

Ingram Marshall is the great poet of the indistinct. His music is filmy, nebulous. It melts. It enters unobtrusively and dies by slowly slipping away. In between the drama can be gripping, but it sneaks up on you. A friend once accused me of neglecting Marshall for the reason that his music is too unstructured, too devoid of discrete objects and clear outlines, to be easily written about. Actually, I've written little about Marshall because his music, though well known, is seldom performed in New York. But it's true that few composers write music so difficult to spin words out of. That may be why his career has seemed as nebulous as his reputation. He made a splash 20 years ago with *Fog Tropes* and *Gradual Requiem*, and his flow of CDs has never abated. With some justice he could have been considered the "sixth minimalist" after—or even before—John Adams, yet he remains a quiet background figure. For the record, let it be known that I've found Marshall's music glorious since *Fog Tropes*, and age has only honed his powers.

But evaluation, as Virgil Thomson took pains to note, is infinitely less helpful than description, and description is indeed a larger than usual challenge here—especially with the January 31 "Interpretations" concert at Merkin Hall, which featured three solo works. Here were no extramusical associations to latch onto, like the prison doors slamming in Marshall's *Alcatraz*, or the Russian folk songs underlying his *Hidden Voices*. Instead, in *Holy Ghosts*, we had Libby Van Cleve's soulful oboe d'amore gliding across a filmy background of virtual (or prerecorded) oboes d'amore. Steve Reich, of course, in *Vermont Counterpoint* and other instrument-and-tape works, has worked this genre into boppy tapestries of interwoven lines. By contrast Marshall gave us a wash of wavery glissandi, lovely and as pastoral as any Handel andante but completely out of focus.

A little more distinct was *Soe-Pa*, a new work for guitar and digital delay written for and played by Ben Verdery. Flurries of melody from the guitar dispersed into filminess in the electronics, but there was also a quote from Pachelbel's Canon, and a bassline repeated to play melodies over, baroque-style; for all his hipness, Marshall draws from the classical European tradition more than any new-music figure I can think of. (Likewise, *Holy Ghost* stole some melody from Bach's B-minor Mass.) The piece that I was most curious about, though, was *Authentic Presence*, a piano piece without electronics given its sparkling world premiere here—premiere at least in this



AST III UHS
would do
Z out the hard

edge of the instrument.

And it's a tribute to Marshall that he managed to create a compelling new classic of the piano repertoire while staying within his own aesthetic world. *Authentic Presence* opened with big, romantic, hand-crossing gestures rippling across the keyboard, segueing into mid-register repeating figures and melodies that hovered around the tops of major seventh chords, like so much of Harold Budd's music. Yet despite its romanticism, variety, and un-Marshall-esque loudness, the piece managed to sustain a harmonic stasis via the unpredictable return of previous figures, and thereby create a luminous spiritual aura. To call the piano piece Terry Riley-ish would be misleading, although it did share something of Riley's lush tonality and gentle momentum. But every Riley improvisation sounds like an unpredictable journey, while *Authentic Presence* stood rapt in one place like some second-century desert saint. It's always an interesting challenge to hear a composer survive deprived of his trademark techniques, and Marshall proved that as much as he loves his electronic washes, he can also induce ecstasy without them.

Marshall was paired for this concert with Donald Knaack, the West Coast percussionist who bills himself as the Junkman, and who performs energetically on the discarded debris of civilization: recycled wine bottles, saw blades, PVC pipes, tin cans, brake drums, even a defunct Mac computer. Knaack played for 45 minutes almost entirely in 4/4 meter, with plenty of Caribbean syncopations, but never once (that I heard) stepping outside the 16th-note grid for even a triplet. There was timbral variety aplenty, but he denied us much interest in the one area where we might have expected the most invention: rhythm.

Sponsor Content

©2016 Village Voice, LLC. All rights reserved.