



Kyle Gann

Private Dances

Sarah Cahill, Da Capo Chamber Players, Bernard Gann

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The Day Revisited

Time Does Not Exist

Hovenweep

On Reading Emerson

I dance only privately, and in my head: thus, *Private Dances*. I have never been one to write suites of small pieces, but I was motivated to try to do so by the example of Bill Duckworth's wonderful pieces in this genre. The ideas for *Private Dances* are all rhythmic, and "Sexy" is the simplest, an ever-further-modulating tango. "Sad" is an arrangement for live pianist of one of my Disklavier studies, *Folk Dance for Henry Cowell*. I had to excise some of the original 11-against-13 rhythms, but the piece is still tricky. The idea was to have a clear harmonic rhythm while thoroughly obscuring the meter. "Sentimental" plays with a messy kind of counterpoint in which the two hands rarely come together, implying different tempos. "Sultry" cycles through a series of 11 chords in a repeating rhythm of 29/4 meter - but not every chord appears in every cycle. "Saintly" starts out with a melody in virtual 4/4 over a 5/4 ostinato, but after an impassioned climax, the two hands switch meters, and thereby achieve calm. "Swingin'" is freer, releasing a boogie-woogie melody from its implied 4/4 meter and letting it cadence when- and wherever it wants. The obvious seventh dance would

have had to be “Savage,” and since I didn’t want to fall into the clichés of the early 20th-century “danse sauvage,” I couldn’t bring myself to write it. I wrote the first two and a half dances in 2000, and finished out the set in a burst of inspiration in 2004.

Hovenweep (2000) was a commission from Joan Tower for the St. Luke’s Orchestra chamber series. She requested something “American” - I went back as “American” as I could imagine, back to the days before Columbus arrived. A lot of my music has been inspired by, and even borrowed from, the song and dance of the indigenous tribes of the American southwest. In the present case I could only imagine such music, because Hovenweep, a highly developed and well-preserved village on the Utah-Colorado border, was the center of the Anasazi civilization from 500 BC to 1300 AD. The beginning of the piece is an assembly of spirits. After chanting together, each instrument tells its story, starting in its respective high register and descending, to bring down to earth the power of the gods: the lithe, graceful flute; the impassioned and mercurial violin; the quirky, leaping clarinet; and the gruff, grandfatherly cello, who barely deigns to stir himself. Then the piano leads into a tragic finale suggestive of Hovenweep’s great mystery: why the Anasazi were forced to abandon the city they had built.

Rhythmically, a lot of my music involves a paradigm in which repeating melodies of different lengths run out of phase with each other, creating textures that are static, meditative, yet never literally repetitive. *Time Does Not Exist* (also 2000) is a tour de force of the technique. The piece is about therapy, conceived as the spiraling inward path described by James Hillman, in which one keeps traversing the same territory, only a little different each time. The opening linear monologue gets broken into fragments which swirl against each other in various types of nonsynchronously repetitive texture. A rather neurotic attempt toward the end to reassert a directional continuity fails, and that failure leads to acceptance. “In the unconscious,” Freud said, “time does not exist.” The piece is gratefully dedicated to Joseph Bakst Zahm (1944-99) in memoriam.

Through some inexplicable inner compulsion I had, in the past few years, strongly reconnected with music I wrote back in the early 1980s, including pieces I hadn’t thought about in years. In 2005, I found myself haunted by a 1982 piece called *As the Day Is Long*. This was a partly improvisatory piece for synthesizer, flute, drums, and tape. I took the theme of the work, derived a scale from it, and transposed it to various pitch levels in a framework of just intonation (tuning according to pure ratios). The result was a 29-pitch scale, each harmony related to a D drone. Not much

is retained from the earlier composition beyond the calm atmosphere, but the original theme comes back at the end, when everything momentarily resolves to the drone pitch. Pat Spencer and Meighan Stoops had asked me for a piece that would require them to play microtones, and it is dedicated to them. I thought of calling it *As the Day Is Long (Revisited)*, but that seemed cumbersome, and simply *The Day Revisited* captured the nostalgic tone. As with most of my microtonal music, the strategy is to use simple harmonies to tie together a polyphony unmoored from our conventional pitch sense - and to cause the listener to float.

