer this question, but given Hamm's success at integrating issues of artistic production and audience reception, perhaps they and others should.

—Dennis Loranger



"The whole world moves to Berlin's music."  
Herb Roth, 1913

## Behind the Beat with Mark Tucker

**"Invincible Man."** The cornetist Rex Stewart once described a magical entrance made by Louis Armstrong, who bounded onstage "immaculate in a white suit," carrying his trumpet "as if he were holding a wand of rainbows or a cluster of sunlight, something from out of this world." Armstrong had that kind of spellbinding power. He made critics melt in wonder and ooze extravagant praise. "One of the most extraordinary geniuses that all music has ever known," proclaimed Hugues Panassié in 1936. One of the extremely rare "artists of genius in the world of jazz," wrote André Hodeir in 1956. "The pre-eminent musical genius of his era," agreed James Lincoln Collier in 1983. At the start of his Armstrong essay in *The Jazz Tradition*, Martin Williams tried to buck this critical trend: "Call a man a genius often enough, no matter how justly, and his work gets to be beyond comment." By the end, though, Williams was comparing Armstrong's "surpassing art" to late Beethoven quartets, pronouncing it "beyond category" and nearly "beyond music" itself.

To be sure, Armstrong had detractors. Younger musicians scorned the grinning mask of his stage persona. Jazz purists could not reconcile the crowd-pleasing Satchmo singing "Hello, Dolly" in the 1960s with the brilliant innovator they heard on recordings from the 1920s. But such minority views haven't dimmed Armstrong's luster. Judging from recent biographies and CD reissues, he continues to hold a lofty and inviolable position in the jazz firmament.

Laurence Bergreen's *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* (Broadway Books, 1997; \$30) tells a heroic story. Appealing to the general reader, Bergreen keeps musical discussion to a minimum, focusing instead on Armstrong's resilient character, triumphant career, and complicated dealings with others: women, family members, musicians, fans, and business associates (notably the street-smart thugs who became his managers). Bergreen starts out at a leisurely pace, taking a detailed look at the early years and making good use of Armstrong's published memoirs and interviews as well as unpublished autobiographical writings now housed in the Louis Armstrong Archives at Queens College. The picture he paints of Armstrong's New Orleans youth is rosier than that of earlier biographers. Collier, for example, stresses the deprivation Armstrong suffered in an environment of "extraordinary violence and squalor," while Bergreen makes the city's rough neighborhoods seem exciting, filled with colorful Runyonesque characters—prostitutes, pimps, gamblers, hoodlums. More conventional is the depiction of pianist Lillian Hardin, second of Armstrong's four wives, as shrewish and manipulative. (Hardin has yet to receive even-handed treatment in the Armstrong literature; a full-length study of this fascinating figure is long overdue.) After taking more than 400 pages to get Armstrong to the age of forty in 1941, Bergreen needs fewer than 100 to cover the last thirty years—during which Armstrong

spent much time on grueling road trips with his All Stars. Like other biographers of jazz musicians, Bergreen discovered the difficulty of turning an endless string of one-nighters into gripping narrative.

While Collier depicts an Armstrong tortured by a sense of inferiority and unable to assert himself, Bergreen portrays him as proud and defiant: "His whole life can be read as a rebuke to bourgeois proprieties. Louis played, smoked, ate, made love, and lived as he damn well pleased.... [He] didn't care much what people, especially those in authority, thought of him." Yet what hobbles Bergreen's account is the weakness for hyperbole shared by most writers on Armstrong. When Armstrong gets a telegram from King Oliver in 1922, for example, it changed "his own life, the development of jazz, and the course of popular entertainment, even the face of American society." By 1931, Bergreen asserts the trumpeter had revolutionized "the entire field of jazz, and by extension, contemporary music." And at a concert in 1947, "every note he blew was amplified by history, and by the time he finished . . . he had transformed his career, thrown off the harness of swing, and reinvented himself."

