

The Pastoral After Environmentalism: Nature and Culture in Stephen Albert's *Symphony: RiverRun*

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The year 1972 was a landmark in the history of the environmental movement: the Environmental Protection Agency, founded two years earlier by Richard Nixon, banned the toxic pesticide DDT and authored the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, later amended to the Clean Water Act of 1977. While criticism of DDT was nothing new—Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, a detailed exposé of the chemical, was published a full decade earlier (Carson 1962)—the EPA's ban heightened Americans' awareness of environmental issues and lent momentum to the interrogation of cherished post-war ideals, especially those of technological and economic progress. In the arts, a suspicion of progress narratives, which had been gathering steam in the 1960s, fueled the search for alternatives to modernism and its principles of artistic autonomy, abstraction, and the evolution of technique. Besides such well-known contenders for the countercultural throne as minimalism, the vibrant musical landscape of the early 1970s included edgy political works like Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together* and *Attica* (both 1972) and pieces alluding to ecological matters, such as Alan Hovhaness's *And God Created Great Whales* (1970) and George Crumb's *Vox Balaenae* (1971).¹ I begin with a reference to 1972 because that year witnessed one of the more spectacular disavowals of serialism, considered by its practitioners to be the most progressive compositional approach. George Rochberg, a former serialist, broke with the modernist demand for advancement by mimicking the styles of Beethoven and Mahler in his Third String Quartet.² At first glance, Rochberg's momentary resurrection of the expressive language of romanticism seems to have little to do with the nascent musical environmentalism of Crumb and Hovhaness, let alone the ban on DDT. Yet the postmodern philosophy of history that Rochberg promulgated—a philosophy which discards the notion of linear evolution in favor of an alleged timelessness of musical styles—was a vital factor in the emergence of a genre of music that I will call the neo-romantic pastoral.³ Combining the romantic and environmentalist impulses of the early 1970s, neo-romantic pastorals, penned by such composers as Stephen Albert, Libby Larsen, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, unabashedly adopt (and adapt) the conventional pastoral topoi of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since many of

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those topoi are coincident with basic features of tonal music, neo-romantic pastorals typically exhibit some form of neo-tonality.⁴

Just as the revival of tonality has inspired controversy among composers and music critics committed to modernist ideals, the reemergence of a relatively traditional form of the pastoral raises questions about the significance of this genre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Viewed in tandem with official and grass-roots efforts to stem the tide of environmental damage, the pastoral's traditional themes of innocence and retreat into nature might appear merely quaint, or even dangerously out of touch with a world in need of concrete solutions to problems of global proportions. Nevertheless, the branch of literary criticism known as ecocriticism has been at pains to show that the literary pastoral, particularly when it foregrounds the provisional status of the retreat to nature, constitutes an indispensable artistic forum for reflection on how human existence is (or has been, or might be) conceived in relation to the natural world, an issue whose discussion is vital to any environmentalist project.⁵ Might the neo-romantic pastoral be capable of playing a similar role? This paper contends that Stephen Albert's *Symphony: RiverRun* (1984) highlights the complex interplay between nature and culture whenever the former is taken as an object of artistic representation. I argue that the particular ways in which Albert harnesses both pastoral devices and the stylistic and generic limitations of the symphony constitute an acknowledgment that the appearance of nature in a musical work is fully the effect of discursive means, of techniques of signification which are culturally determined rather than directly evocative of nature.⁶

First, a caveat: non-tonal idioms do not necessarily exclude the pastoral, nor do pastoral themes require a conservative or nostalgic musical treatment. On the contrary, earlier American composers such as Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles employed dissonant harmonies and knotty textures in works based on pastoral themes, including Ives's "Thoreau" (the last movement of the *Concord Sonata*) and Ruggles's orchestral piece "Men and Mountains." "The Housatonic at Stockbridge," the last of Ives's *Three Places in New England*, suggests the complex motion of water via orchestral textures of extreme rhythmic intricacy. The most familiar inheritor of Ives's and Ruggles's preoccupation with nature, John Cage, recommended imitating "nature's manner of operation" (1961:9). As the defining gesture of "experimental music" (the title of Cage's essay), turning to nature did not entail recourse to venerable musical conventions of pastoral representation. On the contrary, nature is presented in Cage's essay as the antithesis of "musical habit," as the impetus spurring an iconoclastic musical modernism in which imaginary landscapes took precedence over any natural scenery. Later composers took

