



OTHER NOTABLE COMPOSERS

Nancy Van de Vate (b1931)

Written by Nelly Case

Composer and political activist Nancy Van de Vate was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1931. She entered the Eastman School of Music as a piano major but completed a bachelor's degree in composition at Wellesley College (1952), a master's degree at the University of Mississippi (1958), and a doctorate at Florida State University (1968). She later undertook post-doctoral studies in electronic composition at Dartmouth College and the University of New Hampshire. Moving south with her husband and three children, she taught at Memphis State College, played the viola in the Knoxville Symphony, established the first chapter of NOW (National Organization for Women) in Tennessee, and led the Southeastern Composers League for ten years. In 1975 she founded the League of Woman Composers (in 1979 renamed the International League of Women Composers), which she chaired for seven years. In 1995 this group merged with the International Alliance for Women in Music.

Also in 1975 Van de Vate moved to Hawaii, teaching first at the University of Hawaii and later at Hawaii Loa College, where she also served as Dean of Academic Affairs. During this time she was first exposed to and influenced by Asian music—an effect only heightened by living in Indonesia from 1982 to 1985. Thereafter she moved with her second husband to Vienna, and in 1994 was granted dual Austrian and American citizenship. Since then she has developed close ties with leading composers in several East European countries, while focusing on large works for orchestra. She has also remained politically active, choosing to resign from the Austrian Composers' League in 1999 in protest against the near-total exclusion of women performers and the works of women composers from the personnel and repertoire of the major professional music organizations in Vienna, including the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

Van de Vate views her own music as a logical continuation of the more than 1000-year-old tradition of Western art music, and from time to time uses traditional melodic and rhythmic ideas, harmonically based tension and release, and idiomatic treatment of voices and instruments. These do not prevent her from employing many current compositional techniques, such as serialism, aleatory, and massive tone clusters, in an effort to create dramatic and coherent works that will appeal to a broad audience. Her stockpile of musical materials expanded markedly with the discovery of Edgard Varèse's music in 1972. As a result of her stay in the Pacific during the early 1980s she became enamored of gamelan music with its pentatonic sonorities, repetitive rhythmic patterns, and plethora of malleted instruments. With the move to Vienna, she came into contact with composers specializing in sound mass, such as Krzysztof Penderecki. Over time Bartók, Stravinsky, and Sofia Gubaidulina have also provided role models for Van de Vate, who values, above all, music of striking emotional expressiveness.

Van de Vate's abiding sense of social responsibility and compassion for humanity often take center stage in her compositions, including *Katyn* (1989), a huge work for chorus and orchestra honoring the 4,000 Poles killed by the Soviet Army during World War II, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, an anti-war opera she wrote in 1998. Equally disquieting is her symphonic poem *Chernobyl*, commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts after the nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union during April of 1986.

This thirteen-minute orchestral work is divided into two large sections, the first of which pictures the meltdown of the nuclear reactor using a series of slowly building tone clusters punctuated by coloristic percussive effects. By contrast, the second section develops discrete thematic ideas, including a so-called “weeping motif” highly reminiscent of the familiar two-note descending sigh motive. Extended pedal tones on B, accompanying a repeated two-measure melodic figure starting on F#, lend more of a tonal feeling to this second section of the piece, although its final measures restore the harmonic opacity of the work’s opening. Meanwhile relentless articulation of each quarter-note beat in one slow-moving, eighteen-measure passage near the end strongly suggests the footsteps of survivors trying to leave the contaminated area. While the composer wrote no detailed program to go with the score, her music clearly evokes powerful images and emotions while raising awareness of the destructive potential of modern technology.

Prolific composer, teacher, and promoter of contemporary music, Nancy Van de Vate has written all kinds of music, from songs and keyboard works to chamber ensembles and opera, though her orchestral pieces since the 1970s have had the biggest impact. Adept at administrative work, public relations, and mass communication, she has composed music that has been performed in as many as thirty-six countries on five continents. Almost all of her works have been recorded, thanks in part to the recording company she and her husband started in 1990 called Vienna Modern Masters. Both her life story and her music have much to offer to the musicians of today and tomorrow.