



Let's talk postminimalism. Yes, I know it's an ugly word, and no one likes it, and worst of all, it says nothing about what the music it refers to is like, only what it came after. Yet the more new music I hear, the more that term makes a certain sense. For there is a new musical style abroad in America: gentle, snappily rhythmic, process-oriented, rarely dissonant, and as rarely completely consonant. The proponents of that style grew up listening to Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Thus they inherited minimalism as a done deal, and, having no need to define it, were freed to use it as a lens through which to look out at the world. One could say that minimalism has passed from its navel-gazing phase, in which it was obsessed with its own technical desiderata, into a new stage in which it recedes into the background for composers who are once again describing the world around them, though in terms shaped by the minimalist critique.

This thought has been growing in me for a few years, but it jumped out of my brain full-blown recently upon listening to *Sara's Grace*, Belinda Reynolds's piece for chamber orchestra and two sopranos played by the Albany-based orchestra Dogs of Desire. For, after a few deceptively quiet measures, this delightful work suddenly bursts into a rousing boogie-woogie rhythm, over and under and behind which are occasionally heard phrases of the song "Amazing Grace." And yet it's not real boogie-woogie: it's a *postminimal* boogie-woogie, abstracted into a handful of chords that no real boogie-woogie ever saw before—a gaily tinted still photograph of boogie-woogie. And it's not really "Amazing Grace" either, because it always stays in 4/4 and the phrases don't come out right. But it's an almost Ivesian musical picture of a certain world, and while you certainly can't call it minimalist, minimalism is the camera through which it is taken.

Belinda Reynolds, a San Francisco composer and member of the Common Sense Composers' Collective (like Carolyn Yarnell whom I recently wrote about in this column), is one of the smoothest postminimalist composers around, someone whose work epitomizes the style with particular clarity. This isn't to say that her music is undistinctive; certainly Dogs of Desire sparked an uncharacteristically raucous essay from her in *Sara's Grace*. But it does suggest that her role, so far, has

For postminimalism is nothing less than a new paradigm for instrumental music, especially in the chamber medium. Minimalist music was long, linear, and unbroken, but *Cover* is a mosaic, its textures and tonalities as smoothly fused as panes of a stained-glass window. Composers today are still allergic to the four-, eight-, and sixteen-bar themes and periodic structures that made the classical rep from Bach through Brahms possible. Instead, they need a new type of continuity, and they find it in greatly foreshortening minimalism's use of gradual process. The opening figures of *Cover* imply no structural closure but an open-ended field, and so it becomes the composer's job to sensitively size and modulate the panes of this mosaic, drawing a picture not note by note, but texture by texture, stage by stage, intensity shift by intensity shift. I could list 200 pieces that fit this description, but not one that achieves the aim with more perfection than *Cover*. It stands out not for any idiosyncrasies, but for its elegant polish, the persuasive pacing of its metamorphosis, the complete absence of false steps or miscalculations.

And Reynolds's conception of the style is not a limited one. In the more recent *Solace* (1999–2000) for Baroque flute, oboe, and viola da gamba with harpsichord—one of several Reynolds works for Baroque ensemble—she puts the music through more radical transformations of speed, opening in near-stasis before adding melodies in quarter notes, eighth



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been more analogous to that of Haydn or Brahms than to Berlioz or Liszt. In other words, she is involved in the perfecting of a language to which other composers have contributed, rather than rebelling against the strictures of earlier musics and striking out on her own. In times of musical chaos like the late twentieth century, the revolutionary stance can be a futile gesture, whereas synthesis can lead to revolutionary progress.

Take *Cover*, Reynolds's 1996 work for flute, cello, and piano. One could imagine this piece being immortalized in the 2075 edition of *Norton Anthology of Music* as a perfect specimen of the newest 1990s American style. Like some of Reynolds's works, it is a perpetual motion of eighth notes, though the rhythmic surface is kept lively by a continual switch between quarter-note and dotted-quarter accents. The piece begins in some ambiguous E minor scale with A-sharps thrown in, and—as minimalism taught composers to do—adds new pitches gradually, one at a time. Key changes are frequent, sudden, and unprepared yet graceful and well-motivated, more like subtle shifts in color than dramatic changes of focus. There are melodies that come back and structure the work, but they are so calculatedly impersonal that they remain in the background, and you would hardly notice them on first hearing.

notes, and sixteenths with no change of real tempo. While her more "introverted" works concern themselves with such processes, her "extroverted" ones like *Sara's Grace* and *Between You and Me* look outside themselves to the wider world: the last-named is a poignant duet for the keyboard/electronics duo Twisted Tutu, in which intimate spoken phrases of enigmatic import overlap via keyboard sampler, set off by sadly contemplative chords.

It's pretty music, all of it, but never mindlessly so. It is "accessible," whatever that means, but intricate, its evolution spurred on by thoughtful dissonances that force modulation rather than resolve. It requires considerable performer virtuosity, but of the understated Haydn type, not the visible hard work of an Elliott Carter gig. The rhetoric of modernism has given us a reflex for praising those who break all the rules, and left us without a vocabulary for admiring those who invent and refine rules, and who increase the potency of an ongoing collective artistic current. But Ezra Pound has pointed out what an advantage it is to inherit a usable language: those who do so, he wrote, "don't have to begin by reinventing everything." The elegance of Reynolds's music proves what an enviable advantage that is. ■