Minimalism: Still PULSING After All THESE YEARS

Once dismissed as a flash-in-the-pan, the stripped-down school is now in its second generation. Is less still more?

By Joe Goldberg

A
rroll Schoenberg, the unbending avatar of the 12-tone system of composition, once remarked that there was a lot of spurious music still to be written in that style. In 1966, Terry Riley did just that, and the piece, called "In C," was performed in 1965 at the Tape Music Center in San Francisco. One of the principal performers was composer Steve Reich, who suggested that Riley add a steady pulse to the music, which consists of 53 rhythmical and melodic fragments that the players are free to repeat as many times as they wish, dropping out as they please, until the series is completed. It is the first great minimalist composition. In 1990, a 25th-anniversary concert was performed in San Francisco by Bay Area players including Kronos, and the resulting version, lasting 76 minutes, has been preserved on CD by New Albion Records.

EYE AND EAR MUSIC

When minimalism first came to people's attention, in the 70s, it was clear that the form was attracting attention no less than being the storm that had been dominated by the Pinder-Stockhausen axis in Europe and by increasingly complex serialist composers in American academia. Many of these works included simple, even serene forms of sculpture that looked beautiful, but that didn't sound very good when you played them. Philip Glass, one of the earliest and still most influential of the minimalist composers, called it "creepy music made by creep people."

Minimalism was anything but difficult. If anything, it was too simple. A steady rhythmic pulse supported tiny melodic fragments over unchanging harmony in pieces that could last, with interminable repetition, well over an hour. Some pieces got the point long before the pieces were over. Younger audiences were literally entranced. Glass' "Unseen Birds on the Beach" and Reich's "Drumming" and "Music for Eighteen Musicians" became classics of the new style. The difference between the abstract structural and mathematical gestures and the new music lay in Reich's remark that he was interested in processes you could hear.

Rather than being the flash in the pan that many predicted, it has now lasted into the second generation, although not, in most cases, in its original form. And not as minimal as it once was. In many, music having gotten as complex as it possibly could, hit a wall, and had to go back to basics to start all over again.

The young American composer Aaron Jay Kernis says, "Minimalism was a defining, but brief, style. It was so limited that it could not help but grow and expand. It's surprising to see how completely these composers' music has changed, with the exception of Reich. It's exciting to see the younger generation of composers, who were caught up in the whirlwind that minimalism engendered, using those elements in new, fresh, personal, individual ways. I think that minimalism is breathing new, fresh life into music at the end of the century."

He makes the point by saying "Academic scruffiness had pushed the idea of pulse, of melody, of harmony and of emotion completely out of reach."

Kernis, whose own recent work draws from minimalism's sense of rhythmic and emotional sensitivity (several compositions have been released on Argo), studied with John Adams, who began composing shortly after the first minimalist generation and may be the finest composer of them all. People understand what he's doing, and so Nixon In China," and most recently, a very popular Violin Concerto. He is presently working on a clarinet concerto, and a piano concerto for Emanuel Ax. "When you say "minimalist," Adams says, "minimalism was a tremendously controversial response to the prevailing style of the time—seriational and the European主义风格. Minimalism in its earliest guise was very simple and utilized very primal, some sad primitive, musical resources. It was something that was very easily compre- hended, and then went with a prime topic of conversation, like pop art. Now we've moved on, and we're in a period when styles and modes of composition are not so clear."

One of the more unusual minimalist composers is the Englishman Colin Matthews, a CD of whose work has been issued on Deutsche Grammophon conducted by Oliver Knussen. Matthews is rendered unusual by the fact that he is a state executive of the British label NLM, specializing in contemporary British music, and because he produced the Nonesuch recording of the Greek Third Symphony. He is especially fond of the music of the Dutch minimalist Louis Andressen, and although he says that "early Steve Reich and particularly Terry Riley was very refreshing, an open window that hadn't been open before," he says of the method, "It's too easy, I always saw it as a useful prop rather than as something to make your entire musical language out of." And he adds, "You can master minimalism in an afternoon." Nonetheless. "Fourth Sonata"—an orchestral piece—on the DG recording is one of the finest examples of the genre.

