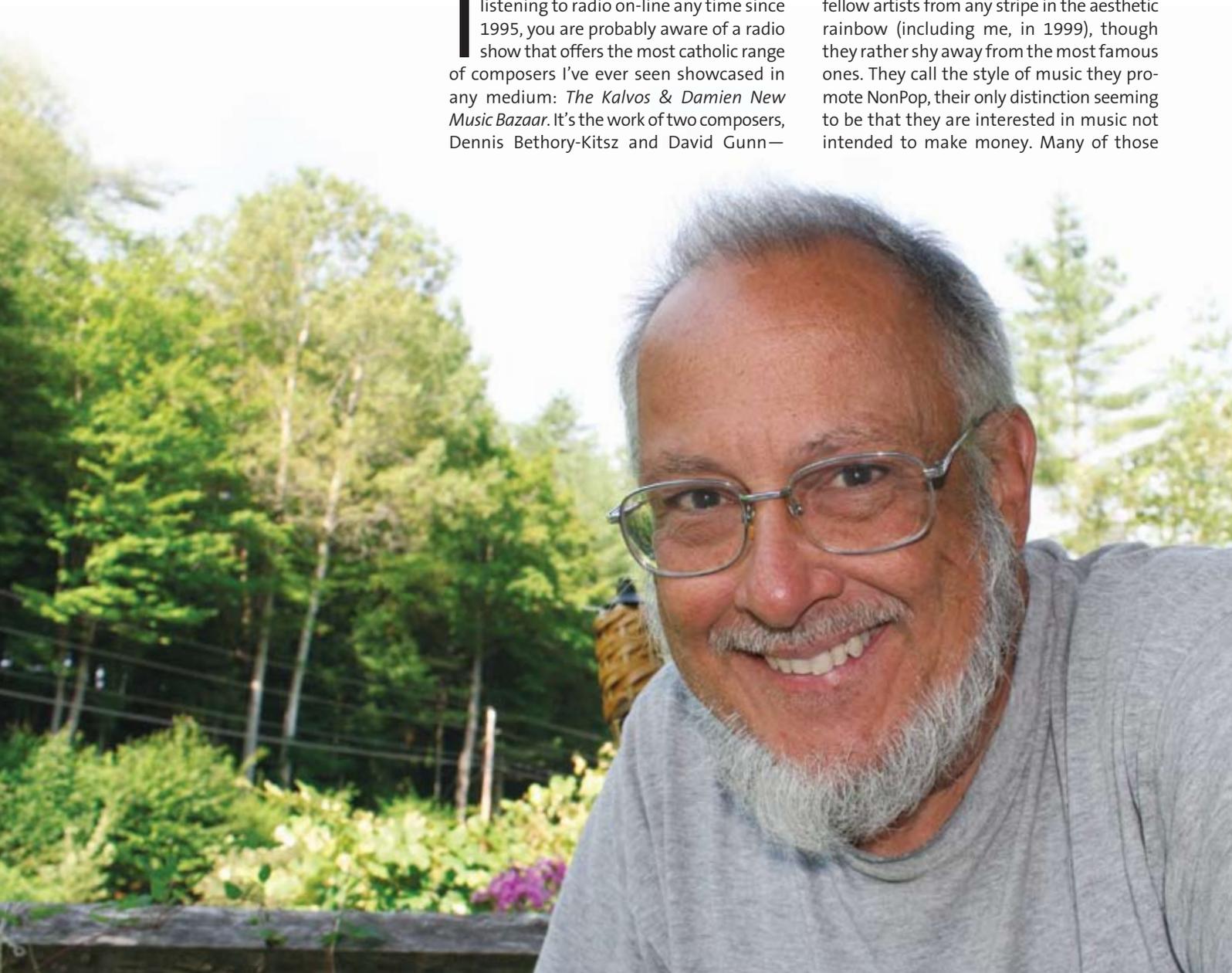


# Dennis Bathory-Kitsz

BY Kyle Gann

If you're a new-music fan and have been listening to radio on-line any time since 1995, you are probably aware of a radio show that offers the most catholic range of composers I've ever seen showcased in any medium: *The Kalvos & Damien New Music Bazaar*. It's the work of two composers, Dennis Bathory-Kitsz and David Gunn—

funny, talkative men willing to interview fellow artists from any stripe in the aesthetic rainbow (including me, in 1999), though they rather shy away from the most famous ones. They call the style of music they promote NonPop, their only distinction seeming to be that they are interested in music not intended to make money. Many of those



interviews are available on the Web at <http://kalvos.org>, a tremendous and entertaining resource for early-21st-century music.

