

Piercing the Curtain:
One Composer's Penetration into Eastern European Music Festivals
An Introduction to the Music of Gloria Coates,
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Today we will explore some of the music of an American born composer, Gloria Coates, one who promoted the music of women, contemporary composers, and Americans in Europe; her radio program in Germany, how she was featured in an Eastern European festival, and how she extended the timbre of instruments. An interesting array of topics inspire her to compose; examples include:

astronomy (*Symphony no. 2* has movements named for aurora; the electronic piece, *Neptune Odyssey*);

peace (vocal works like *The Force for Peace in War*; and *Symphony no. 7* (1990-1991), that was dedicated to all who brought down the Berlin Wall in peace);

art, particularly impressionists (with works such as *Leonardo's Notebooks*, *Homage to Van Gogh*); and

nature (as in her *Ecology*, and *In the Glacier*).

Gloria Kannenberg Coates, a composer whom Nicolas Slonimsky described as “quaquaversal,” was born during the Great Depression, in Wausau, Wisconsin. Her father, Roland E. Kannenberg, had operated a granite quarry, and served four years in the Wisconsin State Senate as a Progressive. Young Gloria learned music from her mother,

Natalie Zannon Kannenberg, a singer of Italian extraction, and later took voice lessons from Elizabeth Silverthorn, the choir director at the local Episcopal Church.

Gloria Kannenberg spent the 1950s in theaters acting, married attorney Francis M. Coates in 1959, and then studied musicology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. It was here that she also wrote for the local afternoon newspaper, the *State Times Advocate*. Her reviews included concerts, art exhibitions, and even a puppet show by the performers of “Howdy Doody,” Rufus and Margo Rose. Her artistic training occurred at the Cooper School of Art in New York. She later studied composition with Alexander Tcherepnin and Otto Luening. In 1969, she embarked upon two daring voyages: she divorced, and left the United States for Munich, Germany, with her daughter, Alexandra.

The environment she entered had been tempered by twenty-five years of a simmering East-West conflict. During the spring of 1945, the Army of the Soviet Union approached Berlin. With the capture of this city, a new era would begin, that of the Cold War. West Berlin became increasingly isolated and an airlift was ordered in 1948 by President Harry S. Truman. Tensions increased as construction of the Berlin Wall began in 1961, and on 26 June 1963 American President John F. Kennedy uttered that famous line, “Ich bin ein Berliner.” This further escalated until after President Ronald Reagan had demanded that the Wall be torn down.

From 1971 to 1983 Gloria Coates hosted the German American Contemporary Concerts in Munich. In 1975 she founded the University of Wisconsin at Madison’s Division of International Programs in Munich; she had previously presented a master class at the Madison, Wisconsin campus.

Coates developed a relationship with the Sinnhoffer Quartet, a pioneering string quartet that performed and recorded twentieth century compositions that others would not touch. Otto Luening's *String Quartet No. 2*, composed in 1923, had been rejected by several groups because of its difficulty (Luening, O. 1935). The Sinnhoffer Quartet not only performed this in 1971, but recorded it and other works for Composers Recordings Inc. Gloria Coates's work in Munich radio promoted several other twentieth century composers, including Walter Piston, Leonard Bernstein, Walter Zimmermann, and Manfred Kelkel. Among the performers featured were pianist Charlemagne Palestine and two women's ensembles, the Fanny Mendelssohn Quartet and the Crescent Quartet.

Her first symphony, also entitled *Music on Open Strings*, had been performed in September of 1978 in Warsaw, by the Polnisches Kammerorchester (Polish Chamber Orchestra), Jerzy Maksymiuk conducting. As Coates described it, *Music on Open Strings* (1973-1974) "was written not only to exploit the colours of open strings along with their derivatives, but also to express musical aesthetics involving changing colours, complexes, systems and structures. In the first movement the strings are tuned to the minor pentatonic scale C - D flat - F - G flat - B flat - C, and within the framework of these tones a theme is mosaically woven through the strings. Kaleidoscopically it is gradually transformed to a new colour complex. During the third movement (scordatura) the string[s] are restored to the normal tuning via peg glissandi. Thus the pentatonic G - A - C - D - E emerges. The final movement is a fourteen line refracted mirror canon which forms a single body of sound composed of the action of the individual lines moving in polyrhythms and microtonal intervals." (International Festival of Contemporary Music 1978, p. 120-121) (Coates, G. 1996)

Many commentators highlight the harmonic nature of this symphony (pentatonic and open strings), and the preponderance of glissandi. However, the symphony includes many timbral, textural and rhythmic features worthy of analysis.

Coates also uses percussive techniques for the string players, what I would call timbral extension: throughout the first movement there is intense pizzicato that Coates identifies as Bartok style; string performers are instructed to strike the violin with their knuckles during the first and even more in the second movement. (Coates, G. 1996)

Although *String Quartet no. 4* also employs this technique in a serious vein, it is displayed playfully in *Lunar Loops* for guitars. (Coates, G. 1990)

Subsequent to the premiere of *Symphony no. 1*, Gloria Coates received a commission from East Germany to write a composition using electronic sound. *Ecology 2*, an electro acoustic work, utilized two tapes, five percussionists and voice. Her sound sources included a recording of a whale, water in bucket, a rattle, balloon, kazoo, and a water pipe. Gloria Coates wrote a text fashioned after American and English nursery rhymes; her text is a set of rhetorical variations on the poems. With the cold war looming in the background, Coates edited out the spoken text and re-titled the piece, *Between*; the work was dedicated to the Year of the Child. A radio recording was made by Sender Fries Berlin.

In September of 1979, Gloria Coates became the first composer outside of the Warsaw Pact whose work would be performed at the Tag der Neue Musik, Berlin (sometimes called the East Berlin Music Festival). This coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the DDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), known in the west at that

time as East Germany. Portions of *Ecology 2* exhibit her use of electronic sound recording. The voice is that of the composer. (Coates, G. 1979)

Coates's first job in Munich had been as a tour guide for the United States Army; she escorted groups to museums, castles and the concentration camp, Dachau. *The Force for Peace in War*, composed from 1974-1989, uses poetry by German and American women, something that drew protest during its early performances. The poets were Charlotte Hagedorn, Phyllis McGinley, and school teacher Elfriede Birndorfer; as a matter of coincidence, one of the early performances, on October 3, 1989, at the Dresden Festival, was soon followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Coates often practiced self-borrowing. *The Force for Peace in War* was derived from *The Voices of Women in Wartime* (1972-1973), for soprano, piano, violoncello and two percussionists. Coates used the same text, a combination of German and English poetry by women.

Symphony no. 7 (1990-1991) is described as darkness by some critics. Dedicated to all who brought the Berlin Wall down in peace, its second movement is a tribute to those who attempted escape, many of whom lost their lives.

More recently, *String quartet no. 8* (2001-2002) was dedicated to the victims of 9-11, those in the World Trade Center, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. Its second movement, entitled "In Falling Timbers Buried," borrows a theme from the song of the same title from her 15 song Emily Dickinson cycle, about someone who was buried alive. (Coates, G. 2003)

While on the surface some may see a preponderance of glissandi, Coates uses a number of harmonic, rhythmic, timbral and textural techniques to convey her ideals.

In summary, Gloria Coates represents a western voice that has penetrated the eastern bloc and expressed herself on issues of peace. Her music is even more known in eastern Europe than in her native United States. Her contributions continue as she is working on further symphonies, which now stand at fourteen.

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