



Kyle Gann wrote his first “American Composer” column for Chamber Music in 1999. Ever since, his writing has appeared in every regular issue of the magazine, analyzing and celebrating the work of more than fifty composing colleagues. This month, Gann takes a well-deserved vacation. We have taken the occasion to invite Frank J. Oteri to discuss the work of a significant American composer who had never been the subject of one of these columns: Gann himself, a man whose music is as distinctive and intelligent as his writing. —ED.

by Frank J. Oteri

Kyle Gann

Few musicologists have written as passionately or as well as Kyle Gann did, in *American Music of the 20th Century*, about such composers as Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, John Cage, Harry Partch, and Conlon Nancarrow—a group often lumped together oxymoronically as America’s “maverick tradition.” And *Music Downtown*, his collected writings for *The Village Voice* on the rise of minimalism and the other musical trends that evolved in Lower Manhattan at the end of the century, is perhaps the single best history of the period. So it’s no surprise that both

musical developments are evident in Gann’s own music. Unexpected, however, is how seamlessly he weaves them together. In fact, Gann’s compositions could be invoked as proof of a single, individualistic American aesthetic—the existence of which he has long argued for.

Gann’s music often sounds as mellifluous as the less overtly process-driven music that Philip Glass started writing once he had access to a string section. But a quick look at most Gann scores reveals how metrically irregular and harmonically weird they are at the same time. Embracing repe-

tion and crafting truly beautiful melodies, Gann creates rhythms and harmonies as complex as those promulgated by his maverick forebears and makes them sound not only extremely pleasing, but inevitable. Conlon Nancarrow—one of Gann’s compositional heroes and the subject of his first book—had to resort to the player piano to fashion his dense and seemingly counterintuitive polyrhythms. Gann, who has produced a whole series of similar Disklavier études, has benefited from the emergence of new generation of performers much better equipped to handle such fare. So Gann’s off-kilter grooves, written for human players, sound totally natural.

As for melodic and harmonic vocabulary, many of Gann’s works explore possibilities beyond the piano’s twelve-tone equal temperament (aka 12tET), such as just-intonation scales including as many as 29 notes per octave. While most players don’t feel comfortable with this smorgasbord of pitch possibility, Gann has found resourceful ways around the problem (e.g., by restricting the more remote pitches to keyboard samplers). But even when writing for instruments that are “un-retuned,” his adventures with microtonality inform the music. And Gann’s *non*-microtonal music is not in 12tET by default, but rather because the composer is able to idiomatically and fully exploit the kinds of things this particular tuning does so effectively, such as median modulations and semitonal alterations. (One cool thing Gann does is to change just one note in a chord in a way that completely alters the musical context—for example, the major/minor shifts in “Pluto” from his magnum opus, *The Planets*; in so doing he wonderfully mines one of 12tET’s greatest resources.)

Undoubtedly, Gann’s highly original sonic explorations are trickier with larger forces. Good luck finding an orchestra that is willing to devote the rehearsal time necessary to keep the pace in a passage of 17/16 or to play correctly in tune in 13-limit

just intonation! And, in fact, the music that Gann has written for big ensembles either eschews these gambits altogether (as in the nevertheless extremely lovely 2006 *Transcendental Sonnets*, for soloists, chorus, and orchestra) or remains sitting on his shelf (as with the 78-minute orchestral version of *The Planets*, completed in 2008). Ultimately, Gann writes music that is best served by chamber musicians; therefore, he has written a staggering amount of

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chamber works over the course of his compositional career.

Among his earliest is a short piece for handbell choir; but the earliest work he’s still proud of is the ravishing *Satie*, for soprano, flute, violin, vibraphone, celeste, and harp from 1975, when he was still an undergrad at Oberlin. *Siren* (1978), dating from his graduate-school years at Northwestern, is scored for five flutes, a fascinating early-ish example of a so-called “multiple piece” for a group consisting of all the same instrument, which would become such a popular format for many experimentally inclined composers in the 1980s and ’90s. Multiples have remained a fascination for Gann as well; in 2008 he completed *Composure*, for four electric guitars.

Yet another Gann multiple piece, *Long Night* for three pianos, written in 1980–81—recorded by Sarah Cahill for Cold Blue via multi-tracking—is one of the best examples I know of multiples as an intoxicating sonic experience. The piano, despite its being the torchbearer for 12tET,

has ironically been a frequent timbral muse for Gann. In addition to his prolific output for solo piano, he has also composed for piano duo the 26-minute *I’toi Variations* (1985); the equally long *Implausible Sketches* (2006), for a single piano played with four hands (2006); and *The Convent at Tepoztlán (Canon 23:24)*, a monstrously bi-rhythmic 1989 work that (as you may have already gleaned from the title) canonically pits a rhythmic cycle of 23

against one of 24. The piano is also far more than a mere accompanist in his *Cyclic Aphorism*, for violin and piano (1988), and *Last Chance Sonata*, for clarinet and piano (1999), although the metrical counterpoint in these works is considerably less daunting.

