

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY MARION S. GUSHEE



A Most Wondrous Babble: American Art Composers, Their Music, and the American Scene, 1950–1985. By Nicholas E. Tawa. (Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance, 9.) New York: Greenwood Press, 1987. [xiii, 284 p. ISBN 0-313-25692-6.]

Art Music in the American Society: The Condition of Art Music in the Late Twentieth Century. By Nicholas E. Tawa. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987. [viii, 277 p. ISBN 0-8108-1976-7. \$25.00.]

It is an irony that the most difficult period to write about is one's own. No small amount of courage is required to set oneself forth as an authority on topics with which people are, to a greater or lesser degree, already familiar. Perhaps it is for this reason that the study of contemporary music as a serious academic discipline is still not recognized in many quarters. One is often given the impression that to musicologists the only good composer is a dead one; indeed, the deader the better.

Nicholas Tawa is one musicologist who feels that this postulation "ain't necessarily so." Tawa takes on the challenge of making sense of the musical turbulence affecting our country during the past thirty-five years in his two latest books, *A Most Wondrous Babble* and *Art Music in the American Society*. These works, both published in 1987, are complementary—the former deals with composers and styles, the latter with the current state of serious music culture in the United States.

As one of this country's foremost American-music scholars, Tawa directed his previous efforts toward the past in several highly regarded books. *A Sound of Strangers* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982) focuses on the musical acculturation of post-Civil War ethnic groups, while his *A Music for the Millions* (New York: Pendragon, 1984) deals with antebellum American popular music. Tawa brought his study of American music forward in *Serenading the Reluctant Eagle* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), which discusses musical life in this country from 1925 to 1945. His essays on the music of the present, then, form an al-

together logical continuation of his earlier studies.

In *A Most Wondrous Babble* Tawa discusses significant musical currents in America between 1950 and 1985, the main advocates of these styles, and the success of each one with various constituencies of critics and audiences. There are chapters on serialism and atonality, indeterminacy and related countercurrents, "visionary" music and minimalism, as well as on the music of conservative and mainstream composers. Before discussing these various movements Tawa provides comprehensive summaries of the musical and extra-musical events surrounding the development of late twentieth-century American music. He pays particular attention to the attitudes of contemporary composers vis-à-vis older mainstream music and to the majority of listeners (and many performers) who have felt alienated from the avant-garde.

As he states in his preface, Tawa does not attempt technical or theoretical analyses; rather, he examines "each contemporary style's impact on the ear and how technique and structure contribute to that impact" (p. xi). He feels that this examination is necessary because "what the composer says about his music and what the public experiences may have few correspondences" (p. xi). Tawa's work, then, is a departure from other books on contemporary music in its psycho-sociological point of view, a stance from which Tawa has provided such clear insight in his earlier works.

From his particular perspective, Tawa makes a number of significant observations. In their struggle to break from the

past, postwar composers—especially those of the serial and atonal schools (the avant-garde)—left mainstream audiences behind. This alienation continued as the leading modernists—Milton Babbitt, Charles Wuorinen, Elliott Carter, and others—isolated themselves in their various academic communities. The intellectualism of the period soon pervaded American universities and was enthusiastically advocated by New York critics. Older contemporary composers who displayed the least hint of accessibility (Copland, Harris, Piston, and Barber, for example) became anathema among all “intelligent” listeners. But somehow this intellectual enthusiasm never succeeded in reaching the broader concert-going public. Tawa cites a 1968 article in which the *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg observed that a special audience of about three hundred existed in New York for avant-garde concerts. Most of them were other performers, and composers whose works would be played at other avant-garde concerts.

Regardless of their small audiences, these composers continued to garner critical praise and support; perhaps most important, they succeeded in winning most of the available grants and prizes for the furtherance of their careers outside the traditional institutions that had supported composers in the past. We might be repulsed by Tawa's accounts of the smug attitudes of the modernists, were these observations in the end not a little sad—witness Tawa's first-hand account of a retrospective concert honoring Babbitt (who was present) at Wellesley College in 1983: “The audience was pitifully small, most of it apparently more than fifty years of age and from the academic community.” One of Babbitt's most famous works, the *Composition for Four Instruments* of 1948, “after thirty-five years . . . still sounded formal, overly sectionalized and cryptic” (p. 91). And, although the performers were “veterans” of the piece, they still had difficulty with it. Babbitt's most successful works, Tawa notes, are his electronic pieces, perhaps because the composer had total control over their execution as well as their conception.