Bathory-Kitsz has gone on to a couple of other high-profile projects, including a NonPop festival in his native Vermont, and a commissioning project called We Are All Mozart. Arguing that the big problem for today's composers is that we don't get enough time to develop our skills, and that many of us could be Mozarts if we were just given enough uninterrupted time to compose, he set out to get commissions to write a new piece every day of the year 2007, though he finally settled for only a hundred pieces. Most of them are solo pieces, as you'd imagine, but one is for orchestra, one for string quartet, and three for clarinet quintet. It's a ton of music, but only a drop in the bucket of Bathory-Kitsz's output, which comprises more than a thousand pieces so far.

Listen to many of those pieces (which you can, and peruse many of the scores, on Bathory-Kitsz's huge and well-organized website at <http://maltedmedia.com/people/bathory/index.html>, and you hear how he can compose so quickly. His music is generally tonal and tends toward minimalist textures, with many repeated chords or rippling arpeggios. But if the music sometimes seems obvious at first, it takes interesting twists and turns. Some of his pieces are real sucker-punches, like the piano solo *Framing the Sum of Three* (one of those 2007 pieces). It starts out with rather mundane, Chopin-esque D-minor arpeggios in the left hand, and a simple melody. But the melody moves into steady quintuplets, then triplets within quintuplets, adding tone clusters, and the repeating left-hand arpeggio turns spikily arrhythmic, and after a while you're listening to a texture of Xenakis-like complexity: not at all what the demure opening measures led you to expect.

Such incommensurabilities abound. *Crosscut* (2009) is a 20-minute concerto for piano and winds with a gratifying shape: the three movements are loud/soft/loud, but contain enough recurring figures to

suggest the sense of a one-movement work. Once again, the piece starts off with rather minimalist repeated chords and arpeggios, but becomes so rhythmically complex in the piano and dissonant in the brass as to gradually give a more muscular impression. Then, after an abrupt cutoff comes an almost stationary slow movement with a couple of rhythmically complex figures that keep recurring every few measures. The unity they produce is remarkable, though the repetitions are too complex to become predictable. The third movement smoothly quotes material from both its predecessors. If Bathory-Kitsz's style varies considerably from work to work, each movement is always unified by a clear concept.

On the other hand, Bathory-Kitsz can also exhibit intense single-mindedness. One of my favorite of his works is his third string quartet titled *L'Estampie du Chevalier* (2005), a breezy essay in endless melody. Two of the strings (and which two they are keeps changing) are always playing a duo-melody in ever-changing note values with insouciant disregard for the bar line, while the other two appear and disappear, punctuating or filling in with running eighth notes or pizzicato double-stops. It's a single thirteen-minute idea played out with very little change yet continually self-renewing variety, one of the most unified quartet movements you'll ever hear. *Fuliginous Quadrant* (2001) for violin, cello, clarinet, and piano is written almost entirely in the A-harmonic-minor scale, yet every one of its texturally varied phrases cadences on a high F in the violin, which really messes with your large-scale perception of the tonality. Another one-idea piece is the orchestra piece *Autumn Dig* (2008), which consists of one-, two-, or four-measure phrases each repeated twice, with new instrumental figures being added and subtracted with each phrase. You quickly get the somewhat Philip-Glassian idea, but the piece builds up a pleasant atmosphere.

It's not hard to see why the 62-year-old Bathory-Kitsz has remained something of a shadowy figure. It's difficult to get a grasp of these composers who write dozens of pieces a year. I'm a big Darius Milhaud fan,

for instance, but every now and then I try to comb through Milhaud's output, and there's just too much to assimilate. Many of the recordings on Bathory-Kitsz's website are MIDI demos, partly because some of the music (like *Framing the Sum of Three*) is exceedingly difficult to perform. One might argue that a composer needs to divide his time between composing and the more difficult job of getting pieces played, and played well, and recorded well. Compounding this is that composers who public-spiritedly spend their time providing venues for other composers tend to start looking, to other composers, like means rather than ends in themselves. I bet that most composers Bathory-Kitsz talks to are thinking about what he could do for them, not what they could do for him.

It's too bad. We should think to do a little more for these composers who spend their careers promoting new music in general, and not just their own work. Still, Bathory-Kitsz is indomitable, and this fall will see the premiere in Vermont of his opera *Erzsébet*, the true story of a mentally disturbed Transylvanian countess (and, apparently, distant relative) Erzsébet Bathory, who tortured and killed hundreds of young servant girls before dying in prison in 1614. A rehearsal excerpt on his website reveals that it makes reference to Baroque musical styles before veering off in a much crazier direction, naturally. It should be the intriguing capstone to a remarkable career. And if you miss it, there's plenty of other Bathory-Kitsz music for you to discover.

*Composer Kyle Gann is an associate professor of music at Bard College. He is the author of several books on American music, the latest of which is No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33" (Yale University Press). His music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.*