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Stefania de Kenessey on the Derriere Guard, and the Past and Present (With a Few Predictions Thrown in for Good Measure)

MICHAEL DELLAIRA

Born in Budapest, Stefania de Kenessey was educated at Yale and Princeton Universities, receiving her doctorate under the tutelage of Milton Babbitt. She is a leading figure in the current revival of contemporary tonal/modal classical music, and is the founder of The Derriere Guard, an alliance of traditionalist contemporary artists, architects, poets, and composers. Her operatic successes include *The Monster Bed*, a comedy; and *The Other Wise Man*, a holiday fable, presented to critical acclaim by the Mannes Opera in 1998. Recent commissions have included a concerto for trumpet, percussion and strings for Chris Gekker, a new work for the Turtle Creek Chorale which will be featured during the ensemble's European tour of 2002, and a dramatic cantata for soprano Marni Nixon.

This interview took place at the Popover Café on Manhattan's Upper West Side on April 17.

DELLAIRA: Can you begin by telling us a little about The Derriere Guard – what it is, its purpose and history?

DE KENESSEY: The Derriere Guard is an association of contemporary creative people in all the arts, in other words, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, music.

DELLAIRA: Dance?

DE KENESSEY: I don't actually have collaborators in the dance. In theory, it's meant to reach out to all the arts. In practice, it's been confined to the ones I just mentioned. And the common thread binding us all together is that we are all people who feel that we are working at the cutting edge by doing something quite new and quite innovative that is nonetheless unlike most 20th-century painting, poetry and music: very firmly grounded in the past, in historically recognizable traditional techniques, sonorities, shapes, and so forth. So for painters that means there's a whole generation of younger painters who are using real oil techniques, real perspective, learning to paint from live models. The architects are doing neo-classical architecture with a sense of proportion, again derived from basically Renaissance and 18th century architecture and a using ornamentation. The composers are trying to refashion a musical language which is thoroughly tonal – basically consonant, if you like, and not simply a pastiche or derivative of past styles, but really trying to move ahead. And of course how one moves ahead is a fairly complicated and cumbersome question. But that's the common thread that binds us all together. And it's all people who really see themselves, in some sense, as pushing the envelope.

DELLAIRA: It might strike one as a little odd to use the term "pushing the envelope" to describe a movement which, in a sense, looks back in time.

DE KENESSEY: Yes, it's funny to use those terms precisely because the kind of music we write is, on the surface, completely inoffensive: there are no pianos set on fire, there are no outlandish events at the music concerts, and there are no outlandish images in the paintings; and the poetry has rhyme and meter and narrative and all these "old-fashioned" things. But I don't think in the context of the times that any of this is, in fact, old-fashioned.

DELLAIRA: But the name "Derriere Guard" implies the opposite of the progressive.

DE KENESSEY: The reason behind the name is quite simple: I feel the avant-garde has become the establishment in the last 50 years, so when you look at the major museums, the major musical institutions, the major poetic journals that publish poetry, they're really and truly wedded to pushing and promoting modernist art, poetry, and music and have been doing so very forcefully and very effectively for the past 50 to 75 years, to the point where the so-called avant-garde has really become the status quo. So I actually think what I'm doing is avant-garde, but to use that term makes mush of the concept because it's been misused or it's acquired a completely different meaning. I tried to come up with something that would represent the connection to the avant-garde and would be memorable to people, and would have a sense of humor about it.

DELLAIRA: When did you start it, and why?

DE KENESSEY: Well, I coined the term in '95 or '96. I was so sick of being turned away from programming and competitions because my music wasn't avant-garde, and I wanted to find some term – and I thought it would be much more practical and powerful to band together not just composers – who are a pretty sorry lot – but also painters, etc. There's real strength in numbers. I wanted to band up with people in other fields to show a common spirit because I actually think of this as an historic shift – I don't just think it's my quirkiness, but an historic moment that's happening in all the arts. So in 1996 I started approaching people and went to the then-director of The Kitchen, Lauren Amazeen. I coined this logo, had a friend who made a line drawing, and went to her with all the materials. I thought it would be a two-minute meeting but she listened to me for a couple of minutes and said "You know, I see my job here at The Kitchen as fostering new ideas that I haven't heard from before. This sounds new and different to me. Whether you're right 50 years down the road or not, I haven't the faintest clue, but it seems to me this is exactly the kind of thing we should be fostering precisely because it's new and different." And she signed on right then and there.

DELLAIRA: That doesn't happen every day.

DE KENESSEY: No, it doesn't, but then I actually had to put together a festival for her, which I did, and we had it in the spring of 1997. It was four days at the Kitchen; we sold out virtually every event. We had orchestral concerts, a big gallery exhibit of contemporary paintings, architectural drawings and sculpture, chamber music, panel discussions, poetry readings not just by poets but by actresses and actors, and I got Tom Wolfe to be my keynote speaker to cap the whole thing. And it was a huge success. We had no money, of course: the Kitchen funded most of it, and we had no advertising. I'm not kidding; we sold out virtually every event – we were double sold for the opening and closing nights.

DELLAIRA: Were there any comments or criticisms of the festival which were particularly important or meaningful to you?

KENESSEY: The only critical comment I heard about the first Derriere Guard Festival is that, since it represented metro area artists, it was perhaps only a fluke, one of those far-out New York things, only possible in this crazy town. The question for people still remained: is this a genuinely broad, universal trend?

DELLAIRA: And you had the answer, I suspect.

DE KENESSEY: My answer is and was an emphatic yes: the return to traditional conceptions of beauty and craft in the arts is an historic, fin-de-siecle event that can be found everywhere. To demonstrate this, I held a festival in the spring of 1998 in Chicago (at the Graham Foundation) and the fall of 1999 in San Francisco (at the SomArts Center). The format was closely modeled on the first festival: three days of various musical events, poetry readings, roundtable discussions, keynote speeches, art and architectural gallery exhibits. In each case, the festival focused on local (broadly defined) artists. In Chicago, this meant individuals from the Midwest and South; in San Francisco, artists up and down the West Coast. Having held three highly successful public festivals, I now plan to host a series of salons in the New York area this season. As before, they will be a mixture of exhibits (both art and architecture), poetry readings, musical concerts and debates/talks. The idea is both to have a space for artists to share their experiences, to find kindred spirits -- and to begin to reach potential patrons and the intellectual elite, to heighten their awareness -- which is still quite low, in my estimation -- of this cutting-edge development. I should add that a PBS documentary is now in production: the topic is the return of classicism in the arts, and the final segment (in addition to the background music throughout the documentary) will be devoted to my work and to the activities of the Derriere Guard.

DELLAIRA: I've noticed that you choose to describe yourself in program and liner notes as a composer of "contemporary classical music" when what you mean, I think, is a composer of "tonal music". Are you avoiding that term for some reason, or are you trying to express something more grand and all-encompassing?

DE KENESSEY: When people use the term "contemporary music" they often mean something quite dissonant or quite "alternative," so I was trying to avoid both of those associations. It was just a catch-all phrase to let people know that contemporary music doesn't mean "popular" music, yet it's not contemporary music the way most people in the classical field think of it either because it's not dissonant, so I thought "contemporary classical music" somehow goes in the cracks, between those two normative definitions.

DELLAIRA: But wouldn't you say that Milton Babbitt, for example, writes contemporary classical music?

DE KENESSEY: No, I'd say that most people would say he writes "contemporary music." In my experience, by and large, contemporary music either means post-serialist avant-garde art music, or it means heavily jazz-influenced pop music, and I do neither one of those things, so ...

DELLAIRA: But I'm just wondering whether you're emphasizing the word "classical" because the Derriere Guard emphasizes classical forms ...

DE KENESSEY: Yes, absolutely, that certainly plays into it; I do see myself as continuing in that tradition. And, in all fairness, so does Milton Babbitt. The word "classical" is meant to evoke that entire legacy from, minimum, the 15th century onward, if you like.

DELLAIRA: Do you think in terms of classical forms? In certain pieces of yours one can definitely hear sonata form, for example.

DE KENESSEY: I work that way, but I don't think about it. I never, ever sit down and say to myself "today I'm going write a piece in sonata form or in ABA form" or anything like that. I literally don't worry about the form prior to the act of composition: it just comes along with the territory. On the other hand, I also trained myself when I was a student to learn all of those forms, to do passable imitations in all of those structures, in all of those styles. In some sense they're really ingrained in me, so I do wind up using "sonata form," for example, fairly often, though not invariably.

DELLAIRA: Are you aware while you're doing it that you're doing it ...

DE KENESSEY: Yes ...

DELLAIRA: So you're thinking of secondary themes in contrasting keys, development and recapitulation ...

DE KENESSEY: I'm aware of it, yes, but not because I set out to write something in sonata form.

DELLAIRA: So it just comes out that way.

DE KENESSEY: Yes.

DELLAIRA: You work quickly. I think you once told me that.

DE KENESSEY: I *can* work quickly. In other words, I can spend quite a bit of time coming up with ideas that I think are both quite memorable on a first listening and are strong and sophisticated enough to sustain larger forms.

DELLAIRA: O.K. Sounds reasonable.

DE KENESSEY: And to find both of those in the same musical idea is not that easy to do. And that can take me quite a while. So I have lots of sketches, lots of sketchbooks, lots of notes. I fiddle around enormously. Once I feel I have an idea, or a theme, or a main concept, then I can kind of run with it, so to speak, then I can really write pretty fast. The best metaphor I can give for it is this: if I were a novelist and I finally figured out what my main character looks like, walks like, dresses like, talks like, I feel like I know that person. Then you know what that person is going to do within the novel that makes sense, and you still want the novel to have a certain narrative, a certain resolution, a certain shape and form to it, but it has to have its own internal logic, and that internal logic has to come from the character, some interior motivation of the character, and for me the same thing is true with themes. Once I've got a really good theme -- to some extent of course I carry all this baggage: sonata form and tonality, etc. -- I feel as if the whole piece were simply right in front of me.

DELLAIRA: Strange, but perhaps also brave, that you chose to study composition at Princeton. After all, you've said that you had no interest in 12-tone music, especially as a composer.

DE KENESSEY: I had no other place to go. It's not like there was any other institution dedicated to teaching serious tonal composition. I had an interview with Babbitt and told him what I was interested in, and he said that at Princeton composers spent as much time studying Mozart and Brahms as Schoenberg. He told me that he would support what I was doing and protect me. And he was true to his word.

DELLAIRA: Ah. It just sounded a little disingenuous, about how you had no place to go. Certainly there were other institutions that would have been sympathetic to a composer writing tonal music.

DE KENESSEY: I didn't mean literally I had no place to go. I really thought that given the fact that there was no one with whom I had a genuine aesthetic sympathy or rapport, then the best thing I could do was be with the best representative of something that made sense. And for the 20th century, like it or not, 12-tone music is what makes sense. It has been the dominant form of writing music. And to my mind Milton Babbitt has been and is the premier practitioner. The notion that music is organized sound, which finds its inception in modernism and gets expressed in 12-tone music, is expressed absolutely brilliantly by Milton Babbitt. What he seeks out to do I think he does absolutely, wonderfully well. And just to be with someone who does what they're doing really, really well is a genuine pleasure. And you're going to learn something unless you're a complete idiot. And he was interesting to be around. He has a brilliant mind, there's no question about it. I'd say the problem for me with modernism is that I disagree with its fundamentals. I don't have any problem with Milton as a person or as a composer. I disagree with the idea that music is organized sound -- pure and simple. And that's where we part company. And that's where I didn't find any alternative or different point of view in any other academy. So if you're going to work with people who believe that, at least go work with someone who's really brilliant at it.

DELLAIRA: So what did you study there?

DE KENESSEY: I took every course that was offered. It's one of those wonderful places where there are no requirements. As a result, everybody takes everything, because you have no idea what you should be doing. I caused something of a furor because not only did I take all the classes offered to composers but I took a class offered by Lewis Lockwood on Mozart which I was not supposed to do. I didn't realize that. I was only a composer, and composers were not supposed to take courses in musicology.