Cage's suggestions in several different directions. Among mathematically oriented modernists, nature was less an object of representation than a stimulus to various means of organizing sound: for example, the structure of gasses served as Xenakis's model for stochastically generated musical "clouds," while composers of spectral music used the natural overtone series to regulate consonance. On the other hand, soundscape composers such as Hildegard Westercamp and Francisco López took to heart Cage's pronouncement that all sounds can be music, creating pieces based on natural sounds recorded in the wild.⁷ While the peculiar kind of mediation involved in such "electronic pastorals" is ripe for exploration, here I will be concerned only with music that makes a double gesture of return—music in which the representation of nature is achieved through the appropriation of materials associated with tonal music.

In the early 1980s, a handful of composers who had rejected or never embraced serialism and experimentalism showed renewed interest in nature as an object of artistic depiction, evidenced by the use of poetic titles and recognizably pastoral musical devices. This interest took a variety of forms, from pieces directly inspired by entities in the natural world, like Joan Tower's orchestral piece *Sequoia* (1981), to works that relied heavily on triadic harmonies and recognizably classic or romantic musical textures, such as Larsen's *Symphony: Water Music* and Albert's *Symphony: RiverRun* (both completed in 1984). All three pieces, commissioned by major American orchestras, belong to the type of rhythmically active and brightly orchestrated symphonic music that formed an important "new horizon" on the compositional landscape in the 1980s, a horizon attractive to performing ensembles seeking to revitalize their relationship to contemporary music without alienating audiences.⁸ Unlike, say, R. Murray Schafer's 1979 *Music for Wilderness Lake*, which was intended for performance at a specific outdoor site, the pastoral pieces by Tower, Larsen, and Albert were composed for a traditional ensemble (the orchestra) and setting (the concert hall). To that extent, stylistic neo-romanticism converged with a traditionalist impulse that might seem to have endangered the movement's capacity for progressive political content. At the same time, however, neo-romanticism's very engagement with tradition created new opportunities for commentary on the relationship between human and natural worlds thanks to its knowing use of musical conventions in service of the representation of nature.

Born in 1941, Albert belonged to the generation of American composers who encountered serialism in the 1960s but quickly set off in pursuit of alternative compositional and expressive means. Significantly, his experience at a performance of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*) in the mid-1960s nudged Albert in a self-consciously romantic direction.⁹

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Subsequent works reflected the composer's love of the outdoors; *The Stone Harp* (1988), for example, set texts by John Haines, a poet known for his sensitive meditations on humanity, nature, and landscape. *Symphony: RiverRun*, unusual among Albert's nature-themed works because of its lack of text, was commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra under Mstislav Rostropovich and premiered in January 1985. Like several other pieces in Albert's oeuvre, the symphony takes a novel by James Joyce as its point of departure—"riverrun" is the first word of *Finnegans Wake*. The symphony traces the course of Ireland's Liffey River, the watery backdrop of Joyce's novel, from its origins in rainfall through scenes of merriment on its banks to its final exit into the sea. Unlike Cage, who turned to *Finnegans Wake* in search of what he called a "nonsyntactical 'demilitarized' language" (1978:1), Albert approached Joyce's text as a "reference work" capable of generating "suggestions and impressions" amenable to musical treatment. Whereas Cage was drawn to Joyce's linguistic experiments, Albert was attracted to the musical and atmospheric qualities of the Irish author's prose as well as its "convoluted nostalgia."¹⁰ While *RiverRun*'s musical language is not tonal in the way that the music of Beethoven or Mozart is tonal—no key signatures appear in the score—familiar elements are plentiful: strong suggestions of major or minor tonalities, tonally stable ostinati and pedal points (particularly in the first movement, "Rain Music"), and a cyclic distribution of themes across the four movements. One of the most important themes, an elegantly contoured phrase built out of sixteenth-notes, has a "rolling" feel characteristic of music depicting water (a trait found in two obvious ancestors of Albert's piece, Wagner's Prelude to *Das Rheingold* and Smetana's symphonic poem *Die Moldau*). The overall impression of geniality, however, is disrupted by occasional bursts of chromaticism, massed chords based on seconds and fourths rather than thirds, and a restless harmonic motion rarely governed by functional relationships. Albert's own style might rightfully be called the product of a "convoluted nostalgia" for the tonal past.

