

“Some of the rhythms developed through the present acoustical investigation could not be played by any living performer; but these highly engrossing rhythmical complexes could easily be cut on a player-piano roll. This would give a real reason for writing music specially for player-piano. . . .”

—Henry Cowell

In his seminal book *New Musical Resources*, Henry Cowell (1897–1967) proposed a theory of rhythm grounded in the whole-number relationships of the harmonic series. Cowell demonstrated the promise of this notion in his groundbreaking *Quartet Romantic* (1917). But as with many of his visionary ideas, he never fully explored its possibilities.

Enter Conlon Nancarrow (1912–1996). The young Arkansas expatriate living in Mexico took Cowell’s idea and ran with it, right down to the suggestion of the player piano as the instrument for his investigations. In Nancarrow’s hands this unlikely vehicle yielded an astonishing body of music exploring previously uncharted regions of rhythm, texture, and tempo relationships.

Enter Kyle Gann (born 1955). Like many composers of subsequent generations, Gann was captivated by Cowell’s theories and Nancarrow’s music. But Gann is also a brilliant writer and theorist. So he wrote the book on Nancarrow. With its authoritative and incredibly detailed analyses of virtually everything Nancarrow composed, *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* is the essential source for any serious study of Nancarrow’s work.

Knowing so much about Nancarrow’s music, it’s hardly surprising that it would occur to Gann to consider the question of how he might make the mechanical piano his own. His answer is the music on this recording.

The instrument isn’t exactly the same. Nancarrow employed the old-fashioned player piano, driven by paper rolls with holes punched in them. Gann uses the more recent Disklavier, which is controlled by a computer via MIDI data. However, like Nancarrow, Gann employs the mechanical piano for both musical and practical reasons.

The musical attraction, of course, is the one Cowell observed: The instrument allows the composer to compose with tempo relationships and rhythmic velocities not readily playable by human performers. The practical appeal is that Gann felt that not enough people were playing his music. So in the do-it-yourself spirit of Nancarrow, Lou Harrison, Harry Partch, and so many other American composers, he decided to take matters into his own virtual hands.

But although Gann’s reasons for working with the mechanical piano are similar to Nancarrow’s, the musical results are quite different. Gann picks up where Nancarrow left off, developing his own personal methods of working with multiple tempo layers, and weaving elements of popular and classical music into his vivid and distinctive musical tapestries.

While Nancarrow often worked with pre-compositional forms conceived in large blocks of sound, most of Gann’s mechanical piano pieces are through-composed. This is central in his approach to the medium. As he began working in the new medium, he says: “I tried disciplining myself to compose completely spontaneously.” The tour-de-force impromptu *Nude Rolling Down an Escalator* (Study No. 3) was his first realization of this ideal.

Gann’s music embraces a wide range of influences but sounds like no other. His fascination with complex tempo structures and microtonal tunings places him in the experimentalist tradition from Cowell to La Monte Young. Yet the directness and accessibility of his music reveal his affinity with American populists such as Roy Harris and Virgil Thomson. In this highly personal blend of experimentalism and populism, Gann’s closest musical forebears are Partch and Charles Ives.

Like Partch, Gann often works in acoustically perfect tunings, utilizing as many as 37 tones to the octave. His music often grows out of the nuances of the spoken word. His one-man opera, *Custer and Sitting Bull*, comes as close as any recent work to realizing Partch’s ideal of “corporeality”: the holistic fusion of language and tone. In setting the words of those two archetypal American characters, Gann uses the nuances of microtonality to heighten the rhythms and inflections of speech into music. More than merely a vehicle for the theatrical narrative, this music is deeply informed by the flow, the texture, the feeling of language.

Gann has a deep love for Hopi, Zuni, and Pueblo music. This influence on his music is not programmatic. It is profoundly musical. He has assimilated the reiterations and syncopations of this original American music, transforming and integrating them into his own unique rhythmic idiom of successive and simultaneous tempos.

Like its composer, Gann's music is wry and sophisticated, very smart and a little idiosyncratic. But although there's plenty of humor, there's no sarcasm in this music. This isn't ironic post-modernist pastiche. And it's not facile neo-romanticism. Gann grew up in Texas. But he has a New England Yankee soul. In the spirit of Ives, Gann's music (whether these pieces for mechanical piano, or his choral/orchestra work *Transcendental Sonnets*) invokes ragtime, jazz, folk music, and Native American music on equal footing with classical music and purely abstract sonic speculations.

A critic once somewhat dismissively referred to Gann's music as "naïvely pictorial." This is an aesthetic position the composer fully embraces. As he says: "All the microtonal complexities and humanly unplayable rhythms are a lot of fun, and they keep my brain entertained while my ear is busy composing. But the most important part, the part that empowers music to resonate through society and enables one to 'speak truth to power,' that part that will make your work dangerous and threatening to bureaucrats and academics, the part that will make you despised by keepers of the status quo and loved by generations yet to come, is the hardest part to achieve: the part that is naive."

