

EXCAVATIONS OF NOSTALGIA AND MYTH:

re-claiming the past, re-examining the present, re-imagining the future

While in our post-modern (or post-postmodern) era, it is virtually impossible to write a musical work that is not situated in some relationship with past (musical or extra-musical) traditions, each of the four works presented tonight takes this relationship as the central theme. With evocations including myths, mariachi bands, marching funeral bands, Georgian singers, stride pianists, and singing shamans, tonight's concert attempts to excavate past musical traditions in the hopes of offering new visions for the future.

Silvestre Revueltas: Sensemayá (1937)

We will probably have to wait until the next century to get a correct perspective on the musical history of this one.

My opinion is that such a perspective will differ radically from the one that has been promulgated through the universities and academic scholarship since the 1940s; and that in such a corrected view, Silvestre Revueltas will figure as one of this century's greatest composers.

Indeed, in the twenty years since Peter Garland made these remarks in his definitive biography *In search of Silvestre Revueltas* (1991), the perspective seems to have changed. While still, perhaps, the “famous unknown composer,” Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) is now regarded as one of the most important figures of Mexican twentieth-century music. In the last ten years, there have even been numerous CDs of his music released by such eminent performers as the Los Angeles Philharmonic (with Esa-Pekka Salonen, conducting), the Ebony Band of Amsterdam, the London Sinfonietta, and the Orquesta Sinfonica de Xalapa.

If Revueltas is still underappreciated or undervalued, though, it is likely for two reasons. First, that he died young, and thus, arguably, did not reach his full artistic potential. Leonard Bernstein—who knew Revueltas's music, having recorded the show-stopping, full-orchestra version of *Sensemayá* with the New York Philharmonic in 1964 (Stokowski recorded it in 1947)—said as much, observing: “Revueltas might have achieved true greatness had he lived.” However, Revueltas lived longer than both Mozart and Schubert, and, in a frenzied ten-year (1930-1940) burst of creativity, was astonishingly prolific, having written more than thirty pieces (including a half dozen film scores, several large orchestral scores, and numerous chamber ensemble works). To say that he did not live fully or “long enough” would seem to ignore Revueltas's very nature.

The second, and more compelling, reason for Revueltas's “snub” is his thorny relationship with other established composers, most notably Carlos Chávez (and thus by extension, Aaron Copland and his generation of American musicians). Revueltas spent most of his formative years in the United States, studying and working in Chicago, New York, and Austin, but when Chávez summoned him to return to Mexico in 1929 to serve as assistant conductor of his Symphonic Orchestra of Mexico and to serve as violin professor at the Conservatory in Mexico City, Revueltas eagerly obliged. The early 1930s were a highpoint in Mexican arts and music—and Chávez and Revueltas were the two dynamic young leaders of this movement; both had a tremendous impact on Mexican music during this period, in similar capacities as composers, conductors, performers, teachers, and organizers. However, by 1935 Revueltas's and Chávez's friendship had entirely eroded: Revueltas resigned from both the Orchestra and from the Conservatory, and in an act of open rebellion, established the National Symphonic Orchestra in opposition to Chávez's “official” Mexican orchestra. That Revueltas and Chávez could not co-exist for long is hardly surprising in light of their antithetical aesthetic goals and interpretation of “Mexicanism.” As Sergio Fernández Bravo writes:

Chávez perceived Revueltas's compositions, whether or not they proved successes, as threats. Chávez's music, with a “Mexicanism” derived from folkloric melodies and rhythms, contrasted with the music of his colleague, whose “Mexicanism” seemed innate, unforced. Indeed, Revueltas, did not need to borrow popular themes to make the very essence of his music feel entirely Mexican.

Other critics agree, such as Benjamín Juárez Echenique, who adds:

Musically, the work of Chávez tries to recreate a Mexico without the original sin borne by European blood,

or else it tries to imagine an ideal past like the one of Greek mythology.... His music radically denies traditional music structures, isolating itself in a spiral of grueling access. Revueltas's music starts from a more real and tangible Mexico, accepting the contradictory urban surroundings of its time. Nothing stays out of his vocabulary, not even the coarsest swear words, and it shows great ease in making fun of the refined, scholarly or cosmopolitan art.