Not surprisingly, a repertory staple was paired with *RiverRun* at its premiere, one with special significance for Albert's piece: Beethoven's Symphony no. 6.¹¹ Placing the "Pastoral" symphony alongside *RiverRun* (most likely Rostropovich's decision) was more than the typical attempt to allay lingering fears of modern music. That choice quite obviously bolstered the latter's claim to membership in the small but exclusive club of pastoral orchestral works. Indeed, placing Albert's symphony in the daunting company of Beethoven only increased the enthusiasm for *RiverRun*'s premiere performance. In the following day's *Washington Post*, reviewer Joseph McLellan called the symphony "brilliant," "evocative," "artfully constructed," and "immediately communicative" (1985:C3)—qualities that evidently appealed to that year's

Pulitzer judges, who awarded the symphony the music prize for 1985. But the final attribute in McLellan's list, "immediately communicative," soon generated a certain critical anxiety over Albert and other neo-romantic composers whose music was potentially (if not actually) profitable. The *Boston Globe* writer Richard Dyer noted that despite the workmanship evident in pieces like *RiverRun*, "the accessibility of Albert's style has made his music controversial" (1989:97). After the composer's untimely death in an auto accident in late 1992, Dyer admitted that it was only upon getting to know Albert personally that he was able to appreciate the sincerity of the composer's "conservative and Romantic" style, which in other hands could be a calculated way to make money (1993:66). Among newspaper critics, the *New York Times*'s Bernard Holland was most forthright about his discomfort with neo-romanticism. Reviewing a performance of Albert's *Flower of the Mountain*, a setting of Molly Bloom's monologue from Joyce's *Ulysses*, Holland wrote that, while graceful and sophisticated, the music is "designed to go down easy, pre-digesting our musical food into a soothing, nice-tasting oatmeal." Although (or perhaps because) the audience "loved it," Holland continued, "one mistrusted this music's careful refusal to offend" (1986:C23).

What is striking about these criticisms from an ecocritical standpoint is their resemblance to late twentieth-century concerns about the capacity of the *literary* pastoral to deal adequately with contemporary social and ecological issues. Such concerns arise from the oft-noted tendency of pastoral writing to devolve into a willful escapism fixated on the image of a tension-free nature, a strategy that fails to do justice to the complexity of human interactions with the natural environment.¹² Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973) argued that the pastoral was gradually vitiated of the critical import it had in Virgil's *Eclogues* to become a literary mode in which the political and economic realities of country life were suppressed. In place of those vicissitudes, poets substituted an idealized landscape that served as the backdrop for innocent human pleasures rather than disputes over land management or the hardships faced by rural laborers.¹³ A decade earlier, Leo Marx's study *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* ([1964] 2000) set out to distinguish "complex" pastorals—literary works that foreground the conflict between the technological dimension of modernity and the persistent appeal of simple, rural ways of life—from "sentimental" ones.

Marx's choice of terms recalls Schiller's essay *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* ([1795–96] 1966), which proposed that the naïve poet (largely a creature of the past) is embedded in the natural world while the sentimental one is estranged from it—the latter can only effect a reconciliation in the

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ideal sphere of art. However, the signal error of sentimental pastorals, as Marx viewed them, is precisely that they do not recognize conflicts between humanity and nature, let alone try to overcome them in a heroic, Schillerian manner. Marx's concept of sentimentality is derived from neither Schiller nor the more general eighteenth-century sense of a cultivated refinement of feelings but is rooted in the modern meaning of false, misguided, or simplistic emotions. Predictably, perhaps, Marx attributed the "ill-defined feeling for 'nature'" and "mawkish taste for retreat" characteristic of the sentimental pastoral to popular media such as westerns, Norman Rockwell illustrations, and advertisements that place their products in attractively remote settings (today's beer and car commercials rely on the very same tactic). In this guise, Marx argued, the pastoral offers little more than an "escape from reality," a "simple-minded wishfulness, a romantic perversion of thought and feeling" ([1964] 2000:10).