As you’d suspect from a composer enamored of complex metrical relations, percussion music is an important part of Gann’s *oeuvre*. His three *Snake Dances* for four percussionists (1991, 1995, and 2010)—the third one raises the stakes by adding two microtonal keyboards and a fretless bass—are chock full of shifts across a wide range of uncommon meters (at one point the time signature changes from 35/48 to 5/16). While such rhythms might seem recondite or academic, they’re actually the result of Gann’s fascination with the irregular metrics that pervade Native American traditional music. *Hovenweep*, Gann’s only score thus far for

continued on page 47

the ubiquitous Pierrrot configuration (flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano) opens in the dizzying meter of 13/8 but doesn't stay there for long, although the main meters it does shift to—5/4, 7/8, 11/8, 17/16—are equally unstable. But once again, the music sounds completely natural. In *The Day Revisited* (2005), for flute, clarinet, two keyboard samplers, and fretless bass, Gann keeps the rhythm in a straightforward duple meter the whole time; but since he employs a total of 29 different pitches, there's plenty of new terrain for both players and listeners to tread.

In recent years, Gann has taken a great interest in the string quartet. In 2003, he adapted a segment from the third act of one of his operas into a short work for a string quartet in just intonation—*Love Scene*. Last year, he composed three more quartets—*Concord Spiral*, *Hudson Spiral*, and *The Light Summer Land*, all conventionally tuned but nevertheless fascinating. *The Planets*, arguably Gann's most significant composition to date, is also tuned conventionally; but that might be the only conventional thing about it. The ten-movement work was composed on and off over some 15 years (1994–2008) for the unusual instrumentation of the Philadelphia-based new-music ensemble *Relâche* (flute, oboe, alto saxophone, bassoon, synthesizer, percussion, viola, and contrabass). Even more than the celebrated Gustav Holst work of the same name, it is constructed to correspond to specific celestial bodies. (Gann, like one of America's earlier maverick composers, Dane Rudhyar, is astrologically inclined.) The movements—one each for the traditional eight planets other than Earth, plus the Sun and Moon—have attributes associated with their corresponding celestial travelers. Mars (a rocky planet) is extremely jagged, and Neptune (a gas giant) is vague. Gann conveys Neptune's amorphousness by setting the material for the eight players in eight different tempos (ostensibly in an impossible-to-hear ratio of 18:19:20:21:22:23:24:25). The interpretation of these is left somewhat open to chance, and therefore no two performances will ever be identical.

While he is yet to compose for wind quintet or brass ensembles (someone should commission him), there is much for chamber music performers to mine from Kyle Gann's output. And while the major publishers have yet to be clued in to the importance of this music, making his scores hard to find in traditional outlets, Gann has posted PDFs for all of them, and for many parts as well, on his website (www.kylegann.com/Gannmusic.html), which makes finding his music even easier. So if you still haven't familiarized yourself with it, now's the time!

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usually uncomfortable with." He started rolling out discs: *Omar Omar*, a solo piano outing, followed by large-ensemble recordings, like 1998's outstanding *Spirit of the Roots* and 2000's critically lauded *Bembon*. Sosa being Sosa, he kept extending the reach of his world-music fusions. On *Prietos* and *Sentir*, the languages included Spanish, Portuguese, Yoruba, Arabic, and English; and the instruments included marimba, oud, djembe, balafon, and guembri. This sounds like a recipe for a car crash of epic proportions. But such is Sosa's clarity of vision, skill as an arranger, and strength as a pianist and bandleader that he more often than not produces compelling, seductive textures laced with canny improvising. *Sentir* was nominated for both Latin and Latin-jazz Grammys; it took the 2003 Latin crown.

By then, Sosa's frenetic pace had outlined several enduring artistic directions.

Our Mother, Sosa's first symphonic work melding Caribbean and African folk sounds with sophisticated jazz harmonies, was debuted by the Oakland East Bay Symphony. Another of his periodic solo discs, *A New Life*—showcasing, as usual, his more contemplative sides—was dedicated to the birth of his son Lonious, named for Monk; it was recorded in a Big Sur studio set on bluffs overlooking the Pacific, which helped shape its oceanic emotional tides. The Smithsonian gave him a lifetime-achievement award to honor his contributions to Latin jazz in the U.S. His pace and reach never slackened: *Mulatos*, a fiery exchange featuring Irakere veteran Paquito D'Rivera, was nominated for a 2006 Grammy (later reshaped by several DJs on *Mulatos: Remix*); *Aleatoric EFX* is a solo piano disc with samplers.

Last year's *Across the Divide: A Tale of Rhythm and Ancestry* (Half Note) marks one of Sosa's more unpredictable leaps, with a banjo picker and a kalimba player. Its "Promised Land," is a haunting Welsh hymn that found its way to old Kentucky. The banjo, like the kalimba, is an African instrument; even the most hidden hollers of lonesome Scotch-Irish Appalachia came under the black influences that infuse American culture.

Sosa has been based in Barcelona for nearly a decade. He says, "In Europe, there are intellectuals with a hippie side who understand what my music is about." The rigors of his creativity seek to transcend formalism. The audience, as with late Trane, must suspend expectations about format, duration, and commitment, must be willing to enter the musical trance unfolding around them. But the challenge is worth rising to. Of Sosa's myriad languages, at least one is bound to snare you. Give *Calma* a chance, and it will.

*Gene Santoro is the author of several books on American music, including *Myself When I am Real*, a biography of Charles Mingus (Oxford, 2001), and *Highway 61 Revisited*, which examines the complex roots of American music (Oxford, 2004).*