

# Finding doors not yet opened

## Imported musicians tackle Robert Morris's music

by Josh Mailman

Life is full of contradictions, so the saying goes. Yet art teaches us that what appears certain actually might be contradictory, and what appears contradictory might be resolved through a change of perspective. If life may imitate art as much as art imitates life, let us hope that our world leaders can resolve the contradictions in their own domain as artfully as composer Robert Morris resolves them in his.

Morris, the chair of the Eastman School's Composition Department, and one of the most accomplished music theorists in North America, hypothetically fits the profile of the "academic" composer who writes "stuffy" music for the concert hall. Yet in Morris's hands, concert music can meld with the great outdoors; meticulously planned structure can bear the spontaneity of jazz and embrace the freedom of indeterminacy; the latest rarified developments in Western art-music can join hands with the most ancient traditions of Eastern spiritual and musical culture. What seemed like contradictions were actually just doors not yet opened.

Morris opened the doors between his music and nature in *Playing Outside* (2001). The piece was scored for chorus, orchestra, four improvisers, and Balinese gamelan playing simultaneously in various Webster Park locations, as musicians and the audience wandered around: "an experience that merged music with walking or hiking," Morris says.

Though Morris spent months planning the piece, its core concept embraces the delightful indeterminacy that nature provides. Morris, and the rest of us, could enjoy little surprises like "hearing the birds flying overhead with a similar texture in an ensemble piece; or the august quiet of the forest among long silences marked only by tiny, high pizzicati in the strings; or noting the way people attended to the music, standing and sitting in various degrees of attention. The best

thing was that all kinds of people were involved, with their kids and pets, as well as people who came to hear music."

This Sunday afternoon, musicians from several other cities converge in Rochester to perform a concert of Morris's recent works. Each musician has a specific relationship to Morris and his music.

Pianist Fang-Tzu Liu flies in from Taiwan to perform the world premiere of *Meandering River*. When presented with the work, Fan-Tzu told Morris she found the title fitting "since she had many dreams about a flowing, sinuous river as a child. Later, as she was learning it, she remarked how the piece seemed strangely connected to her personality, even though she has never played anything quite like it."

Marianne Gythfeldt comes from New York City to perform the world premiere of *On the Go*, for clarinet and computer-generated sounds. "Marianne is now one of the most advanced performers of new music in the States," Morris says. In *On the Go* (the second work Morris has composed for Gythfeldt), the computer sounds act as a "virtual orchestra" that "generalizes the clarinet's timbre." The concept is similar to that of Morris's guitar and computer sound piece *To the Nine*, which is available on a CD entitled *Sheer Pluck* (CRI) performed by Todd Seelye. The computer sounds in *To the Nine* turn the classical guitar from a gentle lamb of an instrument into a dynamic pouncing tiger of sound colors. If *On the Go* is anything like it, it won't disappoint.

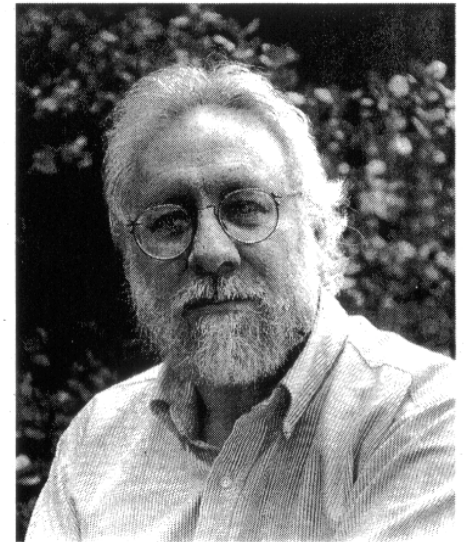
Piano and percussion duo Paul Hoffman and Tom Goldstein are coming from Maryland to perform the world premiere of *Struck Sound*. "I wrote *Struck Sound* for the Hoffman/Goldstein Duo after hearing them play an amazing concert of new music. I went up to them immediately afterwards and told them how much I had enjoyed their performances, and they

hinted that they would be interested in my writing a piece for them. Immediately I got to work and presented it to them a few months later. I wasn't sure they'd like the work or even accept it, but they dove right in and began rehearsals." Both the title and the rhythms of *Struck Sound* are inspired by Indian music, which Morris has studied for over 40 years.

Members of the Lithium Saxophone Quartet, based in Chicago and Missouri, will perform *Bob's Bop*. Says Morris: "You can hear this piece in many ways, and the title suggests that listening to it as related to the jazz tradition is appropriate. It has the gesture, swing, and wildness of free jazz, and also the flow that underlies the impulsive qualities of that music. Many of my friends are jazz players. I love bebop and free jazz and the use of the saxophone in that music. The ways in which jazz artists interact in improvisation as well as in 'big band' ensembles has been an inspiration in all my music."

Members of Lithium will also perform *Vibhatsa*, which is inspired by Indian aesthetic theory and composed in 1978. "The late '70s were a time of despair for many of us who lived through the artistic idealism of the 1960s and early 1970s... But there was also a growing awareness that Western classical music was among other sophisticated musics in many different times and places, and this was exhilarating."

Four Zen poems posing metaphysical riddles are scrambled up to form the text of *Sung Song*, a work Morris wrote at the request of singer Heather Gardner, who will perform it unaccompanied. "*Sung Song* is refreshingly pleasant to sing," says Gardner. "There is a great deal of recent vocal music that is difficult to sing because the composer doesn't understand the voice and demands things that, while perhaps possible, are not



Robert Morris brings an Eastern philosophy to his Western music.

necessarily comfortable. This piece, however, is one of the more comfortable pieces that I have performed recently."

Those who can't wait until Sunday's concert might listen to Morris's *Motet on Doo-dah*, (on the New World Records CD *New Music For Virtuosos*). In typical Morris fashion, it combines such diverse elements as Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races," Medieval French motet structure, and Korean *Ah-Ak* court music into a unified whole: Still a riddle perhaps, but no longer a contradiction. ■

**A concert of recent works by Robert Morris**, Sunday, March 2, at Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall, 26 Gibbs Street, at 3 p.m. Tix: \$5 at the door only, free to UR ID holders and Eastman Series subscribers. 274-1100.

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