Marx's pejorative use of the word "romantic" resonates with the reception of musical neo-romanticism, whose accessibility has tended to inspire either happy pronouncements of art music's reconciliation with the public or fears that the style's appeal signals its capitulation to the demands of capitalism.¹⁴ In addition, Marx's blunt equation of the sentimental pastoral with popular genres finds an echo in the musical world: for many critics, neo-romanticism's popularity (insofar as any orchestra's patrons can be understood to represent popular taste) disqualifies it from the realm of "serious music," to use Milton Babbitt's phrase, where composers hone the cutting edge of creative techniques (Babbitt 1987). As Dyer observed, "it is hard to sound sincere when you speak the language of another day" (1993:66). Similarly, Holland complained that "the present is deflected" in neo-romantic works by the likes of Albert and Zwilich (1993:C20). These judgments are virtually identical to those Marx leveled at the sentimental pastoral: retreat, whether to bygone tonal practices or to an uncomplicated vision of man and nature in harmony, results in an escapist art drained of contemporary critical significance. From this standpoint, the "return" to tonality mirrors the pastoral retreat in two ways. First, it bypasses (or, more negatively, evades) the critical expectation that music should respond to and reflect present-day social and technological conditions instead of attempting to recover a lost (and to a certain extent fictionalized) cultural wholeness in which composer and audience are imagined to share a common musical language. Second, it mobilizes still-common notions of the "naturalness" of tonality's harmonic system, notwithstanding the modifications equal temperament imposes on the pure intervals of the overtone series. Hovhaness's succinct judgment that "atonality is against nature," for example, leaves little doubt as to his beliefs about tonality (Relei 1997). Thanks to its purported

natural pedigree, composers who avail themselves of tonal materials reinforce the notion that, like nature, the resources of tonality are ahistorical and ever-present, ready to be tapped at will.

Albert's *RiverRun* thus courts accusations of retreat on account of both its musical language, whose quasi-tonal features run the risk of being condemned as a sign of pandering and creative weakness, and its seemingly nostalgic subject matter, the course of the Liffey river and the folksy revelry that takes place nearby. But rather than view Albert's use of triadic harmony and "grandly Romantic orchestral gestures" (Kozinn 1991:C12) as creative backsliding or base profiteering—the inevitable conclusion of an orthodox modernist—it would be more fruitful to ask whether the familiar devices of tonal composition allow Albert to comment on the substance and purpose of the pastoral genre in the 1980s in a way that a modernist idiom could not. Might Marx's notion of the "complex" pastoral be useful in developing such a perspective? Marx derived the concept from literature in which the "interruption of the machine" ([1964] 2000:15) upsets the illusion of a pastoral realm insulated from modernity, a device that enabled new insights into the relationship between nature and civilization. While such a narrative would be by no means impossible within the domain of instrumental music, it is not especially relevant in the case of *RiverRun*. Because of its broader scope, Terry Gifford's (1999) concept of the post-pastoral as a genre in which the retreat into nature is understood to be provisional ultimately proves more relevant for the evaluation of Albert's symphony. In addition to expanding the range of interpretive possibilities, a further advantage of Gifford's approach is that, unlike Marx, he does not draw strict boundaries between "popular" and "high" art, a stance that seems important in the case of neo-romantic music which enjoys a broad appeal.

While Gifford's study outlines several qualities that can make a literary work a post-pastoral, the most pertinent to *RiverRun* is the notion that post-pastorals "convey an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature" (1999:162)—that is, they tend to avoid dogmatically isolating the two spheres from one another. Gifford's idea might be refined as follows: post-pastorals reflexively point to their own participation in discourse about nature. Rather than feigning a transparent representation of the "real thing," post-pastorals acknowledge their active role in constituting their objects of representation. I would suggest that *RiverRun* highlights this process from the very beginning of the first movement, "Rain Music" (example 1). After a brief introduction that evokes G# Minor but is punctuated by dissonant chords built on the tritone-related root D, a falling figure in the piano, vibraphone, and chimes (m. 10) ushers in the random pitter-patter of rain. First presented as a rhythmically indeterminate succession of staccato C#s in

