

Meyer Kupferman Biography

In 1942, Virgil Thomson reviewed a concert of student works at the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. He thought that the concert's quality presaged well for the future of American music, but that the student composers were structurally and harmonically conservative. He wrote, "The farthest any piece strayed from mid-nineteenth-century harmonic syntax was the moderate but wholly neat and charming French impressionism of Mr. Meyer Kupferman's Wind Sextet." This was the first notice in print that the sixteen-year-old Kupferman received. He would go on to create a gigantic literature of chamber and orchestral works. Moreover, he would continue his precocious defiance of what Thomson called "the basic musical language of educated America." Stylistically, Meyer Kupferman's music covers a vast range. The only common characteristic of Kupferman's output has been the expressive exuberance never far from the surface of even his most abstract works.

Kupferman enrolled at Queens College after high school, but left without completing a degree. Formal education held little appeal for the young jazz clarinetist. When he wasn't playing in New York City clubs and writing jazz arrangements for himself and his friends, he continued to write concert music and to study the works of his favorite composers on his own. Later on, the early importance of jazz in his life would have an enormous influence on his personal musical style, as would the still earlier influence of his immigrant father's folk tunes from Eastern Europe.

Early in his career, however, he wrote music consciously distant from these popular roots, but possessing an immediacy and directness that earned him notice. His most popularly enduring work from this time is the short, frenetic *Ostinato Burlesco*. The piece, which exists in a number of different orchestral and solo piano versions, has been described variously as "a brash send-up of Bartok's famous *Allegro Barbaro*" (Lehman, American Record Guide) and as "Bernstein on turbo" (Barnett, Classical Music Web). His first opera, a playful one-act setting of a text by Gertrude Stein called *In A Garden* (1948), attracted a great deal of attention, leading to a teaching position at Sarah Lawrence College in 1951 for its composer. Overall, the reception of Meyer Kupferman's early works may be summed up by the remarks of William Moortz of the Louisville Courier-Journal. Reporting on the premiere of the *Fourth Symphony* by the Louisville Orchestra in 1956, Moortz wrote, "[Kupferman's] star is still rising on the American musical scene. Kupferman is a composer who demands unusual concentration from his listeners and writes with impressive technical polish."

Throughout the 50's, the composer developed his interest in serial techniques in ways characteristically non-academic. Reminiscing during an interview in February of 1999, he remarked, "[W]hen I got to the 12-tone idea, which fascinated me, I was not classical about it and didn't feel that I had to do it Schoenberg's way. The reason was that, being self-taught, I didn't know what Schoenberg's way was." Kupferman devised new pitch ordering systems based on the 12-tone concept for works such as the *Chamber Symphony*, a piece based on a firmly reinforced tone center that shifts regularly while progressing through the tone row.

But Kupferman's interest in jazz inspired him to address what he saw as a common weakness in the 12-tone music of his day. He remarked in a 2001 interview, "I was feeling the impact of slow music on the current, contemporary scene. It seemed to me that the physical rhythm of

music had gone by the wayside, and that audiences were very restless because they were hearing very complex serial rhythms that moved in static bursts.” The idea led to the *Sonata on Jazz Elements* (1958), a 12-tone, jazz-classical piano work in classical sonata form. Eric Salzman, reviewing the sonata for the New York Times, said:

... [T]he idea of mixing a little jazz with a long-hair concert piece has tempted many, but few have succeeded in getting the combination to work.

Meyer Kupferman did and in his 'Sonata on Jazz Elements' he has worked out certain parallels between some advanced jazz sounds and a good, fat contemporary composing technique.

This is not jazz proper nor is it meant to be. Its sounds and lines are illuminated by the jazz experience and filled with an expressive tension between the layer of jazz ideas and the 'serious' constructive fundamentals. Big, many voiced harmonic sounds and a sense of forward impulse help out the imaginative combination of elements.

