

COMPOSITIONS OF NOTE

BY ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

LOTHAR KLEIN DOESN'T SO MUCH TEACH AS CHALLENGE. HIS STUDENTS THRIVE

WHEN HUANG AN-LUN, WHO GOES IN THE WEST AS Aaron Huang, submitted his symphonic poem *The Sword* to Lothar Klein of U of T's Faculty of Music, the reaction was dramatic. "After he read it," Huang remembered, "he stood up and said, 'Aha! A new Aaron is born!'" Huang's fellow composition students congratulated him. *The Sword* showed clear, yes, significant traces of the techniques of the contemporary Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki, who had been the subject of recent Klein seminars. For a student whose previous compositions included passages Tchaikovsky might have chastised for undue conservatism, *The Sword* was a watershed. It is a wonder the veteran composer for Peking's Central Opera Theatre did not pass out cigars.

Huang came by his 19th century idiom naturally. His father, a conductor and professor at the Peking Conservatory, had studied briefly with the German-born American composer Paul Hindemith in the 1940s, but the 1949 revolution — also the year of Aaron's birth — put an end to any further updating of the Huang musical household.

Indeed, the Cultural Revolution put an end to virtually all the exposure Huang enjoyed to traditional Western music. One day the Red Guards paid a visit to the Conservatory; Huang saw his father manacled and beaten on the concert hall stage. Later the family library was destroyed. Huang himself was compelled to labour in the countryside, but he continued to compose operas, sometimes in committees, but often with popular success. His talent stood out to *The Globe and Mail* correspondent in Peking, John Fraser, whose former post at the newspaper had been dance and music critic.

It was partly at Fraser's urging that Huang arrived in Toronto in 1981 to undertake a crash course in modern music history. For Klein, Huang was a unique case, not only because of the Chinese-folk cast of his melodies, but because of his antiquarian perspective on the Western tradition. "He came to us really with good knowledge of the classics," said Klein, whose typical student arrives with an exhaustive knowledge of the latest blip-beep-squawk composer and perhaps a faint recollection of having once heard Beethoven's Fifth. "Aaron wrote impeccable harmony, which I gather he learned while he was in some sort of camp. He really is gifted; he hears traditional harmony wonderfully. It was my job to open a new world to him, to suggest that he become acquainted with this or that 20th century piece."

Yet Klein's agenda was not to suppress Huang's romance with the past; it was to quicken it with a sense of the present. "When I first saw this music, I was shocked," remembered Huang, "I couldn't understand it at all. Later on I got some ideas from it.

"But Klein always said: I can introduce new music to you, but you must keep your own style, because you are a Chinese composer."

This philosophy has drawn many talented students of all stripes to Klein. Martin Van de Ven, a 27-year-old Dutch-born clarinetist who recently won the Sir Ernest MacMillan Award from CAPAC, a composers' copyright organization, was practically Huang's opposite. His father, an amateur double bass player, listened as a hobby to free jazz, Berio and Varese; Martin grew up exercising these idioms as a clarinetist in various pop, reggae, jazz and experimental bands, adding electronic music to his vocabulary at the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. To him, Mozart and Haydn were ancient curiosities. He came to U of T because he knew that Klein, the author of compositions with titles as diverse as *Musica Antiqua*, *Paganini Collage* and *Musique a Go-Go*, would not be hostile to his jazz interests.

This is not to say Klein smiles benignly at everything from a distance: he will quiz students on any number of details. Van de Ven's prize-winning composition (and master's thesis — graduate student composers submit and defend scores rather than monographs) is a concerto for soprano clarinet called *Conversations*. When the final movement was half complete, Klein urged him strongly to rescore the orchestral accompaniment for double rather than single woodwinds. Van de Ven did not budge. "He was right in pointing out that at that particular place in the score it would be difficult to orchestrate without the extra woodwinds," concedes the student. But Van de Ven wanted single woodwinds to emphasize the sense of dialogue with the solo saxophone.

Fine, said Klein. "He doesn't press his point any further," says Van de Ven. "That was never a problem. He would point out certain things, and I would have an appropriate response ready, because I know him pretty well, and the kinds of things he might complain about."

The doctoral thesis of another Klein student, Richard Romiti, last year earned the \$5,000 George F. Eastman Prize from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music. "I really don't feel he imposed anything at all on the piece," said Romiti, referring to his 1982 *Palingenesis for Flute and Small Orchestra*. "He encouraged me to try things I perhaps previously wasn't comfortable or familiar with. But his influence on me was not so much an updating as a broadening, giving me a greater awareness of music in general. In a sense his influence was less on my style than on my pre-composition plans."

There are limits to Klein's tolerance: minimalism, he says, though the fad of the hour, stands in relation to serious music as does see-Spot-run to serious literature.



*Lothar Klein
Opposite, left to right: Aaron Huang, Martin Van de
Ven and Richard Romiti*

But the process of teaching composition remains to Klein a liberalizing endeavour, whether by overcoming a student's rebellious rejection of the classics or accidental ignorance of the avant-garde. At its *most* coercive, it remains a Socratic prodding of the student into an awareness of his own beliefs. "A musical psychiatrist," Klein calls himself.

The method has proved successful: Huang is pursuing a master's degree at Yale (he was a special student at U of T) and is achieving increasing renown in the west for his dramatic (and now, individual) tonal language. A

suite from his ballet, *Dream of Dun Huang*, will be performed by the Toronto Symphony this fall, having already found a market in Sydney, Australia. He is still, of course, China's most popular young composer. Romiti teaches at Providence College and hears himself performed regularly by a Rhode Island composers' collective. Van de Ven says he still has competitions to win before he can consider himself a successful composer; in the meantime, he will teach privately and perhaps rekindle old reggae friendships. No doubt, with Klein's blessing. ■