



The name of San Francisco's **Other Minds Festival** comes from a line in an obituary for John Cage: "He composed music in other people's minds." But it easily can refer to the maverick composers whom the festival has celebrated throughout its two-decade existence. In fact, executive and artistic director Charles Amirkhanian (himself a composer) has spent a lifetime advancing the cause of "other minds" that have flouted the orthodoxy of their day. His efforts started in the late 1960s, when he was music director of KPFA radio in Berkeley and championed the emerging minimalist movement. His programming of Steve Reich's *Come Out* provoked a flurry of angry calls to the station. "People were saying 'the record was stuck!'" Amirkhanian says. "They wanted me to be fired. But a year later, they couldn't get enough."

In those days, serialism—and the East Coast—dominated contemporary music. "The minimalists weren't getting the kind of support that the post-serial avant-garde was getting," Amirkhanian says. "Here we were so close to Asia, and New Yorkers were so close to Europe, that a dichotomy had arisen. The Asian influence, Buddhism, drugs—a lot of these things gave people here the notion that they could focus on simpler melodic and harmonic ideas, and have a powerful and lasting result."

Other Minds grew directly out of Amirkhanian's predilections. Its first incarnation featured works by Cage, Philip Glass, and Julia Wolfe, plus a Conlon Nancarrow

world premiere. The festival's advocacy in its first seasons extended to such "other minds" as Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison and Virgil Thomson; and one year Ned Rorem was in residence. "Rorem never paid any attention to fashion," Amirkhanian says. "He just did his own thing." The roster of composers in this year's 20th-anniversary festival included Harrison, Miya Masaoka, the late Peter Sculthorpe, Amirkhanian himself, Michael Nyman, and Pauline Oliveros, who offered the world premiere of her *Twins Peeking at Koto*, for two accordions and koto. A concert commemorating the centennial of the Armenian holocaust featured works by Tigran Mansurian, whom Amirkhanian describes as "the Bartók of Armenia."

All of the living composers will be at the festival. Another remarkable element of Other Minds is that the composers gather before the festival for a four-day conference at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, a half-hour south of the city. "It's 700 acres in the middle of nowhere—the only thing you can see is the Pacific and Neil Young's ranch," Amirkhanian says. "We've taken the Esalen position: you put people in a room and let them talk and talk and come to a consensus." He points to a year when Julia Wolfe and Philip Glass formed a bond: "She lived five blocks away from him in New York City, but she'd been afraid to talk to him."

"It's a gift to have some down time to listen to music and talk about it," Amirkhanian says. "They open their minds to each other's work, and get recharged—excited about composing again. It has a profound impact."

■ www.otherminds.org

Charles Amirkhanian



Maverick Time