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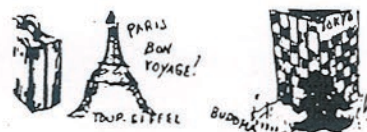
*Highlighted in this issue:
American composers who
are anchoring their careers
in Europe -- first in a series
of reports -- 11*

Gloria Coates
(above) now
makes her mark
in Germany, while
Mardi-Ellen Hill
(center) pursues
her operatic dreams
in Paris, France.
Bruce Stark
(below) finds his
creative soul
nurtured by the
peace and quiet
of Tokyo sanctu-
aries.



*Also in this issue:
Honoring Otto Luening at 95 - pg. 4
Sensory overload at Avery Fisher - 9
MMC Recordings quietly
comes on the scene - 14
Opus One celebrates the organ - 15*





"OVER THERE"



Major issues now face the careers of composers and performers as we reach the 21st century, a century looming largely as the age of global enterprise. Europe, especially Western and Central Europe, was once an important factor in the careers of serious musicians, but in a different way than now. A century ago, a MacDowell, a Herbert, a Griffes were obliged to study abroad to attain the proper credentials regardless of how well grounded was their training in the States. Later, even that singularly homegrown phenomenon, George Gershwin, longed to give his name genuine eminence and his craft the utmost polish through studies with the prestigious Maurice Ravel. (Ravel's famous remark still stands as the ultimate lefthanded compliment: "Why do you want to be a second-rate Ravel, when you are already a first-rate Gershwin?") It was only when Copland, Thomson and others made another French connection, with the iconic Nadia Boulanger, that Americans saw Europe as the springboard for a true American music.

Mlle. Boulanger nourished at least three generations of American composers, and some would argue, she was the force behind our rise to world leadership in musical training and education. The U.S. now has the best trained musicians and probably more professionals who call themselves composers than any nation in history. And yet the hard truth is we are not a society that embraces our most gifted musical figures, unless one speaks of a Frank Zappa or a Michael Jackson or even, to a lesser degree, a Philip Glass, who are as much successful merchants as they are creative figures. Generally, outside the pop music field, one almost always had to have academic or, perhaps, media credentials to survive. (Aaron Copland was a notable exception, though he did assume an important teaching position at Tanglewood long after gaining the epithet "Dean of American composers.")

In recent years, a number of American composers have been seen to drift abroad again in significant numbers, not merely to study or to take sabbaticals, but to stay. Observers are beginning to see this condition as a trend, and so we pose the question of why Americans are finding their way overseas once more? Are they searching for their roots? Are there more lucrative positions abroad? Is their work better appreciated? Is the general historical/ aesthetic climate over there more conducive to a richer productivity? These are questions we explore in a series of reports from American music professionals who we have found to be articulate and forthright about their lives in adopted cultures. We begin here with the French connection.

Award-winning composer **Mardi-Ellen Hill** (born 1958 New York City) is not the first American artist to discover and fall in love with the city of Paris but among the very few to celebrate that and other European cities' histories as part of a major work. Her oeuvre, a full-length opera called *Vaugirard, Odette's Ascent*, is a complex endeavor with many overtones and so defies easy description. She discussed the work in a recent interview with Palmer Poroner.

Palmer Poroner: *Mardi-Ellen Hill, in our present society, in the U.S. and here in New York, we are bombarded for reasons political and social with the need to 'make up' for the 'excesses' of the past. We are told how necessary it is to recognize our multi-cultural roots. We are obliged to remember a broader range of culture which we have inherited, rather than simply the 'European,' which is now somehow alien to the spirit of our age. This new era is maybe far too narrow if it ignores the mainstream of our tradition. So much of this opinion has prevailed that one wonders whether artists still recall our main heritage, the democratic spirit and the rational mind of the West.*

Hill: *As a musical composer, I do indeed remember. My opera virtually surrounds you with our heritage in all its manifestations, as the mirror of centuries of Western culture. The work is global, including references to Africa and Asia, but its focus is on the West.*

P.P.: *You glory in the West's many diverse qualities, you celebrate its glamour and triumphs throughout your new opera.*



Hill with Palmer Poroner at Steinway Hall, June 1993.
The work-in-progress is unveiled.