Such portentous prose backfires: instead of bringing Armstrong closer it has the opposite effect, raising him to a height where he towers over lesser mortals, blinding in his brilliance.

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"His stomach looked as if he were eight months pregnant. His hair was parted into two bangs and pasted down over his oval-shaped face like a shiny black umbrella." So Armstrong appeared to Mittie Travis when she saw him perform on Chicago's South Side in 1922. Mrs. Travis told this to her son Dempsey J. Travis who includes it in his slender

biography, *The Louis Armstrong Odyssey: From Jane Alley to America's Jazz Ambassador* (Urban Research Press, Inc., 1997; \$23.75). Filled with photographs, anecdotes, and descriptions culled from newspapers, Travis's book resembles a personal scrapbook kept by a dedicated Armstrong fan. Chicago looms large in this account, with a number of the city's residents relating first-hand encounters with Armstrong. Race figures prominently, too. Travis charges Armstrong's white managers with financial exploitation and physical abuse, driving him "like a plow horse" with the punishing itineraries they arranged. He reinforces the point with editorializing chapter titles ("A Handshake into Servitude") and photo captions ("Joe Glaser, former Al Capone associate and Armstrong's manager and driver man"). Travis's main theme, though—like Bergreen's—is triumph against the odds. The legacy of Louis Armstrong, he concludes, "was not one of sorrow but of joy."

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Perhaps Travis was in the audience when Armstrong and his All Stars appeared at Chicago's Medina Temple on 1 June 1956.



Louis Armstrong, c. 1930

## Behind the Beat (continued)

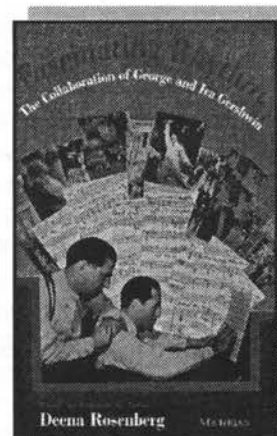
A recording of the concert was made but not released until 1980. Now a fuller version has been reissued on a two-CD set, *Louis Armstrong: The Great Chicago Concert 1956* (Columbia/Legacy C2K 65119). Though the performance is not uniformly "great"—the band sounds barely under control on "Tiger Rag" and gets lost on "Manhattan"—it does preserve a typical evening's entertainment by the All Stars, including Armstrong's singing and patter together with vocals by Velma Middleton and others. But not wholly typical, since the concert featured an opening segment called "50 Years of Jazz" in which the All Stars provided music for a script read by actress Helen Hayes. On this "complete" CD reissue, the narration has been axed, thus preventing listeners from hearing the concert in its entirety. Helpful context does come in separate liner notes by George Avakian and Dan Morgenstern, the latter discussing Armstrong's struggles with concert producers trying to dictate what and with whom he performed.

It was Avakian who came up with the idea for *Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy* (Columbia/Legacy CK 64925), recorded in 1954. Apparently Armstrong was happy to comply and had ample rehearsal time before entering the studio. The physical strain audible on *The Great Chicago Concert* is nowhere evident in Armstrong's interpretations of Handy's well-known blues, and the All Stars sound relaxed and at home with the material. Additional tracks not offered on the 1986 reissue of this disc include Handy conversing with Avakian, Armstrong telling a ribald story, and some rehearsal sequences that—in the case of "Loveless Love"—feature a level of intensity even higher than on the issued take.

More Armstrong from the 1950s is available on *The Complete Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong on Verve* (Polygram 314 537 284-2), a compilation of the three LPs these artists made for producer Norman Granz. Here the spotlight shines on Armstrong the vocalist, though occasionally he picks up his horn. Granz chose repertory from the American popular songbook that was Fitzgerald's bread and butter: Berlin, Porter, Kern, and Gershwin, including a concert-style arrangement of *Porgy and Bess*. Armstrong, by contrast, doesn't always sound at ease—he painfully labors through some of the lyrics (e.g., "Let's Do It") and the grin seems forced. These recordings, then, offer a chance not just to compare two of America's most distinctive song stylists but to explore power relations between producer and performer: at what point does creative direction become a form of oppression? And how did an artist like Armstrong devise strategies to wrest control for himself, even to subvert someone else's agenda?