Kupferman continued to write jazz-classical works with great success throughout his career. In 1963, the State Department commissioned a *Jazz String Quartet*, which was played at the Johnson White House by the Claremont String Quartet. The Claremont also toured with it, as did the Kronos Quartet some time later. The Hudson Valley Philharmonic commissioned and premiered a *Jazz Symphony* in 1988 to celebrate the bicentennial of the Constitution, and the clarinet solo *Moonflowers, Baby!* (1986) was described by Bernard Holland in the New York Times as "full of charm and cleverness, one of the finest 'third stream' pieces this writer has encountered. Hints of blues and jazz fly by ..., their earthiness and grace hinted at deftly in a context far more precisely plotted and complexly argued than most jazz improvisations can be."

Meanwhile, Kupferman's 12-tone technique evolved further as he sought a way to convey his characteristic emotional exuberance using the serial technique. In 1961, he conspired with flautist Samuel Baron to compose a 2-hour solo work for Baron to perform as a single concert. The work, *Infinites One*, was based on a single 12-tone row that Kupferman would use repeatedly for the rest of his career. He decided that a tone row, if heard in multiple works, would gradually reveal more of itself both to the audience and to the composer. The Infinites row (G, F, A-flat, C-flat, B-flat, D, F-sharp, E, C, E-flat, A, C-sharp) became the basis for more than 30 works, from short solos to a lengthy opera. Kupferman also used it in dozens of other works, many of them not strictly atonal, until the row had become a core component of his musical vocabulary.

In addition to jazz, atonality and the Romanian folk tunes he learned from his father, Kupferman experimented with many other musical ideas during the 70's, including visual scores, aleatoric and improvisatory elements and the combination of pre-recorded tape with live performance. By the 80's, he seldom conceptualized a work that could easily be described as one kind or another. He recognized the mixed voice as its own aesthetic and dubbed it "gestalt". A "gestalt" work is not structurally straightforward, but full of contrasting moods. Themes and motifs do not receive linear progressive treatment, but contribute to a set of resonant echoes within the overall flow. A

“gestalt” work is perceived by the listener on two levels. First, there is a moment by moment progression of moods, sometimes startling by contrast, but always emotionally convincing. The second level, by contrast, does not unfold linearly in time. Instead, structural elements build connections throughout the course of the work, leaving an overall impression that comes together in the mind of the listener when the piece is complete. In an interview in 1992, Kupferman said:

For years now, I've been bringing into close, even conflicting proximity, musical styles that normally are polarized by time, culture, common practice, philosophy, and geographical distance.

In short, I like to mix things that normally don't mix. It's a bit like walking down Broadway, or riding the subways of New York. There's a sort of a mix of love and hate, fears, joys, and tragic components, all mingled in the sights and sounds around you. I think that because I'm a New Yorker, I have this sense of what can happen in a very tiny area between all of these unmixable elements.

The total output of Meyer Kupferman includes several operas, dozens of songs, tens of orchestra works, a few string quartets and woodwind quintets, dozens of solo works and a few hundred chamber works. This enormous oeuvre, perceived as a whole, can be said to exemplify the gestalt idea. Anyone who picks twenty works at random will see contrasting stylistic elements, but the essential Kupferman will emerge – big, emotional, humorous and grand. Throughout his career, he followed expression and meaning wherever it led musically, without regard for promoting a consistent image. "The fact that stylistic signatures seem to have become so overwhelmingly essential to composers today has troubled me since the late 1940's," he wrote in a letter to the New York Times in 1988. "[A]ny great leap forward, any revolutionary stylistic change by a gifted composer will certainly be absorbed in time and accepted by his listeners." Serialism, tonality, neoclassicism, minimalism, total serialism, aleatory – as the debates about form and harmony raged, Kupferman refused to accept assignment to a particular camp and gleefully adapted any techniques that suited him.

Virgil Thomson's offhand comment about the high school composer proved to be prophetic. And if the young Kupferman was precocious in defying conservative romanticism in 1942, the mature Kupferman was predictive in disowning all of the strict ideologies of the middle and late 20th century. It is early to be certain of a trend, but, so far, 21st century musical thought has shown a desire to emulate the diversity that is drawn so vigorously in the music of Meyer Kupferman.

- JoyEllen Snellgrove