

CLASSICAL

by K. Robert Schwarz

After two years as a teacher in the United States during the 1890s, noted Czech composer Antonín Dvořák issued a surprising challenge to his hosts.

"Just as this nation has already surpassed so many others in marvelous inventions and feats of engineering and commerce," he said, "and has made an honorable place for itself in literature . . . , so it must assert itself in the other arts, and especially in the art of music."

In Dvořák's time, as today, American classical music was being tugged in two directions. Oddly enough, Dvořák, a foreigner, espoused the *nationalist* cause, joining those composers who have viewed America's native culture—our folk and ethnic music, ragtime and blues, and, later, jazz and rock—as a legitimate foundation for a distinctly American classical style. On the other side, the "internationalists," represented in Dvořák's day by composers such as John Knowles Paine, have dismissed the whole notion of a national style as chauvinistic. Implicitly assuming the inferiority of American culture, they have argued that American composers should learn mainstream European musical idioms.

Throughout American history, but particularly during the 20th century, the pendulum has swung back and forth between these two opposing views in almost every generation of composers and critics.

The tension between European and American styles emerged long before Dvořák's challenge. During the Revolutionary era, the sacred music of New England was dominated by the compositions of Boston-born William Billings (1746–1800). By the early 19th century, however, as the young nation absorbed a fresh influx of European immigrants, native New England church music was increasingly seen as crude and clumsy. New England clergymen began eliminating American compositions from hymn-books, replacing them with European works or imitations thereof. By the time Lowell Mason compiled the *Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection of Church Music* (1821), hardly a trace remained of the native sacred repertoire.

Nor was the trend limited to church music. Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–69), a piano virtuoso and composer who was raised in the Old Quarter of New Orleans and educated in Paris, wrote brilliant solo piano compositions based on the Afro-Caribbean music he had heard as a child. Today, the vividness of his melodies and the snap of his rhythms seem a prescient attempt at American musical nationalism. Yet Gottschalk, despite tremendous success as a performer, was repeatedly stymied as a composer by the prevailing attitude among the educated urban

classes in his homeland that European (and particularly German) music was superior to American.

By the mid-19th century, German musicians were everywhere in America, and native composers, if they wanted to be taken seriously, had to ape the German style. Some went to Germany to study composition; they returned to America sounding like Schumann, Brahms, or Wagner.

This was the unfriendly milieu that Charles Ives (1874–1954) encountered when he arrived at Yale to study with the noted composer Horatio Parker in 1894. Parker had little sympathy for either the young man's love of the American vernacular or his musical experiments. Yet to Ives, such tendencies came naturally. Raised in Danbury, Connecticut, he was the son of an all-purpose town music director of extraordinary eccentricity. George Ives, involved with band music, organ playing, and camp-meeting hymn singing, was reluctant to divorce classical music from popular music. And he was a relentless experimenter who used his son—and all the townsfolk of Danbury—as his test audience.

An Audience of None

"Father insisted on the use of the ears and the mind to think for themselves—in other words, not to be too dependent on customs and habits," Charles later recalled. Although the son seems to have exaggerated the father's originality, George's attempts to "stretch the ears" certainly took remarkable forms. Once, in a spatial experiment, he directed several bands to march around Danbury's town square in opposite directions, playing different tunes, an effect that Charles later recalled in his *Three Places in New England* (1912). In a tonal experiment, George had his son sing in one key while he sang in another. And always it was the spirit, conviction, and sincerity of a performance that counted far more than mere musical accuracy.

It is no wonder, then, that Charles Ives' compositions bore the imprint of his father's experiments. Yet the younger Ives realized that audiences were unlikely to appreciate his compositions any time soon. After graduating from Yale, he chose a career in life insurance (like his contemporary, poet Wallace Stevens) rather than music. "If he has a nice wife and children, how can [a composer] let the children starve on his dissonances?" Ives asked with typical Yankee practicality.

Thus Ives became a spare-time composer, writing in virtual isolation at night and on weekends at his homes in Manhattan and Connecticut. His few attempts to have his work performed provoked hostility and

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European composers and performers dominated opera and classical music in America through the early 20th century. Here (circa 1916), Enrico Caruso, the Italian-born "superstar" of New York opera, sings the lead in Donizetti's popular L'Elisir d'Amore.

incredulity. "I seem to have worked in composition with more natural freedom when I knew that the music was not going to be played, at least publicly," he later rationalized.