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Example 1: Stephen Albert, *Symphony: RiverRun*, first movement, mm. 10–18. Music by Stephen Albert, Copyright © 1989 by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

A Moderato; un poco misterioso ed inquieto
♩ = 66-72

Winds, Hns., & Strings **ff** Pno, Vib., & Chimes Vns. **pp** Tpts. 3 Ob. 3

Cl.2, Hp.2 (different rhythm) Vns., trem. (>)

Cl.1, Pno. (different rhythm) Vns., trem. (>)

Fl.2, Hp.1 (different rhythm) Vns., trem. (>) Fl.1, Pno. (different rhythm) Vns., trem. (>)

(Vns.)

Tpt., Vib., & Chimes **f marc.** 6

Tpt. **f** (Ob.) **p**

the clarinet and harp, other instruments soon join in the rainfall, outlining the motive $G\#-A\#-C\#$. This motive (0 2 5) is also heard in the supporting texture of string tremolos, and its intervallic span is echoed by falling fourths in the trumpet and oboes (m. 17). The rainfall ceases as a more assertive passage expands on the motive of a fourth (notably presented as a pedal by the double basses) and the falling figure that initiated the rainfall.

Example 2: Albert, *RiverRun*, first movement, mm. 38–41. Music by Stephen Albert, Copyright © 1989 by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Inquieto e precipitando

38 Picc., Glock. *ff* *ffp* Pno., Xyl. *ff*

(a)

ffp *ff*

The random sound of raindrops soon returns, however, and this time, the “rain instruments” and the strings trace the figure C#–D#–F# (0 2 5), again emphasizing the perfect fourth. The two groups of pitches then blend into a giant massed chord, while the piccolo and glockenspiel transform the falling-fourth motive into an urgent birdcall (example 2). In a dramatic abrogation of the rain’s rhythmic freedom, the texture abruptly shifts to a trio of horns pounding out a four-square ostinato on D, which is then given a more lasting form by the bassoons, harp, and double bass (example 3). Thinking back to Cage’s comments on Joyce, one might say that Albert “remilitarizes” the unsystematic rhythm of rainfall into an almost comically repetitive ostinato, as if to illustrate the crudeness of musical attempts to imitate nature. Obviously, the impression of a “steady” rainfall, actually the sum of innumerable individual droplets, cannot be fully conveyed by the members of a single orchestra. “Steadiness” is instead communicated by way of the enormously simplified technique of ostinato. From this point on,

Example 3: Albert, *RiverRun*, first movement, mm. 44–50. Music by Stephen Albert, Copyright © 1989 by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

44 **D** Allegro ♩ = 126

f poco ten. e marc.

Hn.1

Hn.2 *mf* *pp* *mf* *sempre sim.*

mf *pp* *mf* *sempre sim.*

Hn.3

Hn.4 *mf* *pp* *mf* *sempre sim.*

E *Va. pizz.*

Bns., Hp. *f marc* *mp*

Str.

Db. *pizz.*
C.Bn.

the music remains securely within the bounds of traditional notation—its nod to indeterminacy is revealed as no more than that. Albert jettisons the Cage-like imitation of nature's random "manner of operation" in favor of conventional pastoral topoi, which are used to depict the river and the outdoor locale. In other words, Albert does not gesture to the realm of nature by declaring his independence from "musical habit" (thus reifying the distinction between humanity and nature) but by entering the hybrid sphere of pastoral signifiers. While some of these signifiers (like the intervals of the perfect fourth and fifth) are more closely related to natural properties than others (such as the pedal tone, whose pastoral quality derives from the drone-based instruments once favored in the country), even the natural overtone series requires that a human being build an instrument before it can become a vehicle for the representation of nature.

