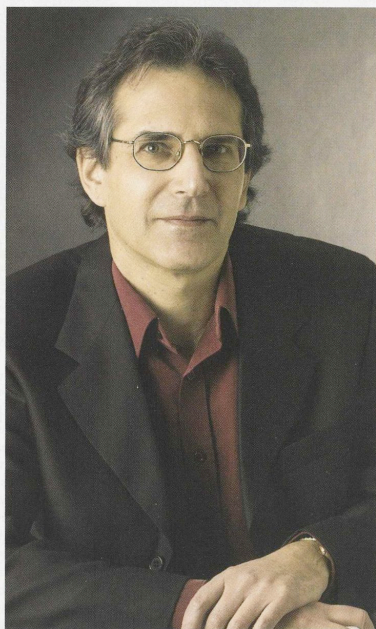


American **Composer**

Wayne Siegel

by Kyle Gann



Expatriates: we think of them leaving to pursue dreams that would be illegal, immoral, or quixotic at home. We imagine Gertrude Stein in the whirlwind literary world of 1920s Paris, Colin McPhee indulging his homosexuality and love of gamelan in 1930s Bali, Paul Bowles off the beaten path in Morocco, Ernest Hemingway proving his manhood on safari in the Serengeti, Conlon Nancarrow hiding away from American political paranoia in Mexico City. But what about the American artist who escapes to a world more civilized than the one at home? That's the question that haunts me about Wayne Siegel, the Californian postminimalist who's lived his adult life in Denmark. Never heard of him? Not surprising, since he's hardly had any stateside presence these last twenty-five years, though over yonder he's had an enviable career and gets plenty of commissions and performances.

I'm writing from a European sabbatical, and sought out Siegel, whose music has long charmed me. The last time I had run across him was in 1982, at New Music America in Chicago. There he played a silky, sensuous continuum for piano and electronics called *Autumn Resonance*. It was, for the time, a classic instance of West Coast minimalism: shimmering chords limned by a halo of tape delay, rotating around pivot notes with the languor of Harold Budd and the perpetual motion of

Steve Reich. A minimalist streak survives in Siegel's music to the present day; but from the beginning it was clear that his fascination was not with stasis but with transformation and even formal surprise. His string quartet from that same period manifested an original approach to stylistic collage: proceeding from eerie glissandos through fugal writing to hillbilly folk-fiddling to postserialist abstraction to bopping minimalist eighth-note streams with tape delay, it demonstrated that minimalism was only one arrow in Siegel's quiver.

From that point in the early '80s Siegel seemed to disappear from American view, though it's turned out that was only partly true. Later I found his music on a CD only available in Europe, notably a big orchestra piece called *Devil's Golf Course*, on an eponymous disc. Plenty of 8th-note perpetual motion in that work, but also a higher and one might say more European level of dissonance. The Kronos Quartet commissioned a Siegel work, *Tracking*, for quartet and computer. And it turns out that, despite his absence from high-profile American stages, Siegel has enjoyed a sur-repetitious comeback in his native land in the form of solo and duo works for marginalized instruments. His *42nd Street Rondo*, for percussion, is widely played on the college circuit, as is his *Jackdaw* for bass clarinet and electronics, of which more below. Able to command larger ensembles and theatrical venues in Europe, he keeps one toe in the American scene via a kind of instrument-specific *Gebrauchsmusik*.

He's also become quite a leader in the small Danish corner of the European new-music world. After undergrad studies at Santa Barbara, Siegel had gone to Aarhus in 1974 to study with the leading figure of 20th-century Danish music (and an underacknowledged early European minimalist) Per Nørgård. Working his way up through a number of arts administration jobs, in 1986 Siegel became director of

the prestigious Danish Institute for Electronic Music, in which capacity he was an important player at conferences and festivals. When that organization got folded into Aarhus's new Royal Academy of Music in 2003, Siegel became the country's only official professor of electronic music—even though he still, to this day, writes more chamber music than electronic music. He lives in a quiet suburb of Aarhus with his wife Elisabeth, a novelist and distant cousin of the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and their pet jackdaw, Alice.

A jackdaw is a small, remarkably intelligent, raven-like bird with an annoyingly loud caw. I mention Alice because of her starring role in *Jackdaw* (1995), probably Siegel's most widely performed piece: a boppy postminimalist work threaded through with samples of Alice's squawks and chirps. So popular is *Jackdaw*—an attractive showpiece for an instrument deficient in solo literature—that it's been appropriated by instrumentalists on other neglected instruments (like baritone sax), and cuts a wide swath in university wind departments. Another very practical work is *Domino Figures*, a canon for anywhere from 10 to 100 electric guitars, based on a classically minimalist procedure: the first guitarist starts up, switches to a new repeating figure when the second guitarist echoes him, then the first figure is taken over by guitar 3, and, like falling dominos, the piece's phrases make their way around the circle. Don't know what to do with all the student guitarists in your music department? *Domino Figures* makes a nice end-of-semester half-concert.

Siegel's come a long way since his California minimalism days, yet any Europe-ification of his music has been only subtle: aesthetically, I still have to think of him as American. A recent (2005) piece for voice and guitar, *Sappho Fragments*, is entirely free from minimalist process, yet still languidly diatonic. His

magnum opus to date is a science fiction opera written to his wife's libretto: *Livstejn*, or "Signs of Life" (1993–94), about a scientist plunged into a personal crisis by his unexpected discovery of intelligent life on one of Jupiter's moons. An attractive, slightly John Adams-ish work that allows full play to Siegel's ability to meld electronic sound effects with repetitive instrumental patterns, the piece received nine performances in 1994, and he hopes to revive it some time. It sounds well worth reviving.

So where to place this prolific composer of self-assured, attractive music in our international music outlook? There's an argument to be made that England, France, Germany, and Italy have traditionally played disproportionate roles in our public perception of the international scene. Certainly the Netherlands has been one of the world's musically liveliest countries for some time now, and I've been hearing music lately from Ireland, Finland, and Serbia that I prefer to anything the Germans are doing. Denmark remains peripheral despite Nørgård's masterful conceptual innovativeness (among other things, he has a concerto with the piano at one tempo and orchestra at another). Like so many expatriates, Siegel is sometimes considered an American by Danes and a European by Americans. Nevertheless, Europe and our sadly diffuse musical culture being what they are, his career chugs along securely, whether we hear much about him or not.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College and the new music critic for the Village Voice. He is the author of The Music of Conlon Nancarrow (Cambridge University Press) and American Music in the Twentieth Century (Schirmer Books). His music is recorded on the Lovely Music, New Tone, and Monroe Street labels.