By the mid-1920s, a variety of chronic health problems brought Ives' business life and musical career to a close. His music still earned him only ridicule. One reason was his assertion of the worth of all facets of American music—hymns, marches, ragtime, patriotic and popular songs—and thus his refusal to separate art from daily life. "You cannot set off art in the corner and hope for it to have vitality, reality, substance," he said. "It comes directly out of the . . . experience of life."

Ives believed that music should try to recreate life, with all its disorder intact. A song such as *The Things Our Fathers Loved* (1917) evokes this reality, and specifically Ives' own Danbury childhood, by means of quotations of hymns, marches, and popular songs, all juxtaposed with joyous disregard for traditional European notions of consonance and dissonance.

It was Ives' scorn for convention that led him to experiment with many revolutionary 20th-century techniques, sometimes before they were "discovered" in Europe. He equated dissonance with strength, and explored the implications of densely-textured music lacking a tonal center. Ives knew his compositions might sound "difficult," but felt that listeners ought to be challenged: "Beauty in music is too often confused

with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair. Many sounds that we are used to do not bother us, and for that reason we are inclined to call them beautiful.”

Ives might have been a model for younger American composers during the early 20th century—had any of them ever heard his music. Not until the 1930s did Ives begin to win attention. “There we were in the 1920s searching for a composer from the older generation with an ‘American sound,’ and here was Charles Ives composing this incredible music—totally unknown to us,” Aaron Copland later recalled.

Music for ‘the Masses’

So Copland, born in Brooklyn in 1900, had to look elsewhere for his models. Like many American composers—from Virgil Thomson in 1921 through Philip Glass in 1964—he went to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger, a renowned teacher. Boulanger, who was convinced that American music was just about to find its own native voice, encouraged her young student to explore the sounds of home-grown music. When Copland returned to New York in 1924, he was “determined to write a work that would immediately be recognized as American in character.”

During the 1920s, the most natural way for an American composer to emphasize his nationalism was to turn to jazz. At the time, symphonic jazz was all the rage; in 1924, bandleader Paul Whiteman had introduced George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, a hugely successful attempt to synthesize jazz and concert music. Copland tried his own version of symphonic jazz in *Music for the Theatre* (1925) and Piano Concerto (1926).

But to Copland symphonic jazz was a dead end. “It was easy to be American in musical terms, but all American music could not possibly be confined to two dominant jazz moods—the blues and the snappy number,” Copland said. Where would he find a music upon which to base a richer American national style?

The answer came out of the great economic upheaval of the 1930s. The Depression years brought a turn toward conservatism in the arts and leftism in politics. Leftist sentiment encouraged composers to reach out to “the masses,” to speak a musical language that would appeal to the common people. And what better basis for such a language than American folk music? Suddenly, composers (like many artists and writers) became fascinated with historical and regional Americanism, and particularly with the rugged American West. Meanwhile, the growth of motion pictures, the phonograph, and radio assured composers a broader audience, provided that their music was simple, direct, and functional.

It was left to Virgil Thomson, born in 1896 in Kansas City but trained in Paris by Boulanger, to create the new style. Thomson wrote the scores for two documentary films, one of which, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), propagandized in favor of resettlement aid for Dust-bowl families. For his score, Thomson turned to the music of his

youth—Baptist hymns, blues, and, most importantly, folk and cowboy songs—and used them in a disarmingly unpretentious, tuneful manner.

Armed with this lesson, Copland embarked on his own attempt to reach a larger public by means of what he called “imposed simplicity.” He later wrote:

During the mid '30s, I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. The conventional concert public continued apathetic or indifferent to anything but the established classics . . . Moreover, an entirely new public had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist.

Recognizing the split between composers and audiences that was then only just appearing, Copland, unlike many later composers, found a way to bridge it. Without compromising quality for the sake of popular appeal, he pared down and simplified his already lean musical vocabulary. To the rhythms of jazz he added a new ingredient—American folk music, reinterpreted in his own style. Thus the ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942) turn to cowboy songs, and *Appalachian Spring* (1944) includes the Shaker melody “Simple Gifts.” During World War II, Copland responded to the nation’s renewed patriotism with the heroic, brassy, *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), one of the best-known pieces of American music next to “The Star Spangled Banner.”