I do not mean to suggest that any work deploying pastoral topoi necessarily concedes their conventional (and thoroughly human) character. In order not to be undermined by their own enabling principles, romantic depictions of nature depended for their efficacy on the suppression of convention's role in representation. Albert's handling of pastoral devices differs from his nineteenth-century predecessors' in that the "naturalized" framework of tonality—its formerly self-evident character—is itself disturbed in *RiverRun*, disrupting in turn the possibility of representing nature in a way that effaces human intervention. Beginning with the introduction of the ostinato, the movement embarks on a series of rising pedal points allusive of the mounting waters generated by the rainstorm. Invariably played by the low strings and occasionally joined by other instruments, these pedal tones almost always move upward by fourth or fifth, producing a compelling (and familiar) sense of movement but little sense of an ultimate goal. D, the pitch on which the first ostinato is based, gives way to G, C, F, and B \flat once the ostinato is discarded. Brief excursions to E \flat and A \flat culminate in a B \flat dominant seventh chord (a rare sonority in this work), which resolves deceptively to B by way of a dissonant stack of thirds. After another section based on the original ostinato, the bass begins to move again, this time by fifths: from B to F \sharp , C \sharp , and G \sharp , ending finally (after several excursions to tritone-related roots) on a C \sharp Minor chord with added minor sixth. To be sure, the powerful effect of the bass motion stems from the circle of fifths, yet the various bass notes are not hierarchical members of a single scale, nor do they articulate a network of functional harmonic relationships. Instead, they produce a sense of cyclical motion independent of the channeling power of tonal harmony. In order to convey the unrestricted quality of the rainwater's path, Albert ironically cites one of the most constrained forms of tonal motion—motion along the circle of fifths—but in a way that thwarts

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the directedness characteristic of tonal music. While an echo of the tonal past undoubtedly reverberates in Albert's work, the return to tonality appears to be just as provisional as the retreat into nature.

The idea of cyclicity is also conveyed by the symphony's overall thematic process, in which motives and themes presented in the first movement develop and recur across the entire work. Notably, the rising motive (0 2 5) featured in the first movement's rain episodes evolves into what Albert called the "voice of the river" (Freed 1988:6), a theme whose grand apotheosis takes place in the final movement ("Rivers End"). Because cyclic form originated as a means of ensuring an ostensibly "organic" coherence, Albert's symphony appears to exhibit a commitment to the ideology of organicism. While seeming to honor the idea of natural growth, organicism hardened over the course of the nineteenth century into a formal approach whose human origins were suppressed even as it became a sign of an integrated (and typically Germanic) subjectivity. That is, organicism became "second nature," a cultural practice that masqueraded as natural and whose value remained unquestioned throughout much of the twentieth century.¹⁵ While only a longer study could fully address *RiverRun*'s organicist principles, it is nonetheless apparent that the symphony's cyclical procedures, rather than reinforcing a romantic narrative of subjective evolution, have the effect of distancing the human realm from the natural world. Like Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony, *RiverRun* turns to the social sphere in the third movement (entitled "Beside the Rivering Waters," a quote from the end of part 1 of *Finnegans Wake*), which recreates a scene of riverside revelry and mourning using tunes reminiscent of children's games, funeral marches, and pub songs. "Instead of the conventional scherzo and trio," Albert wrote, "is a fragmented march and scherzo" (Freed 1988:6). The trio, often an episode of pastoral repose, is here replaced by raucous frenzy in counterpoint with funereal music that recalls the opening movement of Mahler's Symphony no. 2. Rather than enclosing the pastoral within music evoking dance or other social pursuits, as sometimes happens in classical minuet and trio movements (for example, in Haydn's Symphony no. 88), here Albert surrounds the "human" third movement with the rolling "water music" that ends the second movement ("Leafy Speafing") and returns in the fourth. In contrast to the final two movements of Beethoven's "Pastoral," which depict a thunderstorm followed by a shepherd's song of thanksgiving, the human dimension recedes in Albert's last movement as passages evoking a "distant" music box and "haunting" folk-like tunes (to quote from the score) are ultimately swallowed up by the swelling river waters. By replacing the momentary joys and sorrows of human existence with the eternal flow of the river, this work allows the natural world to trump the human. The

ultimate reality, it seems, is found in the cycles of nature rather than the spiritual “beyond” that comforted Beethoven’s shepherd.