Through his *PostClassic* Web log and Internet radio station, Gann is known as the foremost exponent of postclassical music—the term he uses to distinguish the music of composers such as Beth Anderson, Mikel Rouse, Lois Vierk, Peter Garland, Eve Beglarian, Larry Polansky, Janice Giteck, and many others from that of their culturally conservative contemporaries who more readily find favor with the presumed "mainstream" of the classical music world. As Gann observes ". . . 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."

Yet Gann is no uneducated iconoclast. He knows classical music from the inside out. He's forgotten more about classical music than many of us will ever know. When he invokes Chopin or builds an entire piece from Beethoven quotations, he does so knowingly and lovingly. He has a special passion for Liszt and Bruckner. He's a connoisseur of lesser-known Classical era composers such as Hummel, Dussek, C.P.E. Bach, Wanhals, and Wagenseil. And it seems somehow fitting that this composer of manic works for mechanical piano is also an aficionado of the keyboard music of Muzio Clementi.

Gann's ten *Mechanical Piano Studies* are a series. And as well as the individual pieces stand alone, the cumulative effect of listening to all ten in sequence is even more satisfying.

Both Conlon Nancarrow and Scott Joplin were born in Texarkana. In addition to those native sons, Gann's exuberant little musical *séance* *Texarkana* also invokes the spirits of Earl Hines, Art Tatum, and James P. Johnson. Traversing tempos of all the odd numbers from 3 to 29 against a constant "tonic" tempo of 13, it races through all twelve major keys in its first 48 measures.

In *Nude Rolling Down an Escalator*, Cubist planes of hammered chords, furious tremolos and blazing scales bid an enthusiastic farewell to modernism. In the composer's words: "The twentieth century began with a Nude Descending a Staircase, and I thought it should end this way."

Petty Larceny is composed entirely of bits and pieces of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Alberti figurations, broken octaves, cadential trills, and other familiar gestures elide and collide, their syntax shattered in a brave new world of multilayered tempos and complex textures. Everything is quoted verbatim, without transposition. ("I let Beethoven do my modulating for me," quips Gann.) The work opens with three simultaneous quotes from early (Op. 2, No. 1), middle (the *Appassionata*), and late (Op. 111) sonatas. And it closes with further quotes from the same three. If all this musical plunder weren't so long in the public domain, we can only imagine the litigation it might provoke.

Composing his homage to the great pianist Bud Powell, Gann decided that the mechanical piano couldn't really play much faster than did the man. So in *Bud Ran Back Out* he came up with some tricks that Powell might have envied: blazing melodies in chromatic sixths and triple octaves, and in tempos of 7 against 8 against 9—all over a relentless walking bass. The result is a vertiginous vamp guaranteed to make the listener smile.

Cosmic Boogie-Woogie is another homage to another keyboard great, Terry Riley. Composed in seven repeating and evolving melodic layers, each delineated by its own distinctive register and rhythm, the music sits on an eight-tone scale and a constant pulse throughout. And it rocks.

Despotic Waltz is a musical joke that the composer describes as “Chopin meets Nancarrow.” The virtual right hand is Nancarrow, running along in an almost continuous stream of 32nd notes. The left hand is Chopin, constant only in its rubato—which fluctuates between subdivisions of 3, 5, 7, and 9, with occasional detours into 11, 13, and 15. The relationship between these two strong forces is a taffy pull of harmony and tempo. With typical dryness Gann observes: “As with any screwed-up marriage, it’s hard to tell which partner is really controlling which.” Chopin determines the harmony, while Nancarrow provides the rhythmic drive. Chopin holds forth. Nancarrow interjects. A frank exchange of viewpoints ensues. It seems that Nancarrow may have the last word. Or maybe not.

In his piano music Cowell often used simple folk-like tunes as transparent vehicles for exploring tone clusters, sounds produced by playing directly on the strings, and other new musical resources. In *Folk Dance for Henry Cowell*, Gann uses the framework of a little dance in E-minor to provide sounding proof of Cowell’s observation that there’s nothing wrong with interspersing triplets, quintuplets, and septuplets in any way one likes as long as it all adds up at the end of the measure.

The Waiting is constructed of seven voices in tempo relationships of 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, and occasionally 15. The work opens with a cloud of reiterated tones and short melodic cells vaguely reminiscent of late Morton Feldman. In succession, three clouds are punctuated by three pauses—breathing, waiting. A longer, more continuous cloud dissolves into short figurations and faster harmonic motion. Clouds continue in the lower register, punctuated by faster, longer figures in the upper voice. The harmonies become more dissonant. The underlying clouds grow denser, faster, building to a climax and then, again, the waiting. Slowly the clouds open up to reveal more distinct contrapuntal voices, dissolving in a concluding arpeggio.

In *Tango da Chiesa* a hymn in 8 floating over a bass line in 11 and a middle voice in 13 yields what the composer calls “The delayed aftereffect of a Baptist upbringing: a hymn-like tango that no one can dance to.”