DELLAIRA: How did you get along with other students in composition seminars? I'm pretty sure there weren't too many others interested in what you were doing.

DE KENESSEY: I was always the odd duck. I was completely different from everybody else. Everyone was writing atonal music, almost everybody was writing postserial music, and for me to be writing this triadic stuff was just so far out in left field that I don't think anybody quite knew what to make of it. So people never said a word to me, basically. There was no reaction at all.

DELLAIRA: So you spent three or four years in an environment where you were invisible?

DE KENESSEY: Yeah.... Yeah!

DELLAIRA: That must have been very difficult.

DE KENESSEY: Yeah, well, graduate school is not an ideal situation for many human beings. I did better than most, frankly. I kept my head down, I learned a lot, I had my lessons, I studied my scores, I wrote as much music as I possibly could, I did a lot of conducting so I got lots of hands-on experience as well ...

DELLAIRA: Conducted where?

DE KENESSEY: The Princeton University Orchestra. We did a bunch of Mozart operas in addition to the regular repertoire and then I also founded the Princeton Chamber Orchestra -- we did Bach, Haydn and Handel.

DELLAIRA: And after?

DE KENESSEY: I started teaching at The New School. It was a very fledgling program, still is having growing pains, but it is now a four-year college. And I started teaching there long before I got my Ph.D. They've treated me very well and have been very nice to me. I can't complain. It has a number of advantages -- pedagogically, they let me teach whatever courses I wish. I design all my own curricula, which is very nice. I'm also the only full-time music person on the faculty. I'm both senior faculty and junior faculty, so I have great meetings.

DELLAIRA: You've been writing tonal music for more than 20 years, during which time the musical climate has changed. Do you find you're getting more performances -- not because you've been around longer but because of a greater acceptance of tonal music?

DE KENESSEY: Yes, there's been an enormous difference, even from ten years ago. The receptivity to tonal music, and to tonal music of the sort that I write, has just exponentially increased. I'd like to think it's because I've become a better composer but I don't think that's why I'm getting lots and lots more performances. Ten years ago, I was treated like a true crazy. And five years ago I was a genuine eccentric, and now people don't bat an eyelash at the kind of stuff I do. In fact I'm starting to get some great reviews.

DELLAIRA: I read that rave review of your new CD in *Fanfare*. Is that indicative, do you think, of a shift in musical values, or did you just get lucky?

DE KENESSEY: Well, obviously, it was luck to get a sympathetic reviewer. One doesn't always get a sympathetic reviewer even if there's an underlying aesthetic sympathy. On the other hand, there's no way I could have gotten that review ten years ago. Absolutely no way. No way that the music would have been measured on its own terms, that the music is good enough to stand next to Mozart or Brahms. And nobody would have been willing to say that ten years ago.

DELLAIRA: Which he said.

DE KENESSEY: Which he said. But in all honesty, ten years ago I got a note from a very eminent musician about that clarinet quintet which essentially said almost exactly the same thing as this reviewer, but concluded with the phrase "but one cannot write music like this in the 20th century." And that's the difference. Ten years ago most all the critics said "her music has the kind of rhythmic and melodic interest *of*," and then they will name someone like Brahms, Verdi, Fauré, Dvorak, or Schubert ... *But*, and there's always the qualifier "*but* do we need another Brahms or Verdi?" It's always then made as a negative comparison, not because I don't stand up, but because one ought not to be doing that. I think the level of craftsmanship is always implicitly recognized, but the message is always, "that's irrelevant."

DELLAIRA: I've read a fair number of reviews of other composers who are similarly compared to Boulez, Xenakis, Messiaen, or Berio.

DE KENESSEY: But then you're presumed to be part of a crowd.

DELLAIRA: But it's no less demeaning.

DE KENESSEY: Yes, except when you're compared to Xenakis or Messiaen, unless the critic says it's a poor imitation of, it's meant to be praise. When you're seen as following in the footsteps of Brahms, almost always the context is negative. It's not like they're saying "if only the melodies were better", "if only the rhythms were better" – but they don't say that.

DELLAIRA: They have a hard time getting past the surface.

DE KENESSEY: Absolutely. One of the reviewers of my CD said that the language and materials that I'm working with completely determine and inform the shape and surface of the work. He meant it as a negative, but I thought: what better definition of form is there?

DELLAIRA: How much influence do you think minimalism has had on the ability of listeners to hear tonal music in new ways?

DE KENESSEY: I think it had an enormous influence. It reintroduced the triad, it reintroduced the idea that music could, at least on the surface, be fun, be pleasing. On the negative side, it de-emphasized the concept of Western music -- which I think is integral to its value -- that it is also intellectually sophisticated and narrative, with a different conception of time altogether. For my purposes, minimalism is finally not the kind of thing I'm interested in, because I like the drama of moving from point A to point B to point C --with a forward narrative. And minimalism, as I see it, is based on a non-Western, elliptical notion of music in which there's lots of repetition which brings one, if not full circle, then in a kind of spiral ... and it's fundamentally a kind of music which I think is meant to be meditative and hypnotic. Which explains why, perhaps, while it's lasted 40 years or so, it's lost its vitality.

DELLAIRA: I recently attended six concerts at the national SCI conference in Syracuse, New York. The overwhelming majority of works were atonal. I was surprised.

DE KENESSEY: Yes, and this is going to sound extremely arrogant but most people follow, they don't lead. So yes, most universities are going to be full of people who are doing as their teachers have taught them to do. It doesn't mean they're bad composers, but actually the time-honored way of doing things – which used to work – is you learn from your teacher, and you imitate what your teacher did and hopefully you'll get a little bit better. I think the whole legacy is problematic and for me insufficient. I have to move beyond it, and never accepted it as a workable legacy. So I'm not at all surprised. I think the academy moves extremely slowly, and I think most people move extremely slowly, but on the other hand I think there's a handful of very talented people out there who are writing music that is tonal which is not just a rehash of the past and are doing really interesting work.

DELLAIRA: What contemporary composers do you listen to?

DE KENESSEY: For pleasure, almost none. What I envision is a continuation of the unabashedly beautiful music of the past and I feel that as brilliant as Britten and Barber and Copland have been, I think they always deep down feel an indebtedness to the 20th century by way of infusing their music with a certain dissonance, a certain bite, a certain irony, a certain kind of sourness, which I just don't find personally pleasing nor intellectually refreshing or interesting. So for me wrong-note tonality is not really fascinating or fulfilling.

DELLAIRA: What kind of music qualifies for the *Derriere Guard*?

DE KENESSEY: Music which is very well-crafted, using principles from the past, not as a pastiche of past techniques or styles, but as music which tries to forge a genuine voice in a new and distinctive voice. Which is a pretty tall order, right?

DELLAIRA: Yes, pretty tall, though there are quite a few composers who wouldn't qualify because they're writing or using some pitch system and who still claim that their music "does" all the things music of the past did -- that they're still clearly in the Western tradition.

DE KENESSEY: Well, you could say the same about modernism to some extent. That's why all the qualifiers about being rooted in the past and in offering something of genuine beauty -- that's what I mean by the past. My definition of the past is anything prior to modernism, anything prior to the new definition of music which is understanding music as ordered sound. And if you think about the definition of music in prior centuries, as different as renaissance music is from medieval from baroque from romantic, you will get some fundamental understanding of music which is, of course, organized sound, but which is also beautiful and expresses something in addition to that. And it's that difference which is what I'm trying to bring back.

DELLAIRA: But I'm sure you get lots of argument. Take even an early atonal piece like Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*; it's highly expressive. One wouldn't say simply that it's "organized sound."

DE KENESSEY: No, it's disorganized sound!

DELLAIRA: So it's not beautiful, then, by your definition?

DE KENESSEY: No. I don't want to make a case for pabulum here, but I also don't believe music has to be dissonant, or difficult to comprehend on a first listening, for it to have a meaning. And yes, sometimes *King Lear* is a profoundly, profoundly upsetting work for me, yet it also has ineffable beauty to it, and I can also understand it. I could understand it the first time, and I can understand it the 20th time. One tries to create a kind of art which is perfectly beautiful and draws the listener on the first instance, but has a kind of richness to it that is both emotional and intellectual so that the work needs to be revisited.

DELLAIRA: But for you "perfectly beautiful" music will, on a theoretical level, be music which has a very strong sense of functional harmony. And I say "functional," because it's not enough to be merely a succession of triads.

DE KENESSEY: That's right. Not just a repetition --

DELLAIRA:-- or sequence.

DE KENESSEY: -- or sequence of triads. Right.

DELLAIRA: Then isn't an ordered sequence of triads, which is certainly an accurate, if loose, way of describing functional harmony, also a kind of organized sound?

DE KENESSEY: The only reason I balk at that is because I admire renaissance music, which is not functional harmony in the way we think about it. But which still operates on the fundamental concept that music is beautiful sound which expresses something. And in that sense one could say that minimalism falls into that rubric -- except for the fact that it has let go of a crucial piece of the puzzle, which is the notion of music as also an intellectually compelling and dramatically constructed narrative.

DELLAIRA: What do you say to someone who's just walked away from a performance of an atonal piece who tells you that it was a beautiful experience. I'm sure many readers could give at least one example.

DE KENESSEY: Chacun á son goût. What can I say? People have radically different tastes. One of the reasons why I'm willing to make these completely hyperbolic statements is because it's a personal statement. What the hell... I'm free to think and say what I like. Also, it's remarkable to me the extent to which 20th-century music has been historically and in a very real aesthetic sense a failure. It has failed to capture the imagination of its public. And not just for 50 or 75 years, but essentially for a century. It has lost that lively connection where it is expressing something to a contemporary audience.

DELLAIRA: Unless you include rock.

DE KENESSEY: Unless you include popular music, yes. And popular music has never lost that connection ever. It wouldn't dare.

DELLAIRA: One could say jazz did.

DE KENESSEY: It did. When it became infected by all the principles of modernism.

DELLAIRA: Which to you means...?

DE KENESSEY: A belief that music is organized sound. And therefore questions of meaning or beauty do not enter into the equation. Post-modernism is not a coherent ideology, but is an understanding, somehow, that modernism doesn't work, and it's an attempt to use pieces of the past, along with modernism, in a very ironic way to construct new things, without an understanding of how one might move ahead.

DELLAIRA: You haven't mentioned the interest in "world music," which replaces time with place, using not pieces of the past, but from other cultures in the present.

DE KENESSEY: Yes, but I think one of the reasons Western culture has thrived for the last 500 years is because it has been unabashed about cannibalizing, borrowing, stealing, absorbing whatever influences it can, from wherever it can. It doesn't always acknowledge it, but it finally does it and does it quite successfully. I think the situation today is a little bit different because I think the history of the 20th century is so different from other centuries that I don't think the parallels are quite genuine. So the influence of, let's say, Indonesian music on Debussy is not quite the same as the interest in world musics today, and I think the current interest suggests that the legacy of 20th century classical art music is so dry right now that it needs to turn to other sources for inspiration. For me personally, I have quite different reasons for being interested in it -- and for me, it has to do with the fact that, although I call my music tonal, it isn't and never has been. It's always been modal, although modal with a very strongly functional tonality. The places where one finds modal music are a very odd conglomeration of places: medieval or pre-tonal music, popular 20th century American music that's blues-derived, certain 20th-century classical composers, and "world music." That's a very, very interesting ingredient, and that's also partly why people are interested in these sounds, because I think that classical major/minor tonality of the sort practiced from Bach to Wagner, is all played out. And that's partly why modernism was so successful. I think the modernists got that absolutely right. I don't think we can do anything genuinely new with that kind of chromatic understanding of tonality. What I do, however, think *is* interesting, which I hear in music of many of the contemporaries whom I admire, is based on the other kinds of modes which were discarded at the beginning of the baroque period and which thrive, or are thriving, in popular musics, and in the world musics that most people like. That's a technical way of looking at it, but it's the glue that binds all those things together.