A ‘Prepared’ Piano

Perhaps at no other time in American history were composer and public so united in their musical taste. But that bubble of solidarity was soon to burst, as American composers began to turn from nationalism to internationalism, from American models to European ones, a shift that was to have ominous consequences for both composers and the public.

The most surprising development in music after World War II was the rapid adoption on both sides of the Atlantic of the 12-tone technique that Austria’s Arnold Schoenberg had pioneered during the 1920s, and carried to the United States in 1933 when he fled the Nazis. The technique offered a new way of organizing the 12 pitches of the scale—a method that deliberately avoided any hint of tonal center (what we commonly call “key”). It is a cerebral, rational, compositional system, in many ways akin to mathematical permutation.

It was not until after World War II that the American composer Milton Babbitt realized that Schoenberg’s 12-tone technique might be extended beyond pitch. If one could order the pitches of a composition in such a way as to both predetermine structure and void tonality, why not also order durations and dynamics? Thus Babbitt, trained as a mathema-

tician as well as a composer, began to use a series of durations (the lengths of notes) and a series of dynamics (the volume of notes) along with Schoenberg's series of pitches. Babbitt's extension of 12-tone technique became known, logically enough, as serialism.

Babbitt's approach led him to create staggeringly complex and rigidly organized compositions. "I believe in cerebral music—in the application of intellect to relevant matters," he declared proudly. "I never choose a note unless I know precisely why I want it there, and can give several reasons why [I chose] it and not another." Yet listeners were left utterly in the dark, for the mathematical permutations of serialism are inaudible on the musical surface. When confronted with the pointilistic sound of Babbitt's music—melodies fragmented into tiny, leaping, disjointed bursts—and its avoidance of both tonal center and regular pulse, listeners responded with dismay. And they became increasingly alienated from the American avant-garde.

Babbitt's reaction was to lash out at the "conservatism" of audiences, and to retreat, along with other composers who shared his predilections, into academia. With the development of the electronic sound synthesizer during the late 1950s, Babbitt, at Princeton, was finally able to realize his goal of totally-controlled music: Without having to worry about the limitations of human performance, he could obtain precise organization of complex rhythms, dynamics, and pitches.



The masters of 20th-century American classical music: Aaron Copland (left); Virgil Thomson (upper right); and Charles Ives (lower right).

One of the great ironies of American music history is that while Babbitt was extending serialism—a musical language that became the epitome of internationalism, at least among the avant-garde of the 1950s and '60s—another composer was moving in the opposite direction.

Instead of trying to rigidly predetermine every aspect of music's structure, John Cage was attempting to reduce the composer's control over his creations. Cage can hardly be considered a nationalist, for he showed little interest in indigenous American music. Nor can he be considered an internationalist, for he had even less use for European models. Yet he is an internationalist of a different sort, a man strongly influenced by non-Western music and philosophy. And he belongs to a distinctly American lineage, that of the stubbornly independent innovator who, like Ives, follows his own path, oblivious to the dictates of fashion.

Born in Los Angeles in 1912, Cage grew up hearing as much non-Western music as Western. He became especially interested in the gamelan, an Indonesian orchestra of metal percussion instruments. By the 1930s, composing for percussion ensemble, Cage was attempting to recreate the gamelan aesthetic—not only its chiming sonority, but its distinctly non-Western static, nondirectional quality.

By 1938, Cage had succeeded in transforming the inside of a piano (by inserting screws, bits of rubber, and other objects) so that it sounded like a miniature gamelan. But Cage saw the "prepared piano" as only a first step in the absorption of non-Western aesthetics. He had become convinced, like Ives before him, of the need to blur the distinction between music and noise, between art and life. In 1937, he predicted that "the use of noise to make music will continue until we reach a musical product through the aid of electrical instruments, which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard."

The Sounds of Silence

Thus Cage's *Credo in Us* (1942) combines home-made gamelan-like percussion with an electric buzzer and a radio. At precisely indicated points in the score, the radio is turned on to whatever happens to be broadcast (although the player is advised to "avoid news programs during national or international emergencies")—a deliberate abdication of control by the composer.

Another step came in 1947, when Cage began attending lectures on Zen Buddhism. "The study of Zen led me to the enjoyment of things as they come, as they happen, rather than as they are possessed or kept or forced to be," Cage said. "One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let the sounds be themselves, rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."