Hill: *I express the heritage in every aspect of life. I praise it in poetry, dance, singing, story-telling, costumes, acting... it is there, in personal moods and struggles, family hatred, anger, undying love, aloofness, pride... in the adventures of mythology of the classic time, 17th century Florence, with the Elizabethan choral idea, as well as the great 19th century scientific development.*

P.P.: *How do you manage to keep all of this together and make sense and music of it?*

Hill: *The breadth of my theme is what unifies the many threads. I put down a grid of the city of Paris, the central line being the rue de Vaugirard, the longest street in Paris and the 'trunk of the tree' of the old Paris, its 'Broadway.' The street begins in view of the Pantheon, by the University*

Palmer Poroner, art critic and publisher of the international art magazine *Artspeak* (Artliaison on the Internet) for 16 years, also writes on social and economic subjects. During the years he spent in Paris he once resided on the rue de Vaugirard just opposite the Luxembourg Gardens.

of Paris and the Boulevard St. Michel, proceeds along the Luxembourg Gardens and the 17th century Luxembourg Palace, crosses the Boulevard Raspail, passes through four arrondissements and goes near the present Chamber of Deputies and the Eiffel Tower. All the greatness of Paris, of France, of Europe, passes by us. That is one of the reasons the opera is titled 'Vaugirard, Odette's Ascent,' since it includes all of this in direct or indirect allusion.

The main theme unifies the work. It's the theme of Rae (after the middle name of three women of different generations) which is the mother theme, a lullaby or child's tune. This developing motive traverses the entire opera by building up to powerfully dramatic ensembles, such as at the end of Act II. The initial melody expands upon itself, variation upon variation, until the penultimate scene, where the wedding of all the variations occurs in a dramatic tableau called 'Rae's Round Table,' at the Luxembourg Gardens.

P.P.: How can you include this in an opera placed in the present day?

Hill: It is true that I present concrete scenes of today. Take for instance the story of the Holy Grail, where I use one of the great themes of the middle ages. The music that I create carries us forward into the present while I employ flashbacks of the plot to transcend time. I convert action images into music of abstract form.

P.P.: You continually use metaphor and allusion as you travel back and forth in time. The mystery of 'Vaugirard, Odette's Ascent' is in its enigmatic, diaphanous mystical vision.

Hill: Another example lies almost opposite the Luxembourg Palace, along the rue de Vaugirard, the Place Paul Claudel. I allude to this poet's "Symphonic Odes" and the chaotic turbulent history of his own family in my opera, especially in the cataclysmic opening scene.

P.P.: How is it that this notable street is not so world famous?

Hill: The tourist Paris came later, and the modern Paris we know as the City of Light is united by its Grand Boulevards, a new grid placed over the old by the great city planner Baron Haussmann. In a like manner, the rue de Vaugirard, which crosses some boulevards, unites the areas. I mirror these connections in the orchestration by using the bell sounds of different churches in the surrounding environs to signal the passage of each generation. All the bells are delivered (heard) en masse in an eerie final act.

P.P.: What roles are given to the different characters of the play?

Hill: On the personal level, this opera is unified by the progress of Odette, 'Odette's Ascent', as it traces the story of two prominent rival families, the originally English Protestant Anciennes and the French Catholic Dutrois, who

stemmed from the same family and somehow -- I don't want to give the mystery away -- unite again in the child, Odette Rae. Here's a clue: She's descended from the royal blood of the first Frankish dynasty, the Merovingians, a clan thought to be of Judaic roots.

P.P.: And this raises the question of you personally. How did you happen to pick France as the other country in this international tableau? You are a native New Yorker.

Hill: From an early age, I was intrigued by the sounds and rhythms of spoken French. Also, French is another language and, like music, another expression, and it forces one to think in another way, in the purpose and manner of thinking of the French people. I went to Paris in 1986 on a fellowship and stayed there a year. I found that I also responded to their architecture, their ambience and way of life, and more.

P.P.: And you've gone there since?

Hill: When I'm on the move, France is a good destination. I have returned often.

P.P.: Would you say a person is truly international who has a home in two countries?

Hill: Absolutely. Also, I traveled in France and found I have an affinity for taking railroad trains, because I hate automobiles. Paris is a city which has become home. However, unlike New York, it has no family ties and the memory of those obligations. Also, I hear music differently in Paris. I picture Paris differently, in its own special order, the visualization of a thing or the architecture of a place, how it is ordered and reordered. I can express it in a musical way. It helps me to write music.

