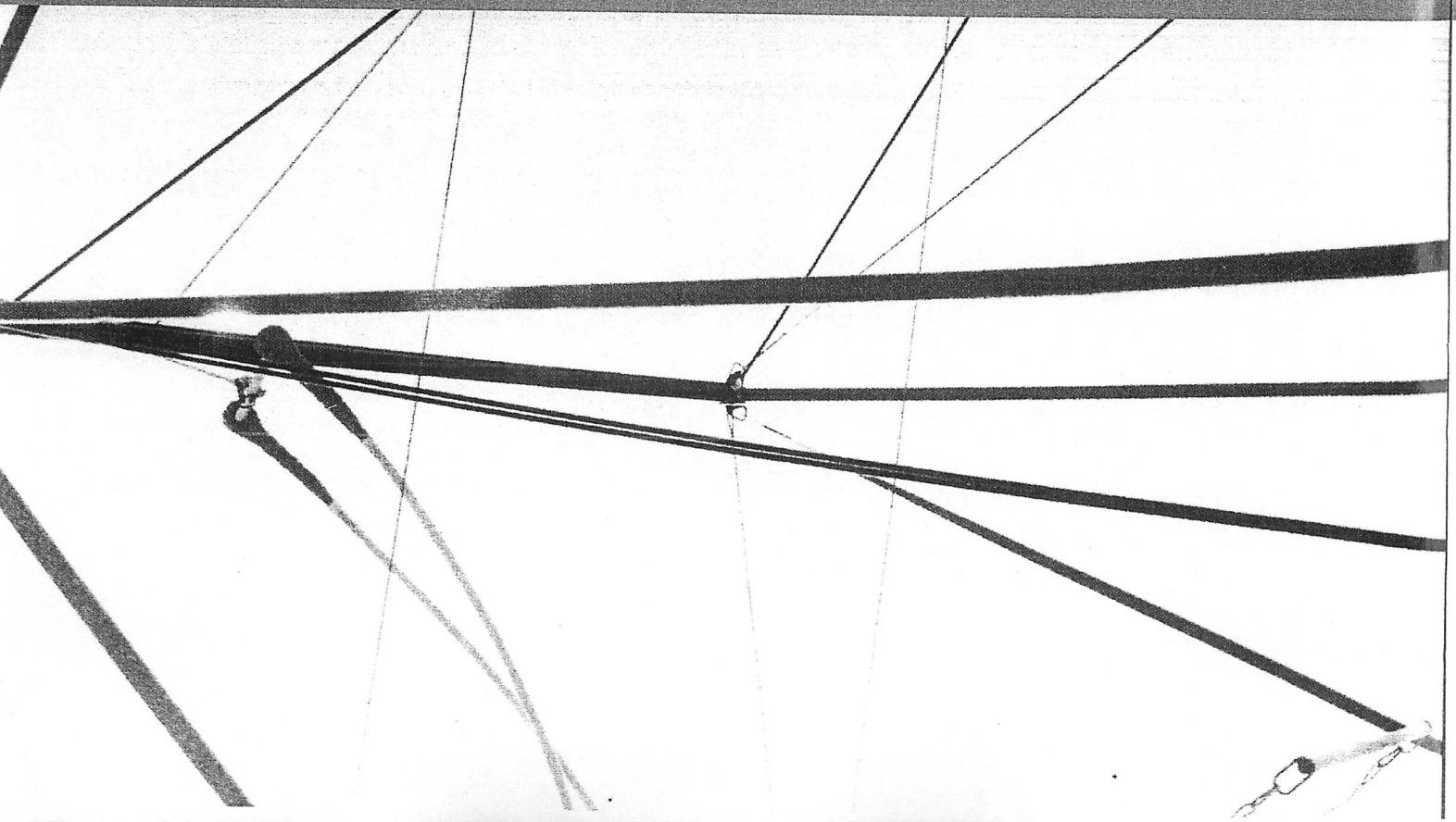




When I was young I had this idea that anyone who was truly musical ought to be able, stranded on a desert island, to make enchanting music with nothing more than two sticks. Whatever the value of the idea, it's a test that Mary Ellen Childs would pass with flying colors. In fact, the most amazing work of hers I've ever witnessed live was exactly that—or rather, it was performed by three people each with nothing more than two wood blocks. The piece was called simply *Glick*, and while I can't possibly do it justice in description, I'll try to give you the flavor.