*Louis Armstrong: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings* (RCA 09026-68682-2) presents Armstrong fronting his orchestra in 1932-33 and playing with both large and small groups in 1946-47. This is an essential set for any jazz collection, featuring canonical classics, New Orleans standards, sweet pop songs, zany novelty numbers, and plenty of blues. Though Armstrong reached the apex of his career in the 1950s and 1960s, he sounds at the height of his expressive powers on 1933 recordings like "Basin Street Blues" and "I've Got the World on a String." Tenderness, pathos, pride, desire, wisdom—it's all there in his aching voice and searing horn, cutting like a laser to the heart of what matters.

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**MICHIGAN**

# Remembering John Cage

Richard Winslow is John Spencer Camp Professor of Music, Emeritus, at Wesleyan University. As noted below, he first met John Cage in 1955, when the composer played a typically controversial recital at the university: "The place started to go mad," he recalled. "I saw people, red-faced with anger, punching each other. I saw people stuffing handkerchieves in their mouths." Five years later Winslow arranged for Cage to be a Fellow at Wesleyan's Center for Advanced Studies. The residency coincided with the establishment of the university's vanguard program in world music, which continues to flourish today. In the following vignettes, Winslow vividly captures Cage's quixotic sense of humor and unique view of the world.

In 1959 I was a faculty representative on the editorial board of the Wesleyan University Scholarly Press—the word "scholarly" here used to identify what was then only a small part of the Wesleyan University Press, an organization whose chief activity was for-profit publication of secondary school materials (including the hugely-circulated *My Weekly Reader*). Meetings of the scholarly press editorial board were usually attended by the CEO of the whole works, who was a hard-hitting business man.

One day when we were brainstorming about possible sources of manuscripts, the CEO asked about my acquaintance with John Cage. "Hey, he's Big Stuff, isn't he?" And I, knowing that his sense of "Big Stuff" didn't exactly apply to Cage, said "Oh sure." So I was invited to write Cage and ask if he had anything for consideration.

A few weeks later, a large bundle wrapped in grocery paper and tied with heavy twine arrived from Stony Point, New York, where Cage lived at the time. I unwrapped it to find a sprawling mass of pamphlets and periodicals that, as it turned out, contained everything Cage had written to date.

In those days, when Cage was recognized at all by academics it was usually to ridicule him—so what happened next bordered on the miraculous. (1) The scholarly press's managing editor, Will Lockwood, and his brilliant copy editor, the late José de la Torre Bueno, saw the possibility of a book in all these snippets and genuinely admired the material. (2) The CEO was sufficiently convinced about Cage as "Big Stuff" to give a go-ahead. (3) The Press had on its staff a wonderful book designer, Ray Grimila, who coveted the unusual challenges posed by Cage's material. (4) The Wesleyan Institute for Advanced Studies provided Cage with a resident fellowship for the academic year 1960-61, which allowed him to work steadily—often daily—with the editor and designer to shape the various essays and articles into a book. Somewhere along the line John decided on the title, *Silence*. (It is still

astonishing to me that they accepted chance operations as a way of deciding certain aspects of the layout.)

\* \* \* \* \*

One day in 1962, John asked me where he might find an interesting theory of rhythm, adding that all he'd ever been taught was that music was either on or off the beat. My mind did not go to theoretical discussions but to compositional manifestations that had interested me. We listened together to a recording of the final section of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* which, readers will recall, is loud, muscular, and full of shifting meters. After three or four minutes, John suddenly exclaimed, "Isn't this awful! Isn't—this—simply—AWFUL!" And as so often when he found his own sensibilities contradicting prevailing wisdom, he laughed until the tears came.

