›Profile‹

»Glenn Branca«

In July 1982, John Cage was uncharacteristically vexed. The composer was attending the New Music America festival, taking place that year in Chicago. In conversation with the Belgian composer Wim Mertens, the topic turned to the previous evening's performance of Glenn Branca's *Indeterminate Activity of Resultant Masses*, a piece for 10 electric guitars and drums, which Cage professed to not having enjoyed.

'It wasn't because it was so loud, because I can put up with the loudness,' he complained. 'The Branca is an example of sheer determination of one person to be followed by the others. It was not of a shepherd taking care of the sheep, but of a leader insisting that people agree with him, giving them no freedom whatsoever.' He continued: 'I don't think that the image of that power and intention and determination would make a society that I would want to continue living in.' Cage went on to compare Branca to Wagner, whom he disliked for his use of sustained climaxes, adding the stinging comment, 'No intelligence is suggested. Only power and energy.'

The fact that Cage's dismissal was later included on the 2007 release of *Indeterminate Activity of Resultant Masses* suggests that Branca wasn't overly disheartened by the episode. In Cage's centenary year and with Branca no longer the new upstart rejecting the radical paths explored by post-war composers such as Cage, the world of contemporary music is large enough to accommodate both Cagean detachment from emotion and embrace of indeterminacy, and Branca's controlled dynamism, intensity and, yes, forcefully determined intelligence.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1948, Branca originally studied theatre and co-founded the experimental Bastard Theater company in the mid-70s, before moving to New York in 1976, where he played guitar in the No Wave bands Theoretical Girls and The Static. Both groups exhibited a taut, wiry and austerely gritty sound, foreshadowing later solo compositions. His first release under his own name was *Lesson No. 1* (1980). If the playing ensemble still resembled a rock band, with two guitars, bass, drums and organ (with the addition of Harry Spitz on sledgehammer on the second work, *Dissonance*), then its harnessing of chiselled, cleanly picked repetitive rhythms to a surging, harmonious momentum was more reminiscent of Reich and Riley.

Given Branca's position in the midst of New York's downtown scene at the time, the common ground between his early compositions and the music of contemporaries such as Sonic Youth and Swans is unsurprising. Indeed, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo and Swans leader Michael Gira have all played in his ensemble, although it would be simplistic to assume that the influence only flowed one way in what was such a famously fertile artistic environment.

As the 80s progressed, Branca's ensemble grew, as did his compositional ambition: with *Symphony No 3 (Gloria)* (1983) he began more systematically exploring the harmonic series – the myriad vibrating overtones produced above the fundamental pitch of anything other than a pure sine wave. Subtitled *Music for the first 127 intervals of the harmonic series*, the symphony opened with slowly ascending groups of sustained tones, simultaneously both harmonious and dissonant. As a slow but powerful drum rhythm propels the movement towards a sustained, yet fervent climax, it becomes apparent that Branca's music may indeed be forceful and overwhelming, but rather than crushing listeners under the crashing waves of his will, the composer is inviting them to join him in surfing its transcendent peaks.

Branca eventually tired of the harmonic series, but *Gloria* is also notable for showcasing a move beyond the traditional techniques of the electric guitar, making use of custom-designed instruments which were played horizontally, often using mallets to strike the strings, and with a third bridge added to increase the range of overtones. A greater leap in instrumentation occurred with *Symphony No. 7* (1989), which found Branca writing for a traditional orchestra. Since then, he has written for ensembles, soloists, duets and for voice, whilst the works in progress section of his website promises future pieces for 20 percussion instruments, for 100 violins and one, tantalisingly, for 'primitive analogues of conventional instruments'.

And still the guitars keep gathering. A piece commissioned by the French government to celebrate the millennium that would have involved an ensemble of 2,000 guitars never came to fruition, but the following year saw the arrival of *Symphony No. 13 (Hallucination City)*, a work for 100 electric guitars (80 open-tuned guitars and 20 basses, plus a drummer). The work not only amplifies the energy of Branca's music to thunderous levels, but the scale of presenting each performance lends it an imprecise nature, the air thick with the overtones from thousands of vibrating strings all clashing and combining in unpredictable style.

Even so, one senses that Cage would have not been pleased. Yet even given his ideological opposition to Branca's music, he couldn't deny the impact of Branca's music in performance. As he told Mertens: 'I found that my knees were weak after that experience. I had trouble standing. It was like when the sun is very bright and it hits your eyes by hitting a building at a particular angle. You see a bright light coming to you.'

© Abi Bliss