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All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century, by John Rockwell

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John Rockwell, *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983. 286 pp. \$15.95.

Review by Jennifer Rycenga Plonsey

The publication of John Rockwell's *All American Music* this year was an important event in the history of contemporary music criticism. The book consists of an introduction and twenty short chapters, each on a different composer. Rockwell uses these twenty men and women to trace the development of contemporary music in the United States. Indeed, he delights in showing American music in all its native splendor — a constant melting pot of styles, schools, individuals, groups, commercial ventures, radical philosophies, and the time-honored “tradition” of experimentation. Rockwell already has established his critical reputation and audience through his work for the *New York Times*, but this book gives him a welcome opportunity to delineate his entire aesthetic system. The basic thesis — openness to musical eclecticism and acceptance of permanent changes in our musical environment — is what makes *All American Music* a seminal work. As he states in the introduction, there are people “for whom the seemingly radical presuppositions that underlie this book are already taken for granted,” and I believe this is especially true for the generations of musicians and listeners who've grown up with the media and popular arts surrounding them. But Rockwell's clear, enthusiastic enunciation of this position gives the book a special significance. By unabashedly embracing all interesting music, regardless of form or genre, he has legitimized a most exciting way of experiencing the music of our time, and he has given this viewpoint the prospect of wide consideration.

This book will definitely help those who wish to learn about modern music and enjoy it. I should stress that it is for everyone — musicians and lay people alike. Rockwell avoids technical language, and his descriptions of musical pieces and events are easily imagined by readers. But I must recommend listening to the music he discusses; a task made easier by the bibliography/discography, which includes all pieces mentioned in the text. Since over half the book concerns artists whom one would classify as “avant-garde,” their music really needs to be heard to be understood. Although Rockwell admits that

his book is for "everyone who enjoys thinking about music," he would certainly encourage active, attentive listening as well.

All American Music also has the advantage of being cast in a highly readable form. Each chapter is self-contained, and there is no narrative requiring a strict "cover-to-cover" reading. There is a chronological bias, and the overtly "non-classical" artists are all located at the end of the volume, but this does not reflect a prejudice on the author's part. Rockwell anticipates one obvious criticism by confessing that his choice of musicians is arbitrary, and based more on the importance of the composer and his school than on the author's subjective admiration for their music. Also, many of the major figures not included as chapter subjects are mentioned prominently in the text. *All American Music* is an equal opportunity book, and every genre that values composition, including rock, jazz, Broadway, and Latin music, is included.

One of Rockwell's strongest points is his understanding of the guiding philosophies of the different schools of composition. He seems to have spent time with individual composers and musicians, trying to see how their music, lifestyle, and beliefs interact. He includes, wherever possible, quotations from the composers' own essays, interviews, and books; this technique is especially helpful in the chapter on John Cage, which often seems to be heading towards a glibly negative assessment only to be rescued by almost two pages of the composer's aphorisms. Rockwell is never a completely objective critic, and no artist is considered without being evaluated, sometimes quite harshly. Still, the music is the concern here, and I feel that Rockwell has done his best to examine even those pieces which he does not like in the spirit of tolerance and diversity which he recommends.

Some of the issues raised in the book are left unanswered. Rockwell never addresses the critical problems involved in an all-pervasive eclecticism, and the definitive judgments he chooses to make seem curt (he avoids this fault when he couches his criticism in the form of open questions). Similarly in his discussion of the benefits of rugged individualism vs. the centering effects of a musical "capital," I find his conclusions inadequate and indicative of a New York City chauvinism. Also, I found myself wondering at his reasons

for leaving European composers in a peripheral role. The nationalism of the book is an accepted premise, but he ignores European influences and reactions in a way that smacks of musical isolationism. Improved communications and mass media have not only brought popular arts to a greater audience than ever before; they have also helped to erase national boundaries in the arts world. Many of the composers in this book have spent large periods of time abroad — teaching, studying, and making their reputations. This has long been the case for jazz, but Rockwell fails to draw out the ramifications of the situation. Many American musicians start to feel “homeless” and cease to worry about pleasing the critics, their colleagues, and even, in extreme cases, their audiences. The result is certainly well documented in *All American Music*: a bright, creative avant-garde, a healthy mix of styles, and a self-reliance on the part of composers. But I see this as a result of tensions between European aesthetics and modern Western lifestyles, not as an indigenous part of American art.