Some years later Cage called on Stravinsky in New York. He later told me the visit had been a delight. According to Stravinsky the 1914 uproar over *The Rite of Spring* in Paris was much greater than any controversy Cage had ever caused.

\* \* \* \* \*



John Cage and Richard Winslow conducting Cage's *Et Cetera*  
Photo by William Van Saun (1974)

In the late 1950s Cage came to Wesleyan for a lecture recital. In honor of the event, the late political historian Sigmund Neumann gave a dinner party for about twenty guests. During before-dinner drinks, I noticed a stranger, a short man wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses, chatting with Cage. When we sat down for the meal, the man departed and I asked John who he was. John said it was Paul Weiss from

Yale. I knew the name—Weiss was not only a prominent philosopher but also the guru of my colleague, Louis Mink—so it was with interest that I asked what he had been doing there. John replied that Weiss liked to talk with him about aesthetics. This prompted me to ask about Weiss's stand on music. In reply, John chose his words carefully. "His stand on music is (pause) that if he could only understand (pause) Beethoven (pause) well enough (pause) he might finally understand (pause) music." There was a silence while he pondered what he had said. Then once again he laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

I first met John Cage in 1955 after a letter came from him out of the blue saying that he and David Tudor were touring New England with a two-piano recital of Cage-Stockhausen music and asking if they could play at Wesleyan for a fee of \$200. Indeed there was an opening on the all-college Assembly Series but only half the requested fee was available, so I wrote back suggesting that just he, Cage, come do a solo recital for \$100. He said they'd

## Remembering John Cage (continued)

both come for \$100—and they did and gave a recital to a hall filled to the rafters with students, some of whom were under the impression they would be treated to a Spike Jones-like spoof. An uproar resulted, with the audience split into factions, part mad as hell, part dying of laughter, part worshipful. My wife had planned a small post-concert reception at our house, but a mob of uninvited students jam-packed the living room so that I, arriving late after carrying out post-concert duties, had to squeeze my way in. Everyone was intensely quiet. I couldn't see John, but his voice floated across the room: "Well, remember how it says in the New Testament: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these.'" I believe he was responding to a question about using unheard-of apparatus in the concert—hammer, klaxon horn, slammed piano lid, and stopwatch.

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Cage was, of course, music director for the Merce Cunningham Dance Co., for which he used a great deal of his own compositions. Once in the mid-1960s I met him for dinner following a rehearsal for a Cunningham performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He was exhilarated because union problems had prevented any music from being used during the rehearsal, and

the dancers had moved in total silence. "Oh, it was so beautiful," he said. "I almost wish the performance would go on that way."

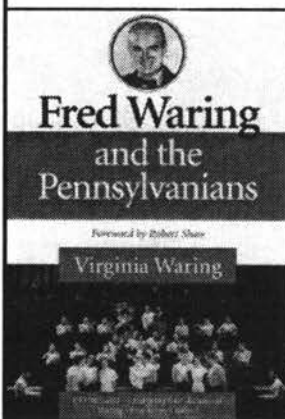
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Once in the early 1960s I drove John to Bradley Field where he had a reservation for a flight to Boston. I waited in the lobby for him to be ticketed, and when he turned away from the counter, his face registered sheer delight. He couldn't wait to tell me, "The computer goofed! The computer goofed!" The computer had mistakenly put him on a flight to Detroit, and now he'd have to wait around for another flight to Boston, a hitch in plans that did not bother him in the slightest. Rather, he was simply thrilled that the computer might exhibit indeterminate traits, just like people.

\*\*\*\*\*

John was having lunch around the kitchen table with me and my wife when our seven-year-old son, Larry, came home from school, silently handed me his report card, and disappeared. I read aloud his teacher's comment. "Larry is a bright boy but he doesn't seem to pay attention." "Must be thinking about something else," John said, smothering a laugh. Letting the laughter open out, he added delightedly, "Maybe he's in heaven."

