

Note: I have a degree in music theory and from 1984-1986 I worked as a music reviewer, columnist and feature writer for the Bloomington Herald-Telephone in Bloomington, IN. Sometimes, while interviewing the composer-of-the-week about an upcoming concert, I got a little tired of the posturing that seemed to go hand in hand with contemporary composition. One day, I snapped and the column below was the result.

In a weird synchrony, the day after I scanned this into my computer I heard a piece on NPR about a "sub-minimalist" composer, Simon Fluegel—who has written a piece called B-Flat that features various instruments playing. . .well, B flat. NPR called it a "daring new aesthetic." Some things never change.

A Dream That Was All Too Real

Maybe it's the late hours. Music reviewers never seem to get enough sleep. But I had a dream the other night and in it I was interviewing a composer who had arrived in Bloomington for the premiere of his new composition.

"What's the name of your composition?" I asked, just to get things rolling.

He beamed back at me. "I call it Alpha-Omega for pan-pipe, horns, percussion, wazoo and string orchestra. It's a tone poem reflecting the creation of the universe, the evolution of life upon earth, man's emergence and struggle with his environment, and the dangers of nuclear war."

"How long does it last?" I couldn't help but ask.

"About 14 minutes. It's very concentrated. There are four different one-note motifs and these are used in inversion, retrograde inversion, augmentation, diminution, canonic imitation, multiplication and division."

"Sounds complicated," I said.

"It's very difficult both for the performer and the listener. I'm afraid the musicians will have a hard time playing it correctly. Actually about a third of the notes are not possible on the instruments they are written for, but I did that intentionally. Man has always struggled against impossible odds, and it is only fitting that in this work the musicians do the same. I'm sure that if they practice long enough they'll be able to get it."

"And what do you think the audience reaction will be?"

"Oh, they'll hate it." He shrugged philosophically. "But what do you expect? Beethoven and Mozart weren't appreciated in their day. Modern audiences are musical reactionaries. They expect a composer to pamper them with melody and harmony, with tension and release, with some form of beauty. But all that went out eons ago. What's important today is to have a solid intellectual content and an interesting texture."

He cleared his throat and I could tell he'd given this speech before.

"Modern music," he continued, "has finally progressed to the point that a composer can do anything he wants to, but most people are still hung up on beauty. Who said art has to be beautiful anyway? People don't realize it is their duty to support and love these profound works we are creating whether they like them or not."

"Tell me," I said quickly, for he looked as if he could go on for some time, "what would you like us to know about Alpha-Omega?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, as you know, the universe started with a big bang. How do you think that could be approached musically?"

"Ummm." I considered it. "Blow up the orchestra?"

He gave me a scathing look. "I'm not a gimmick composer," he said icily. "No, my approach is so simple it's pure genius. Alpha-Omega begins with a pan-pipe solo. The pan-

pipe, which in my composition represents man's earliest attempts at music, is silent just as the cosmos was silent before the explosion that blasted our universe into existence."

"You mean the pan-pipe solo is nothing? It's silence?" I stared him for a moment. "Didn't John Cage already do that?"

He waved a hand in dismissal. "Oh Cage, yeah, he did something similar. But he used a *piano* for silence. I use a pan-pipe for mine."

He talked on for some time, but I lost track of what he was saying. I drifted back to that reviewer's dreamland where all the concerts are electrifying and all the reviews are raves. Only in the morning did I remember Alpha-Omega and its metaphysical creator. But was it really a dream? Something in that interview seemed all too familiar