

# GARY SCHMIDT

by Larry Polansky



Gary Schmidt is a young composer, playwright, pianist, painter, and country-western songwriter living in Winter Haven, Florida. His works in each of those areas, and taken together as a whole, show a startling degree of inventiveness and a tremendous individuality of artistic expression. As a pianist and composer, he has toured the country with the now defunct New Kanon New Music Ensemble, a group of five musicians/composers who performed American avant-garde music exclusively, but in the last few years Schmidt has been quietly composing and performing occasionally in Central Florida, far from the main "centers" of professional activity (read: hustle) in the United States. This physical isolation has seemed to heighten what is to me the primary strength of his music—a quietness and elegance of form and style which draws deeply from personal experience and belief, and little or not at all from current trend and artistic fashion.

As a "serious" composer, his works tend to be for small chamber ensemble or for piano solo. Two of the most interesting were part of the repertoire of the New Kanon Ensemble—*Endings: To Mark and the Monk By the Sea* (for flute, contrabass, piano or harp, and guitar); and *Piano Variations* (on five haiku by this author). *Endings...* is a long, extremely quiet and lyrical work which reflects Schmidt's profound interest in the visual arts (the Mark in the title is Rothko). It consists almost entirely of aborted, half-finished melodies, and establishes its own very unique contrapuntal, timbral, and harmonic language. The piano variations, which have been performed only by Schmidt (they're quite difficult), are not easily described, for stylistically they have little in common with any music I've heard. Suffice it to say that they are moving, intricate, and deserving of frequent performance and study. Two other chamber works, *Four Hesse Songs* (piano, flute, violin, two sopranos, and three percussion), and *Interpretations of Hesse Poems* (alto, alto fl., harp, guitar, viola, violin and percussion) have been performed at the U. of Illinois, but nowhere

else—and both of these works not only exhibit Schmidt's prodigious compositional "chops" but also a tremendous instinct for unusual phrasing and orchestration. In these earlier pieces, one hears a definite reference to the works of Morton Feldman, not so much in sonority, but in formal relationships to what might be called visual archetypes. In the last few years, his compositions have in fact been mostly large abstract canvasses to be interpreted improvisationally.

Schmidt has also been active in other arts besides composition. As a pianist, first for the American Chamber Players and later for New Kanon, he has given first and important performances of many American works. His musical comedy *A Little Getting Used To*, about, appropriately enough, a young piano player trying to reconcile his life and work with a straight-laced family and community, has been produced once, and he is the author of several other plays. He is a prolific painter—his works tend to be large windowshades or canvasses, although he prefers to keep these private (unless they are for musical performance). But besides his chamber music, the aspect of his work that interests me most is his country music. His songs, like his classical music, are *sui generis*, and have the intelligence and humor one finds in the works of people like Bob McDill, Guy Clark, and a very few others. One of the most beautiful is a tune called "Deserts of Steel," a haunting ballad about the changing face of America—

*"Our fathers' dreams, of wide open spaces,  
Were all traded in, for life behind the wheel,  
They burned out all traces, of the wild country  
places,  
And turned oceans of grain, into deserts of steel."*

At present, recordings and scores are only available from me (c/o Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College, Oakland, CA 94613) or from Schmidt himself (Casa Chica del Soto, 1812 17. St. NW, Winter Haven, FL 33880).