—Richard Winslow  
Wesleyan University



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# All About Virgil

Anthony Tommasini's *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (Norton, 1997; \$30) is an important addition to the surprisingly small family of biographies about American composers. It is a trade book, not an academic study. It treats the man and his career, not analytic details in his music. It focuses most fully on Thomson's three operas, on his work as a music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and on the ramifications of his carefully hidden personal life. Writing neither hagiography nor pathography, Tommasini delivers a loving but critical assessment. He makes his own friendship with the composer part of the story, yet squarely confronts the contradictions in Thomson's character. "Virgil is the devil," declared John Cage in an interview with Tommasini. Over the course of 572 engrossingly written pages, Tommasini puzzles out whether Thomson treated life like a big Halloween party, wearing a devil's costume when it suited him, or whether he really sprouted horns.

Tommasini's substantial section about *Four Saints in Three Acts* gives a good sense of his method. Interweaving a host of eccentric personalities, Tommasini achieves a prose equivalent to the collage construction of Thomson's early scores. He covers expected ground, especially Thomson's rocky relationship with librettist Gertrude Stein. But he also veers onto tangents—or so they first appear. A digression to the New York salon of R. Kirk Askew, Jr. and his wife Constance, for example, turns out to lead directly and meaningfully to the Hartford premiere of *Four Saints* in 1936. Among the panoply of characters who pop in and out of view are "Chick" Austin, director of the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, architect Philip Johnson, critic Carl Van Vechten, director John Houseman, choral conductor Eva Jessye, and dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein. This is contextualizing history of a high order.

Race is a recurring theme, both in the section about *Four Saints* and in the book as a whole. The all-black cast of *Four Saints* has been acclaimed for breaking racial barriers. But rather than genuflecting at this achievement, Tommasini probes Thomson's "sweeping generalizations" about African Americans, exposing the ways he "could sound patronizing, even racist." Never reductive or over-simplifying, he situates Thomson in place and generation, exploring what it meant to be a white native of Kansas City born only thirty years after the end of the Civil War, who viewed himself as a thoroughly reconstructed Southerner but never could break free of an essentializing outlook.

A similar balance characterizes the treatment of Thomson's homosexuality. Rather than simply dragging his subject out of the closet, Tommasini probes why Thomson chose to stay there. He avoids drawing connections between Thomson's sexuality and his music, choosing instead to tell a personal and political story. Thomson's professional life—whether his association with Gertrude Stein, artists in the Askew salon, or writers at the *Herald Tribune*—was significantly laced with homosexuals and bisexuals. At the same time as he could seem "homophobic," as Tommasini puts it, Thomson capitalized on the insider position yielded by his own sexual orientation.

With a subject who was such a gifted writer and who could

barely open his mouth without uttering some brilliant aphorism, Tommasini might easily have let Thomson tell this tale. But he avoids excessive quotation, letting his own voice reign. The result is a frank critique that explores the nuances of a very complex man, leaving intact his prejudices, generousities, political cunning, and deep sense of personal loyalty.

—Carol J. Oja

College of William and Mary

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## News of Note

**Gershwin at 100.** On 6-7 November 1998, ISAM and the Music Department of the CUNY Graduate Center will celebrate the centennial of the birth of George Gershwin with a two day conference and film festival. Musicologists, cultural historians, film critics, and musicians will come together to reassess the music and legacy of America's best known composer. Mark your calendars and look for details in our spring newsletter.

**Copland Heritage Association.** The Copland Heritage Association, established in 1993 to save and repair Aaron Copland's home as a workplace for American composers and scholars, has announced the formation of The Copland Society. The mission of the Society is to develop a nationwide constituency for support of the Association's long-range goals.

