The Village Voice has long held an important role in defining the New York cultural scene to the wider world, and as that city has acted as a beacon for an outsider’s view of the United States – culturally most in sympathy, seemingly, with a European perspective – the Voice has acquired a reputation which greatly exceeds that of most other scene-based publications. Music has played an important role in defining the identity of the paper: it has featured writers as diverse as Nat Hentoff, Lester Bangs and Joy Press; and unusually it has given sustained attention to the avant-garde. During the 1970s, composer and critic Tom Johnson, charged with the task of reporting on the new music scene for the paper, helped to articulate the idea of a uniquely American avant-garde which turned away from the European classical tradition, and instead took inspiration from the visual arts, various kinds of indigenous music, and the experimentalism of John Cage (collected in Johnson 1989). The most notable product of the times he reported on was ‘minimalist music’, now most associated with the repetitive processes of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and the drone-influenced music of La Monte Young (Johnson’s contemporary, composer Michael Nyman, then also a critic, fulfilled a similar role in the UK, and both helped to establish the term ‘minimalist music’). Johnson presented a very particular vision of the New York scene, influenced by his own interests as a composer, which had been fomented in the loft-based happenings of the Fluxus artists, and through the practice of composers establishing their own performing ensembles, broadly rejecting orchestral and academic patronage (which was, in any case, largely unavailable to them).

Kyle Gann took up Johnson’s lead in the early 1980s sharing many of his colleague’s sympathies but finding a generation of composers and performers enthused as much by developments in popular music such as New Wave and No Wave bands at venues like CBGBs as by the work of the first wave of minimalist composers: for example, the multimedia composer-performer Mikel Rouse, a clear favourite of Gann’s, began his musical career with Tirez Tirez, a support band to Talking Heads.

Music Downtown collects together the highlights of Gann’s career at the Village Voice. As this runs to around ninety reviews and feature articles of usually not less than 1,000 words each, he has provided the reader with something potentially substantial to consider. The book is divided into sections devoted to interview features, articles on aesthetics, music and politics, and concert reviews, and obituaries of leading figures. The space given to Gann’s reviews is such that he is often able to...
provide much more context and reflection upon the whole experience of the music than most classical reviewers are able, and occasionally Gann covers areas with only a tangential relationship to his brief such as Hopi music, dream experiments, or the pragmatist philosophy of Richard Rorty.

All critics are advocates, whether for things ‘as they were’ or for how they could be, and invest their ideals in the music they encounter identifying common themes and values and often setting them in opposition to some other aspect of contemporary practice. Gann is also a composer and musicologist (author of a book on bionic boogie merchant Conlon Nancarrow) and is emphatically in favour of the new: many of the names in the book will be unfamiliar to readers or listeners in Europe such as William Duckworth, Mary Ellen Childs, Fred Ho and Eve Beglarian, and Gann gives them as much consideration as established figures like John Cage, Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

Defining what Downtown Music is or who practices it is not quite as straightforward a thing as it might have been for Johnson. ‘Downtown’ refers, of course, to Greenwich Village, home of the Voice, and a hub of artistic activity since the 1940s, but several of the musicians have no direct link with the musical scene in Manhattan. Gann surveys them all from a downtown perspective (though he too is an outsider). However, it is the ethos of Fluxus, John Cage, and the minimalists, which connects the music of the generation Gann surveys more than geography as such. And Gann is at pains to emphasise what downtown music is not, namely ‘uptown’ or (worse) ‘midtown’ music. Uptown music is that which lives largely in universities and takes its lead from European modernist and serialist values (for example, the music of Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt); Midtown music is made by those who, in Gann’s words, ‘continue to write symphonies and concertos, wear tuxedos and formal attire to concerts, and do their level best to ignore their marginalisation in a world in which they are . . . made to feel that their music is inferior to even the minor opuses of the dead masters such as Brahms and Mendelssohn’ (p. 2). Gann’s view of what is vital in American music is more John Luther Adams than the more famous John (Coolidge) Adams (whose later work is described by Gann as midtown).

Most studies of minimalism and what has followed it have been introductions to the work of the most prominent figures such as Reich and Glass, and as yet little sustained writing has been devoted to the music of the next couple of generations which developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Gann’s book views the scene from the inside, as it were, setting it in context against the musical politics of the time (cuts in NEA funding, the promotion of women composers, and government censorship – composers responding to the reaction to 2 Live Crew in 1990 [pp. 240–4]) and other kinds of downtown music like that by John Zorn (whom he sees as more of an uptown avant-gardist than a jazz musician). Speaking of Zorn, Gann can be provocative and forthright in his judgements, for example, ‘Not for nothing was John Zorn the Reagan era’s quintessential composer: he made us feel good about macho progress again, he achieved his greatest success with yuppy audiences, and he did it by recycling ideas two or three decades old’ (p. 119). But Gann is rarely arbitrary, in his commentary, and it is often clear that he has gone to great lengths (well, more than most classical critics) to find out all he can about the motivations behind the music he reviews.

At several stages, Gann attempts to articulate common tendencies in Downtown Music, namely ‘postminimalism’, broadly defined as a more intuitive and less
systematically structured minimalist music, and ‘totalism’, an attempt to introduce more complex formal, often polyrhythmic ideas without losing the direct impact of minimalism. One recurring notion is that of the desire on the part of many of these composers to create memorable musical ‘images’ as opposed to what Gann views as an obsession with musical language or technique (pp. 168–70), which was the tendency with serial and even process-driven minimalism. The use of the term ‘image’ as opposed to ‘hook’ or ‘catchiness’ shows Gann to be distinguishing between a pop musician’s and classical composer’s emphasis on issues which are similar but not the same.

In the wake of recent developments at the paper, with a new more emphatically commercial ownership – which has made several highly contentious changes, such as the sacking of Robert Christgau, and placed restrictions on political comment – it would appear that The Village Voice will no longer have a place for a scene such as the one Gann has surveyed, and there seems to be little sign of anything remotely equivalent in the mainstream cultural press (leaving music magazines such as The Wire to one side). Gann’s journalism is much more occasional now that he has turned more towards his own composing and to an academic career, but he now maintains a blog (http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic) which exerts as much if not more influence than his columns for the Voice.

The subject of this collection may not be the most immediately appealing to the readers of Popular Music as it is more obviously connected to matters in contemporary classical music, and perhaps it is problematic that so few of the names Gann celebrates have become more widely known. Yet the book offers a valuable insight from an engaging and immensely readable author into music in the wake of minimalism, and could work well as a companion piece to a study such as Robert Fink’s (2005) recent cultural study of minimalism in classical and disco music.

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References


In much historiography of pop and rock music, it has become commonplace to focus on canonical figures whose creative output or innovative approach to writing or marketing songs, playing an instrument or pushing established musical boundaries is used to explain the development, succession and decline of various styles, genres and