Revueltas's relationship to Mexican traditional musics was spontaneous and deep, not studied or self-conscious as it often appears in Chávez's work. He shared a sense of camaraderie with the folk musicians, heightened by his political ideals. For Revueltas, there were no class distinctions in music: music, life, and revolution (social and artistic) were not separable; the street music of the mariachis was as important a model as the Aztec or Anglo-American heritages. As Garland writes:

On simple musical terms, to ignore the popular traditions in Mexico would be to turn your back on everything around you. Those who have not spent time in Mexico are unaware of how intense, active and varied the popular musical culture is. It is everywhere, and itself represents a special synthesis of European and indigenous American elements which continue to inspire and influence ongoing generations of composers. As we know, Revueltas was alive and open to that musical world all around him. As a violinist, he could share empathy and understanding with classical virtuosi, and mariachi players from Jalisco. This big world of life and music brims over with energy in Revueltas's work. Like the best of the muralist painters, this art is intensely modern *and* traditional—but of a different tradition than the European. Like the dissonances in Revueltas's melodic and harmonic structure, these elements co-exist together in place and time.... The popular culture does not walk a humble distance behind the classical and appear only as quotation. They dance and clash with each other in complete simultaneity in Revueltas's music.

In *Sensemaya* (1937)—regarded by Garland as “one of Revueltas's greatest works, and one of the furthest points he was to reach creatively”—Revueltas seemed to find a successful way to integrate his Mexican nationalism into a more symphonic form. As Otto Mayer-Serra comments:

In his *Sensemaya*, he undoubtedly achieved the most tightly constructed realization of his sound material. The density of this motivic/rhythmic writing which culminates in the contrapuntal combination of the three principal motives...gives to the entire work a great sense of unity and resolves, at least here, the problem of form in a genuine way. All the formal incoherence of certain early symphonic works—like the conventionalism of the tripartite form, which Revueltas uses in many cases—here has been superceded by a new concept of form which is capable of taking nationalism in Mexican music in new and fruitful directions.

What Mayer-Serra did not notice (or at least did not mention), however, is that the uniqueness of *Sensemaya*'s form results from its inspiration—namely that it follows quite literally the structure of the eponymous poem by Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén which reenacts a magical snake rite. There are several exact onomatopoeic correspondences between music themes and words or phrases in the text, such as the opening four-note percussion ostinato (with the accented last note) which seems to project the word “sensemaya, or the initial violin motive which Revueltas indicates is associated with the incantation “¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!” Revueltas even seems to “set” many of the lines syllabically, in the score placing words beneath specific melodies, such as the trumpet's second entrance that seems to correspond with “La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio” (“The snake has glass eyes”). Revueltas once admitted: “There is inside me a very peculiar understanding of nature: Everything is rhythm. The poet's language is everyday language. Everyone understands it or feels it. Music alone has to perfect its own language. All of that together is what music is to me. My rhythms are booming, dynamic, tactile, visual. I think in images that are melodic strains, that move dynamically.” In a 1998 article entitled “The song of the snake,” Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon goes so far as to conjecture that *Sensemaya* is not just a mere “evocation” of the poem, but instead “a close programmatic rendition of the poem, accounting for its formal design, overall compositional process, thematic functions, and many other relevant points in the musical construction.” He continues: “It is a far more congruous proposition to assume that both the compositional process and the musical material in *Sensemaya* are designed, as in a song, to forcefully project and expand the meaning of the text.” Given Revueltas's belief in the power of the language, this interpretation seems especially compelling.

To convey the poem's primary protagonists, Revueltas utilizes two primary themes. The first, representing the snake, is stated initially by the trumpet (but is often played by the trombone) and uses an octatonic pitch collection whose chromatic inflections tend to impart a relatively dark and menacing character. The second theme, representing Man, is usually stated in upper woodwinds and uses a more stable (noble?) pentatonic pitch collection, alluding perhaps to the simplicity of folk music. An effective film composer, Revueltas employs cinematic procedures to comment on or depict the events narrated in the poem's stanzas—and so, a slithering snake, emerging from tall grass, can be observed in the interjected 7/16 measures; fragments of the "Man" theme seem to represent the trudging, determined hunter; the fatal ax blows and resultant agonized convulsions of the snake can be heard in the harsh, unison-rhythm strikes. Demonstrating Revueltas's contrapuntal dexterity, in the final section of the work, the two primary themes finally appear simultaneously; as Zohn-Muldoon observes:

They are not just juxtaposed, but placed in a clear contrapuntal relationship, in which the theme of Man is heard as the principal voice, and the Snake theme as a supporting voice.... This type of relationship metaphorically conveys, in my view, a sense of resolution of the conflict, and the expected outcome of the sacrifice: the life force of the Snake has been subsumed to the life force of Man (whose theme appears with renewed strength), and their new interdependence has given rise to a higher order of things (two formerly independent melodies conform now to a contrapuntal structure).