DELLAIRA: So you throw out Ionian and the altered Aeolian modes, and you've got all these others to work with?

DE KENESSEY: Yes! And you can do really interesting stuff with that! There's a kind of freshness there. We have this linear vision of history, just looking at Western history, that everything that is progress is uniformly progress; in fact, progress is always three steps forward and two steps back. And the things that get shunted aside are sometimes historically quite interesting. And if you look at the Renaissance as an historical movement, the fact is the Renaissance happened by going back to the distant past, so I think there's ample precedent for what we're doing, which is to not look at the last 100 years, not even the last 200 years, frankly, but much beyond that and outside of that. And it's happened before, and I think it's going to happen again -- I really see this new renaissance in all the arts.

DELLAIRA: You might be right.

DE KENESSEY: I will be right! No, really. I make very, very few predictions. This one's going to come true. I'm quite sure.

DELLAIRA: So the western tradition will be leapfrogging how many centuries?

DE KENESSEY: Hard to say, but certainly Romanticism, where, as I see it, tonality begins to dissolve and becomes overripe. How people synthesize it, and exactly the nature and shape of it -- that's for history to unfold, and that I'm not willing to predict.

DELLAIRA: While I have you in a predicting mode, what about the future of opera?

DE KENESSEY: I think there's ample precedent for opera being one of the most important loci for important stylistic shifts to happen. And I think some of the most exciting work is being done in the realm of opera, or dramatic vocal music. I think music that is, if you like, a cinematic experience, which has scenery and staging, and acting and story and words -- the whole panorama of sensibilities -- is, I think, for contemporary audiences much, much more interesting than simply sitting in a concert and trying to figure out, "what modalities is this composer using ..."

DELLAIRA: You just had an opera produced in Singapore?

DE KENESSEY: Yes. *The Other Wise Man* was just done in Singapore in December. A very nice performance. Bart Folse was the conductor. He's the Associate Conductor of the Singapore Symphony. For the principals they used young American singers who did a wonderful job.

DELLAIRA: Do they live there?

DE KENESSEY: No, they live in the U.S. They were brought over for the production. It was a wonderful experience and it was wonderful to hear it with a full orchestra. The piece had already been done at Mannes with chamber orchestra --

DELLAIRA: -- along with *The Monster Bed*?

DE KENESSEY: Yes, with *The Monster Bed*. That was wonderful, but just not the same as hearing a full orchestra. The Singapore Symphony is, much to my delight and surprise, a crackerjack orchestra; they're really first-rate players. So I went in just for the last couple of rehearsals and they nailed everything. Really an absolutely professional orchestra.

DELLAIRA: How many performances?

DE KENESSEY: Three. It was a blast. And it was great to get to go to Singapore. Slightly disappointing, since there's so little of historic Singapore left -- the rest is Starbucks and things of that sort. But I had someplace warm to go to in December, plus I got to hear great singers and a great orchestra.

DELLAIRA: Any predictions for the symphony orchestra?

DE KENESSEY: I'm less sanguine about those. They're very large, cumbersome and expensive. I've been thinking about this and -- the other prediction I'm quite happy with -- this, I don't have a crystal ball for, but my hunch is that they're in deep trouble -- increasingly what composers will be writing are various arrangements of their music for flexible ensembles -- as in the Renaissance and early Baroque. I think the day when you only write for triple wind orchestra with x number of percussionists and that's the only version or possibility of life for that piece -- I think those days are numbered. That's not to say that symphony orchestras won't exist, but only as conservators of the past repertoire.

DELLAIRA: And that's because of expense?

DE KENESSEY: Yes. Fees that soloists and conductors get. The whole thing has just gotten out of hand. There's no connection to the economic marketplace, and insofar as there's a complete disconnect between art and the marketplace, the arts sooner or later will suffer. You don't want an absolute and one-way connection to the marketplace, but it's the in-between that doesn't exist. Either there's the pop stuff that has to sell in the gazillions, or there's the contemporary music which will get performed regardless of economic reality. And I think increasingly the world of classical music will have to be beholden to an audience -- not in the millions, but an audience nonetheless. And I think that's where cultural institutions like symphony orchestras, which have these enormous expenses and virtually no revenue -- I don't see how they can survive long-term. I hope I'm wrong, but I'm fairly pessimistic.

DELLAIRA: But you're not about opera, which is even more expensive.

DE KENESSEY: No, because there's a kind of interest and freshness to opera that I think the symphonic repertoire doesn't quite have. For example, I have friends who -- in their 30's and 40's; after listening to only rock and roll for years -- have started to gravitate to classical music. They go to opera, and it's amazing to me that these people who have no training in classical music, are bored out of their minds at a symphony orchestra concert, go regularly to the opera. That really says something.

DELLAIRA: Well, opera can be something of a spectacle, like a rock concert.

DE KENESSEY: But another thing I should mention is that I think many instrumentalists have been imbued with the idea that music is organized sound, with the result that they play with incredible rhythmic accuracy, right on target pitch, and not a great deal of anything else. Whereas opera singers have always assumed that they are communicating something through those pitches and rhythms -- and are willing to sacrifice both pitch and rhythm sometimes -- but the assumption is that there's something behind it. And I think that's a completely old-fashioned, completely Derriere Guard attitude to music and I think people know it. And that's one of the reasons I love working with singers.

DELLAIRA: When do you think there will be performances by the major musical institutions, if ever, of Derriere Guard music?

DE KENESSEY: The timeline for this is difficult to guess. Eventually, sure; in my lifetime, I don't know. But on the other hand, when I look back on the collapse of the Soviet Union, I could never have predicted it. I could have said, Oh, this is going to go on for another 75 years -- just another slow dissolution of everything -- and I can imagine that being true for post-modernism, too; it just goes on and on until there's nothing left. On the other hand, I can imagine it turning around in three years. Boom! Something happens. Some critic, some donor. I don't know, but I could imagine it turning on a dime, also.

DELLAIRA: That's a good analogy.

DE KENESSEY: The thing I try to do with the Derriere Guard Festivals is to give history a little kick in the rear -- to move it forward as much as I can.

Concert Reviews

Drang!

MARGIE WU

The St Petersburg 2000 *Sound Ways Festival*. John Palmer's *Drang*. November 25, 2000, St. Petersburg, Russia

Spread over ten days, the St Petersburg 2000 *Sound Ways Festival* allowed soloists and chamber music ensembles from all over the world, as well as larger choral and orchestral groups, to showcase a large number of contemporary works varying tremendously in compositional scope, style and innovativeness. *Drang*, by British composer John Palmer and its performance by the young St Petersburg accordionist Sergej Tchirkov, was the highlight of the Festival.

In his program note, Palmer says:

This music is to be played with much Sturm und Drang character: impetuous, yearning, passionate, gestural, directional, and always virtuoso-like. For this reason, rubato techniques are essential for the performance of this work and the performer is encouraged to emphasize -- and exaggerate -- much of the phrasing and articulations according to her/his virtuosity and interpretation. The production of air sounds from within the instrument should resemble the inhaling and exhaling typical of human breathing. The air sounds should strongly enhance the dramatic character of the music. Therefore, they are no less important than the notes.

Drang is a supremely virtuosic accordion work, confronting the performer with enormous interpretational, technical and physical hurdles. Its structure arches over more than ten minutes of intricate, filigreed, very involved figurations interwoven with, and interrupted by, chordal declamations and pillars of silence. Palmer's integration of human breathing into all of this fuses the instrumental with the vocal, the inanimate with the animate, and the decorative with the essential.

Sergej Tchirkov plunged into *Drang*, playing the entire work from memory, completely unhindered by any of the aforementioned difficulties. The complex figurations flowed from his fingers as if they were ordinary classical patterns, the physical stamina required for the performance and the emotional intensity Tchirkov brought to, and sustained throughout the work were seemingly without effort, as simple and completely natural as breathing. In Tchirkov passion, intelligence and a finely differentiated aesthetic sense come together in a most promising mixture. This young player is an ideal interpreter for this difficult but important addition to the music of our century.

The Glitter of Gay

JANOS GEREBEN

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Del Tredici's *Gay Life*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through May 5. Reviewed May 5.

William Sharp is an extraordinary singer. His voice has beauty and power, his interpretations are intelligent and moving, he is equally at home in oratorio and musicals. And, as demonstrated on May 3 in Davies Hall, he handles abuse very well.

For the premiere of David Del Tredici's orchestral song cycle *Gay Life* (which is quite without gaiety or life), Sharp was put in front of a 110-piece orchestra, with a headset and a huge microphone an inch from his mouth, and he was required to sing for 54 minutes nonstop. On three consecutive nights. Even in the third performance, he was doing well. It must be a new record, the equivalent of singing Hans Sachs in the third act of *Die Meistersinger* six times over. To what end?

Del Tredici messed up a promising work, going from what sounded four years ago -- at the first performance here of the initial piano version -- "hauntingly beautiful," to a grotesquely overblown, overlong, overdumb piece, received with yawns, snickers, and a short, perfunctory applause -- the San Francisco equivalent of booing. Ever since his 1955 debut in San Francisco (as a pianist), Del Tredici had a good run, through music directors (from Enrique Jorda to Edo DeWart) and both subscription and new-music festival audiences. And now, when Michael Tilson Thomas is supporting him with all his might, Del Tredici has lain an egg.

Think Andrew Lloyd Webber meets Respighi meets Melachrino meets (closing the loop) a Broadway pastiche. Think loud and bloated and excessive and nervous and uncertain and music-for-the-circus (albeit with a nice quote from *Tristan und Isolde*!) and over 100 repetitions of the phrase "remember me" in an endless conclusion, which created a large-scale squirming and audible calls for "quit it already." It was not a happy event.

At one point, as Sharp was singing the phrase "lay his head on your heart in peace," the orchestra did an *1812 Overture* bit, complete with timpani, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, tubular bells, glockenspiel, crotales, crash cymbals, tam-tams, triangle, tambourine, cowbell, ratchet, whip, castanets, guiro, glass wind chimes, woodblocks, temple blocks, snare drum, siren, wind machine, celesta, and more. All "in peace," to be sure. Del Tredici must have gone the rabbit hole once too often.

The text that worked in the early, modest version doesn't anymore. There have been some big changes in what is included and what is not; the final lineup: "Ode to Wildwood" (Michael Calhoun), "In the Temple" (Wilson Hand Kidde), "Personals Ad" (Allen Ginsberg), "After the Big Parade" (Ginsberg), "Here" (Paul Monette), and "Memory Unsettled" (Thom Gunn). Maybe "final" is not the right word. Originally scheduled to run 38 minutes, *Gay Life* came in at 45 minutes on the May 3 premiere, 50 on May 4, and 54 on the 5th. The monster that ate a fine song cycle is still growing.

Back in 1997, I wrote -- of the piano version -- that "Here," with

a cascade of feelings, open to parsing several ways, contained the most clearly ravishing music of the cycle so far. The twice-whispered "here!" at the end ranks with some of Mahler's great endings. The Lorca song [no longer in the cycle] is 'Ballad in Yellow' -- composer and singer getting a variety of stunning effects from 'Over a sky/Made of daisies/I walk.'"

Gone, all gone, leaving only tripled winds, a battery of percussion, the damned amplification, and a composer getting lost on the way.

Rouse's Reinvention

JEFF DUNN

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Christophe Eschenbach, presents the world premiere of Christopher Rouse's *Clarinet Concerto* (2000, with Larry Combs), plus Martinu's *Memorial to Lidice*. Orchestra Hall, Chicago, May 17, 2001.

