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Beth Anderson

KYLE GANN

Is there such a thing as "too pretty" music? Future historians will certainly think we thought so. Recent critical rhetoric extols composers who are "tough" with the audience. "Beauty in music is too often confused with something that lets the ears lie back in the easy chair," wrote Charles Ives, little guessing how rare musical easy chairs would someday become. We now associate prettiness with New Age music, mindless tripe to be played in the background by yuppies with no taste. And prettiness is further linked with effeminacy, dissonance with masculinity and strength. "Stand up and use your ears like a man!", Ives once shouted. In an age which disdains most sexual stereotypes, "dissonance = masculinity = good" and "prettiness = effeminacy = bad" still survive in professional music circles.

Beth Anderson writes pretty music -- the prettiest music I know of, after Schubert, Fauré, Debussy, and a few other long-dead white males. Her prettiness is not an intellectual deficiency, but a political stance. "To make something beautiful," Anderson likes to say, "is revolutionary." Her web page (<http://users.rcn.com/beand/>) lists her as a "neo-romantic, avant-garde composer," and she may be the only composer in the world who could justify both contradictory labels. Her music has the simplicity of that of Erik Satie or, even more, Virgil Thomson. It is listenable, melodic, fun to play. Such qualities often bring her into conflict with other composers. On one 12-tone-heavy musical festival, she says, after her lullaby was performed "everyone quit speaking to me." And yet her music is no throwback to an easy past, but radical on its own terms.

Radical because the content of a musical work has more to do with its form than its materials. Anderson's forms are not conventional, and the prettiness is a result of her formal ideas. She is, after all, a tonal composer out of a John Cage tradition, and her music preserves something of Cage's nonlinearity. Many of her instrumental works are called *Swales*, a form she invented herself. A swale is a term for a meadow or marsh in which a lot of plants grow together, and Anderson's *Swales* are collages. But they are not the collages of John Zorn or Karlheinz Stockhausen, in which musical fragments are juxtaposed for their jarring incongruity. Anderson's *Swales* modulate in texture and mood every few measures, but with the same artlessness with which you'll see Queen Anne's lace and milkweed growing next to each other in a meadow.

Her *Pennyroyal Swale*, for example, has been played by New York's intrepid Flux String Quartet. It opens with a jaunty C-major melody for alternating violins, then switches to another melody marked "Country Fiddle," to indicate the correct style of playing. Over 12 measures this winds down to a key change and a calm passage mostly in whole notes marked "Pastoral." A fughetto arises, then a section of arpeggio textures, moving to a rousing folksy passage in minor key with fast violin pizzicati. None of these changes is abrupt, many pieces of the mosaic are linked by tonality, motive, or rhythm (3 + 3 + 2 is common), and ideas return as generously as wildflowers in an unattended field. In its collage-like nonlinearity and freedom from development, this is radical music. But while its form may challenge musical sensibilities, its idiomatic textures and melodies are delightful for the quartet players and audience alike. Anderson achieves her subversive ends through seduction, not confrontation.

One would never guess that such music had its origins in Cage's iconoclastic philosophy. Though trained to write dutiful 12-tone pieces in her native Kentucky, Anderson studied in California in the '70s, and was freed by contact with Cage, Terry Riley, and Robert Ashley to write the text-sound and minimalist pieces that she found more congenial. Like just about everyone in that era, she relied at first on mechanical methods: a favorite was converting the letters of a chosen text into pitches (in this way she wrote an opera based on the trial of Joan of Arc). But she soon found herself limiting her resources, so that ultimately an otherwise chance-written piece might contain only three or four pitches. She also embarked on a series of highly rhythmic solo-voice pieces that, to this day, she continues to perform with an entertaining theatrical vigor.

And so she evolved a style in which the materials are freely chosen and intuitively shaped, yet the overall rhetoric is free from any Romantic notion of cumulative emotional buildup and climax. Like Cage's music, it is nonhierarchical; there are no structurally accented points of arrival. But the texture is like folk music, especially the Irish variety, diffracted into a whimsical kaleidoscope of textures and themes. She's written, "I hear most things in my head for orchestra and would orchestrate my entire output if I had the energy/time/money and interest from orchestras." Since she doesn't, she's written loads of chamber music.

The Flux Quartet has also played Anderson's *Rosemary Swale* and *January Swale*, while violinist Mary Rowell has championed her *Tales* for violin and piano; these latter are modal with an Asian flavor, almost devoid of accidentals but allowing loads of expressive interpretation for the violinist. The only other living composer it might remind you of is Lou Harrison, who in recent years has gotten belated recognition for his lyric simplicity.

New Mexico Swale for flute, percussion, and string trio, has strings accompany percussive solos on guiro and bullroarer, and the viola and cello share a long dialogue on just a few pitches. My favorite Anderson work so far, though, is the 12-minute *Concerto for Piano and Six Instruments* that pianist Joseph Kubera premiered a few years ago, whose rollicking, modal tunes do crescendo into a rare Anderson apotheosis.

It's charming, accessible music, striking and sturdy. Why have you never heard it before? Because the distribution of new music is mostly controlled by composers, who (this is one of

the profession's dirty secrets) are loathe to program composers whose music is more audience-friendly than their own. As a result, Anderson is underrepresented on discs, though you will find her *Minnesota Swale* for orchestra on Opus One with the Slovak Radio Symphony, and her lovely *Trio: dream in D* on North South Recordings. As Schoenberg said, there's a lot of great music left to be written in C major. Following that advice -- or rather, not needing it -- Anderson has demonstrated that originality, simplicity, and beauty are still more compatible elements than many composers want you to believe.