Sensemaya is one of only of Revueltas's pieces to exist in two versions (the other is *Janitzio*); in both cases, the later revision is the "official" version. The two versions of *Sensemaya* have essentially the same basic structure, although the latter significantly expands and elaborates on the former. The version heard this evening, though, is the recently rediscovered, original chamber version written in May 1937 for only eight winds, three strings, three percussionists and piano—a spare, open-textured mariachi orchestration that Revueltas also used in *Ocho por Radio* and *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca*—as compared to the revised version, which is scored for a large orchestra of 27 winds, full string complement, and 14 different percussion instruments. (It is not known if Revueltas ever expected this chamber version to be performed, or if it was a draft that was eventually subsumed into the larger orchestral version.) While Garland claims, "I'm not convinced of how successful it is as a piece of music—compared to the later version, it seems too stripped-down and bare," Dutch conductor Werner Herbers disagrees, stating, "In comparison to the orchestral version, this version is a miniature in terms of decibals, but the rhythmic excitement is no less potent" (Werner Herbers). Perhaps critic Tim Page observation, which applies equally well to either version, is more accurate: "the visceral effect is brutal and thrilling, yet *Sensemaya* is constructed with extraordinary rhythmic subtlety. If Igor Stravinsky had written some 'tunes' to be played with Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation*, the result might have sounded something like *Sensemaya*."

The last four years of Revueltas's life (including a 1937 concert tour of Spain, where his music was enthusiastically received at many of the Nationalist strongholds—during which his revolutionary idealism was inflamed, but then crushed as he saw Spain in defeat and ruins) were torturous for him. His life began to fall apart and he teetered between the heights of intense creative activity and the depths of self-destructive despair. His music was as powerful, or more so, than ever—but there is an element of darkness and sadness to it previously absent. (It was after his return from Spain that Revueltas re-orchestrated *Sensemaya*.) Feeling life an oppressive weight, Revueltas commented upon seeing a Van Gogh exhibit:

I don't believe his self-portraits are of himself. His face reflects the anxiety of all mankind, and he studies human sadness with a sad passion in his own face. His self-portraits hold no vanity. Death invades each one slowly, with no mercy.... Only his eyes stay audacious, inquisitive, tortured. I contemplated with anxiety this figure of a man who seemed to be alive in the silence of the room. I felt his presence. I felt his anxiety, his sadness, his strength, inside me, as if they were my own.

And like Van Gogh, Revueltas would see the insides of insane asylums, institutionalized for acute alcoholism before dying of pneumonia caused by his alcoholism in 1940.

Sensemaya
canto para matar una culebra
by Nicolás Guillén

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!

La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio;
la culebra viene y se enreda en un palo;
con sus ojos de vidrio, en un palo;
con sus ojos do vidrio.

La culebra camina sin patas;
la culebra se esconde en la yerba;
caminando se esconde en la yerba,
caminando sin patas.

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!

Tú le das con el hacha, y se muere:
¡dale ya!
¡No le des con el pie, que te muerde,
no le des con el pie, que se va!

Sensemaya, la culebra,
sensemaya,
Sensemaya, con sus ojos,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, con su lengua,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, con su boca,
sensemaya.

¡La culebra muerta no puede comer;
la culebra muerta no puede silbar;;
no puede caminar,
no puede correr!

¡La culebra muerta no puede mirar;
la culebra muerta no puede beber;
no puede respirar,
no puede morder!

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, la culebra . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, no se mueve . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, Za culebra . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, se murio!

Sensemaya
(Chant to kill a snake)
translated by Willis Knapp Jones

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!

The snake has eyes of glass;
The snake coils on a stick;
With his eyes of glass on a stick,
With his eyes of glass.

The snake can move without feet;
The snake can hide in the grass;
Crawling he hides in the grass,
Moving without feet.

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!

Hit him with an ax and he dies;
Hit him! Go on, hit him!
Don't hit him with your foot or he'll bite;
Don't hit him with your foot, or he'll get away.

Sensemaya, the snake,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with his eyes,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with his tongue,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with his mouth,
sensemaya.

The dead snake cannot eat;
the dead snake cannot hiss;
he cannot move,
he cannot run!

The dead snake cannot look;
the dead snake cannot drink;
he cannot breathe,
he cannot bite.

¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, the snake . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, does not move . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, the snake . . .
¡Mayombe-bombe-mayombé!
Sensemaya, he died!

Kyle Gann: *Sunken City: In memoriam New Orleans (2007)*

A versatile musician of prodigious and diverse talents and interests, Kyle Gann (b.1955, Dallas) has been described as “a force of nature, a commanding presence in the landscape of American music” (NewMusicBox, American Music Center). Kyle is a writer, perhaps most recognizably as the long-time new music critic for the Village Voice. In such role, he once described himself as “just another irritation [New Yorkers] had to live with, like subway noise.” He is the author of many books, including *The Music of Colin Nancarrow* (1995), *American Music in the 20th Century* (1997), and *Music Downtown* (2006), which is a collection articles, essays, reviews, and think-pieces from the Village Voice, and he presently is working on a book on John Cage’s 4’33”. His writings include more than 2400 articles for more than 45 publications, including scholarly articles on La Monte Young (in *Perspectives of New Music*), Henry Cowell, Mikel Rouse, and other American composers. He writes the “American Composer” column for Chamber Music magazine, and he was awarded the Stagebill Award (1999) and Deems-Taylor Award (2003) for music criticism. Through his *PostClassic* blog, Gann is known as the foremost exponent of postclassical music—the term he uses to distinguish the music of composers such as Eve Beglarian, Michael Gordon, Larry Polansky, and Lois Vierk from their more culturally conservative (Uptown and Midtown composers) contemporaries; as Gann quips: “there are a lot of classically-trained composers out there making music that wouldn’t be called ‘classical’ by any of the nice people at the Philharmonic concerts.”