"I have never felt the attraction of repeating myself endlessly and formulaically and like to try to 'reinvent' myself from time to time." So declares Christopher Rouse in program notes for the premiere of his new clarinet concerto. As he put it to the Chicago pre-performance audience, the overt tonality of *Rapture* was "too tempting a field to remain in ... you get the *un-Rapture!*"

The result was indeed a far more objective, less passionate work, closer to the neoclassical aesthetic of delight and surprise than that of Expressionist/Romantic all-consuming emotionalism. The "reinvention" of the piece turned out to be rather a "return to an invention," the invention being Rouse's whiz-bang *Infernal Machine*, the 1981 piece that made him famous. Surprise is a key feature in both works. For the *Clarinet Concerto*, the unexpectedness was achieved by employing a simple randomization technique to insert into the main one-movement concerto three unrelated, three-movement "microconcertos" averaging 30 seconds each. What Rouse did was throw two dice every 12 measures. If "boxcars" (two sixes) were rolled, a microconcerto was inserted.

An extremely colorful speaker who would be wonderful on the tour if there were such a thing as a market for lecturers on contemporary music, Rouse likened his microconcertos to the duck that suddenly popped down for the Magic Word in Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life*. Rouse placed this inspiration in the milieu of the more "mindless" types of game shows that featured "semi-humiliating physical acts," such as *Truth or Consequences* or *Beat the Clock*. The first movement of each microconcerto, he explained, is announced by the strike of a slap stick. The second "micromovement" of each begins with a stroke of a gong, the third with a short roll on the snare drum, and the return to the concerto proper with "flurries of wooden percussion." Paradoxically, however, one's knowledge of the existence and strategy of the microconcertos highlights the *non-mindlessness* of the music. The mind of this listener was stimulated to rapt anticipation of each microconcerto, so much so that the rest of music receded in structural importance. This is despite the innate interest of the bulk of the music, with its incredible technical challenges superbly executed by soloist Combs.

"One of the most respected, elegant, and performed composers in the world" were the words Augusta Read Thomas, composer-in-residence for the Chicago Symphony, used to introduce Rouse to the audience. On the basis of his latest concerto, this high flattery continues to apply. Why then, is Rouse so egregiously underrated relative to his contemporaries John Adams, John Corigliano, Philip Glass, and Michael Daugherty?

Could it be that Rouse's frequency of orchestral performance and popularity with audiences and performers brands him as being beneath the dignity of some modernist critics' purview? In any case, while Rouse continues to reinvent, now working on a *Requiem*, it is time for certain Eastern Establishment writers to reinvent their perspectives on the evolution of American music or else face a requiem of a different sort—the death of interest and credibility on the part of their readers.

Record Reviews

Arthur Rimbaud

DAVID HICKS

Harold Blumenfeld. *Seasons In Hell: A Life of Rimbaud* (libretto by Charles Kondek). Albany Troy 262/63.

Seasons in Hell: A Life of Rimbaud has been composed by Harold Blumenfeld on Charles Kondek's libretto with great care and sophistication. From the notes that accompany the two CD's one senses the composer's impassioned attachment to his subject. Blumenfeld has taken the setting of Rimbaud's poetry as a major project of his life's work. This opera complements that project. The piece exhibits numerous novel features, the most daring of which is the overall dramatic trajectory. The critical moment of the opera is the point at which Rimbaud forsakes his poetry. While this was only halfway through his life (and he lived on, for years, doing business as a trader/gunrunner in Africa until his death at 37), we arrive at this life-crisis only at the conclusion of the opera. And time travels both forward and backward to this vanishing point. This bifurcated, unifocal trajectory necessitates another novelty: the side-by-side existence of two Rimbauds, one "Old," the other "Younger," their stories a kind of retrograde inversion of each other, intertwined around the axis of that spiritually critical moment.

Blumenfeld's orchestra is supple and spare, often delicate. Sensuous sonorities, organized into elegant phrases, accompany the voices. The music in general, however, has an aversion to coalescence. Soaring tunes never emerge. This is music of innuendo and adumbration, implication and inference, reluctant rather than direct in its expression. We find ourselves hoping that some throwaway scrap of melodic material might linger, establish itself, anchor us for more than a phrase, producing an impression strong enough that later it might insinuate itself in another form. This hope will not be realized.

While the composer's handling of the orchestra is highly sophisticated, this listener found the voice parts less engaging. Ostensibly from within some extended-tradition of "continuous melody," the voice parts are aperiodic, avoiding repetition, and as a result are neither hummable nor memorable. In short, "song," in the usual sense, has been removed from the composer's operatic quiver.

Because the opera covers such a long stretch of time, many of the characters appear in only a scene or two. Perhaps because there are so many walk-on parts, the characterizations tend toward the static and one-dimensional. No character (not even Rimbaud) has signature melodic or rhythmic motives that get developed over time. Excepting Rimbaud, who of course goes through a lifetime's worth of change, the other characters, even the ones whose parts recur, do not evolve during the opera. Their purpose seems to be to supply us with psychological data for understanding Rimbaud. For example, in a bit of Freudian reductionism, Rimbaud's mother, with her nagging, her bourgeois homilies, her dressed-in-black austerity, is held to account for Rimbaud's fundamental and profound alienation. One gathers from this that much of the violent rhetoric of his poetry has her as its target.

Rimbaud's relationship with Paul Verlaine is the basis for the real drama in the opera. Verlaine was Rimbaud's initial sponsor, on whose suggestion Rimbaud left Charleville for Paris. The midpoint of the opera revolves around their love affair, and Act I ends with an orgy. The highpoint of Act II occurs when Rimbaud decides to break off with Verlaine, and apparently simultaneously decides his life as visionary poet has been a waste. Verlaine, broken in heart and spirit, shoots and superficially wounds Rimbaud.

Aside from a handful of such vivid moments, which appear as extrusions on the surface of a much quieter dramatic landscape, most scenes in the opera take the form of a static prolongation of a single, unifying characteristic or mood, dictated by the dominant quality of the character the scene revolves around. For example, the presence of Izambard, Rimbaud's teacher, occasions a scene dominated by dry sonorities which flatly underscore, seemingly with no irony intended, the didactic and unimaginative teacher.

One of the opera's novelties is its opening. At this millennial juncture, an opera without an overture will hardly cause a shock. Still, the composer pushes the envelope on the concept. The piece, with malice aforethought, steadfastly refuses throughout the course of the first scene to commit itself to opening. It takes courage and confidence to execute this literal self-denial, the non-beginning beginning, especially in a work for the stage. The effect is to cast a pall on our expectations of what might be in store. Which is just what the composer wants.

This first scene takes place in a hospital, and Rimbaud is already dead, under a white sheet. Thus physical death is an anticlimax, literally forethought. The orchestral accompaniment is muted, reserved, with whirring winds, effecting an appropriately bloodless mood. The vocal parts (Rimbaud's sister Isabelle and the Mother Superior of the hospital discussing funeral preparations) are stilted, ordinary, by choice.

With the listener's expectations quickly ebbing low, Scene II comes on with an explosion, (highlighting the whirring, oscillating dyad that marked the prior scene's music). Suddenly the world is alive with menace. A low, threatening wind sustains throughout this scene. It is as if the opera has come to life, and in fact it has, literally. For the sheet covering Rimbaud begins to glow, and he rises, melodramatically, from his deathbed. This scene offers us our first encounter with the theatrical presence known in the opera as "the VOICE": a disembodied female intoning excerpts from Rimbaud's poetry, in French, highlighted by electronic amplification and processing. In this scene Old Rimbaud echoes the disembodied VOICE's poetry, in English: "If I remember rightly, and I do..." These words are from the opening of Rimbaud's poem, *Season in Hell*, the work with which he renounced poetry for a life of "Action." The old man continues: "I strangled on excrement, gagged on blood and vomit, before being thrown back to the world to impale myself on the thorns of reality." It is as if Rimbaud in deathbed delirium were remembering his spiritual day of reckoning. At this point the Young Rimbaud arrives on the scene, also talking poetry: "One finds ecstasy in destruction, rejuvenation through cruelty." If one is not familiar with Rimbaud, this excerpt captures effectively his penchant for nouns, shock-at-any-cost, and the poetry of bodily function.

The 20th-century composer's quest for new expressive means gave rise to numerous novel vocal effects. In the case of the VOICE in *Seasons in Hell*, the novelty, and therefore one's sense of displacement, will be relative. In the context of traditional opera these distortions are indeed fresh, while contrasted with recent electronic and computer-manipulated voice-sound works (cf. those of Paul Lansky), they are not particularly new-sounding. Nonetheless, the VOICE, with its electronic distance, does a nice job of capturing the displacement of the poetic Rimbaud from either "real" Rimbaud.

What subsequently emerges out of this intriguingly ambivalent opening is a sequence of set pieces with transitions between. The set pieces are themselves generally static, whereas the transitions are often wildly exhilarating, almost magical. A good example of such a changeover occurs between scenes 5 and 6 of Act I, as Younger Rimbaud shakes his poetry in the face of the teacher Izambard. High ethereal strings and winds are complemented by flourishes in metallic percussion, blending eerily with the echoing VOICE, which gives way to Younger Rimbaud working his vowels over: "I will uncork the silent pregnancies of vowels..." "A black! E white! I red! U green! O blue!" The poet composes in a near delirium, seeing himself as a visionary -- and a criminal as well.

One senses that the intensity of these transitions (whose underlying stagecraft too is highly intricate) is a way to compensate for the lack of movement within the scenes themselves. But these are transitions, and of necessity short-lived. The music is colorful, vivid even, on a moment-to-moment basis, with each individual phrase (particularly in the orchestra) artfully shaped. However, ironically, in spite of the ambitious structuring of the libretto, the deeper levels of the musical architecture recede ineluctably into the background -- the structural issues inherent in composing a work this size go unresolved.

Perhaps understandably, for given the goals of the libretto of *Seasons in Hell*, it is clear that no conventional musical formal design would easily encompass such dramatic/temporal complexity. (One can of course imagine musical devices -- like the retrograde structure of Berg's Allegro misterioso movement of the *Lyric Suite* -- but applied to a whole opera such machinations would likely feel excessively artificial.)

Having mentioned Berg, a word about the style of the music: it is atonal in a non-abrasive way. And notwithstanding the periodic emergence of various forms of off-stage real-world music, the opera is stylistically consistent. These interruptions from without (a Salvation Army band, Arab-music moments for the Abyssinia scenes, a barracks scene reminiscent of the snorers in *Wozzeck*, etc.) clearly owe a debt to Berg. But Blumenfeld shares none of Berg's constructivist compulsion, his need for overarching structures in which to pour his unconventional musical ideas.

The musical style does not deeply reflect the ethos of Rimbaud's poetry. (Contrast this with Shostakovich's *The Nose*, in which the music distills, with militaristic concision, the essence of Gogol's ironic vision of the random brutality of the world.) The composer of *Seasons in Hell*, as much as he clearly loves Rimbaud's poetry, is not by nature disposed to reflect the violence of the imagery in his music. (One could say that the VOICE, the musical metaphor for the poetry, embodies some of this violence, but perhaps owing to the preponderance of reverb, a softener of sharp edges, the VOICE tends to smooth out, rather than accentuate any jagged outlines in the music.)

The scene of the Parisian poets' derision of Rimbaud is a good example: the repetitive laughter creates an aura of buffoonery, which the few harsh strokes at the end do little to dispel. This scene might have contained some truly hostile music, or better still an undercurrent of implicit and escalating violence, yet it conveys a completely different, and less forceful meaning.

From the vantagepoint of traditional operatic action, one might think that the drama might work better if Rimbaud's relationship to Verlaine were the crux of the opera. Then perhaps we might *see* Younger Rimbaud beat Verlaine to a pulp and leave him unconscious, rather than merely hear Older Rimbaud describe the event to his mistress Djami.

Alternatively, one might wonder idly if the life of a gunrunner wasn't full of "operatic" moments whose dramatic opportunities the libretto somehow ignored.

