

# Music essays

## Critic looks at cultural fiber of modern America through its composers

By Ifan Payne

contributing reviewer

**Americas: Essays on American Music and Culture, 1973-80**, by Peter Garland (Soundings Press; \$15)

**A**mericas: *Essays on American Music and Culture, 1973-80* is one of the more important and fascinating books on American music to be published in a long time.

Peter Garland's discussion is not limited to American music. He also delves into the spiritual well-being of contemporary society and its creative arts.

The author is a composer and critic, best known as the editor of the journal *Soundings*. His stated

purpose in *Americas* is to remind the reader of such neglected figures of 20th-century music as Harry Partch, Silvestre Revueltas, Conlon Nancarrow, Paul Bowles, Lou Harrison, Dane Rudhyar, Henry Cowell and John Cage.

"It is actually the substance—not the method—of Western culture that is falling to pieces," Mr. Garland writes. "Thought itself is in crisis, and no quick patchwork job of standardization will ease this situation."

He goes on to quote Mr. Partch's observation that the West has "abandoned values, beautiful and significant things, that in toto are at least as impor-

tant as what we have preserved."

Mr. Garland argues that American composers have been ignored when they sought out their musical roots or tried to integrate their music within a worldwide framework of traditional music. Often American composers have been banished physically as well as culturally. Some, such as Mr. Nancarrow, fled the country, while others, such as Mr. Partch, sought self-exile within the vastness of the United States.

Mr. Garland's literary style is a little frustrating. His prose moves in a freewheeling manner, with diversions and excursions into his own travels and experiences. It is as if Mr. Garland wanted to be a

latter-day Thoreau, whom he clearly admires, although he lacked the spiritual stillness of the master of Walden Pond.

Many more voices are proclaiming that classical music as we know it is dead. Whether the reader of *Americas* has caught the whiff of canker in the air, he will be prompted into considering the view that the development of music from Bach and his predecessors to Schoenberg and his successors—like the development of the Western world from the Industrial Revolution to the nuclear age—may be a dead end, and that we should have followed the paths of those colorful musical pioneers whom Mr. Garland describes.