Presently on the faculty of Bard College, Kyle is also a composer, musicologist, and theorist. (Gann once said: “Webern was a musicologist who became a composer. Bartok was a composer who became a musicologist to get material for his music. I’m a composer who became a musicologist to get a job.”) Kyle studied composition with, among others, Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena. Kyle’s friend and fellow composer John Luther Adams may have most succinctly and accurately described his music, referring to it as a synthesis of “simplicity and complexity, passion and intellect, style and substance. Yet there’s one quality [Gann] values above all others: sincerity.” As Kyle wrote in 2000:

There is nothing wrong with simplicity. It is easier to write complicated music than simple music; Beethoven’s sketchbooks show how hard he struggled to achieve simplicity. It occasionally happens that profound music is difficult to understand, but it does not follow from this that music that is difficult to understand is therefore profound. Most difficult-to-understand music is simply unclear. The value of music is not proportional to the quantity of intricacy of its technical apparatus. Like many great composers throughout the ages, Mozart believed in an “artless art” in which the effort of composing is hidden beneath an effortless surface; this is as it should be. The audience wants to be delighted, inspired, entertained, not reassured that the composer is highly educated and working hard. There is nothing wrong with occasionally writing an ostentatiously technical piece for the delectation of one’s colleagues, but to do nothing but that is to pretend that composers have no obligation to society, and by extension that neither do doctors, politicians, generals, or any other profession. A piece of music is not good just because it is popular, nor is it bad because it is popular. The music profession has many incentives to bestow fame and honor on certain of its members; the quality of their music is only one of those incentives and never an essential one.

His music is often microtonal, using up to 37 pitches per octave; while this music is often treacherously difficult to perform (and Gann only writes this music for specific commissions), the motivation behind it is simple—the math behind just-intonation is clear, the resultant sounds more pure than their even-tempered analogues. Revealing not only his life-long fascination with Charles Ives’s music and his admiration for Henry Cowell’s book *New Musical Resources* (particularly the chapter on rhythm), but also the influence of Native American music (particularly that of the Hopi, Zuni, and other Southwest Pueblo tribes who have in common a technique of shifting back and forth between or among two or more tempos within a song), Gann’s music—especially that written for Disklavier (the modern player piano)—often features complex rhythmic relationships created by repeating loops, ostinatos, or isorhythms of different lengths going out of phase with each other. As Kyle has written: “But those rhythms I learned from the Pueblos are part of my own language now, and I use them in ways that the Hopis and Zunis would never recognize. I feel that they, along with the other ideas I’ve taken from Ives, Henry Cowell, Nancarrow, Glass, and Johnston, make my music truly indigenously American. And I

spend my life trying to prove that there is such a thing as an American classical music.” While the rhythms sound complex, they are usually built on “simple” structures of prime numbers (e.g. 13:19:29). In an interview in 2003, Kyle discussed his love for multi-tempo and rhythmically intricate music, saying:

I was always interested in the idea of competing tempos and beats, from the moment I heard my first Charles Ives piece—I grabbed that idea as if it had been my own all along. I think American music, like American painting, went back to nature for inspiration, and for music nature means numbers and pulsations.... As I say, for me, everything most exciting in the American rhythmic tradition began from the three-against-four tempo clash of the two simultaneous marches in the second movement of Ives's *Three Places in New England*. Once I heard that—at the age of 13—I wanted to hear it again for the rest of my life, and I connected it with Thoreau's famous comment about marching to a different drummer. Everything else could have come from that one example. (My high school composition teacher said to my parents, in bewilderment: “Most young composers start out writing like Mozart, but Kyle started out writing like Charles Ives.”)

The much bigger influence, very important for hundreds of American composers and often overlooked, was Henry Cowell's book *New Musical Resources*, which outlines a whole universe of new rhythmic possibilities, many of which still wait to be explored. I checked the book out of the library in college (it's mostly been out of print), read it, and consciously forgot about it—but years later when I looked at it again, I realized how many techniques I had tried from that book, that must have subconsciously stuck in my brain. Several other composers I've talked to have had the same experience, like Mikel Rouse and John Luther Adams.