Three people stand facing the audience, holding a wood block in each hand. In quick rhythmic unison, they start tapping one wood block with the other. In perfect synchronicity, they begin alternating taps on their own wood block with taps on the right-hand wood block of the person to their left. The left hands of performers 1 and 2 shoot up in the air and tap wood blocks over their heads, then 2 and 3. Never breaking rhythm, they turn toward each other; the middle person holds out his wood blocks as the other two alternate tapping on the top and underneath, tapping now the wood block nearest them and then the other one. All this goes on for ten minutes, a complex and mercurial choreography memorized, with a perpetual motion of sixteenth notes in continual split-second timing. It's too quick for them to even watch what they're doing. The hands shoot up and, as in an expert trapeze act, the other person's wood block has to be there at that microsecond. When I saw *Click* at Experimental Intermedia in New York City, the entire audience cheered, whooped, and whistled afterward.

Childs lives in Minneapolis, and while she writes conventional chamber music too, these days she's involved with a percussion/dance group called Crash. That's who performed *Click*, and she's written them other pieces with snare drums, frame drums, cymbals, and even just drum sticks. *Click* wouldn't mean much on a recording; it's just clicks in intricate patterns in a steady

The danger is that permutational logic can be very difficult to follow, as critics of twelve-tone music have now pointed out at length, and you have to have an innate sense for what kind of logic is musically meaningful. Childs realized that the disparate gestures of a choreographed ensemble are easy to trace. Take her Crash piece *Drumroll*: four drummers on wheeled office chairs glide and spin around stage hitting snare drums at the cardinal points and a bass drum in the center. The patterns they make—simple rhythmic motives, hand gestures, huge circles—operate on different levels that don't interfere with each other, and it's possible to keep track of a polyphony of actions all at once. And it's really entertaining, too, with that brilliant kind of simplicity that forces the question, "Why didn't anyone ever think of this before?"

The same kind of logic operates in her more conventional chamber music as well, on the more subtle level of pitch and harmony. *Kilter* for two pianos of 1992 (she liked the word, because you always hear of things being *out* of kilter, never in) revolves, almost literally, around a middle-register F played back and forth between the pianos. Patterns emerge from that F, not with minimalistic gradualness, but with the suddenness of inspiration. Every Childs work goes through a number of sections, but she creates the impression that all the patterns were there from the beginning, as potentials. The music jumps

AMERICAN COMPOSER

by KYLE GANN



MARY ELLEN CHILD S

rhythm. Nevertheless, it's not just a piece of choreography, but a piece of music. It contains themes, polyphony, rhythmic displacements, retrogrades, sectional divisions, and canons—especially canons. It is, like all of Childs's music for Crash, choreography—written by a composer. You have to notate it musically. It is musically structured. It's just music that can't live without the theatrical element.

Childs gravitated into this odd field because she has an unparalleled aptitude for an aspect of music that minimalism touched on only briefly: logic. It's not the large-scale harmonic logic of sonata form, or the complex logic of twelve-tone music, but the kind of binary logic of Steve Reich's and Philip Glass's early music: if AB, then BA. If ABC and BAC, then BCA followed by CBA. This playful permutation of simple elements seemed to be the essence of minimalism for a few months in 1967, after which most of the minimalists veered off in search of atmosphere, hypnotic continuity, and massive form heading back toward romanticism. But Childs clearly saw possibilities there that everyone else missed. Music theory classes have made us think of logic as the dry part of music, but Childs, like Haydn, realized that it can actually be the playful, engaging part.

from idea A to idea B to idea C, then brings back A and C together, then tries out B and D, always changing but very much of a piece. The logic is just beneath the surface, and you couldn't pinpoint it if someone asked you point-blank, but it unifies postminimalist works while allowing for whimsical changes of texture and speed. Even her sad music (meaning slow, minor key) is playful.

For instance *Parterre* of 1988 for mixed sextet, including a mezzo-soprano, is pervaded by recurring patterns within a B-flat minor scale, anchored by repeated notes that pass from instrument to instrument and change the apparent tonic by moving around. The slow, ethereal introduction of *Four of One of Another* for accordion and string quartet segues seamlessly into a rousing but harmonically motionless allegro in 6/8. It is not music of great range or versatility, nor is it markedly emotive. While it has atmosphere, the atmosphere is always secondary. But it is delightfully logical music; it pleases the ear by sounding right, and pleases the mind by being memorable the first time around, like a Beethoven sonata. And you sense that if Mary Ellen Childs ever got lost on that desert island, she'd pick up two coconut shells and keep right on going. ■