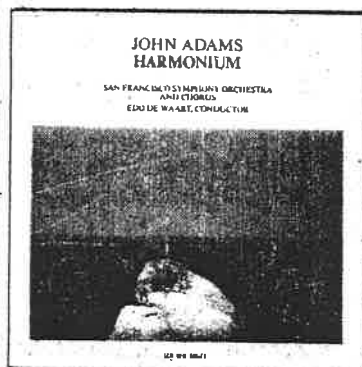


RECORDS



JOHN ADAMS: GRAND
PIANOLA MUSIC
STEVE REICH: EIGHT LINES
EMI Angel DS-37345
JOHN ADAMS: HARMONIUM
ECM 25012-1

By Kyle Gann

If you've been intrigued by what you've heard about the recent musical movement called "minimalism," but have been led to believe that it's just a bunch of composers repeating the same

Monte Young and the expression-
eschewing works of John Cage. At
some point—difficult to pinpoint,
but somewhere between 1974 and
1978—minimalism did an about-
face, and switched from asceticism
to sensuousness. The bare time
structures that were the end-in-
itself of the early pieces became
clothed with pretty sonorities,
poignant or dramatic chord
changes, and brilliant instrumental
colors. In recent works of Glass
and Reich, the time structure still
retains a vestige of its claim to
priority; John Adams, Glass's and
Reich's musicohistorical nephew
(so to speak), dispenses with it as a
crutch no longer needed.

(Actually, there are two John
Adamses on the new music scene
right now, one the minimalist from
San Francisco and the other a
rather "mystical" Alaskan com-
poser whose work I have not yet
found very interesting. *Schwann
Catalogue* recently confused the issue
further by listing the Alaskan
Adams's record *A Northern Suite*
under the other Adams's name.
Don't be fooled: the Alaskan has
recorded only on Opus One
records, a label on which the San
Franciscan has not appeared.)

As resident composer of the
San Francisco Symphony, Adams
has had a growing underground
reputation for years, a reputation
not quite justified by his one
previous record (1750 Arch Records
S-1784). *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker
Loops*, one for piano, the other for
string septet, are pleasant works
in an oddly whimsical minimalist

the same material separated by only
an 8th or 16th note, and which are
played in the grand manner by
pianists Alan Feinberg and Ursula
Oppens. The mood throughout
nicely demonstrates different levels
of bittersweetness, alternating be-
tween a melancholy optimism and
an exuberant sense of tragedy. The
first movement (unforgettably en-
titled First Movement) revolves
around dominant and minor-minor
seventh chords, delineated by
steady eighth-notes in the wood-
winds and rousing crescendos in
the brass. Three wordless soprano
lines create a beautiful aura around
the piece, sung with a fetchingly
casual portamento by Pamela
Wood Ambush, Jane Bryden, and
Kimball Wheeler. One is reminded
at many points of the Stravinsky of
the *Symphony in Three Move-
ments*, and never more so than in
the second movement's oboe solo
accompanied by brass, an unusual
sound favored by Stravinsky. Like-
wise, this movement's arching,
wide-ranging woodwind melodies
of consonant intervals will appeal
to anyone who likes the Third
Symphony of Aaron Copland. The
last movement is the most conven-
tionally tonal, full of blasts of brass
and percussion, and it finally
breaks into a trumpet theme of
Beethovenian simplicity: mi-MI-fa-
MI-DO, in a grandiloquent triple
rhythm.

Adams still seems a little
timid about working out his ideas
past the minimalist arpeggio-pat-
tern phase; and while his slow-

sure we already needed, even in an
orchestrated version, another
recording of Reich's *Eight Lines*
(previously entitled *Octet*, and
recorded under that name on
ECM-1-1168, along with his *Music
for a Large Ensemble*—Reich's titles
are so imaginative). *Eight Lines*
represents the quintessence of
Reich's postface style: elegant,
colorful, seamless, and not very
eventful. Eight polyphonic lines,
two of them virtuoso piano parts,
play repeating patterns in 5/4
meter for 18 minutes, in a mild,
diatonic idiom enlivened by sus-
tained dissonances in the strings
and pretty offshoot melodies in
the flutes and clarinets. A certain
element of danger found in Reich's
earlier works is missing here, as he
attempts to consolidate his earlier
achievements in a more respectable
and monumental (and commission-
able) form. The early works—*Come
Out*, *Piano Phase*, *Drumming*—closely
risked becoming boring, and, para-
doxically, now that Reich no longer
takes that risk the work is less
interesting.