But this would be to miss the point entirely. We must wait, for it is only at the end of the opera that we finally achieve the necessary perspective to take in the opera's driving point. As Younger Rimbaud enters the barn to write *Season in Hell* and turns into Old Rimbaud, he effectively writes himself out of a life, in exchange for the pursuit of Action. We are witnessing an existential moment of self-annihilation. The casual viewer may expect Younger Rimbaud to do physical harm, or perhaps even to kill himself. Instead, perplexingly, he writes another text. By renouncing his art, Rimbaud cheated himself of life. And, if Rimbaud was Satan's gift to poetry, he betrayed culture and humanity as well. So if the opera lacks action, it is saying that action in the conventional sense is inconsequential when compared to creativity. It is saying that creativity *is* in fact action. And perhaps an existential suicide is *more* dramatic than a real one.

This complex of events and meanings is condensed artfully, captured in a single, telling gong stroke. This moment in the barn represents, in a distilled Zen-like fashion, the crucial mirror-focus of the structure. The final gong, at the reprise of Rimbaud's deathbed scene, effectively equates the physical death with the spiritual one.

Seasons In Hell is an intriguing and challenging opera. There is much enjoyable music, particularly in the handling of the orchestra. Appreciation will doubtless be enhanced if one is an aficionado of Rimbaud's poetry. For all the encouragement of the composer in the libretto booklet, and for all the enthusiasm of the cult surrounding Rimbaud, I am not so enthusiastic. From the composer: "He sets out to create a new language, new syntax, and to 'reinvent love, with all possibilities permitted.'" And thus, as the composer's notes go on to say: "the Rimbaud Myths were born." When the mythmakers organize a symposium to commemorate their hero, *Seasons in Hell* will effectively serve as the prelude to that event, or, for that matter, the postlude.

Tepper for Two and Three

ELIZABETH AGNEW

Albert Tepper. *Duos and Trios* [*Trio Barocco. The Toy Flute. Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon. Sonata for Viola and Piano. Three Inventions on DBH. A Shakespeare Garland. Moorish Drone Dance*]. The American Chamber Ensemble. 4-Tay.

There is certainly nothing tepid about Albert Tepper's output. In his 4-Tay release, *Duos and Trios*, the composer trots out seven chamber works with no less than 29 individual selections.

Tepper is a practical, academic composer who writes well and entertainingly, whether he is evoking baroque and postserial in *Trio Barocco*, or working under the limited accompanimental restrictions of *The Toy Flute*. His *Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon* cleverly pays homage in an only partially enigmatic fashion to "A.S., P.H., D.M., I.S., and B.B.," and the references to Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky, and Bela Bartók are clear. Somehow Heitor Villa-Lobos gets into the mix as well.

The *Sonata for Viola and Piano* is an engaging work from 1948 that explores the dark, emotive side of string playing to fine effect. *Three Inventions* on DBH, honoring Dorothy B. Hoag, takes its head motive from the German spelling of D-B-Bb and then takes off on a serial wander. The third of these miniatures begins with a Beethoven's Fifth short-short-short-long that then canonically romps about a 12-note row-row-your-boat.

A suite of incidental music to various dramas is gathered into *A Shakespeare Garland*, mixing various Elizabethan and contemporary allusions to alluring results. The album closes with a brief *Moorish Dance Drone*. Performers of The American Chamber Ensemble -- flutist Patricia Spencer, clarinetist Naomi Drucker, bassoonist Braden Toan, mezzo-soprano Deirdre Kingsbury, violinist Eriko Sato, violist Losi Martin, and pianist Blanche Abram -- acquit themselves admirably.

Time Sings On

PHILLIP GEORGE

Time Marches On: More Modern American Songs [Norman Mathews. *Songs of the Poet* (Walt Whitman). Joelle Wallach. *Four Songs from "up into the silence"* (e.e. cummings). Corey Field. *3 Yeats Songs* (W.B. Yeats). Elizabeth Austin. *A Birthday Bouquet* (e.e. cummings, Christine Rossetti, W.B. Yeats). Stephen Wilcox. *Facing the Moon* (Li Yü, Liu K'o Chuang, and Li Po). Paul A. Epstein. *BirdSongs* (Toby Olson). Ronald Perera. *Songs from Sleep Now* (James Joyce)]. Gregory Wiest, Tenor; Oresta Cybriwsky, piano. Capstone.

The poets are first-rate Americans, Europeans, and Asians in *Time Marches On: More Modern American Songs* (Capstone), featuring the artistry of tenor Gregory Wiest and pianist Oresta Cybriwsky. Norman Mathews brings postimpressionist touches to Walt Whitman in seven *Songs of the Poet*, ending with a touch of the ecstatic in "The Last Invocation."

The four songs of Joelle Wallach's *up into the silence* marries a stern solitude to the verbal whimsies of e.e. cummings. Corey Field's *3 Yeats Songs* finds new beauty in such classic poems as "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," "The Witch," and "The Young Man's Song (Brown Penny)." In the latter, a haunting, Crumb-like quality nicely pervades the accompaniment.

Elizabeth Austin's *A Birthday Bouquet* provides a gentle continuity with the above in poignant, heartfelt, and mysterious settings from Cummings, Christine Rossetti, and Yeats. The orientalia of *Facing the Moon* -- four settings by Stephen Wilcox of texts from Li Yü, Liu K'o Chuang, and Li Po -- enticingly add a welcome voice to this collection. Particularly striking are the arpeggiic flourishes of the second "Leaf by Leaf" and the pentatonic ostinati of "Drinking Alone with the Moon." Heady stuff.

Paul A. Epstein's *BirdSongs*, to poems of Toby Olson, continue the high quality in gentle and strident ornithology. *Songs from Sleep Now*, Ronald Perera's settings of James Joyce, are as strident ("I Hear an Army") and transcendent ("Sleep Now") as the texts require.

Tonsured Toensing's Office Hours

MARK ALBURGER

Richard Toensing. *Responsoria*. Choir of the Church of Saint Luke in the Fields, conducted by David Sheller. North/South.

The compositional lineage that Catholic liturgy has inspired over the centuries through Mass Ordinary, Requiem, and Vespers settings spans from Machete's *Mess des Noser Dame* through Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles* to this writer's *Vespers of 2010* (stay tuned). Less well-known is a related continuity provided by the framework of *Tenebrae*, the combined Matins-Lauds services held on the eves of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday [Batman!]. Each of these three combo-offices contain three Nocturnes, and each of these feature three Responses. The complete 27 *Responsoria* (3 x 3 x 3) have been set by Victoria, Gesualdo, Lassus, Charpentier, Michael Haydn, and now recently by Richard Toensing, in a release from North/South Recordings.

Toensing's is a major work, divided into three books (one for each day's service) on three CDs. The music is modal, spare -- a synthesis of the classic and current, the arcane and urbane in the tradition of Górecki, Poulenc, Stravinsky, Tavener, Vaughan Williams... [That's a tradition?] The work is scored throughout for six-part chorus with six soloists, piano, metal percussion (tubular bells, orchestral bells, and tam-tam), and double bass. The instruments mostly intone and sustain, punctuating the lovely, meditative choral lines with contemplative and ominous drones and tollings.

Vocal ranges are wide and the entire set is organized according to intervallic rules that look on paper more limiting than they sound. The white-note scales utilized are

Book I e, d, c (three Responsories each)

Book II b-a

Book III g, f, e (three Responsories each)

Consonant Women

MARK ALBURGER

Two by Three: Music by Women. [Stefania de Kenessey. *Sunburst*. *Beating Down*. Nancy Bloomer Deussen. *Two Pieces for Violin and Piano*. *Trio for Violin, Cell, and Piano*. Beth Anderson. *Trio: dream in d*. *Net Work*]. North/South.

"Return with us now to the thrilling days of yesteryear..." Well, it's not as simple as that. Neotraditionalist composers such as Stefania de Kenessey, Nancy Bloomer Deussen, and Beth Anderson are having it both ways: writing music that's new that sounds both old and new.

When de Kenessey writes something like the very pianistic *Sunburst*, given a rousing performance on North/South's *Two by Three: Music by Women* with Mary Kathleen Ernst, we hear a solid framework ground in tradition, yet somehow informed by more recent harmonies and rhythms that would not have been heard in past centuries. That the music is appealing is undeniable, both here and in the ensuing *Beating Down*, where Ernst is joined by violinist Teri Lazar and cellist Marcio Botelho. This is at times a sterner work, imbued with passion and energy that sounds as engaging to play as it is to hear. Yes, George Rochberg returned to earlier style evocations such as this decades ago. But here the evocations are not juxtaposed, they just are. The music has a sweep; and like all good music, it has something to say and stays in the ear.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen is another traditionalist, but with a decidedly neoromantic and sentimental swing; her harmonies are given to regularly modulate into somewhat unexpected areas in *Two Pieces for Violin and Piano* and *Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano*. Slow movements are songful; fast ones perky, with every note in place. She is not afraid to be beautiful. This is definite happy-face music that charms -- bright, cheerful, positive virtually throughout.

A darker, more introspective beauty is found in Beth Anderson's *Trio: dream in d*. She buys into the cyclic chord structures of postminimalism, with solid measure-by-measure changes and flat-side lowered harmony on the seventh and sixth degrees of scales. The music has the weight of great import; Anderson is the most "progressive-traditionalist" featured here -- her music somehow informed by the legacy of her teachers: John Cage, Terry Riley, Robert Ashley, and Larry Austin. *Net Work* is even more clearly in a minimalist camp, with the oscillating thirds of much of Philip Glass's music, tweaked with a prominent minor-modal dominant in a major-modal tonic construction. The work's more balladic, folksy style brings it close to some of Michael Nyman's film scores, and it is no surprise to learn that Anderson's fine music has been featured cinematically as well.

Calendar

July 1

San Francisco Symphony performs Ellington's *From the River*. Stern Grove, San Francisco, CA.

Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*. Aspen, CO.

July 6

Gyan Riley performs music of Terry Riley, as well as his own compositions. Old First Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, CA.

July 7

90th birthday of Gian Carlo Menotti.

July 10

U.S. premiere of *White Raven*, an opera in five acts by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. New York State Theater, New York, NY. Through July 14.

July 11

Symposium with Philip Glass. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 13

50th anniversary of the death of Arnold Schoenberg.

July 15

Christopher Rouse's *Seeing*. Aspen, CO.

July 20

Fresh Voices. Mark Alburger's *The Little Prince*, John Partridge's *The Soldiers Who Wanted to Kill Death*, and music of Nancy Bloomer Deussen. Goat Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through July 22.

July 21

Philip Glass's *Music in Twelve Parts*. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 23

Shorts: Philip Glass. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 25

Choral & Chamber Works (1976 to 2001) of Philip Glass. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 26

San Francisco Symphony performs Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Cinematic Shorts (2001), with music of Philip Glass. Lincoln Center, New York, NY.

July 27

San Francisco Symphony performs Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Appalachian Spring*, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

July 29

Ives's *Symphony No. 2*. Aspen, CO.

Chen Yi. Bennington College, VT.

Chronicle

May 2

Extension du domaine de la note. Théâtre Silvia Monfort, Paris, France. Festival through May 12.

Conservatory Classical Orchestra in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

Kernis's *Lament and Prayer* performed by the Minnesota Orchestra. MN. Repeated May 4.

The Boston Symphony performs Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "The Shostakovich is like an application for parole after a year of musical house arrest . . . [A] warm and loving clarinet sound [becomes a] shrill wheeze . . . forced upward and out of its skin. . . Shostakovich's 'band' has an edge of nastiness and a proclivity toward hysteria" [Bernard Holland, *The New York Times*, 5/4/01].

May 3

Soloists of the Goethe Institute in music of Hindemith, Ferneyhough, and Eisler. Goethe Institute, Paris, France.

Extension du domaine de la note. Luc Ferrari. Théâtre Silvia Monfort, Paris, France.