As for the Disklavier development, that was easy. I never write a piece whose performance I can't bring about (well, the string quartet was an exception, because I had an idea). After studying Nancarrow, I didn't write for player piano only because I didn't have one. When I came to Bard College, Joan Tower was getting a piano for my office, and offered me either a grand piano or a Disklavier (computer-operated acoustic piano). I jumped at the chance to have a Disklavier, and immediately started writing for it - I began my job in September 1997 and wrote *Despotic Waltz* in October. Now I'm writing my 10th Disklavier study. Although I was a fairly decent pianist when I was young, I find conventional piano music very difficult to write, because there is so much tradition to define yourself against; but having been a pianist, and loving piano music, I still find it important to write. I refuse to write rhythms I can't confidently play myself, so my music for live pianist is much more limited, rhythmically.

After hearing Gann's recently released CD Disklavier music, Anthony Fiumara (Artistic Director of the Orkest de Volharding—the iconoclastic Dutch wind group that Louis Andriessen founded 1972) contacted Gann, asking him to write a piano concerto for pianist Geoffrey Douglas Madge and Volharding; although a departure from his usual idiom, Gann agreed, stating: “I didn't want to waste the opportunity to write something really virtuoso for once.” And since it was his Disklavier music that prompted the commission, Gann decided to use two of his Disklavier studies—“*Texarkana*,” which invokes the spirits of Earl Hines, Art Tatum, and James P. Johnson; and “*Unquiet Night*,” described by Adams as “music [that] dissolves into orchestral textures of floating figurations”—as the source material for the concerto. (Discussing “*Texarkana*,” Kyle once commented: “I start from stride piano and ragtime, and take the listener through a stream-of-consciousness collage with a wide variety of rhythmic techniques. I have to believe that if you can engage the listener and then seduce him through an experience he's never had before, you can begin to pry him away from the commercial oversimplification and standardization that is the basis of fascism.”) About *Sunken City*, Gann wrote:

Being an American of postminimalist tendencies, I could have responded with a one-idea piece of continuous textural transformation, which would hardly have been outside my stylistic proclivities. But to write a slowly changing sound continuum for brass, reeds, and piano seems impossible; the piano will barely have space to be heard. The first requirement that imposed itself was that orchestra and piano would have to alternate, which led me to the dramatic shape of a true concerto. I've always wanted to write a piano concerto, but had always thought of strings, woodwinds, drums. I considered the few classical models for piano with brass, and was not impressed. (I am familiar with two wonderful concerti for piano and winds, Stravinsky's and Kevin Volans's; but both employ larger woodwind forces, which I didn't have available.) The successful model for brass, reeds, and piano that came to mind was 1920s New Orleans jazz.

At the same time, I had just been deeply touched by Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke*, detailing the tragedy of the government-allowed destruction, and subsequent forced evacuation, of much of New Orleans. (My childhood was dotted with visits to southern Louisiana, where my mother grew up, and some of our oldest friends became Katrina evacuees.) In the documentary, officials from New Orleans visit Amsterdam to see how levees are supposed to be built. So there was my Amsterdam connection, dovetailing with the New Orleans jazz, and I acquiesced to my subject matter as irresistible. The title *Sunken City*, I thought, might draw a link between Amsterdam and New Orleans—though, hopefully, never with similarly catastrophic connotations.

The first movement is pure fun, the Mardi Gras New Orleans of my imagination, a stylized portrait of the energy level and harmonic language of the 1920s music of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and Bix Beiderbecke. Precedents to this kind of symphonic jazz exist, of course, in Copland, Gershwin, and Milhaud, that are bound to be evoked here, but I hoped that the deliberate naivete would all the better set up the second movement's desolation. There are two simple main themes, or perhaps only motives, used in the piece: an alternation of two notes a step apart (sometimes expanded to a third, as in the opening), and a rhythmically irregular repetition of a single note. Only one actual quotation appears in the first movement, a re-voiced chord progression from Frankie Trumbauer's song "Jubilee." Premonitions of the tragedy cloud the coda, which ends in a hasty retreat. The much longer second movement is a kind of interrupted chaconne, based on its opening 17 chords (spelling out the repeated-note theme). Successive variations suggest stages of grief, outrage, nostalgia, and acceptance, but finally the piano drifts into Jelly Roll Morton's "Dead Man Blues" (or rather, its chord changes, with some abstracted bits of the tune), which spreads into the orchestra. The last few minutes return to the chaconne chords, no longer in strict order. The single pitch that runs through all 17 chords is A; the "Dead Man Blues" passages are in B-flat, and the major seventh A above B-flat major provides the movement's rare moments of solace.

