

RECORDINGS VIEW

Atonal, of Course, But Deep Down He's Got Rhythm

By ALEX ROSS

"WE ARE BRINGING them the plague," Sigmund Freud supposedly remarked as his ship docked in New York and delivered psychoanalysis to America. Arnold Schoenberg might have said something similar when he showed up in California in 1934 with his "system for composing in 12 tones." In the postwar era, the 12-tone system swiftly spread through the American compositional community, and in the 1950's and 60's an even more difficult phenomenon called Serialism took hold.

Schoenberg's strict method, ordering the 12 pitches of the scale in nonrepeating atonal rows, was exhilarating therapy for composers beset by a multiplicity of stylistic choices. The plague was on audiences, who detested the jumbled, athematic textures common to the idiom. Schoenberg's conviction that his new system would replace the old proved to be foolish. The 12-tone order failed to make atonality second nature; at the same time, it tamed atonality's unnatural force.

Is dodecaphony finally over and done with? The recent music of Charles Wuorinen, one of the system's most persuasive defenders, slyly suggests otherwise. Mr. Wuorinen's compositions from the last decade, available on a new pair of Koch International compact disks, have kept to the 12-tone program, but an unexpected transformation has occurred: Layers of Serialist torpor have fallen away, revealing a vivid rhythmic and harmonic core. Mr. Wuorinen joins a rather short line of composers who have breathed life into Schoenberg's method and made it dance.

The system always displayed a certain ambivalence. Schoenberg himself slipped back to tonality in his final years, reintroducing triads and octave doublings. Alban Berg turned his teacher's method against itself from the outset, finding loopholes through which Mahlerian lyricism could surge. (A new recording of Berg's Violin

But once Serialism became a wide doctrine, it fossilized. The primary torturers — Babbitt, Boulez, Stockhausen — ways produced compelling scores, but of their imitators fell into dull routine. In the 1960's, contemporary music was discarding new imperatives. The long-neglected tonality became paramount again, and tonality came back in style.

Mr. Wuorinen seems an unlikely rebel. He is a devoted Babbitt disciple who has exasperated many colleagues by advocating what he called "musical pluralism," "chandising" and "conservative reaction" in today's music. Serialism, he insists, is one true way. Yet this 55-year-old composer has been moving toward a more flexible employment of the 12-tone principle.

ALL ALONG, MR. WUORINEN has shown a knack for rhythm. He has declined to follow Mr. Babbitt's "time point" principle, which treats rhythm as another malleable unit in the Serialist structure. Instead, he has insisted that rhythm be derived separately, from the large-scale of a work or movement. "Music passes not through the hearer's record of absolute time but through his perception of a series of events," he wrote in 1979. "Fullness is precisely what many post-serialist compositions lack."

In a recent work like "Five," a concerto for amplified cello and orchestra (Koch 3-7110-2H1), Mr. Wuorinen puts rhythm in the foreground. The second movement is particularly vivid, driven by jazz-age bounce and enlivened by dissonant riffs. Although a pulse is never sustained for long, a pre-Serialist sense of rhythm is clear — the early Stravinsky, and the forceful rhythms of Stefan Wolpe.

More surprising has been Mr. Wuorinen's drift toward tonal centers. One must be careful with the word "tonal" in this context. Wuorinen offers nothing in the way of hard diatonic progressions. But the works habitually underline certain tonal and consonant chords, tugging the listener in those directions.

The exemplary work in this respect is the 11-minute Horn Trio of 1981, contained on the second disk (Koch 3-7123-2H1). The style is exceptionally lucid, the argument classically assured. A "pitch center" is evident at the outset, with E's and F's pronounced by punchy rhythm. Tension in

Charles Wuorinen
has taken the
decrees of 12-tone

music and made them sing.

Concerto on the Deutsche Grammophon label, with the soloist Anne-Sophie Mutter and James Levine conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, shows the atonal-Romantic language at its most sumptuous.)

Even more adventurous heresies followed. The American composer George Perle took the informal methodology of Berg and codified it into a system of "12-tone tonality" that has produced some of the most winning music of the medium. In Sweden, Karl-Birger Blomdahl wrote 12-tone music of thrilling, headlong rhythmic energy, wedding Schoenberg and early Stravinsky. Mr. Perle uses the system to reflect pre-existing forms of tonality; Blomdahl made it a cast-iron frame in which rhythm could burn elementally.

