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## AMERICA, THE BALEFUL

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Sounds of protest in New York's downtown music scene.

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The darkest, grandest noise of the musical season so far—the fanfare to an angry American autumn—was Michael Gordon’s film symphony “Decasia,” as played by fifty-five furiously committed students from the Manhattan School of Music, at St. Ann’s Warehouse, in Brooklyn. The performance took place back in September, but the experience is still burned in my mind. Gordon, one of the founding members of the New York-based Bang on a Can collective, created “Decasia” in 2001, in collaboration with the filmmaker Bill Morrison, the director Bob McGrath, and the visual designer Laurie Olinger. The idea was to create a contemporary equivalent of Disney’s “Fantasia,” a dream procession of image and sound. Morrison assembled the film portion from ancient, decaying footage that he found in various archives. The images are stitched together in seemingly random order, yet they tell a hallucinatory tale. Camels trundle across a desert, children stampede through a nunnery, a man in a fez performs a dervish dance, parachutists descend from the sky. As the nitrate stock disintegrates, the images melt and shatter.

Gordon’s score weds the hypnotic aura of minimalism to the detuned snarl of highbrow punk. It packs a punch on CD, but it needs a live performance to unveil all its power. At St. Ann’s, the

orchestra was arrayed on scaffolding around the audience, in order to highlight Gordon's spatial effects: bass instruments in the back tuned to the given pitch; instruments on one side tuned an eighth-tone above; those on the other side an eighth-tone below. Also, the music demands to be played at maximum volume so that it can acquire the proper monumental presence. With chattering figures building into great washes of sound, the score is a feat of symphonic minimalism akin to John Adams's "Harmonielehre," except that the façade of grandeur is as unstable as the images in Morrison's collage.

In one hair-raising passage, four trombones slide up and down intervals of a minor third, beginning on E-flat minor, the unofficial key of death. Glissando trombones were a signature motif in twentieth-century music: they roared happily in the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's "Livery Stable Blues," and more darkly in Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth." Gordon's trombones have both a festive and a sinister air, embodying the ambiguity of the work. Even as "Decasia" celebrates raw sound, it summons an atmosphere of dread. Too many of its images resemble Cold War footage of structures vaporizing in nuclear tests. Why, then, are you left with a visceral thrill? Perhaps it's the joy of surviving what looks and sounds like the end of the world.