Tawa's assessment of the other atonal and serial composers he discusses (Ross Lee Finney, George Perle, Ralph Shapey, Jacob Druckman, and Andrew Imbrie) is sympathetic and at the same time realistic. He

emphasizes the need—because of the verities of the “American cultural marketplace” and the conservative biases of most persons who control what audiences hear—for some alternative process by which the larger concert-going public can gain exposure to worthy contemporary works.

Tawa observes that if the exponents of serialism/atonality failed to reach listeners during the postwar era, those who advocated total freedom of expression in reaction to the strictures of the serialists hardly fared better. He examines the music of the New Left (represented most prominently by the chance compositions of John Cage) that emerged in the early 1960s, in light of the social and political turmoil of that decade. Other art forms influenced by indeterminacy—environmental music and what Tawa refers to as “neodramatic” music, also variously called mixed-media, happenings, or performance art—by such artists as Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, Robert Ashley, Gordon Mumma, and Laurie Anderson, evoke serious reflection by Tawa. He challenges the musical legitimacy of some these works and questions whether the anarchy out of which they were spawned was in reality “a way to shun responsibility for one's actions” (p. 133). Noting that much of this music was conceived primarily for its shock value, Tawa states that once the novelty wore off, such events seemed nothing more than dated. He concludes that their lasting value is ultimately left to musical posterity; many of them were so intimately connected to the non-musical events of the period out of which they sprang that their special audience will no doubt continue to diminish.

Perhaps the most important legacy bequeathed to art music by the countercultural sixties is the diversity of styles that has since emerged. Less and less have composers felt compelled to follow the crowd, strong though such currents as minimalism have seemed in attracting the public's fancy. This profligacy of styles has presented organizational problems for Tawa in the remainder of *A Most Wondrous Babble*: not all of contemporary music falls easily into such well-defined categories as serialism and indeterminacy. The musical relationship between Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Harry Partch, Morton Subotnick, and the minimalist composers—Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich, for example—is not

apparent at first. What links them, says Tawa, is the influence on their work of myth and symbol, mysticism, and the traditional art forms and philosophies of non-Western cultures. These composers, whom Tawa discusses in his chapter "Modern Music, Visionary Connections," rejected both the strict controls of serialism and the chaos of indeterminacy, as well as the materialism of contemporary American society. While they may have shared values, their musical expressions largely remained unique, revealing few other commonalities. Tawa successfully delineates the distinct stylistic features of these composers, but he plays down traits and influences they have in common with composers he has placed in other categories. Harrison, Hovhanness, and the minimalists owe at least some of their interest in Eastern cultures to John Cage, whose own explorations of Zen and the denial of self in musical expression must have had some indirect or direct influence on them.

Tawa faced similar problems in categorizing those composers who occupy the remainder of *A Most Wondrous Babble*. He divides them into two main groups. The first group is the "traditional mainstream," which he further divides into "musical conservators" (Lee Hoiby, John La Montaine, and Thomas Pasatieri, among others) and the "medial mainstream" (Jack Beeson, Leonard Bernstein, and Norman Dello Joio, among others). The second large category is "venturesome composers of the traditional mainstream." Tawa subdivides this group into "new-fashioned" traditionalists (Michael Colgrass, John Harbison, and Elie Siegmeister) and "artistic mavericks" (John Corigliano, David Del Tredici, Frederic Rzewski, and Joseph Schwantner). While readers may quibble with some of Tawa's choices, his categorization of these composers is thoughtful and arguably logical.

To his credit, Tawa devotes a fair portion of his book to composers who so often fall through the cracks in serious discussions of contemporary music. He praises those conservative composers such as La Montaine, Hoiby, and Siegmeister who have kept "faith with their own convictions in a climate hostile to everything they believed in" (p. 184). He commiserates with them over the lack of attention they have received from critics and the downright hostility they have suffered from modernists

who have denigrated the validity of their compositions.

While we might be tempted to despair at the ultimate failure of the modernists to reach the broader public, or at the critical neglect and disparagement conservative composers have suffered, Tawa concludes on a hopeful note. He sees in the Post-modern music of the eighties a reconciliation. His Americanist sensibilities are evident when he writes that citizens in a democracy have the right to be introduced to the best that their culture can offer, and composers have the responsibility not to deny them this right. If composers live up to this obligation, they in turn deserve fair and honest treatment "by the public and by political and economic leaders" (p. 248).

