

Henry Brant, Avant-Garde Composer, Dies at 94

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Henry Brant, an adventurous American composer best known for his spatial music, in which the placement of performers on the stage and at carefully specified places around a concert hall is a crucial element, died on Saturday at his home in Santa Barbara, Calif. He was 94.

The composer Neely Bruce, a friend of Mr. Brant's, announced the death. Mr. Brant's "Ice Field" (2001), which won the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2002, was inspired by his experience, as a 12-year-old in 1926, of crossing the Atlantic by ship, which navigated carefully through a large field of icebergs in the North Atlantic.

The work, first performed by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony in Dec. 2001, was in many ways typical of Mr. Brant's spatial techniques. The strings, two pianos, two harps and timpani were on the stage of Davies Symphony Hall. Oboes and bassoons were in an organ loft. The brass and a jazz drummer were in the first-tier seats, and piccolos and clarinets were at one end of the second tier with pitched percussion at the other end and other percussion instruments to the side of the audience on the main floor. Mr. Brant played organ in the first performances.

Mr. Brant was already an established composer of sometimes experimental, sometimes conventional music when he began to consider space an important compositional element. In the early 1950s, he began to find that as his music became more texturally complex, the details of the individual lines within a work became more difficult to hear.

Inspired partly by the music of Charles Ives, who sometimes juxtaposed multiple ensembles playing different music, and partly by a work for five jazz orchestras by Teo Macero, one of his composition students who later became an important jazz producer and arranger, Mr. Brant

began using space as a compositional element. He sometimes called it the fourth dimension, along with pitch, timbre and duration. His own first spatial work, "Antiphony I" (1952-3), was composed for five widely spaced orchestras, each with its own conductor.

Simply distributing the musicians around a concert space was not the end of Mr. Brant's experiment. Taking advantage of the new clarity that his expansive placements provided, he also gave each of the widely spaced ensembles music of a different character. In "Hieroglyphics 3" (1958), for example, a lachrymose solo viola is set against a timpani rumble or sometimes an eerie mezzo-soprano line; and tactile, delicately plucked sounds from a harp contrast with brisk, staccato organ figures. Other works bring together angular, contemporary writing, ear-catching melody, arresting jazz rhythms and world music.

Henry Brant was born on Sept. 15, 1913, in Montreal, to American parents. His father, a professional violinist, encouraged his early interest in composition. When he was 9, he wrote for an ensemble of his own invented instruments. At 12, he wrote a string quartet. Mr. Brant pursued his formal studies at the McGill Conservatorium in Montreal, and in 1929 he moved to New York to study at the Institute of Musical Art (which became the Juilliard School) and the Juilliard Graduate School. He studied privately with George Antheil and Wallingford Riegger. Early in his composing career, Mr. Brant supported himself by conducting radio orchestras, arranging music for ballet companies and jazz ensembles and orchestrating Hollywood film scores. He also taught composition at Columbia University from 1945 to 1952; at Juilliard from 1947 to 1954; and at Bennington College, from 1957 to 1980. Mr. Brant moved to Santa Barbara in 1981. Last year he completed "Textures and Timbres," a textbook on orchestration that he began in the 1940s.

He is survived by his wife, Kathy Wilkowski; a daughter, Piri Kaethe Friedman of Portland, Ore.; two sons, Joquin Linus Brant of Escuzo, Costa Rica, and the sculptor Linus Coraggio, of Manhattan; and a brother, Bertram Brant, of Dayton, Ohio.