Death of (Smiling) Billy Higgins, of kidney and liver failure, at age 64. Inglewood, CA. "[He was] one of the best-loved and most-recorded drummers in postwar jazz . . . Since the late 1950's, when he made a name for himself by playing on Ornette Coleman's early recordings, Mr. Higgins was one of the most musically sensitive jazz players around . . . He recorded with Thelonious Monk . . . Sonny Rollins [and] Pat Metheny. . . Higgins was on the faculty of the jazz studies program at the University of California at Los Angeles" [Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, 5/4/01].

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Del Tredici's *Gay Life*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through May 5. "*Gay Life* [is] grown up and loud" [Allan Ulrich, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5/5/01].

Emergency String Quartet: Chamber Music for the 21st Century. The Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco, CA. "[They] specialize in playing compositions that haven't been written yet" [Internet release].

San Francisco Electronic Music Festival. 1814 Illinois Street, San Francisco, CA. Through May 6.

Orchestral Music at the Technological Frontier. Symphony Hall, Boston, MA.

Anthony de Mare plays piano music of Meredith Monk. Here Arts Center, New York, NY.

Milton Babbitt's *All Set* and Earle Brown's *Available Forms I*. Eastman School of Music, Rochester, NY.

May 4

Extension du domaine de la note. Music of Georges Aperghis and Giacinto Scelsi. Théâtre Silvia Monfort, Paris, France.

Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, CA. Also May 5.

Lara Downes. University of California, Davis, CA.

Uncommon Visions. The Paul Drescher Ensemble Electro-Acoustic Band with Joan Jeanrenaud, cello. Drescher's *Dark Blue Circumstance* (1982-86) for solo electric guitar and live digital looping; San Francisco premiere of Anthony Davis's *Blue Funk Into Darkness* (2000) for cello and electro-acoustic band, premiere of John Luther Adams's *The Light That Fills the World* (1999, revised 2001) for violin, bassoon, two electronic keyboards, two electronic percussion; Davis's *A Walk Through the Shadow* (1983, transcribed for Electro-Acoustic Band by Mark Grey, 1999); San Francisco premiere of Drescher's *Unequal Distemperament* (2000-01) for cello and electro-acoustic band; and Paul Hanson's *Pull of the Gold Rope*. The Forum at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St. @ Third, San Francisco. Repeated May 5.

Premiere of Mark Alburger's *Henry Miller in Brooklyn* (words by Mel Clay), directed by Harriet March Page, with RicK Richetta (Henry), Tisha C. Page (June), Elaine Foley Romanelli (Jeanne), pianist Keisuke Nakagoshi, wind-player Brendan Dance, and trumpeter Jab. Potrero Neighborhood House Theatre, San Francisco, CA. Through May 20. "The collaboration of Clay and Alburger is a story in itself. . . . The pair met at what Alburger calls 'an artistic dating game' held at Yerba Buena Center by the American Composers Forum. . . Someone asked [Clay] 'What kind of music are you hearing with [your texts]?' and I said, 'I'm hearing something really cheap, tacky, and vulgar.' Then there was a . . . break, and Mark came over and said, 'Cheap, vulgar, tacky -- That's what I write.' . . . 'The way Mark's music is written is such that you can't really sing it without an operatic approach,' says [Tisha] Page. 'You have to get real singers; you can't just get people who might be able to carry a tune and might be good in a musical. The music is too hard, the range is too wide; you have to be trained to be able to learn it'" [Jeff Kaliss, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4/27/01]. "'Henry Miller is a tawdry subject, so I thought, what is the tawdriest opera I know?' . . . Alburger used the musical structure of . . . Kurt Weill's suitably seedy *The Threepenny Opera* as a blueprint, adding other pre-existing music from various sources and 'mushing it all together. It's a postmodern soup . . . everything from pop tunes to a generic rap sensibility and a fair amount of Philip Glass-type minimalism.'

For example, Jeanne's love ballad 'Arthur Rimbaud' is a combination of some of the harmony from *Threepenny's* 'Pirate Jenny' and 'stolen stuff from Bizet's *Carmen*.' Alburger cheerfully confesses to also ripping off Stravinsky, Gregorian chants, Verdi, ragtime and even Muzak. 'Hopefully the stolen music, plus a major-minor tension [in 'Rimbaud'] will make a fresh sound" [Jean Schiffman, San Francisco Arts Monthly, 5/01]. "*Henry Miller in Brooklyn* . . . worked remarkably well. . . . I thought the derivative nature of the piece would be more intrusive than it was. Somehow, the combination of one guy's forms and key signatures, rhythms, etc., and other peoples melodies and textures (including the composer's, one assumes) took the curse off both, and the amalgam was effective. The cast was convincing, the music was compelling, the set was as unhealthy looking as the relationships portrayed, and the whole thing hung together. We did emerge afterwards humming bits from *Three Penny Opera* even though hardly a note and not a word of it was actually present in the score. It also helped that a full moon appeared pale and ghostly above the bay (like a worn-out old penny) during the intermission" [Annie Quito, 5/7/01]. "*Henry Miller* is . . . [a] hybrid between musical theater and opera. . . . [T]he strong operatic singing and orchestral accompaniment are of surprisingly high standards. . . . [It has] musical uniqueness" [Karen Machlin, CitySearch, 5/8/01]. "A very exciting show. . . . I was amazed by the talent" [Joe Marchi, Pacifica TV, 5/8/01] "[T]he show's overall musical sensibility is enticingly eclectic. Rick Richetta as Miller is a strong singing actor, and Tisha C. Page sings beautifully as June" [Brad Rosenstein, Bay Guardian, 5/9/01] "*Henry Miller in Brooklyn*, an exciting new creation, 'blows the dust out of the ears of opera-goers. . . . Henry Miller is in several aspects superior to several far more elaborate and expensive modern operas which I've reviewed, and its quality tends to quell any anxiety about four-letter words, sensational elegies, and erotic acts and references, all of which pepper the work's two acts. . . . Soprano Page . . . is the brightest and clearest of the [vocal] trio, an important quality when an audience is trying to make out rapid-fire vocal lines without benefit of the supertitles you're provided at the Opera House. 'June's Song,' just prior to the show's single intermission, showcases both the singer's passionate power and Alburger's capacity to elevate and enhance a melodic line. It's the sort of aria which stands so beautifully on its own that it could become an audition piece or a proud part of any good vocalist's recital. Alburger flirts with a closetful of musical styles and devices elsewhere in the opera, and yet with the force of Clay's story and libretto the piece emerges mostly cohesive and rarely loses its momentum, though most longer operas do. A pair of tangos, seemingly crowd-pleasers on opening night, is a sort of tribute . . . to the influence of . . . *The Threepenny Opera* . . . One of the pair, an ode to 'Arthur Rimbaud,' is the best moment for soprano Romanelli . . . Alburger references ragtime; at other points, the composer seems to echo Bizet, minimalist Philip Glass, and something Russian midway between Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. Somehow it all works, and it's all fascination. . . . [T]he credibility so often missing with even the superstars of opera [is] absolutely vital to Clay's honest account (based on his earlier play, which in some scenes did away with the lingerie seen in the opera).

Clay and Alburger have in places intentionally leavened their opera with humor and ear-catching gimmicks, and this is much to their credit. Both acts open with pianist Keisuke Nakagoshi (the lynchpin of a talented instrumental trio) picking up the rhythm of Henry's typing on his antique Royal, and this is both exciting and fun. The cabaret-like context of the Neighborhood House is ideal for confronting this exciting creation up close and personal" [Jeff Kaliss, Commuter Times, 5/10/01] "The authors were well served by the performers and by crisp, clever stage direction from Harriet March Page. Alburger . . . often sends his music cantering over long stretches of monologue in a rapid-fire patter that . . . kept the pace of the show from flagging. Alburger has based his eclectic score in popular dance and other types of repetitive rhythmic structures, and there is quite a bit of reference in it to *The Threepenny Opera*, which the composer acknowledges as his 'scaffold.' The show is even set up like a Brecht/Weill song-play, with numbers titled 'Ballad of the Difficult Life' and 'Useful Song' and so forth. This is a score notable for its fierce energy and drive. . . . Tisha C. Page was an alluring, seductive, and believably wayward June, at ease with her body (not a simple task, given the action of the story) . . . And she really found a thread for her character that she also manifested in her singing. . . . Harriet March Page deserves credit for eliciting the performances from her cast and for her varied use of the space. Alburger conducted his score with visceral glee and kept the show running smoothly" [Michael Zwiebach, San Francisco Classical Voice, 5/15/01]. "Miller comes on and sits at his typewriter in the middle of a grandly sloppy room -- strewn with silk clothes and nude watercolors, lace tablecloths and empty bottles -- while a three-piece ensemble plays angular jazz that evokes the mess. . . . This . . . is an appealing jumble of formal and crass elements . . . A run of the horns in his 'Idea Song' even refers directly to Weill's 'Cannon Song.' . . . Alburger's music is the show's strongest asset. His piano, trumpet, and saxophone move with a restless and complicated energy. . . . The . . . show is packed with 21 songs. . . . Henry's 'At the Blood Bank' is a coarse, half-spoken, arhythmic evocation of the novelist's messy life. 'Subway Madman' is also strong -- a near-total submission to chaos, with a lot of screaming by Henry and blaring of horns where the tune should be. 'Hello Jupiter,' Henry's climactic song, is good in the opposite way: Instead of cacophony and confusion we get exuberant, soaring melody, and Richetta's voice sounds nimble and pure. Page gets similar results out of 'Doctor Song.' . . . But Elaine Foley Romanelli does the show's best work as Jeanne. Her "Ballad of the Difficult Life" is a pretty swoon about the artist-as-Christ, and 'At the Club' is a sinuous, high-voiced tease, aimed at Henry, about June's work as a dancer. Although Jeanne serves as a cursory third wheel on Henry and June's romantic bicycle, Romanelli invests her with a strong presence. 'Arthur Rimbaud' may be the show's most interesting song, with its heavy rhythm and irregular melody" [Michael Scott Moore, San Francisco Weekly, 5/16/01].

San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, with John Bischoff, Carl Stone, and Miya Masaoka. Cellspace, San Francisco, CA. Masaoka also performs May 5 at Southern Exposure.

Britten's *War Requiem*. Kennedy Center, Washington, DC. "Contradicting the liturgy with anger and disgust" [New York Times, 5/8/01].

Chen Yi's *Dunhuang Fantasy*. St. Mary's Episcopal, Kansas City, MO.

Thru the Walls. Cutting Room, New York, NY.

Music by Dan Locklair, including the premiere of his *Te Deum*. St. Paul's United Methodist Church, Houston, TX. A second program is given May 6.

May 5

Penderecki String Quartet in Schafer's *String Quartet No. 1*, Freedman's *Graphic 8*, and Reich's *Different Trains*. Kitchener, Canada.

Glass's *The Light* performed by the Budapest Festival Orchestra. Budapest, Hungary.

Kernis's *Air* performed by the BBC Philharmonic. Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK. Through May 13, by New York Chamber Symphony. New York (NY).

San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, with Bob Ostertag, Maggi Payne, Matt Ingalls, and Ultra Red. Cellspace, San Francisco, CA.

Boston Cyberarts Marathon, with Auros, Dinosaur Annex, Marilyn Nonken, in music of Davidovsky, Reich, and Stockhausen. Slosberg Gallery, Brandeis University, MA.

Birdsongs of the Mesozoic. Somerville Theatre, Somerville, MA.

Jennifer Higdon, William Bolcom, and Jon Deak. Dia Center, New York, NY.

Orchestra 2001 in Varèse's *Intégrales*, Cage's *Second Construction*, Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, Finko's *Quadruple Triangles*, and St. Pierre's *Memento Mori*. Holy Communion Church, Philadelphia, PA. Repeated May 6, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore.

May 6

Tom Heasley. Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

Muir Trio. University of California, Davis, CA.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Kyrie*. First Congregational Church, Palo Alto, CA.