The obvious model for a two-movement work with a vastly larger second movement, of course, is Beethoven's Op. 111 (also Mahler's Eighth Symphony). With Beethoven in mind, I had planned to suggest some sort of transcendental acceptance, but as a friend reminded me, there can be no acceptance of what happened in New Orleans; not the natural tragedy, which was so foreseeable (and actually didn't happen, since Hurricane Katrina devolved into merely a level 3 storm before reaching the shore), but the unforgivable political tragedy: the levees never built to last in the first place, the uncaring abandonment of the population to heat, thirst, and death by drowning, the politicized gutting of government agencies meant to respond to disasters, the turning back at gunpoint of honest citizens trying to escape the city by walking over bridges. My friend was right, and the piece ends as the Katrina debacle itself has so far ended, in bitter inconclusiveness.

Interestingly, the review of the Dutch premiere was not favorable, although the only stated complaint was that the piece was too long. What the critic failed (or chose not) to recognize is the fact that the piece (or, more accurately, the second movement) *should* feel long. The seventeen-chord chaconne theme *is* too long—it should be only eight or sixteen chords long; the nine-beat chords in the middle *are* too long—they should be only eight beats in duration. That is the point: the citizens of New Orleans waited too long for relief, so why would a piece which aims to reflect their devastation, their abandonment, their grief and resignation, *not* be too long? (Besides as Gann—someone who knows a thing or two about music criticism—remarked: "If *Tristan* isn't too long after four hours, how can anything shorter be 'too long'")

Giya Kancheli: *Magnum Ignotum* (1994)

Music, like life itself, is inconceivable without romanticism. Romanticism is a high dream of the past, present, and future—a force of invincible beauty which towers above, and conquers, the forces of ignorance, bigotry, violence, and evil.

-Giya Kancheli

Like Revueltas (and countless other composers), Georgian composer Giya Kancheli (b. 1935) is an admirer of his country's folk music; in fact, he has professed to often being overcome by a bitter sense of nostalgia, a longing for the past. He is Georgia's most distinguished living composer and a leading figure in the world of contemporary music. Relocated by political and social turbulence in his homeland,

Kancheli currently resides in Antwerp, a victim of a self-imposed exile. Before moving to Antwerp, Kancheli lived for a while in Berlin, and while there, he was asked by the organizers of the music festival in Witten to write a piece containing Georgian folk tunes; he declined, stating that he did not want to use folk music in his work. As he elaborated:

Georgian music is a unique phenomenon. I say this quite consciously, as I believe that it is music created by great people whose names we do not know. For me they remain the great and anonymous. What does “folk music” mean anyway? Has there ever been a “folk” that, one fine day, assembled in the village square and decided to write a “folk song”? I shouldn’t think so. I believe it was the product of a concrete human being with an extraordinary gift. I often imagine a Georgian three-part song being written something like this: one day Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart met and decided to sing a song for three voices. I understand this music as a form of composed music. And the more I admire the composers, the more clearly I understand that I have no right to interfere with what they created. I avoid using folkloric material in my works; my dream, on the other hand, is to come closer to the spiritual sphere of sacred chant.... It seems to me that a composer should try to approach the spirit, but not assimilate the material of these songs.”

The Witten festival directors, however, insisted that Kancheli reconsider their offer, and so he agreed to write *Magnum Ignatum* (“The Great Anonymous”) (1994), integrating authentic Georgian folk material—ranging from the High Priest of the cathedral of Anchiskhati reading the Gospel on Christmas Eve, to an archival recording of a polyphonic Gurian song, to a performance of a beautiful male-choral piece “Upalo Ghmerto” sung by the Tustavi Choir. In the end, though, it is the stirring combination and provocative juxtaposition of the “folk” music with Kancheli’s score (for nine winds and bass) that creates the timeless (eternal) and haunting evocation of both times past and present. While many of his works were inspired by folk or religious sensibilities, *Magnum Ignatum* is one of the rare instances (along with the opening of the Third Symphony) where Kancheli explicitly incorporates instances of folk and religious music in his work; in general, the effect of Georgian folk elements on his style is in spirit rather than substance (as Rob Ainsley wryly notes: “Kancheli’s music simply doesn’t sound at all like Georgian folk”—and Kancheli himself says that those who find persistent Georgian references have “too powerful lenses in their binoculars”), making the more substantive, dialectical syntheses that much more haunting and meaningful.

Kancheli's scores, deeply spiritual in nature, are filled with haunting aural images, varied colors and textures, sharp contrasts and shattering climaxes. His music typically draws inspiration from Georgian folklore and sings with a heartfelt, yet refined emotion; it is conceived dramaturgically with a strong linear flow and an expansive sense of musical time. A man of uncompromising artistic integrity, Kancheli has been praised by several Russian composers, including Rodion Shchedrin, who called him: “an ascetic with the temperament of a maximalist—a restrained Vesuvius,” and Alfred Schnittke, who noted:

Kancheli has avoided both experimentalism and orthodoxy in forging his inimitably individual style. His most striking quality, however, is the rare gift of being able to suspend all sense of time. From the very first note we are released from our ordinary, everyday time-sense to float, cloud-like, in eternity. Composers with this rare gift tend towards a dissolution of “normal” time-proportions—either condensing our awareness around every second (Chopin, Scriabin, Webern) or stretching our attention-span to contemplative lengths by de-emphasising sequentiality (Schubert, Bruckner, Stockhausen). In Kancheli's [music], we find a union of both characteristics. In the relatively short period of 20-30 minutes of slow music, we experience a whole lifetime, an entire history; at the same time, the drag of time is absent—we glide high over centuries as if in an aircraft, with no sensation of speed.