Albert does not make this point in a blandly affirmative spirit. Although the climax of the final movement is dense and dissonant, it is firmly rooted on C: the double-bass fourth G–C underpins the climax for thirteen measures, then shifts to octaves on C for three more. As the harmonically mobile “rolling” figure cycles between statements on G, A, E, and C, the “voice of the river” reiterates the (0 2 5) motive beginning on both G and C. Just after a fortissimo statement of that voice by the trumpets, the glockenspiel and chime motive that instigated the first movement’s rainstorm disrupts what might have been a final cadence on C. The rolling figure instead sets off on a series of peregrinations that move further and further away harmonically, finally settling on the root D#/Eb. In the penultimate measure, the piano echoes the figure’s falling thirds with quiet, seemingly aimless rising thirds in the top voice, and the piece comes to a close on a chord that is built on D# but is not triadic (example 4). The uncertain atmosphere clouds both the pastoral image and the tonal focus of the work. By denying a conventional tonal closure, Albert again allows his subject matter to escape the constraints of form, as the “water music” heads off in a direction that takes it beyond the confines of the piece, so to speak. Yet it is only by subverting expectations of closure, and thus by relying on culturally determined principles of musical behavior, that Albert is able to point to something that falls outside of those principles: the natural world of rain, rivers, and the sea. *RiverRun*, then, highlights the discursive quality of the pastoral topoi it cites even while gesturing beyond its own representational limits. In this sense, the symphony can be described as a post-pastoral, as what Gifford calls a “dramatic form of unresolved dialogue” (1999:11) about how culture is positioned vis-à-vis nature both historically and today.

Like other post-pastorals, Albert’s *RiverRun* places culture and nature in dialogue while refusing to collapse one into the other or to offer unrealistic scenarios of humanity and nature in harmony. At the very least, such works remind us that the relationship between nature and culture—like that between present and past—is necessarily open to negotiation. Efforts to make human civilizations more sustainable involve constant testing and fine-tuning of that relationship. The urgency of this project, in which the arts are now active participants, should dispel any discomfort with programmaticism borne of an old-fashioned commitment to artistic autonomy. Indeed, Albert’s approach would have found a harsh critic in Theodor Adorno, who proposed that art which truly respects nature should not attempt to represent it—such representation resembled too closely the kind of technological subjugation of nature that forces it into predetermined conceptual schemes. “The more

Example 4: Albert, *RiverRun*, fourth movement, mm. 148–50. Music by Stephen Albert, Copyright © 1989 by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP). International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission.

rallentando a tempo (♩ = 63)

148

8^{va}
Vns., Vib.

3

3

pp

Picc., Glock.

7

3

Pno.

p bell-like

più p

Hns., Vla.

pp

"Rolling"
figure

3

3

p

Bn., Hp., Vc.

Db., B.Cl.

strictly artworks abstain from rank natural growth and the replication of nature,” Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*, “the more the successful ones approach nature” (1997:77).¹⁶ The true affinity between art and nature, he suggested, lies in the appearance of objectivity shared by both, in their separation from “human intention” (1997:78). At the root of Adorno’s view is a desire to preserve some kernel of absolute otherness in nature as the locus of its resistance to human attempts to dominate it.¹⁷ However much this position may emerge from the laudable insight that meaningful existence on this planet does not stop at human consciousness, it places unnecessary restrictions on the kinds of conversations about nature that can be held within the artistic sphere—conversations that, like Albert’s *RiverRun*, point to culture’s mediating role in any concept of nature while showing that the natural world may nonetheless exceed our ability to represent it.

On a final note, it is ultimately unhelpful to imagine nature as a realm whose otherness is its most significant quality when we are so clearly in need of broader recognition and study of the human impact on the environment and, in turn, of the (altered) environment’s impact on us. If, from an Adornian standpoint, we still need help shedding our dominating attitude toward the world, perhaps we might consider that nature’s otherness inheres in ourselves as well, insofar as most of what takes place in our living, breathing bodies is opaque to consciousness. Awe in the face of nature’s otherness might then motivate humility in the face of that part of ourselves which forever eludes self-knowledge.