Tod Machover's *Hyperstring Trilogy*. Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

Premiere of Orlando Jacinto Garcia's *fragmentos de la noche (Night Fragments)*. Theatre of the Riverside Church, New York, NY.

Steve Reich's *Proverb*, *Different Trains*, and *Music for 18 Musicians* performed by Third Angle, with the composer in attendance. Newmark Theater, Portland, OR. "After 18, . . . I made a rule to myself, young and stupid as I was, that I couldn't do anything that was like *Music for 18 Musicians*. As a result I had the most difficult and depressing time I've ever had, compositionally, in 77 and 78" . . . In the 1980's he produced such memorable works as *Tehillim* and *Desert Music*" [James McQuillan, *The Oregonian*, 5/6/01]. "Reich spoke approvingly of the choices, referring to [the works] as three of the best pieces he'd ever written. 'If you don't like any of these,' he said, 'you really don't like what I do'" . . . Nobody seems to know what 'Third Angle' means . . . but for me it will always have something to do with . . . getting a glimpse of [a work] in a different light and from a different angle [James McQuillan, *The Oregonian*, 5/9/01].

Benjamin Lees's *Piano Trio No. 2 ("Silent Voices")*. American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

Augusta Read Thomas's *Prayer Bells* performed by the Pittsburgh Symphony. Pittsburgh, PA. Repeated May 6.

Premiere of Janice Giteck's *Navigating the Light*, plus music by Herbolsheimer, Macauley, and Nicholson. ArtsWest Playhouse and Gallery, Seattle, WA.

May 7

First Monday. Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

Taimur Sullivan and Marilyn Nonken in music of Milton Babbitt, Martin Bresnick, Jason Eckardt, and Alvin Lucier. Flea Theatre, New York, NY.

Hawthorne String Quartet in works by Erwin Schulhoff, Gideon Klein, Hans Krasa, Viteslava Kapralova, and Viktor Ullman. St. Bartholomew's Church, New York, NY. "Terezin (or Teheresenstadt) [was] the concentration camp in Czechoslovakia that the Nazis turned into a model camp, with an arts program, for propaganda purposes. . . . [A]ll four of [the male composers] died at other camps. . . . Kapralova . . . died in France while waiting to emigrate to the United States. . . . [L]istening . . . to Klein's beautifully involved, melancholy *Fantasia and Fugue*, composed at Terezin in 1943, it was impossible not to wonder how he would have developed had he not been killed, two years later, at 26. Also striking, if not particularly surprising, was the difference in tone between the two works composed before the war . . . and the three composed at Terezin" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 5/12/01].

Mel Brooks's *The Producers* wins 15 Tony Award nominations (besting the old record of 14 received by Stephen Sondheim's *Company* in 1971). New York, NY.

May 8

European premiere of Judith Sainte Croix's *From Far Beyond the Blue Sky*. Vienna, Austria.

Kernis's *New Era Dance* performed by the Hartford Symphony. Hartford, CT. Through May 18, by the Knoxville Symphony. Knoxville (TN).

World Festival of Sacred Music, Philip Glass and John Schaefer, curators. Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY.

Sigur Ros. Irving Plaza, New York, NY. The four-man Icelandic band . . . works within severe self-imposed limits: rigorously slow tempos, consonant harmonies, uncomplicated song forms. Its musical terrain, full of pop and gravity, has been well mapped by Pink Floyd and sundry new-age musicians. . . . Since Sigur Ros has been endorsed by the current paragon of arty rock, Radiohead, its sold-out show drew a stylish audience that wouldn't be caught dead listening to Yanni. But while it can teeter on the edge of kitsch, Sigur Ros has the gift of turning the elementary into the elemental. . . . It began with its sonic signature: Jon Birgisson using a bow on his electric guitar, creating elongated, disembodied tones. That sound, which can be as rounded as a cello or as shrill as a siren, floats through most of Sigur Ros's songs. . . . Birgisson sings in an otherworldly countertenor, sustaining Icelandic lyrics" [John Pareles, *The New York Times*, 5/12/01].

Benjamin Boretz. Jack Straw Productions, Seattle, WA.

May 9

Jorja Fleezanis. University of California, Davis, CA.

Angeles String Quartet. Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

Day of Noise, including the SF Sound Ensemble, with Matt Ingalls. KZSU, San Francisco, CA.

Death of James Myers, at age 81. Bonita Springs, FL. "[His] 'Rock Around the Clock' became a rock and roll anthem. . . . Myers, who also worked under the name Jimmy DeKnight, wrote more than 300 songs and had bit parts in more than 300 movies and television shows. In 1954 'Rock Around the Clock,' written by Mr. Myers and Max C. Freedman, was recorded by a band Mr. Myers had taken under his wing, Bill Haley and His Comets. After modest success, it soared to the top of the charts in 1955 as the theme song for the teenage rebel movie *The Blackboard Jungle*. The song was No. 1 for eight weeks and sold more than 22 million copies" [*The New York Times*, 5/12/01]. "Myers . . . wrote the song with Max Freedman in 1953. The song was recorded first by a Pennsylvania group, Sunny Dae and His Knights. . . . Haley's record was only a minor hit when it came out in 1954, but after the song blasted out of movie theater speakers over the opening credits to the 1955 juvenile delinquent drama *Blackboard Jungle*, it soared to the top of the national pop charts, the first rock'n'roll single to do so. . . . A Philadelphia native, Mr. Myers was a drummer in his own band before joining the Army during World War II. . . . He said the melody evolved in his head over a few years before he finally wrote it down. While picking out the tune on a piano at his office one day, his friend Freedman joined him. 'When we finished it, he said, 'What are you gong to call it?' I said, 'Rock Around the Clock,' Mr. Myers recalled . . . 'And he said, 'Why rock? What's that mean? Why not 'Dance Around the Clock?' I said, 'I just have a gut feeling, and since I'm half writer and whole publisher, I'm the boss!'" . . . It has been recorded by more than 500 . . . from Mae West to the Sex Pistols, and has been used in more than 40 movies . . . Dick Clark called it 'the anthem of rock'n'roll.' . . . Bill Haley's label did not want him to record the song. When he was free of that contract, he and Mr. Myers headed to New York and cut a deal with Decca Records. Decca put 'Rock Around the Clock' on the B-side of a song called 'Thirteen Women,' which flopped. It was Mr. Myers' mailings to Hollywood studios that ultimately paid off . . . Marshall Lytle, the bass player . . . [in] Haley's band, said he realized how big the song was as the band drove to Boston from New York in Haley's new Cadillac. . . . 'I turned on the radio and hit the button and the station was playing 'Rock Around the Clock.' I hit the button again and the next station was playing [it] and the next station, too. Within two minutes that morning, I heard 'Rock Around the Clock' playing on 12 different stations simultaneously. Mr. Myers estimated he made \$10 million in royalties from the tune. . . . [He was] buried . . . in Philadelphia" [Associated Press, 5/13/01].

The Pierre Boulez Workshop: Le Marteau Sans Maître. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

May 10

85th birthday of Milton Babbitt.

Extension du domaine de la note. Group de Recherces Musicales. Théâtre Silvia Monfort, Paris, France.

David Amram performs a rap homage to Jack Kerouac's scroll manuscript for *On the Road*. Tosca, New York, NY.

Chen Yi's *Ge Xu*, Dorothy Chang's *Sunan Dances*, Gerald Levinson's *Five Fires*, Percy Grainger's *The Warriors*, and Toru Takemitsu's *From Me Flows What You Call Time* performed by the Seattle Symphony. Benaroya Hall, Seattle, WA. Ms. Chen's *Ge Xu* and Ms. Chang's *Sunan Dances* are basically European pieces. The allusions to China (the bright, boisterous colors of *Ge Xu*, the pentatonic tunes of *Sunan Dances*) are only allusions. One is reminded of the plates and dishes that flooded England and America two centuries ago: exquisitely Chinese but designed for European use. Mr. Levinson's *Five Fires* . . . was heavy with his past studies in Bali and in France. His orchestra is loaded with the echoing percussion of the gamelan, but the measured chaos and chord progressions moving in lock step seem more about his teacher Messiaen than directly in contact with Balinese music. . . . *The Warriors* by Percy Grainger -- a triumph of enthusiasm over taste -- didn't seem to care about the question [of fusion] at all. . . . Toru Takemitsu's *From Me Flows What You Call Time*, rendered all argument superfluous. This ravishing music hears the East through a veil of French Impressionism. The Seattle Symphony under Gerard Schwarz found its delicate colors, and the percussion group Nexus explored Takemitsu's battery of devices with a welcome calm and leisure. Maybe fusion is not really East-meets-West at all but a third thing rising above the two" [Bernard Holland, *The New York Times*, 5/12/01].

May 11

Quintet of the Americas celebrates the birthday of William Grant Still. Langston Hughes Library, New York, NY.

May 12

Extension du domaine de la note. Pierre Henry. Théâtre Silvia Monfort, Paris, France.

Poon Hill Performances presents music of Leo Ornstein. Woodside, CA. "Leo is now 108 years old. He wrote his *Sonata No. 7* at age 96, and it's gorgeous" [Pamela Deutsche].

Death of Perry (Pierino) Como (b. 5/18/12, Canonsburg, PA), at age 88. Jupiter, FL. "[He was] a small-town barber from Pennsylvania whose rich voice and easy manner made him one of the nation's most popular singers and entertainers in the decades after World War II. . . . Como arrived in the big time (in the 1940's) singing what [Will] Friedwald called 'heavy Chopinesque numbers'. . . . But once on top' . . . he switched over to 'the most idiotic novelties of the pre-Mitch Miller era,' beginning with 'Hubba Hubba' . . . and continuing through 'Chi-Baba Chi-Baba 1947), 'N'yot N'yow' ('The Pussycat Song,' 1948), 'Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo' ('The Magic Song,' 1949), 'Zing Zing Zoom Zoom' (1950), 'Chincherichee,' 'Papaya-Mama,' and the monster hit 'Hot Diggity' (1955). . . . [He was one of 13 children of Pietro and Lucia Travaglini Como, who had immigrated to the United States from the Abruzzi region of Italy. The elder Como, who had a fine baritone voice, worked in the Standard Tin Plate factory in Cannonsburg, a small town in the coal-mining region southwest of Pittsburgh. The town had much in common with the Abruzzi he had left; it was a place where people toiled long and hard. Perry Como started working at the age of 10, sweeping out Steve Fragapane's barber shop for 50 cents a week. . . . and by the time he was 14 he owned his own barbershop, giving trims to minors. He picked up extra money on weekends, singing for the local chapter of the Sons of Italy and other fraternal organizations. Although Pietro Como's circumstances were so meager that he had to buy food on the installment plan, he found the money to give each of his children music lessons. . . . Unlike many singers of his generation, [Perry Como] could read music. It was Mr. Como's intention to remain a barber. But in 1932 he met Freddie Carlone, who with his brother Tony and Frank had a band that played in clubs in Cleveland. . . . By wartime [his] family was living in a small apartment in Long Island City, Queens, and Mr. Como was singing late-night performances at the Copacabana . . . The schedule kept him from spending as much time with his family as he wanted, and he decided to return to Canonsburg and open another barber shop. But an agent persuaded him to give his singing career more time, and his reputation grew. . . . 'I don't have a lot to tell the average interviewer,' Perry Como once told a reporter. 'I've done nothing that I can call exciting. I was a barber. Since then I've been a singer. That's it'" [Richard Severo, *The New York Times*, 5/4/01].

