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BARRON CLABORNE

SYMPHONY NO. 5 IS NEARLY PERFECT, YET PASSIONLESS AND IMPERSONAL.

Philip Glass's New Symphony Eases Us Into the Millennium

I'LL TAKE PARADISE

BY KYLE GANN

The pressure to sanctify a monumental occasion rarely brings out the best in a composer, at least in recent centuries. Bach and Handel dealt with it well, but we moderns seem to approach the attempt with guilty consciences. It may be due to the lack of some such faculty that Philip Glass wrote the most sincere millennium homage I've heard, which is not in itself high praise. His noble intentions can hardly be questioned. He's always been up-front about his Buddhism, and for this grand Symphony No. 5 for choruses, soloists, and orchestra he set texts from the world's major religions: from the *Rig Veda*, the *Qur'an*, the Hawaiian *Kumulipo*, Rumi, the *Popul Vuh*, the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, plus the Old and New Testaments. It was a multicultural smorgasbord of godly tidbits.

On the other hand, he assembled this ecumenical cornucopia with the same pragmatic professionalism he brings to every project, farming out the libretto to a couple of high-ranking clerics (the Very Reverend James Parks Morton, and Kusumita Priscilla Pedersen, chair of religious studies at St. Francis College). Divided into 12 almost-equal-length sections on subjects such as "Creation of the Cosmos," "Love and Joy," "Judgment and Apocalypse," and "Paradise," Symphony No. 5 seemed a musical dissertation on religious spirituality, a musical halo for, rather than illumination of, its texts; nearly perfect in its way, yet passionless and impersonal, more learned than self-transformational, and neither as original nor as provocative as Tom Johnson's analogous *Bonhoeffer Oratorium*, which I reviewed here last June.

Glass's work, released on a handsomely boxed Nonesuch CD concurrent with its American premiere at BAM October 4, 6, and 7, opened with a four-note motive like Beethoven's Fifth (only B-flat, A, G, E-flat, instead of G, G, G, E-flat), which would open the final movement as well. Highlights included some plinky, Carl Orff-ish orchestration in the "Evil and Ignorance" movement and some trademark asymmetrical rhythms, reminiscent of his early electric ensemble work, in "Love and Joy." A general monotony of harmonic rhythm was enlivened by some of the bitonal counterpoint that Glass too rarely gets credit for. Differences in text elicited none in vocal style; you could intone the Man-

hattan phone book on the third degree of Glass's shifting chords and it would sound perfectly at home. The one grating tic, though, was Glass's overuse of the characteristic rhythm that originated in his early orchestral music, an accented eighth note followed by syncopated quarters.

It is symptomatic of Glass's seeming emotional detachment that the "Death" movement was hardly darker than the others, while "Apocalypse" was mainly louder, with none of the delight that Berlioz (think of his mind-blowing "Witches' Sabbath"), Liszt, and other composers have taken in the opportunity to portray judgment and purgatory. On the contrary, Glass's more interesting movement was "Paradise," which hovered in 7/8 meter. Glass seems to be that rare composer who actually enjoys depicting the interminable pleasantness of heaven more than the flames of hell.

This symphony belongs, in fact, not in a grand romantic tradition, in which it seems unaccountably subdued and unmemorable; nor an avant-garde one, in which it is baldly reactionary; but in a mild-mannered, early-20th-century, mostly British, spiritualist genre: Frederick Delius's *The Mass of Life*, Gustav Holst's Choral Symphony and *Hymns From the Rig Veda*, Alexander Zemlinsky's comparably languid *Lyric Symphony*. All of these composers, reacting against the excesses of Wagnerianism, sought mysticism in a continuum of fairly inoffensive but ambiguous harmony. In this company, Glass's Symphony No. 5 fares rather well—more sturdily made than Delius and less obvious than Zemlinsky—and may gain enduring pockets of fans.

I had formed a better opinion of the work from the Nonesuch disc than I received from the live performance, mainly because the Morgan State University Choir is so much better blended than the Desoff Choirs were here, but also because careful miking and mixing on the CD give the work a more inflected dynamic curve. In either case, conductor Dennis Russell Davies has taught orchestras (Vienna Radio and Brooklyn Philharmonic, respectively) how to negotiate Glass's minimalist arpeggios and curves gracefully. If not my favorite Glass symphony, No. 5 is a competent, well-intentioned work with many compelling passages, and one I'll listen to again. The only disappointment is, measure after measure, how resolutely unsurprising it is. **V**