Giving up "the desire to control sound" became Cage's obsession during the 1950s. He began using chance methods to compose, choosing

pitches, durations, and timbres not by conscious decisions but by the results of the coin-tosses prescribed in the Chinese "Book of Changes," the *I Ching*. Next, Cage sought to extend his "chance procedures" to the realm of performance. He realized that there is no such thing as "silence." All the sounds around us are "music." Thus, in Cage's famous silent piece of 1952, *4' 33"*, the pianist sits at the keyboard and plays nothing at all. The listener is encouraged to focus on other sounds, especially those produced by the audience itself.

Cage thus took Ives' refusal to distinguish between art and life to its ultimate extreme. He saw the composer's role not as "an attempt to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake us up to the very life we're living."

Searching for Listeners

Cage could not have expected a warm reception from critics and his fellow composers, never mind the concert-going public. And he did not receive one. But his radical experiments served a valuable purpose, for they forced an entire generation of composers to open its ears. What could have been a better antidote to academia's emphasis on stiflingly overintellectualized serial techniques?

Nevertheless, by the 1960s, composers and audiences had reached a peak of mutual estrangement. Composers, immersed either in academic serialism or the chaotic "happenings" of the experimentalists, dismissed the average listener as hopelessly naive.* Concertgoers, convinced that comprehensible music had died with Mahler and Sibelius, reacted with hostility to new works; conductors chose few new American compositions for performance. Meanwhile, rock and soul music siphoned off younger listeners. More and more, the classical music audience was white, older, upper-crust, and very conservative in its tastes.

However, a few younger composers were beginning to fill the musical vacuum by the late 1960s. Although they had little in common as far as musical style, they all shared a desire to reach out to audiences. Under the general umbrella of "new accessibility," they began to attract the attention of once-alienated listeners. In *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), for example, George Crumb did so by turning music into a theatrical ritual, filled with evocative masks, costumes, and sonorities.

If Dionysian expression rather than Apollonian rationalism was the hallmark of the "new accessibility," no composer epitomized the trend more than David Del Tredici. "New Romanticism" might be a better term for Del Tredici's music: Not only does he embrace Romanticism's emotionalism, he returns to its tonality, its more consonant harmonic

*A notable exception was Leonard Bernstein. More than anyone else during the 1940s and 1950s, he managed to integrate native idioms with the classical tradition, notably in *West Side Story* (1957), a seamless amalgamation of Broadway, bebop, mambo, opera, and symphony. Bernstein has become our greatest conductor, but he was not able to live up to his early promise as a composer.



A scene from Akhnaten (1984), an opera by Philip Glass. Many critics argue that performances of such contemporary American works are all too rare.

language, and its singable melodic lines.

“For me,” writes the Princeton-trained composer, “tonality is a daring discovery. I grew up in a climate in which, for a composer, only dissonance and atonality were acceptable.” Yet *Final Alice* (1976), one of many Del Tredici scores inspired by Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* stories, reveals that the composer returns to Romanticism in a very personal, idiosyncratic way. Despite the virtuoso orchestration, consonant harmonies, and soaring soprano melodies, this is Romanticism transformed by a 20th-century composer—a Romanticism whose obsessive repetition and hyper-expressive climaxes are every bit as perverse as *Wonderland* itself.

Del Tredici’s opulent orchestral scores certainly charmed audiences, but he could hardly win back the audience for new music by himself. That feat was left to a much more radical group of composers, who had roots firmly planted in the American vernacular.

By the late 1960s, at least four composers—La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass—had emerged as pioneers of a new style called minimalism. The term itself, borrowed from the visual arts, is despised by the composers, but it does aptly describe the music—which zeroes in on small details of structure and then magnifies them by repetition to form the basis of an entire work.

The career of Steve Reich, now 51, reflects the predilections of the minimalists as a group. Born in New York City, Reich was fascinated by music with a steady pulse and tonal center—the bebop of Charlie Parker, the music of Africa and Asia, the propulsive rhythms of Stravinsky. Serialism left him cold. Nor was he interested in Cage's experiments. Why, Reich wondered, was there such a gulf between the music he loved and the music his Juilliard instructors wanted him to write?