The current project of the Society is to finance completion of the repairs and renovations of Copland's house, known as "Rock Hill," in Cortlandt, New York. Once restored, the house will be used for short-term residencies by young American composers and for seminars and lecture-recitals.

Membership in the Society is open to all. Annual dues begin at \$25. For information about joining the Society or about the work of the Association, contact Dr. Grant Beglarian or Ms. Florence Stevens, Box 2177, Cortlandt Manor, NY 10566; e-mail [beglarian@advanced.org](mailto:beglarian@advanced.org) or [stevens@highlands.com](mailto:stevens@highlands.com).

**Amy Beach Conference.** "Amy Beach and Her Times," a one-day conference to take place on 28 October 1998 at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, New Hampshire, invites submission of paper proposals. The conference theme may be interpreted broadly to include any aspect of Beach's life and works. The conference committee includes Peggy Vagts, Chair, UNH Department of Music; William E. Ross, Head of UNH Special Collections and Curator of the Amy Beach Collection; and Adrienne Fried Block, City University of New York. Papers should be no longer than twenty-five minutes. Written proposals should be no longer than 500 words. Proposals for musical performances must include the program, performers, and a recording. Please submit three copies of all materials, including recordings, plus a 100-word abstract suitable for publication in the conference program. Please include a list of audio-visual equipment needed. Send proposals to: The Program Committee, c/o William E. Ross, UNH Special Collections, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH 03824-3592 by 1 April 1998. For more information, please call 603-862-2714 or send e-mail to: [wer@hopper.unh.edu](mailto:wer@hopper.unh.edu).

# Popular Music in Its Place

Reading (or re-reading) the essays in *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (Cambridge University Press, 1995; \$59.95) makes me realize how much music scholars owe to Charles Hamm. In the Preface he writes, a little sadly, "Though I was trained a historical musicologist, in a sense I've been a scholar without a home discipline for the last two decades." But the vital and growing community of musicologists who study non-canonical musics might not exist without Hamm's pioneering efforts.

Though this collection of essays contains writings going back to the early 1970s, everything here is still remarkably fresh. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the pieces in this volume concerns methodology. Hamm, unlike many musicologists, never seems to have adopted the "man-and-his-works" approach, instead setting out to situate whatever music he studied in its time and place. As he reflects in a 1975 essay about music since World War II: "There *is* a relationship between a piece of music and what was happening in the world when it was written" (57; emphasis in original). While few musicologists would openly contradict such an assertion today, it was a provocative statement for its time, and few have taken this approach as seriously or productively as Hamm.

Many of these influential essays originally appeared in rather obscure places; having them together at last will save rooting in reprint files. But more importantly, the collection demonstrates Hamm's broad range as a historian and thinker. His formidable intellect illuminates everything he studies, from the music of South Africa, the southern United States, and China, to the works of John Cage, Elvis Presley, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, the Hutchinson family, and Antonin Dvorak.

Most readers, though, will be familiar with many of these writings; obscure Hamm, after all, is not very obscure. Of the new articles, the opening one, "Modernist Narratives and Popular Music," will probably be the most useful for students of popular music. In his usual fashion, Hamm cuts through many of the unproductive assumptions that beset the study of popular music (and in many way, canonical musics as well). These include the narrative of musical autonomy, which Hamm rightly locates in western European class stratification; the narrative of mass culture; the various narratives of authenticity, whether authenticity of race/ethnicity or capitalist production; the narrative of youth culture; and the narrative of classic and classical popular music. In each of these sections, Hamm expertly sums up and critiques the extant literatures, offering insightful avenues and possibilities at every turn. This essay should help guide the study of popular music into the next century.

I have only one complaint with this volume: the unconscionably high price, which means it will be purchased mainly by libraries. This wonderful book deserves to be read, hashed over, and—perhaps most importantly—taught to students who will become the next generation of popular music scholars.

—Timothy D. Taylor  
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