Rockwell treats the “loner vs. capital” issue in almost every chapter. It is a fact that many American artists in all fields have enjoyed working in solitude — something which is perhaps physically difficult in Europe. But it is equally difficult to do in New York City, the capital Rockwell establishes for contemporary music. The disadvantages of working under the glare of publicity are clear to him, but he defends the recent work of Philip Glass and David DelTredici, which seems to many critics (including this reviewer) to suffer from sloppy, fast workmanship and a desire not to risk losing old fans while making inroads with more traditionally-oriented audiences — in other words, compromising and selling out. Rockwell has no trouble hearing the tired clichés of the serialists like Babbitt and Krenek, but he does not make the same judgments on more pleasant sounding composers like Glass or Robert Ashley. I think that the attraction of formerly independent composers — Ashley and Laurie Anderson come immediately to mind — to New York is a detriment to all concerned: the composers, their former locations, and even to the City itself, which tends to over-commercialize and “market” new music, searching for gimmicks and the latest trends. The true independents of the book — John Cage, Ralph Shapey, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Neil Young — always astound me with the range and diversity of their music, which never seems to become

predictable or cliché-ridden. If living in any other city than New York constitutes “loner” status, then we can only hope for more loners, who will enrich their respective cities and states with original music. Once again, the modern world does not preclude contact with other artists in other cities, and Rockwell tacitly admits this when he praises Ralph Shapey (a dedicated “second-city” man) for maintaining ties with important visual artists in New York.

Criticism of eclecticism raises a philosophical issue — how does one judge in an atmosphere of tolerance? Rockwell never tackles this problem directly, but like most tolerant people, he can tolerate anything but intolerance, and makes his sharpest criticisms against those who would dogmatize about how music *must* be. His own credo on the subject appears in the introduction where he says “There are those who will never accept the notion that Neil Young can be discussed alongside Elliott Carter, or vice-versa. But he *can* be; I do it, here.” That final sentence has been seen as comically oversimplistic and somewhat arrogant, but it expresses the message of the book admirably. Still, it is best to conclude that *All American Music* is primarily an informational tool, which is certainly necessary before a solid ground for judging this music can be established. As I mentioned earlier, Rockwell is on stronger ground in describing these artists, their way of life, and their music, than he is in his judgments, and I would advise listeners to make up their own mind, using Rockwell’s book as a spur to their curiosity.

One more area where I find fault with the book is in dealing with lyrics and texts. Especially with the Talking Heads and Robert Ashley, I feel that Rockwell has simply missed the point, which is, in both cases, a highly stylized poetic critique of modern American life and values. But Rockwell’s analysis of the music is insightful and since he does not attempt any grand theories about the connection between words and music, his weakness with lyrics does not substantially harm the book.

There is a problem with criticizing so fine an effort, since the last thing I would want to do is discourage anyone from reading *All American Music*. So many of the composers and groups he covers are, only too often, summarily dismissed by the music press, so any open-minded writings on them are appreciated. But this book is more

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than open-minded; it is graced by an enthusiasm that is genuine. The reader is drawn into Rockwell's chapters by the sheer joy of his writing. Even with those composers he does not prefer, his enjoyment in exploring their music and its cultural effects comes through. When he leaves the reader with questions about a composer or a style, he has done his job to the utmost — sparking the synthesis of thought and appreciative listening that a responsible listener undertakes and that great composers demand. With the exception of the opening chapter on Krenek, I don't believe that any of these sketches would fail to whet the readers' appetite for the real music.

At one point, Rockwell compares America to “a nation of Moussorgskys — raw genius (rather) than craftsmanship.” It is an important point, and one that Rockwell is happy to stress: America produces truly *new* music, without an insistence on refinement. It may not always be music that is easy to understand or listen to, but with critics like Rockwell willing to support it, we can only look forward to more fresh and startling growth in American music.