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Roger Heaton spent the last four months of 1981 in New York doing research on Elliott Carter. He comments here on aspects of the new music scene in the city.

In Louis Malle's film *My Dinner with Andre* Andre Gregory describes New York as a huge concentration camp, built, perversely enjoyed, and perpetuated by the inmates. In this claustrophobic and over-populated concrete jungle it is inevitable that the inner life of New Yorkers, and its outward expression both spiritually and intellectually, should be so active and vital. The sheer number of arts events (in spite of the Reagan cuts) is enormous. While there is as much mainstream classical music making as in London (the New York Philharmonic churns out programmes just as uninteresting as those offered by our own orchestras), the greater activity in dance, writing, and the visual arts gives the flourishing experimental music scene the kind of support it lacks in London.

New York has been an important centre of experimentalism in all the arts since the War, and despite a worldwide regression (perhaps a symptom of world recession and the conservatism of world leaders) – inevitably most apparent in music – performance art, music-theatre, minimalism, and the like are thriving there, with Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson as the man and woman of the moment.

Much has been made of the separation into two camps of the downtown (experimental) and uptown ('university') composers. This idea, perhaps invented by the *New York Times* critic John Rockwell, was amusingly dispelled by Cage and Wuorinen (one from each camp) in a talk with Rockwell, during which the two composers spent many happy minutes swapping zip-codes and locations for various works according to when they were written. However, as a generalisation one may say that experimental composers, and the specialist performance venues, tend to be in the downtown Greenwich Village area.

Philip Glass is a composer who has recently moved, perhaps unintentionally, from 'alternative' to 'establishment' camps. In November *Satyagraha* (completed 1980)[1] received five performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, accompanied by interviews on the radio and in the Sunday colour supplements. Glass has recently signed an exclusive contract with CBS, the first since Copland and Stravinsky, and the Rockefeller Foundation has given him a grant of $90,000 for new projects over the next three years. Despite Glass's popularity he still sees himself as part of the experimental movement, which he hopes is reshaping opera in the post-modernist age. He voices reservations about new music similar to those of the neoromantics, and his response is a music that is appealing, accessible, and intellectual, which crosses the barriers of popular, classical, contemporary, and ethnic music. 'The failure of modernism in music is clear. Modern music had become truly decadent, stagnant, uncommunicative by the 1960's and 1970's. Composers were writing for each other and the public didn't seem to care. People want to like new music, but how can they when it's so

ugly and intimidating, emotionally and intellectually.'[2] The audiences that flock to Reich and Glass concerts seem to uphold this view. Whatever the arguments over current fads in music, what Glass is doing is to rethink, and consequently rejuvenate, opera: 'As much as opera doesn't want to be part of the rest of the world, it inevitably has to be.'[3] Yet it is these very fads, the constant striving for originality, that in the past caused many fine pieces to be lost among the plethora of imitations, and has now led to this revaluation of earlier harmonic and structural procedures.

While a student at Juilliard, Glass claimed that his deepest wish was to be 'Elliott Carter II';[4] after becoming disenchanted with modernism he studied with Boulanger in Paris, but it was the contact with non-Western music that finally gave his work direction. (Boulanger and ethnic music also greatly influenced Carter's very different compositional progress.) In 1968-76, while working with his own group in the familiar minimalist style, influenced in many ways by visual art, Glass began to add a harmonic richness that paralleled the move away from reduction and repetition in art to something more human; this situation is also strangely comparable with the development of the European neoromantic movement in art. With *Einstein on the Beach* (1975-6) Glass produced what has been called 'maximalist' music.[5] Now a fully-fledged opera composer, his next work is in progress. Called *Akhenaton,* and to a libretto by Constance DeJong (the librettist of *Satyagraha*), it will be premièred in Stuttgart in October 1983.

Robert Moran is a composer living in New York whose operatic and environmental work has also been successful on the Continent. He is currently preparing an environmental city piece for Frankfurt in 1983, where his recent opera *The Life and Loves of Adolf Hitler* was also premièred. The New York Public Library presented an exhibition of some of his beautiful graphic scores, reminiscent of Bussotti's early calligraphy. Most interesting among them were five miniatures (1974) in small traditional oval frames, to be realised musically only in the viewer's imagination; two representative titles, conjuring up the types of graphics used, are *Hieroglyphic Notes for an Ant Opera* and *Split Second Sonatina.*

The first concert I attended in new York also had a link with visual art. Phil Niblock presented three of his own works, *SLS, A Trombone Piece,* and *PK and SLS* in a circular gallery of paintings by Robert Rauschenberg. All the pieces used a tape of pitches building to diatonic chords, slightly detuned to obtain beats and played at a high volume, and live instrumentalists — in the first piece two flutes, in the second a trombone, and in the last all three together. The soloists wandered around the audience playing notes picked out from the tape very close to the listeners' ears. The purely sonic intentions of these pieces became tedious well before the gruelling 45-minute concert was up.

