

March 31, 1980

Aimless Major and Other Keys: Pauline Oliveros, Phill Niblock, Julius Eastman, Romulus Franceschini, Harold Budd

Some time ago, I devoted a column to 'The New Tonality' (Voice, October 16, 1978). I discussed Steve Reich, Frederic Rzewski, Brian Eno, David Behrman, Terry Riley, and others, and showed some of the ways in which such composers establish tonal centers in their modal music. Without ever departing from a basic scale, and without relying on traditional chord changes, it is quite possible to set up a tonal center or to shift between several tonal centers, and many composers now work that way. But since then, I have begun to notice a number of other new kinds of tonality and would like to define and label five of them. 'Social tonality' was demonstrated in a recent performance by Pauline Oliveros; 'slip-and-slide tonality' is perhaps unique to the music of Phill Niblock; 'slow-motion tonality' is what I think Julius Eastman is currently using; 'static-motif tonality' cropped up in a piano piece by Romulus Franceschini; and 'aimless major' seems to describe Harold Budd's approach.

Pauline Oliveros provided music for the Elaine Summers Dance Company as part of the series of performances of intermedia works at the Guggenheim this winter. For that evening, Oliveros stationed about a hundred singers all along the ramp that circles up to the top of the museum and provided them with a score which, like many Oliveros scores, is simply a set of instructions. The instructions for this 'tuning meditation' do not require individuals to sing specific pitches at specific times, but merely suggest how they should tune in with one another. During the 30 minutes or so in which massive choral sounds floated down to the floor, where the audience and dancers were, the music went through a fascinating array of tonal shifts. Often, a whole lot of singers would be attracted to one particular pitch, and that pitch would become established as a tonal center. But after a short time, or perhaps after a rather long time, some minority-group pitch would gain momentum, the consensus would shift to that note, and a lovely modulation would take place. Sometimes the music would waver between two or three dominating pitches. Sometimes I would sense that the singers on the top levels were hearing one tonal area while those on the lower levels were hearing another. Sometimes the music would settle quite solidly around one pitch. But everything that happened was purely the result of spontaneous social interaction among the singers.

Phill Niblock works with his own tuning systems. In most of his pieces, prerecorded instrumental pitches hover very close together in a restricted range, usually with live instrumentalists playing along. The volume is loud, the effect is

purely sonic, and one is not likely to think much about conventional music-theory-type questions, such as whether the music is tonal or atonal. In fact, I had been hearing Niblock's music work for several years without ever thinking much about such things. But at one of his concerts this winter, I found myself trying to hear tonal centers in his music, and I realized that they are very much present. Within the clusters that make up the sound, one pitch usually seems to dominate and provide a center of gravity, at least for a particular moment in a particular part of the room. But the situation is always changing. After a while the central pitch is likely to rise or fall very slightly, or the focal point may shift to another tone in another part of the room. In one way or another, the tonal center is always slipping and sliding just a little bit, and I now find this one of the most fascinating things about the music.

Julius Eastman's presentation at the Kitchen this season featured a work for two pianos. At first, Eastman and Joe Kubera played only one note. They played it in a fast rhythm, employing all octaves and lots of energy, but it was just one note. After a couple of minutes, a second note entered, sort of as an embellishment to the first one. Eventually, two more notes came in, which seemed to have a great affinity for each other, and which provided a different sort of tonal function. As new notes and new motifs gradually entered, I found it increasingly difficult to keep track of the original tonal center, and by the time we had moved 20 or 30 minutes into this hourlong piece, I had lost my bearings completely. But I was not disappointed. I was fascinated by the slow-motion modulations that were taking place, as well as by the relentless energy provided by the performers.

When Romulus Franceschini played his 'Omaggio a Satie' in a concert of music by Philadelphia composers last year, I found the piece quite attractive and a little puzzling. The materials were all dissonant, and yet they looped around one another in such a way that the music seemed settled and vaguely tonal. When I later acquired a copy of the score and spent a couple of hours dissecting its structure, I found that the piece is structured quite rationally. The 10-minute score is made out of 11 motifs, most of which consist simply of a couple of chords, and its overall structure simply involves restating these motifs in different sequences. The result is not repetitious enough to sound very repetitious and yet, since the motifs are never transposed or varied, there is a kind of predictability in the texture and a settled quality in the music. In a sense, these 11 different motifs are the 11 chords of a newly created tonal system. This is not a completely new technique. Numerous serial composers have sometimes allowed their music to become more stable by anchoring certain pitches to certain octaves, or even, on occasion, allowing exact repetitions. It seems to me, however, that Franceschini has moved much further in this direction, and that his static motifs have led him to a special

type of tonality, even though his actual materials are dissonant or 'atonal.' Harold Budd's Preludes are also piano pieces, and they also seem to have quite a bit to do with Satie. Budd played for about an hour at his recent Kitchen concert, improvising on precomposed piano textures that involved major-seventh chords and other harmonies I usually associate with cocktail lounges. But while cocktail lounge pianists follow prescribed changes and orient their music toward particular keys, Budd seems to forget all about key structure and just lets the music drift. Many of Satie's pieces do that, too, but while I sometimes feel Satie was simply trying to be as perversely un-Germanic as possible, Budd's motivations seem quite different. Despite the pop harmonic language and the super-pretty surface, I would say that this Californian composer is actually a fairly extreme minimalist. Essentially, he offers no mood changes, no color changes, no tempo changes, no virtuoso licks, no climaxes, no lyrics, and no references to familiar tunes, and even the harmonic changes can take a very long time. There is something poignant, even philosophical, about the intentional aimlessness of the music.

But 'aimless major' and my other categories must certainly make up an extremely incomplete picture. I suspect that tonal centers are being handled in quite a few additional ways, that many such techniques will not be well understood until their non-Western origins are tracked down, and that eventually those discussions about tonality and atonality and bitonality and pantonality and everything-else-tonality will have to be picked up and expanded.