Notes

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1. Morris (2003) addressed the ties between Crumb’s piece and the growing scientific and popular interest in whales in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

2. This was not the first time Rochberg delved into the stylistic past in his compositions. *Music for the Magic Theatre* of 1965 thematized the disorienting coexistence of past and present in contemporary life. The first movement inserts quotations from works by Mahler and Mozart into a musical idiom that is predominantly atonal, and the second movement enjoys a placid classicism until it is suddenly wrenched back to the “present,” signified by intense dissonance. The Third String Quartet’s Variations movement, on the other hand, is consistently tonal throughout, as if to suggest that such stylistic retrospectivism no longer needs to be excused or qualified. For further discussion of Rochberg’s music and its contemporary impact, see Taruskin 2005.

3. See Rochberg’s (1984) commentary on the Third String Quartet. While the historical boundaries and defining characteristics of postmodernism are a matter of debate, one of its

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most commented-on features is the changed relationship to time and history it entails, having rejected the modernist notion of continual progress. The literature on postmodernism is vast, but Jameson 1991 and Harvey 1989 are indispensable.

4. While it may not be possible to draw a firm distinction between neo-romanticism and neo-tonality, the former term tends to point beyond aspects of harmony and musical style toward a composer's desire to communicate with large audiences. This desire has often been interpreted negatively; for example, Jann Pasler writes, "In music, we all know about the nostalgia that has gripped composers in recent years, resulting in neo-romantic works . . . To the extent that these developments are a true 'about face,' they represent a postmodernism of reaction, a return to pre-modernist musical thinking" (1993:17). In the Grove entry on "Neo-romantic," Pasler defines neo-romanticism as appealing "directly to the emotions." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. "neo-romantic."

5. Ecocriticism, a discipline whose boundaries are flexible with respect to subject matter and methodology, typically investigates relationships between cultural products, the environment, and nature, where the latter is recognized to be both physically existing and ideologically constructed. In the field of literary studies, Buell 1995 and Bate 2000 are exemplary. For a concise summary of the field, see Garrard 2004. Ecocritical approaches within musicology, though few, include Toliver 2004 and Morris 1998; see also Rehding 2002.

6. While this conclusion arguably applies to any work of music, some pieces depend on masking their conventional character in order to achieve their intended effect. For example, intimations of the primordially and purity of nature in Wagner's Prelude to *Das Rheingold* rely on hearing its opening measures as an unmediated citation of the natural overtone series.

7. Excerpts of essays and music by these and other soundscape composers can be found in Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001. See also *Organized Sound* 7 (1), a special issue devoted to soundscape composition published in 2002.

8. See the booklet accompanying the New York Philharmonic's 1983 concert series, with essays by composer-in-residence Jacob Druckman and others (Sanders 1983).

9. For a short overview of Albert's career, see Mary Lou Humphrey's (1993) essay in the memorial booklet devoted to the composer.

10. Albert's comments on the symphony are quoted in Richard Freed's notes for the 1988 Delos recording of *RiverRun*, with Mstislav Rostropovich conducting the National Symphony Orchestra (Freed 1988:4).

11. The overture to *Fidelio* was also included on the program (McLellan 1985).

12. On the centrality of the notion of retreat to pastoral literature, see especially Gifford 1999, chapters 1 and 3.

13. For Williams, this process began as early as the pastoral dramas of the Italian Renaissance (1973:18–22).

14. Espousing the latter view, Bernard Holland wrote, "Its mysteries notwithstanding, composing music is also a business. An individual makes an artifact to be used or sold, hoping from it to feed himself, clothe his children and somehow create the protective space to make life bearable. So it will always be. Stephen Albert's 'Flower of the Mountain' . . . is no different" (1986:C23).

15. The familiar concept of "second nature" has been subjected to scrutiny especially by critics in the Marxist tradition, including Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno (see Vogel 1996, chapter 2, and Paddison 1993:31–37). For an introduction to the topic of organicism in music studies, see Solie 1980.

16. For a discussion of Adorno's views on nature in relation to the music of Anton Webern, see Johnson 1999:225–29.
17. Vogel criticizes Adorno for maintaining this borderline “magical” view of the world: “In its desire to assert the reality and ‘otherness’ of the world, this position ends by rejecting any *real* human attempt to interact with that world, worrying that all interaction is a transformation and so inevitably betrays the egoism of domination, the violence of ‘brutal self-preservation’” (1996:95).

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