A rather more sedate, 'uptown' affair was a concert given on 2 November by the Group for Contemporary Music, in its 20th anniversary season;[6] Harvey Sollberger played Varèse's *Density 21.5* and conducted a dry performance of Berg's Chamber Concerto, and Charles Wuorinen directed his own Chamber Concerto for cello and ten players (1963). The latter performance was clearly articulated and expressive, with some marvellously energetic, aggressive playing from Fred Sherry. A characteristically cerebral work, it is divided into five connected movements, each presenting the soloist in a different context, and deals brilliantly with all the techniques of a post-serial style based on what Wuorinen amusingly calls a 'net of canonic undergirdling'.

Another work that belongs to the tradition of freely expanded integral serialism is Elliott Carter's *Night Fantasies* for solo piano (1979-80),[7] given its first New York performance on 11 November by Paul Jacobs.[8] Jacobs's attention to details of colour, dynamics, and articulation gave this complex piece a clarity of structure and figuration that should be the norm for all performances of contemporary scores. Carter is a composer who has explored all the central developments of music in this century and has created a language that will never date because it eschews superficial novelty of sound or technique for its own sake. The piano piece, like much of his other work, flexibly uses twelve-note source sets, divided symmetrically into two-, three-, and four-note sets so as to allow overlapping and combinations that link the diverse musics in a harmonically meaningful and directional way; this is composition by sets rather than by the often unwieldy twelve-note row.

Ben Johnston's *Diversion* for eleven instruments (given its first performance in an amateurish concert at the Carnegie Recital Hall by the New Repertory Ensemble under Leo Kraft) was an example of an unintegrated language. Johnston is well known as a specialist in Harry Partch's music and for his own work on microtonality. His new totally serialised piece deteriorated towards the end into panpipe tootlings and a waltz, which, if one knew no better, simply sounded like out-of-tune tonality. Total serialism, a system devised to codify and integrate, was used here as a found object in a work of many languages. This was sophisticated quotation: what Boulez would call 'anecdotal'.

In November there was a four-concert festival of English music, given mainly by André Previn and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra but with one all-Britten programme by the New York Philharmonic under Raymond Leppard.[9] The only living composers represented were Knussen, McCabe, Tippett, and Walton. John Rockwell previewed these concerts in the *New York Times,*[10] giving an overview of English music since Elgar. This was a strange article which emphasised British conservatism, citing Bedford and Michael Nyman as leaders of experimentalism, and Knussen as 'the bright young hope'; there was no mention of Birtwistle or Ferneyhough, or our own younger generation of 'university' composers, or even Gavin Bryars, who is currently collaborating with Robert Wilson on an opera version of the latter's play *Medea.*

Perhaps the two major educational centres for composers in New York are Columbia University and the Juilliard School. The former's principal teacher is Chou Wen-Chung, with Babbitt and Davidovsky at the Columbia – Princeton Electronic Music Centre (three rather archaic studios, one containing the RCA synthesizer which is looking its age but is apparently still in use). Composers at Columbia organise concerts of their own music played by professionals and funded from several sources, including private grants. The concert I attended contained some very competent music in a free atonal style ranging from clusterous to contrapuntal. Steven Roens's Quartet for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (1981) showed a composer of considerable talent who has learned much from music of the recent past. This short, intense, single-movement work (usefully played twice in this concert) is in three parts, with a central slow section and a short reprise of the quick, nervous music of the opening. Expressive fragments dovetail between instruments in a tightly controlled structure, with an attention to detail that gives weight and presence to every note in true Webernian style.

The Juilliard concert was a depressing affair. The four composers represented showed no recognition of anything new; they seem to have spent their time grinding out insensitive works of the kind of 'wrong-note' music characteristic of Hindemith or Britten — one piece, for wind quartet, even resembled an Arnoldish frolic. One wonders what on earth the distinguished teaching faculty of Babbitt, Carter, and Sessions are doing!

While younger people provide large and enthusiastic audiences for new music in New York (in contrast to the apathy of London music students), there is evidence that in their own work they are succumbing to a growing conservatism, as prevalent in the States as it is in Europe. In New York, at least, one hopes that some of the ideas of the thriving experimental movement will filter into the mainstream. As Charles Ives wrote, 'eclecticism is part of a composer's duty; sorting potatoes means a better crop next year'.[11]

NOTES:

[1] Reviewed by Keith Potter in *Contact 21* (Autumn 1980), pp.33-4.
[2] Quoted from Glass in Robert Coe, 'Philip Glass Breaks Through', *New York Times Magazine* (25 October 1981), p.70.
[3] Ibid., p.72.
[4] Ibid., p.72.
[5] John Rockwell of the *New York Times* has used the word 'maximalist' in articles and talks to characterise the larger forces, higher dynamic level, and harmonic lushness of this piece.
[6] The concert took place at the YMCA on 92nd Street.
[7] Reviewed by Brigitte Schiffer in *Contact 22* (Summer 1981), p.46.
[8] The venue was again the YMCA on 92nd Street.
[9] The New York Philharmonic played in the Avery Fisher Hall at the Lincoln Center, and the Pittsburgh Symphony both there and at Carnegie Hall.

[10] 'The "Blossoming" of English Music', *New York Times* (15 November 1981), p.26.
[11] 'Epilogue', *Essays Before a Sonata,* in *Essays Before a Sonata and Other Writings,* ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p.79.