Kancheli's music dwells obsessively on a complex of interrelated themes—grief, fear, solitude, vigil, memory, nostalgia, innocence, intolerance, protest—each new piece approaching this nexus from a different angle, as if determined to perfect a coded way of talking about something either unmentionable or otherwise difficult to express. In a recent book, though, Rob Ainsley conjectures that all of the elements of Kancheli’s style—from the cinematic parallels to the tenuous links with folk music, from the longer-term formal structures to its slow wistfulness (its “dynamic stasis”)—are best understood as musical expressions of aspects of Nostalgia. The impression of several of his works—particularly the Third Symphony, and possibly *Magnum Ignatum*—is that there may well be an untouchable purity about

the past, but it will always be distorted and attacked by the present—and thus a “Bitter Nostalgia.” Ainsley believes that, since abandoning writing symphonies (Kancheli wrote his seventh—and to date, last—symphony in 1986), Kancheli has begun to

move away from symphonic treatment of past-versus-present ideas, to a more self-quotational, personal one: a move, indeed to the everyday idea of “Bittersweet Nostalgia,” in which past times are cherished rather than contrasted against the present.... In Kancheli’s symphonies, the past tries to survive the challenge of the present—and, as the symphonies go on, it succeeds less and less. But in his post-1989 work, the sense of battle with the present is mostly absent. Each work is a collage-like assembly of characteristic phrases, many taken from, or resembling those in, previous works. It is as if his recent work is one enormous personal musical scrapbook, full of references to the past, yet not contrasted against some ominous present.... The “past” is denoted by subdued themes which quote or nearly quote those from previous works, but there is little or no violent musical “present”—only our present, that of us, the listeners, who are invited to reminisce.... It is positive, “Bittersweet Nostalgia,” that collects scraps of memorabilia to reassure us of our life’s cumulative meaning: the past is gone but it can remind and reassure us of who we once were and are now.

Even the recording of church bells ringing at the close of *Magnum Ignotum* can be interpreted as indicative of nostalgic sentiments. As Ainsley writes: “Bells mark the hours of our lives in the short term, chiming the hours, but in the long term, too, marking our birth, marriage, and death. Nostalgia... is a desperate attempt to find solace in an irredeemably lost past, in the face of existential terror; a powerless observation of the march of time. The words of Donne come to mind, which later gave their name to Hemingway’s book: “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.” In *Magnum Ignotum*, though, Kancheli seems to paying homage to the countless generations of people who carried forward the traditional music of his home-country for which he is desperately homesick—and so the bells might be ringing to remember a glorious tradition that might seem lost in today’s present.

There is no denying the powerful sincerity of this music and its riveting hold on the imagination—a grip that doesn't relent until the consoling conclusion in which the individual and his turbulent, unpredictable universe arrive at a reconciliation.

Michael Colgrass: *Winds of Nagual* (1985)

Winds of Nagual is extraordinarily visual, story-telling music in a way that has gone wholly out of fashion since the great Strauss tone poems like *Don Quixote*. *Winds* is a tone poem for wind ensemble based on the books by Carlos Castaneda about his experience with the Indian sorcerer Don Juan. The music is full of the mystery and the matter-of-fact, it has mountains and rivers and bubbles in it, singing and dancing, meditation and the moon, all precisely, colorfully and imaginatively caught. There is even an audible philosophical point about coexistent worlds of spirit and body. Music in the low brasses resembling Wagner's Annunciation of Death becomes instead an affirmation of life - it immediately gives way to a clowning dance only a fool would call “trashy,” although that is its musical idiom.

-Richard Dyer (*Boston Globe*), writing after the premiere

Michael Colgrass (b. 1932) was first drawn to music when he saw drummer Ray Bauduc in a movie playing *Big Noise from Winnetka* with the Bob Crosby Band. When he entered the University of Illinois as a percussion student of Paul Price, he had every intention of studying only jazz; in fact, he made his living as a jazz drummer, performing 5-6 nights a week. Eventually, his interests began to widen, encompassing composition studies with Darius Milhaud, Wallingford Riegger, and Lukas Foss. After graduation, he spent twenty-one months as timpanist in the Seventh Army Symphony Orchestra in Stuttgart, Germany, before moving to New York City in 1956, where he free-lanced as a percussionist with such diverse groups as the New York Philharmonic, Dizzy Gillespie's band, the original *West Side Story* orchestra on Broadway, the Columbia Recording Orchestra's *Stravinsky conducts Stravinsky* series, and numerous ballet, opera and jazz ensembles.