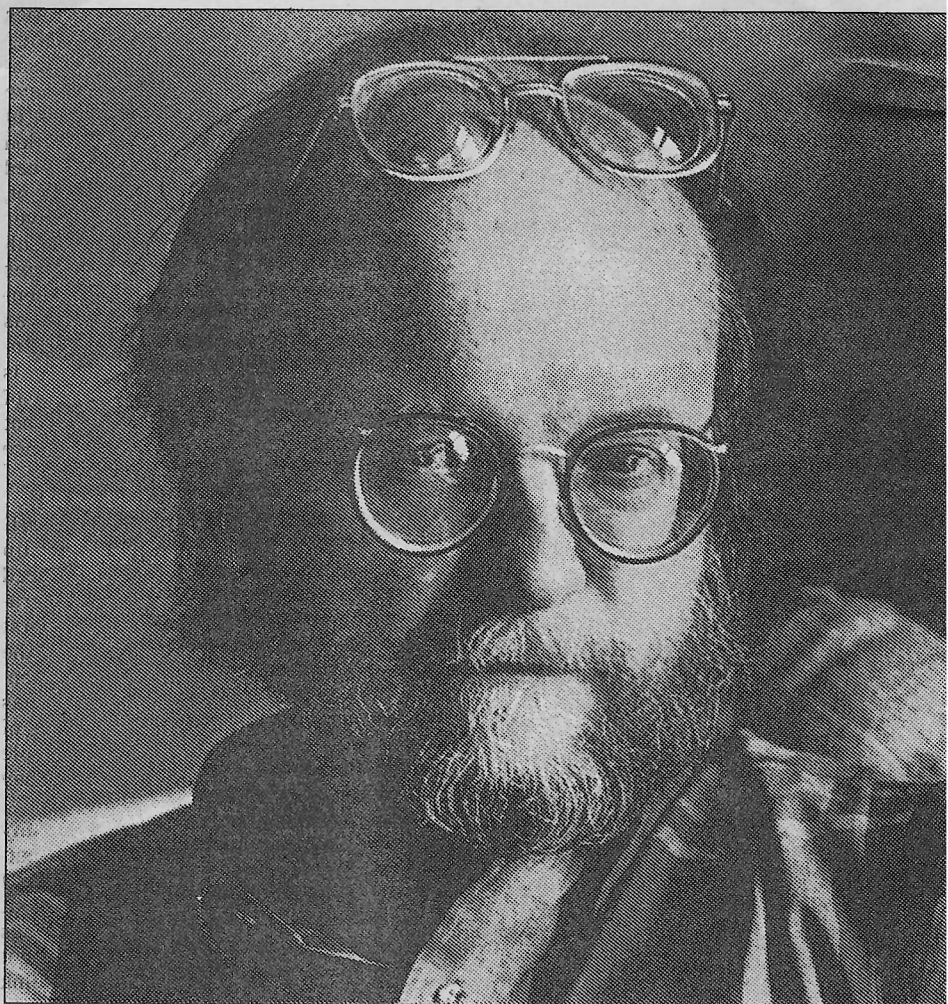
Serialism shored itself against these regressive tendencies. All elements of sound — rhythm, dynamic markings, note lengths and so forth — were now subject to a 12-step, nonrepeatable sequence, and ghosts of the past were banished. Anton Webern's remote, pointillistic miniatures became the preferred ideal. At a time when classical music flourished as a mass-media phenomenon — what might be called the Toscanini/Liberace era — the first Serialist compositions presented a counterculture of authentic strangeness.

ately results from dissonant clashes with neighboring tones. Ten minutes in, after waves of conflict and moments of repose, the central pitches ring out in a seemingly conclusive gesture. But a magical coda suddenly unfolds: Low tones on all three instruments establish shades of E Major, and the music moves with a sighing motion to five bell-like final chords. The ethereal consonance of the ending seems to echo Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time."

The other works on these CD's are, for the most part, similarly pragmatic and concise. The first disk includes more thickly textured pre-1980 compositions that might prove troublesome for dodecaphobes, but the second, devoted entirely to trios, is absorbing from beginning to end.

Mr. Wuorinen continues to resist anything resembling a full-fledged lyric line, although he comes close in the adagiolike breadth of his String Quartet No. 3, available on a New World recording. (These works all receive impassioned and expert advocacy from members of the Group for Contemporary Music, which Mr. Wuorinen founded in 1962.)

If Mr. Wuorinen's recent works are any guide, 12-tone composition is not quite ready to join the heap of history's utopian dreams. As contemporary music becomes a swirl of competing styles, dodecaphonic order will continue to exercise its spell. At its best, it supplies a cold grid on which fragments of warmer sound can be plotted. Or: a stern confessional for the sin of nostalgia.



Charles Wuorinen—His recent works habitually tug in tonal directions.

Anne Dow