Another young minimalist, Michael Torke, whose piece "javelin" was commissioned for the Atlanta Olympics, feels that sensibility prospered because of the universities. "What are they going to teach? The music that can be taken apart logically. The one thing that music could do, you could speak logically about it. For himself, Torke says the main thing is, "Will I ever get a job? Can I do it? In contrast to the scrupulous, who didn't seem to care. It's like a train that was derailed," continues Torke. "Total music work has typified, and the writing style it's done in American popular music. Look at the composers, whether it's Gettysburg or the Beatles. They never became defensive about writing total music, but they had to know what about art had to be. Composers just became more and more complex, that was the progress."

Let's leave the woods for the cities. "I think we're in an interesting fin de siècle situation right now, in that we're all intuitively aware that we're coming to the end of a century, and also a millennium, and also the historical situation: 100 years ago, composers are looking forward but also very much looking backward, sort of summing up many of the developments of the previous 50 to 100 years. You can see that very easily in the work of Mahler, Strauss and Brahms. It's my opinion that very often these reflective personalities are the ones who produce the greatest art. I'm very glad to be alive as a composer right now."

Germany's KlassikKomm: Attendees Voice Varied Views On The German Trade Fair's Virtues

(This story was prepared by Wolfgang Spahn in Hamburg, Emanuel Legrand in Paris, Nigel Hunter in London and Robert Tills in Amsterdam.)

The third annual KlassikKomm, the German trade fair for the classical-music industry, will be staged Sept. 6 to 9 in Cologne, and all major German classical music and instrument manufacturers have been invited to attend. At the same time, the event has drawn criticism from Germany's music publishers and the local music trade fair in Augsburg-also to be staged on other occasions.

The German affiliates of such companies as EMI and Sony say they are inviting retailers to attend presentations of upcoming releases during the fair. However, a meeting earlier this year of the classical-music committee of the German Music Publishers' Association highlighted criticisms of the event. The publishers say they want organizers of the fair—who also stage the Popmessen trade fair in August—to stop marketing classical music as if it were pop, a move they say has failed in the past. The publishers would like KlassikKomm to concentrate more on the classical performance scene and less on retailers, whom they say are already well-represented at the International Music Fair in Hamburg.

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Organizers acknowledge that KlassikKomm was established to make classical music available to a broader public. For this reason, one request made by the German Music Publishers' Association has been accepted—KlassikKomm will be open to the general public throughout the 3 days of the fair. Daily ticket costs 20 DM (approximately $20).

The question of whether to continue the ban on selling CDs and shoot music has not yet been resolved.

"The revised concept [of opening the event to the public] isMusik Klassik's" answer to requests by the music industry. says KlassikKomm's managing director of Schott Music and owner of the classical label Werpolke in Mainz, says that, in contrast to other music fairs in Germany, such as the Frankfurt Musikmesse, which is a sales fair, KlassikKomm is more of an industry forum. "Talking to a lot of different people from the music business is the main aspect," he says.

Thus far, KlassikKomm is still dominated by the classical business in Germany, even while its counterpart, Popmessen, draws more international interest.

"It looked very professional," says Florence Rio of Swiss Music France, who attended KlassikKomm in 1995 at the invitation of her German label. "I saw a lot of people from the industry, from artists to the promotion. But it seems to me it is most of all an event for the German industry.

LOOKING FOR A GERMAN EVENT

Roger Thomas, advertising manager with U.K.-based General Gretsch Music Publishing, says that he is attending KlassikKomm in 1995 and found it "very useful, specifically from the point of view of making contact with independent German classical labels. It's easier to have more detailed discussion of smaller events like this," he says. "We have a wide range of products as well as Gramophone magazine, such as the Good CD Guide series covering German classical artists. We have the hope that [KlassikKomm] will continue as a forum for meeting German companies. We went there looking for a German event, and we found one."

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