P.P.: How would you describe the kind of music you compose?

Hill: It's contemporary. It makes use of new developments in music, yet it remains within a formal tradition. I've been told it has a mellifluous quality making it very singable.

P.P.: How would you compare the music scene in Paris to that of New York?

Hill: People are always interested in hearing of work from other countries. While there is less recognition or sympathy from other places, there can also be a fascination for new ideas. It's a risky business, but it can be rewarding.

P.P.: Where is it more difficult to have success -- in Paris or New York?

Hill: For me, they seem to alternate one with the other. Success in one place helps toward success in another. Fortunately, my agent, Michael Mushalla of Columbia Artists, is international and has been very good.

P.P.: What do you think makes you unique among your musical colleagues?

Hill: I enjoy the challenge of writing all parts of an opera, a

complete story, a libretto, the music and the orchestration. I did this for my opera more or less at the same time. Of course, the nature of the work lent itself to this.

One has to set this story to music because the music brings to it another dimension. Thus the opera includes time, and then the music transforms the experience from one time and place to another.

P.P.: Who else is able to work today in such a major medium, or mediums?

Hill: There must be very few. Opera is all-encompassing, larger than life, and it requires a major theme. One must be immersed in several media, poetry, ballet, etc., over a span of years and have the ability to construct a giant edifice. Opera is too large a form to compose during a one- or two-year scholarship. I was able to combine all the elements together over a nine-year span.

P.P.: And you show the talent to create this in each medium and form. I congratulate you in doing a work that is always alive and stimulating.

[Ms. Hill's many supporters include the National Endowment for the Arts, Arts International, the Guggenheim Foundation, SNCF, Banque Nationale de Paris, Royal Bank of Canada, U.S. French Cultural Services, the Canadian Consulate General and the Groupe Musiques Vivantes de Lyons. Her works have been commissioned and performed throughout the U.S. and Europe. Her first large work for the stage was premiered in Stockholm in 1985. She comes to the world of opera with performance degrees in both keyboard and voice.]

Queries may be made to Mr. Michael Mushalla, Vice President, Columbia Artists Management. Telephone: (212) 841-9533. Fax: (212) 841-9712.

TMC will continue to follow the progress of "Vaugirard" in forthcoming issues.]

If Mardi-Ellen Hill radiates an unfettered sense of fascination for things French, and particularly Parisian, Noel Lee (born ca. 1925 Lafayette, Ind.) is one expatriate living in Paris who speaks from another vantage point. His particular French connection goes back almost 50 years when, following service in World War II, he came to study with (and be much praised by) Nadia Boulanger. "After living off scholarships and the G.I. Bill for three or four years, I deemed it impractical to leave a city I knew better than any U.S. city. . . Here it seemed easier to be independent, 'free-lance,' to build a career. . . and avoid the necessity of being connected with an institution." Lee went on to compose much, receiving many prizes and attention from others, among them, Aaron Copland, who called his "musical discourse always lucid and reasoned."

But his career as a pianist has been his chief claim to fame. He has toured on six continents, has made 180 recordings in Europe of which 13 received the envied Grand Prix du Disque, has made the first ever complete recording of Schubert's piano sonatas, has built up an awesome repertoire of 20th century music and has been in demand as



a visiting professor at U.S. colleges. He also leads workshops in chamber music and the vocal literature, as well as piano.

Lee, who has a keen awareness of the power of the performer in musical circles today, speaks far more cautiously about the role of composers. "After all these years [in Europe], a performing musician is accepted permanently no matter what passport he has -- which would probably not be the

case in the U.S. . . In recent years, given the dwindling of opportunities for presenting new music, plus a restrictive and partisan definition of what is contemporary, a composer is classified according to tendency, as well as nationality, and will be left unperformed if he doesn't fit into the 'norm' as determined by those in musical power."

This state of affairs appears to be reflected in a listing of other Americans now working in Paris who are known to Lee. Only one of the seven he mentions, Jeff Cohen, is billed as a composer. The others, including the well-known William Christie (of Les Arts Florissants fame) are principally successful performers. (Not cited is Tom Johnson, whose *Four Note Opera* was recently produced by the Center for Contemporary Opera.)

In the next issue of TMC, we'll see how American musicians are faring in other countries, and not necessarily those in Europe.
B.L.C.

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