By the mid-1960s, Reich had decided to cast both serialism and Cage aside. Yet his interest in the drone-like modal jazz of saxophonist John Coltrane and the stasis of non-Western music meant that Reich would not simply work in the traditional Western mold. Ignoring Occidental notions of contrast, development, and climax, Reich's music—compositions such as *Come Out* (1966) and *Piano Phase* (1967)—was directionless and static. Although it had steady pulse, clear tonal center, and jazzy syncopations, it created a meditative aura by means of ceaseless repetition and unchanging pitch, volume, and harmony.

Selling Out?

Reich's early works scandalized the avant-garde. Serialists dismissed him as simple minded; Cage's followers denounced him as fascist. Yet younger listeners, long absent from the classical concert hall, flocked to Reich's performances at lower-Manhattan lofts and art galleries. In 1970, Reich traveled to Ghana to learn West African percussion, revealing the fruits of his labors in his magnum opus, *Drumming* (1971). In 1976, after studying the Balinese gamelan, Reich wrote *Music for 18 Musicians*, reveling in lush, varied timbres and an expanded harmonic and melodic range. And *Music* demonstrated that, for the first time in recent memory, a contemporary composer had found an audience—for its recording sold more than 20,000 copies in the first year, and catapulted Reich to international prominence.

Philip Glass's career parallels Reich's in many respects. A native of Baltimore, educated at the University of Chicago and Juilliard, Glass, too, rebelled against academic serialism. During the mid-1960s, he studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. There, he met the Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar and, like Reich, became interested in non-Western music. But while Reich has favored abstract instrumental music, Glass has concentrated on dramatic music—opera, theater, film.

Today, Glass is the most important opera composer of his generation. His operatic trilogy—*Einstein on the Beach* (1976), *Satyagraha* (1980), and *Akhmaten* (1984)—has sold out opera houses around the globe. The trilogy, far from abstract, focuses on three figures representing different areas of human endeavor: Einstein, the scientist; Gandhi, the politician; and Akhnaten, the Egyptian pharaoh and religious monotheist. Even more important, however, is the shift in musical style the operas represent. For Glass's recent operas, like Reich's newer orches-

tral works, reveal a turn from the austerity of minimalism to an increasingly rich, newly emotional, postminimalist aesthetic.

Reich and Glass have not abandoned their roots in American nationalism. Reich's music continues to be imbued with jazz-inflected syncopated rhythms; Glass's *Songs From Liquid Days* (1986) is set to texts by rock stars David Byrne, Paul Simon, and Suzanne Vega. Nor have Reich and Glass abandoned repetition. What they *have* done is to reach out toward the symphonic and operatic mainstream, reinvigorating the ossifying classical tradition. Today, Reich and Glass receive commissions from orchestras and opera houses, and their works appear on programs alongside those of Beethoven and Wagner.

In the same way that Cage helped liberate even composers who did not emulate him, so Reich and Glass have freed a whole generation of younger composers. Whether one is a devotee or a detractor of minimalism, one cannot deny its beneficial effects on American music—its reabsorption of tonal center, steady pulse, and the American vernacular; its appeal to a once-alienated younger public. The effects can be seen in the career of John Adams, who, although once a disciple of both Reich and Glass, has always showed a more intuitive, emotional spirit. His opera *Nixon in China* (1987) played to packed houses during its première run in Houston, and further performances and a recording will reach thousands of listeners on two continents.

It is no accident that these successes recall the enviable achievements of American classical music during the 1930s and '40s. Like Thomson and Copland, the minimalists have reached out to audiences.

What Reich, Glass, and Adams offer is "nationalism" rather than "internationalism," an approach that embraces our culture instead of thumbing its nose at it. And not only the minimalists have succeeded. Following on the heels of David Del Tredici, a whole generation of "New Romantics" has been composing accessible orchestral scores that are finding their way onto concert programs. Stephen Paulus, Libby Larsen, John Harbison, and Joseph Schwantner all display various facets of this coloristic, expressive, often frankly populist symphonic style.

There is, of course, always the danger that composers will oversimplify for the sake of accessibility. Yet the finest composers of the younger generation have been able to write for a broad public without compromising standards. And the hazards they face seem preferable to those created by the avant-garde of the 1950s and '60s, which risked losing forever the audience for living American composers. Both Dvořák and Ives, I think, would be pleased.