Frederick Ullen plays Ligeti's *Etudes*. Cooper Union, New York, NY. "Ullen . . . play[ed] all 17 of the Etudes that György Ligeti has so far made public. When Mr. Ligeti started this project in 1985 his intent seemed to have been to ease himself into a piano concerto. But the studies took on a life of their own. . . . Ullen['s] . . . quickest notes -- in 'WarsawAutumn' . . . were individually audible and properly gathered in tumbling bunches. In the most recent piece, *Breathless*, the smears of quick notes in the low-middle register sounded like groaning gasps . . . 'Rainbow' sounded like a search for a song melody . . . while the first part of 'White on White' was like a Bach chorale" . . . Ullen . . . realized . . . [the] fine combination of liveliness and poignancy . . . of music turning to look back on itself in 'Metal'" [Paul Griffiths, *The New York Times*, 5/16/01].

May 13

Aaron Jay Kernis's *100 Greatest Dance Hits*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

David Byrne. Irving Plaza, New York, NY.

World premiere of Richard Wilson's *Aethelred The Unready*. Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY.

May 14

Live electronics III. Salle Olivier Messiaen, Paris, France.

Birthday of Richard Kostelanetz, Lou Harrison (his 85th), Tania Leon, and Alvin Lucier.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Ascent to Victory*. Bel Air, MD.

Jennifer Elowitch. New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

Boulez conducts his *Marteau Sans Maître, Anthèmes I* (1991), and *Piano Sonata No. 1* (1946). Weill Recital Hall, New York, NY. "[I]t was hard to imagine why this alluring work was ever treated like some dogmatic serialist tract. Written in homage to Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, *Le Marteau Sans Maître* . . . is a setting in nine movements of three obscure Surrealistic poems by René Char, scored with astounding imagination for mezzo-soprano and six wildly diverse instruments Boulez may be the most sumptuous French colorist since Debussy, and the instrumental hues he extracts from the unconventional ensemble are wondrously varied, both when the textures are thick with hypercharged, zigzagging counterpoint, or thinned to diaphanous solos for flute or guitar. The mezzo-soprano Julia Bentley brought rich sound, deep expressivity and an uncanny sense of pitch to the work's restless vocal lines, alive with sudden skips and spiky rhythms one moment, hushed and Impressionistic the next. It was touching to see Mr. Boulez, relaxed and courtly at 76, drawing such vibrant and incisive playing from these earnest and gifted young musicians. The work's 40 minutes went by in no time. . . . [T]he 10-minute Piano Sonata No. 1 . . . [is] astonishingly compact and steely music" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 5/18/01].

May 16

Portrait of John Cage. Cité de la Musique, Paris, France.

The Magical Cabaret of EAR Unit! Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, Takemitsu's *Star-Isle* (1982), Britten's *Prince of the Pagodas* and Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. "Leading what must be the largest percussion section since the orchestra performed Varèse's *Ionisation* several years ago, Thomas blazed his way through the *Pagodas* sequence" [Allan Ulrich, *The New York Times*, 5/18/01].

May 17

New York City Opera presents *Showcasing American Composers*, excerpts from 11 new operas. West-Park Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

Eos Orchestra premiere's Sondheim's *Concertino* (1949) and Jake Heggie's *Cut Time*. Society for Ethical Culture, New York, NY. "Sondheim['s] *Concertino* [was] written when he was not yet 20. Originally scored for two pianos, the 12-minute work has been orchestrated by Jonathan Sheffer [The] work is . . . in the Neoclassical idiom Echoes of Ravel and Copland are plentiful . . . 'In college I did a junior paper on Copland's *Music for the Theater* and a senior paper on Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand*. . . . I'd say I was in my Hindemith phase, especially *The Four Temperaments*. Other listeners may hear . . . Gershwin's *Piano Concerto in F* (though here in G)" [The *New York Times*].

May 18

Corigliano's *The Pied Piper Ballet*. Lincoln Center, New York, NY. Through May 24.

May 19

Scelsi's *Aiôn*. Salle Olivier Messiaen, Paris, France.

48th anniversary of the death of Charles Ives.

Seattle Symphony in Chen Yi's *Ge Xu*. Seattle, WA.

May 20

Max Lifchitz in *Tangos and More!* Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY.

May 21

Stefano Scodanibbio. Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

May 22

Scenes from Bernstein's *Candide* and Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

North/South Consonance presents Euba's *Saturday Night at the Cabana Bamboo*, Shapiro's *Trio*, Diemer's *A Quiet, Lovely Piece*, Whitman's *Ori*, and Kessner's *In the Center*. Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY.

May 23

John Korcz's film *Go to Hell*, with music by Barry Cohen. Dutch Reform Church Funeral Home, New York, NY.

May 24

Lost Objects, by Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe, performed by the Bang On a Can All-Stars. Dresden, Germany.

Ernesto Diaz-Infante. The Luggage Store, San Francisco, CA.

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through May 26.

Premiere of Pinkham's *Partita for Cello and Double Bass*. Williams Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

ASCAP Concert Music Awards, with Peter Schikele, honoring Leonard Slatkin, Fred Sherry, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Merkin Concert Hall (for *Great Day in New York*), John Corigliano, Chen Yi, Tan Dun, H. Robert Reynolds, Tony Visconti, and Martha Mooke (for *Thru the Walls*). *Walter Reade Theatre, New York, NY*.

Composers Concordance presents Rhoads's *Slam*, Rovner's *Hexagram*, Trefousse's *Hotel Brown Poems*, Burke's *Fury of Bloom*, Birtwistle's *Pulse Sampler*, Rowe's *Shells*, Mamlok's *Polarities*, and Beeferman's *Sonata Bombastica*. Frederick Loewe Theatre, New York University, New York, NY.

Music and Poetry, Aaron Jay Kernis's *Still Movement with Hymn* and Stacy Garrop's *Little Bits*. Roulette, New York, NY.

Steve Reich Redux. Tehillim and The Desert Music. Columbia University, New York, NY. "These are among Mr. Reich's most durable works" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 5/28/01].

May 25

Glass's *Voices for Didgeridoo, Organ, and Narrator* performed by the Melbourne Symphony. Melbourne, Australia.

Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France in Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*. Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, France.

Nevada County Composers' Coalition, with music of Mikail Graham, Darcy Reynolds, and Terry Riley. The Miner's Foundry. A second program is held May 31.

May 26

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, conducted by Jean-Louis LeRoux. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

May 28

Arditti String Quartet, with Stefano Scodanibbio. LA County Art Museum, LA, CA.

May 29

79th anniversary of the birth of Iannis Xenakis.

Britten's *Simple Symphony* and Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA.

May 30

Chen Yi's *Duo Ye* performed by the Munich Chamber Orchestra, Munich, Germany. Repeated May 31, Cologne.

San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas, in Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Through June 1. "Thomas aces a masterpiece by Shostakovich" [Allan Ulrich, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6/1/01].

Premiere of Chen Yi's *Ning*. Ordway Center, St. Paul, MN.

Comment

By the Numbers

Number of articles on contemporary popular music in Time magazine, May 2001 (four issues)

3

Total number of articles on contemporary popular music in Time magazine, April-May 2001 (nine issues)

5

Number of articles on contemporary classical music in Time magazine, May 2001 (four issues)

1

Total number of articles on contemporary classical music in Time magazine, April-May 2001 (nine issues)

1

Number of articles on contemporary popular music in the San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday Datebook, May 2001 (four issues)

8

Total number of articles on contemporary popular music in the San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday Datebook, April-May 2001 (nine issues)

18

Number of articles on contemporary classical music in the San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday Datebook, May 2001 (four issues)

0

Total number of articles on contemporary classical music in the San Francisco Chronicle's Sunday Datebook, April-May 2001 (nine issues)

0

Items

On May 1, a chilling memo was issued from Tower Records' headquarters [in Sacramento] to all 113 of its U.S. stores. The memo read as follows: "Effective immediately, the following three companies are on buying hold: Allegro, Harmonia Mundi, and Qualiton. Please do not purchase from these vendors until you have received notice from here." Translation: Do not order any more recordings from these three independent distributors of (mostly classical and jazz) recordings until further notice. Thus, if Anonymous 4 records a new CD on its label, Harmonia Mundi USA, you won't find it in Tower Records. Nor will you find any new discs from Chanticleer on the Dorian and Nimbus labels (among the Allegro stable) or on CRI, Hungaroton, BIS, or Supraphon (some of the larger Qualiton-distributed labels.) . . . Of course the major distributors -- Universal, Sony, BMG, and EMI -- are on no such hold. All have agreed to give Tower deeper discounts on classical product, as well as, in most cases, to let Tower have 360 days to pay them for any product sold (called "360-days dating"). "It's like selling records on consignment," said one label exec. WEA is the only large distributor that has turned Tower down, which for the moment could put the status of any new recordings on Nonesuch, Teldec, and Erato in limbo with the chain. . . . A bit of background: Tower, which has 183 stores worldwide, is one of the few, if not the only, retail chains that carries a substantial array of classical recordings, especially back catalog. (Borders is apparently catching up, but not quickly enough to please distributors of any genre.) In recent years, Tower has been having financial difficulties. Just last month, a major bank loan -- by some reports as high as \$275 million -- came due. The company has been given an extension, but that has not quelled rumors that it may be headed for Chapter 11. Wiser heads say that is unlikely, that the distributors would sooner come to Tower's aid than let it file for bankruptcy. "They're certainly not the force they once were," said one executive. "They're closing some stores; the book division is hemorrhaging money. But going Chapter 11 would really surprise me." One observer posited that the reason for Tower's financial problems in the U.S. is that the North American stores essentially financed the chain's rapid expansion overseas. In any case, if Tower did file for Chapter 11, all of its current inventory would, by the banks' reckoning, be considered an asset and would be liquidated. Which in turn means that the distributors would not be paid for any of the product that happened to be sitting on the shelves at the time of the filing.

Susan Elliott
MusicalAmerica.com, 5/11/01

Writers

ELIZABETH AGNEW is a Philadelphia-based journalist.

MARK ALBURGER began playing the oboe and composing in association with Dorothy and James Freeman, George Crumb, and Richard Wernick. He studied with Karl Kohn at Pomona College; Joan Panetti and Gerald Levinson at Swarthmore College (B.A.); Jules Langert at Dominican College (M.A.); Roland Jackson at Claremont Graduate University (Ph.D.); and Terry Riley. Alburger writes for *Commuter Times* and is published by *New Music*. He is Editor-Publisher of *21ST-CENTURY MUSIC*, and has interviewed numerous composers, including Charles Amirkhanian, Henry Brant, Earle Brown, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, and Frederick Rzewski. An ASCAP composer, he will have three operas *Antigone*, *Henry Miller in Brooklyn*, and *The Little Prince* presented in July through November in the San Francisco area.

MICHAEL DELLAIRA is a composer who lives in New York City. Since 1993 he has been the Vice President of the American Composers Alliance, the oldest composer's service organization in the U.S. He is working on an opera with librettist Susan Yankowitz based on Colette's novel *Chéri* which has had recent readings by the Golden Fleece's Square One series and American Opera Projects. Next January it will be in workshop with The Center for Contemporary Opera.

JEFF DUNN is a freelance critic with a B.A. in music and a Ph.D. in Education. He is an avid collector of recorded performances of new music, a dedicated opera-goer, and a composer of piano and vocal music. His post-modernistic career has included stints as a ranger-naturalist, geologic explorationist, and geography professor. He now serves on the board of directors for *New Music Forum* and is a Bay Area correspondent for *21ST-CENTURY MUSIC*.

PHILLIP GEORGE is an editor for *New Music*, and serves on the staff of *20TH-CENTURY MUSIC*.

JANOS GEREBEN is the Arts Editor of the Post Newspaper Group.

DAVID HICKS is a New York based writer on music.

MARGIE WU was born in Ann Arbor, MI, where she began both piano and violin at an early age. She graduated with distinction from the University of Michigan, with degrees in Piano Performance from the School of Music and in Microbiology from the School of Literature, Science and the Arts. Wu is founder and pianist of the chamber music group *ELIS*. She is active in Europe as a chamber musician, lied accompanist and soloist. Wu lives in Zürich, Switzerland, and teaches piano at the Zurich conservatory.