On Reading Emerson (2006) is the disc's least characteristic piece, one I wouldn't have written without a specific impetus. Pianist Sarah Cahill asked me to write a piece about one of our mutually favorite authors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, for a conference entitled "Emerson and the Power of Imagination" at the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, in September 2006. I resisted the impulse to title the piece "Whim," though like Emerson, "I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation." Emerson's writing seems to me unlinear; he takes a handful of ideas and juggles them paragraph by paragraph, sometimes letting one take precedence, sometimes another. Often, though there is a logic to each paragraph, the order of paragraphs seems inessential. Of course my conception of Emerson is filtered through

Charles Ives, who wrote of him, "As thoughts surge to his mind, he fills the heavens with them, crowds them in, if necessary, but seldom arranges them, along the ground first." To create that effect, I did the reverse: wrote a bunch of passages of music around a single (or double) idea, and arranged them along the ground before fitting them together. Because I think of Emerson as ever aware of the interpenetration of opposites, almost every chord in the piece contains a tone from the opposite chord, and because he is all encompassing, I used, for the first time in my life, a 12-tone row. (It only appears twice, and elsewhere in fragments, and is never transposed, retrograded, or anything). Like Emerson's writing, the piece is peppered with quotations, three of which (by Busoni, Ives, and MacDowell, the Busoni itself a quotation from Bach) the listener may recognize. The fourth will not be recognized: it is from a song that I began writing in college on Emerson's poem "The Rhodora" and never finished, because the only good musical phrase I wrote was the one I resurrect here, setting these lines:

Why thou wert there, O, rival of the rose!

I never thought to ask, I never knew....

I am grateful to Sarah for giving that orphaned phrase a home at last.

- Kyle Gann

Private Dances:

Sarah Cahill, piano

Hovenweep:

Da Capo Chamber Players

Patricia Spencer, flute

Meighan Stoops, clarinet

David Bowlin, violin

André Emelianoff, cello

Blair McMillen, piano

Time Does Not Exist:

Sarah Cahill, piano

The Day Revisited:

Patricia Spencer, flute

Meighan Stoops, clarinet

Blair McMillen, keyboard sampler

Kyle Gann, keyboard sampler

Bernard Gann, fretless bass

On Reading Emerson:

Sarah Cahill, piano

Thanks to: Sarah Cahill, DaCapo Chamber Players, Bernard Gann, Nancy Cook,
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Kyle Gann, born 1955 in Dallas, Texas, is best known for having been new-music critic for the Village Voice from 1986 to 2005. He teaches in the music department at Bard College and has written three books: *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), *American Music in the 20th Century* (Schirmer Books, 1997), and *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (University of California Press, 2006). He studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena.

Pianist Sarah Cahill has commissioned, premiered, and recorded numerous compositions for solo piano. Composers who have dedicated works to her include Kyle Gann, John Adams, Frederic Rzewski, and Pauline Oliveros, and she has also premiered pieces by Lou Harrison, Julia Wolfe, Terry Riley, Ingram Marshall, Toshi Ichiyangi, Leo Ornstein, and many others. Most of her recordings are on the New Albion label, and she has also recorded for Cold Blue, New World CRI, Tzadik, and Albany. She lives in Berkeley, California.

Bernard Gann is a composer and guitarist of the band Architeuthis.

Da Capo Chamber Players was founded in 1970. Winners of the Naumburg Award in 1973, its founding members included composer/pianist Joan Tower, violinist Joel Lester, now Dean of Mannes College for Music/The New School, and flutist Patricia Spencer. The members on this record are: David Bowlin,

violin; André Emelianoff, cello; Blair McMillen, piano; Patricia Spencer, flute; and Meighan Stoops, clarinet.

Da Capo has commissioned over 100 pieces from a wide range of distinguished composers - Joan Tower, John Harbison, Chinary Ung, George Perle, Shulamit Ran, Philip Glass, Kyle Gann, Milton Babbitt, and Martin Bresnick among others. The ensemble regularly visits Russia, performing American works for audiences there and giving workshops for Russian composers and performers.

Da Capo Chamber Players has been in residence at Bard College since 1982, and since fall of 2006 has been ensemble-in-residence with the Composition Department of the new Bard Conservatory. Da Capo has recorded for Bridge, New World, CRI, and Innova labels among others.

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