The conclusion of *A Most Wondrous Babble* provides an effective bridge to its companion, *Art Music in the American Society*. As Tawa explains in the latter's preface, he attempts here to examine "the relationships between the ideals of American democracy, the realities of late-20th-century American society, and the condition of art music" (p. v). He rightly admits the difficulty of this task, but as we have seen in his other work, Tawa is not one to shrink from daunting endeavors.

Tawa's specific areas of concentration in this second book include a survey of post-war American attitudes toward the arts, the cleavage between art and popular music, the proper role of art music in a democracy, the importance of educational institutions in fostering art music, and the business of making music, from both the artist's and the purveyor's points of view.

It is generally agreed that the American standard of living rose to new heights following the Second World War. We became better educated, earned more money, and had more leisure time. A serious democratic attempt was made to improve Americans' cultural opportunities through the private and public funding of arts centers and other institutions and through grants to support individual artistic and intellectual endeavors. Yet Tawa feels that little of lasting consequence has resulted, and he identifies several factors that have impeded progress in the arts. The growth of the superstar system has prevented many talented young musicians from earning an adequate living in music (I would argue that this phenomenon is hardly new, but per-

haps it is more prevalent nowadays). Tawa also faults academic administrators for their failure to recognize music as a serious area of scholarly pursuit (neither is this a new attitude; indeed, one would hope that it had by now disappeared). A third factor Tawa cites is the growth of the mass-music entertainment industry through new and increasingly pervasive technological modes. It may be argued that this development is the most insidious threat to the future of art music in our society.

Although both of Tawa's works are conceived from a subjective point of view, they are based on abundant documentation drawn from a wide and diverse variety of musical and non-musical sources. His discussions of the public's musical tastes, for example, reflect his own perceptions regarding how and why general audiences accept or reject certain artistic values. Tawa's conclusions are based not only on his thorough research of the published literature but on his own studies as well. In over eighteen years at the University of Massachusetts, Tawa has surveyed attitudes toward music among more than one thousand non-music concentrators. The inclusion of this kind of personal detail adds value to his study and credence to his opinions.

In summing up the value of Tawa's latest efforts, we must first admire his temer-

ity in trying to evoke a sense of order out of the chaos of the present, as well as his genuine concern for the future of serious American culture. Tawa's scholarship and insights deserve our consideration; they also deserve more editorial respect than either Scarecrow or Greenwood Press has bothered to give him. Each publication is plagued by a plethora of careless errors (for example, it was Lyndon B. Johnson who ushered in "The Great Society" in 1965, and not John F. Kennedy in 1961, as Tawa states in *A Most Wondrous Babble* [p. 121]).

I recommend that readers study both of Tawa's books, starting with *A Most Wondrous Babble*. They will probably find it the more interesting work, as I did, and one that provides much useful information (librarians will find Tawa's discography of the composers he discusses particularly valuable). Although we might be tempted to play the game "But what about . . ." in perusing Tawa's roster of composers, we should bear in mind that the author did not aim at a comprehensive list. (Nevertheless, I still wonder why John Adams was completely left out of the discussion of minimalism.) Both books are informed by Tawa's holistic view of the musicologist as social historian; more of us should follow his example.

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Duke Ellington. By James Lincoln Collier. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. [viii, 340 p. ISBN 0-19-503770-7. \$19.95.]

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899–1974) poses great challenges for a biographer. He composed over one thousand works but, until recently, only members of his orchestra and an inner circle of friends ever saw his scores. For years he was one of the most visible of public performers, yet he remained mysterious even to those who should have known him well. Constantly on the move from one performance to the next, he did not amass a large collection of personal papers. He preferred using the telephone to writing letters. Although he left an autobiography, *Music is My Mistress* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), it raises many more questions than it answers. In view of such problems, what does a biographer do?

When Barry Ulanov wrote the first full-

length study of Ellington in 1946 (*Duke Ellington*, currently available in a Da Capo Press reprint edition), he received little cooperation from his subject. Apparently Ellington thought the effort premature: "Biographies, like statues, are for dead men, aren't they?" (p. ix). As a result, Ulanov gathered much of his information from the trade press and from Ellington's sidemen and associates. The British journalist Derek Jewell, in *Duke: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (New York: Norton, 1977), drew heavily on *Music is My Mistress* and on Stanley Dance's *The World of Duke Ellington* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), offering little that was new or original.

In several respects, James Lincoln Collier's biography of Ellington resembles its predecessors: it contains no musical ex-