Colgrass has an uncanny ability to write accessible music that simultaneously challenges the intellect and stirs the emotions. His highly personal compositional technique draws on a diversity of styles, reflecting

his widespread interests, and involves a free-flowing mixture of tonal and atonal harmonic language. His compositions have been commissioned and performed by such groups as the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, The Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society, the Manhattan and Muir String Quartets, the Brighton Festival in England, and numerous other orchestras, wind ensembles, chamber groups, choral groups and soloists. Colgrass is the recipient of many grants and fellowships, including two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Grant, and First Prize in the Barlow and Sudler International Wind Ensemble Competitions for *Winds of Nagual* (1985). He also won the 1978 Pulitzer Prize for Music for *Déjà vu* and an Emmy Award in 1982 for the Public Broadcasting System documentary "Soundings: The Music of Michael Colgrass". Besides composing, Colgrass has for twenty-five years been giving workshops throughout North America in performance excellence, combining Grotowski physical training, mime, dance and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). He is the author of *My Lessons with Kumi - How I Learned to Perform with Confidence in Life and Work*.

Colgrass has offered the following on the work:

Winds of Nagual is based on the writings of Carlos Castaneda about his 14-year apprenticeship with don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer from Northwestern Mexico. Castaneda met don Juan while researching hallucinogenic plants for his master's thesis in Anthropology at UCLA. Juan became Castaneda's mentor and trained him in pre-Colombian techniques of sorcery, the overall purpose of which was to find the creative self - what Juan calls the *nagual*.

Each of the characters has a musical theme: Juan's is dark and ominous, yet gentle and kind; Carlos's is open, direct and naïve. We hear Carlos's theme throughout the piece from constantly changing perspectives, as Juan submits him to long desert marches, encounters with terrifying powers and altered states of reality [often through the use of psychotropic substances]. A comic aspect is added to the piece by don Genaro, a sorcerer friend of Juan's, who frightens Carlos with fantastic tricks like disappearing and reappearing at will.

[Although] the score is laced with programmatic indications, ... the listener need not have read Castaneda's books to enjoy the work, and I don't expect anyone to follow any exact scenario. My object is to capture the mood and atmosphere created by the books and to convey a feeling of the relationship that develops as a man of ancient wisdom tries to cultivate heart in an analytical young man of the technological age.

Technically, the work is a fairly rigorous theme-and-variations—as Carlos grows and develops, so does his theme; as Castaneda's narrative progresses, we “see” the various characters interacting (as we “hear” themes returning). True, Castaneda's writings are certainly controversial; supporters claim the books are either true or at least valuable works of philosophy and descriptions of practices which enable an increased awareness, while academic critics claim the books are works of fiction, citing the books' internal contradictions, discrepancies between the books and anthropological data, alternate sources for Castaneda's detailed knowledge of shamanic practices and lack of corroborating evidence. However, the search for self-knowledge, wisdom, and a symbiotic relationship to the world is universal—and it is this journey that Colgrass so masterfully captures.

The following is a more complete listing of Colgrass's "exact scenario":

I. THE DESERT

Don Juan emerges from the mountains.
Carlos approaches don Juan.
The first conversation...
Carlos unsure of himself.
Don Juan shows Carlos a new concept of himself.

II. DON GENARO APPEARS

Genaro clowns for Carlos.
Genaro satirizes Carlos.
Genaro laughs.
Genaro leaps to a mountain top.
Genaro disappears.

III. CARLOS STARES AT THE RIVER AND BECOMES A BUBBLE

Carlos stares at the river, and is transfixed by the ripples of the water.
Carlos is mesmerized by the bubbles, and becomes a bubble.
Carlos travels with the river.
Carlos tumbles in cascades of water.
Juan jolts Carlos awake with a shrill voice.
Carlos feels euphoric, and climbs out of the water.

IV. THE GAIT OF POWER

Don Juan shows Carlos how to leap between boulders in the dark.
Carlos tries it.
Something moves in the dark.
A terrifying creature leaps at Carlos.
Carlos runs... it chases him.
The creature grabs his throat.
Carlos exerts his will.

V. ASKING TWILIGHT FOR CALMNESS AND POWER

Carlos calls to the desert from a hilltop.
Carlos dances.
Carlos meditates.
Carlos moves again.
He feels a deep calm and joy.
Nightfall... mist rolls in and the moon rises.

VI. JUAN CLOWNS FOR CARLOS

VII. LAST CONVERSATION AND FAREWELL

Carlos leaps into the abyss...
and explodes into a thousand views of the world.