One of the things Gann likes about the mechanical piano is that “. . . you can sustain individual notes through a complex texture without the pedal.” Composed as a companion to *Long Night* (1981) for three pianos, *Unquiet Night* is the only one of Gann’s mechanical piano pieces that uses the sustain pedal throughout. Seven bebop chords and six or seven tempo layers is all he needs to sustain this lovely essay in ambience. From the block-chord arpeggios and cellular mobiles of the opening, the music dissolves into orchestral textures of floating figurations (in odd-numbered subdivisions from 5 to 23). In the end the arpeggios and mobiles return, to be integrated with the floating world of the middle.

Kyle Gann’s music alone would be enough to give him a significant place in the landscape of new music. But his writings have had a major influence on the course of recent musical history. As new-music critic for *The Village Voice* since 1986, Gann has documented and shaped the emergence of significant new voices and currents. (Many of these columns have been collected in a new volume, *Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice*.) His composer’s insights into the inner workings of music have made him the most penetrating critic since Virgil Thomson. His commitment and passion have made him even more influential. Gann would rather risk being wrong than being timid.

What Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg did for earlier generations of American painters, Gann is doing for current generations of American composers. Almost alone, he has defined and articulated the premises of an American classical (or postclassical) music distinct from the European tradition. He has written major articles for *NewMusicBox* (the online magazine of the American Music Center) and a thirteen-part series, *American Mavericks*, for Minnesota Public Radio. In his “American Composer” column for *Chamber Music* magazine he has made a special point of writing about the music of women and younger composers.

Reading Gann one usually learns something new, even about subjects we know well. His essays about just intonation and the history of tuning are among the most complete and intelligible resources available, as theoretically sound as they are usefully practical. His in-depth analyses of the harmonic worlds of La Monte Young’s installation works and *The Well-Tuned Piano* are equally definitive. And his book *American Music in the 20th Century* is the first comprehensive and scholarly history of American classical music written from a post-classical point of view.

Gann wants music to have it all: simplicity and complexity, passion and intellect, style and substance. Yet there's one quality he values above all others: sincerity. Much as he might scoff at this word, it's clear that he believes in the power of music to make a difference in this world. And he expects musicians to be true to that power. In this sense, Kyle Gann is the conscience of new music. Because he holds himself to the same uncompromising standards, his music, his writings, and his thought are thoroughly and undeniably real. He manages to be both tough-minded and generous-spirited. And his work always has that sense of depth and wholeness that we recognize as integrity. —*John Luther Adams*

The music of John Luther Adams is recorded on New World, Cold Blue, New Albion, Mode, and other labels, and his book Winter Music is published by Wesleyan University Press. Information about Adams and his work is available at www.johnlutheradams.com.

Kyle Gann, born in Dallas, Texas, is associate professor of music at Bard College and has been new-music critic for *The Village Voice* since 1986. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow*, *American Music in the 20th Century*, and *Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice*. He has published more than two thousand articles on contemporary music, including scholarly articles on La Monte Young, John Cage, Henry Cowell, Mikel Rouse, and others, in more than forty publications, including *Perspectives of New Music*, *The New York Times*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, *Chamber Music* magazine, *Contemporary Music Review*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Chicago Reader*, and *Fanfare* magazine.

Gann (B. Mus., Oberlin Conservatory, D. Mus., Northwestern University) studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena. His music falls into three categories: microtonal (just intonation) music using up to 31 pitches per octave, mostly for electronic instruments; rhythmically complex music for MIDI-driven acoustic instruments; and more conventional keyboard and ensemble music. His rhythmic language, based on contrasting tempos both in quick succession and at the same time, was developed from study of Hopi, Zuni, and Pueblo Indian musics. His major works include *Transcendental Sonnets* for chorus and orchestra, commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir; *Custer and Sitting Bull*, a one-man opera for voice and electronics; *The Planets*, a ten-movement octet commissioned by the Relâche ensemble; and two microtonal chamber operas with librettist Jeffrey Sichel, *Cinderella's Bad Magic* (premiered in Moscow and St. Petersburg) and *The Watermelon Cargo*.

Gann has twice received an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for criticism, and in 1996–97 a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist's Fellowship. In 2003 the American Music Center gave him its Letter of Distinction, along with Wayne Shorter, George Crumb, and Steve Reich. His Web site is <http://www.kylegann.com>.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Desert Sonata. Lois Svard, piano. Lovely Music LCD 3052.

Custer's Ghost. Includes *Fractured Paradise*, *How Miraculous Things Happen*, *Superparticular Woman*, *So Many Little Dyings*, *Ghost Town*, *Custer and Sitting Bull*. Kyle Gann, voice and synthesizer. Monroe Street msm 60104.

Ghost Town. New Tone nt 6730.

Hesapa ki Lakhota ki Thawapi. The Relâche Ensemble. Monroe Street msm 60102.

Long Night. Sarah Cahill, pianos. Cold Blue CB0019.

Snake Dance No. 2. Essential Music. Monroe Street msm 60101.

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NUDE ROLLING DOWN AN ESCALATOR: STUDIES FOR DISKLAVIER
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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
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