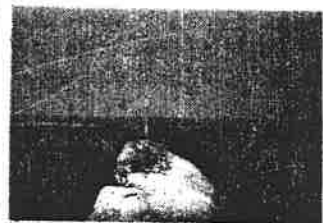
The difference between the
two recordings of *Eight Lines* (*Octet*)
is not great, but I suppose I slightly
prefer this disc to the ECM: the
recording sounds more live, better
differentiated between registers,
and the performance seems a little
more intense, even if it does take
half a minute longer. Both effects
have something to do with Ransom
Wilson's fuller orchestration, made
under the composer's supervision.

My pressing was quite clean,

Pianola Music, *Harmonium* is never-
theless a surefooted and charming
work; as broadly American as
Copland, often as rousing as Orff's
Carmina Burana, and infused through-
out with the poignancy of a distant
train whistle. The harmonic struc-
ture is more stripped down than in
Pianola, but quite similar in mate-
rials, particularly in the use of a
major and a minor triad, a half step
apart, sharing the same third de-
gree. The rhythmic momentum
relies on repeated notes to an extent
that will recall Reich's *Music for 18
Musicians*, though the slow inner
section is tenderer than anything
Reich has yet imagined.

The texts, "Negative Love" by
John Donne and "Because I Could
Not Stop for Death" and "Wild
Nights" by Emily Dickinson, are
an unquestionable departure from
the intent of minimalism, and are
so well treated by the vocal setting
as to perhaps herald a renaissance
in the grateful musical handling of
the English language, which has
suffered so much since Handel
died. The placidly angular setting
of the lines "We passed the school
where children played/At wrestling
in a ring" is particularly beautiful,
reminiscent of the more tranquil
parts of Copland's opera *The Tender
Land*. Best of all, the performance,
by Edo de Waart and the San
Francisco Symphony Orchestra and
Chorus (who premiered the work),
is stirring to the point of being
inspired, and these choral parts
have been brought off with a limpid
elegance that melts on the eardrum.

SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
ONE CD
EDUARD WAKNE CONDUCTOR



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By Kyle Gann

If you've been intrigued by what you've heard about the recent musical movement called "minimalism," but have been led to believe that it's just a bunch of composers repeating the same music over and over ad infinitum—have I got a record for you. *Grand Pianola Music* by San Francisco composer John Adams, which received its midwest premiere here with the Grant Park Symphony in June of '83, has finally been recorded, and the good news is that it's even more beautiful and exciting on repeated hearings and in a well-polished performance than it sounded under Petrillo band shell.

The other news, neither good nor bad, is that the movement itself has completed a strange philosophical inversion. Minimalism began, in the 1960s work of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, as an ascetic movement. Reich's ever so slowly changing tape loops, Glass's absurdly limited, gradually lengthening melodies, were experiments in perception and epistemology, and as such followed unproblematically the drone experiences of La

crutch no longer needed.

(Actually, there are two John Adamses on the new music scene right now, one the minimalist from San Francisco and the other a rather "mystical" Alaskan composer whose work I have not yet found very interesting. *Schwann Catalogue* recently confused the issue further by listing the Alaskan Adams's record *A Northern Suite* under the other Adams's name. Don't be fooled: the Alaskan has recorded only on Opus One records, a label on which the San Franciscan has not appeared.)

As resident composer of the San Francisco Symphony, Adams has had a growing underground reputation for years, a reputation not quite justified by his one previous record (1750 Arch Records S-1784). *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker Loops*, one for piano, the other for string septet, are pleasant works in an oddly whimsical minimalist vein, but rather wandering and unfocused, and their infrequent changes of texture or pattern rarely sound more than arbitrary. With *Grand Pianola Music* Adams has taken a giant leap forward. The measure-to-measure structuring methods of earlier minimalism have been abandoned for subtle but definite points of arrival that project a large-scale, architectonic sense of the piece. As a result, *Grand Pianola Music* sounds about half as long as either of Adams's two earlier works, though it is actually longer.

From the muted but insistent B-flat/A-flat alternation that opens the work, one immediately senses that more is going to happen here than in most minimal music. With tongue-in-cheek heroism, *Grand Pianola Music* treads a fine line between the serious and satirical use of Tchaikovsky pyrotechnics in the two pianos, which often play

the piece along with a seemingly casual portamento by Pamela Wood Ambush, Jane Bryden, and Kimball Wheeler. One is reminded at many points of the Stravinsky of the *Symphony in Three Movements*, and never more so than in the second movement's oboe solo accompanied by brass, an unusual sound favored by Stravinsky. Likewise, this movement's arching, wide-ranging woodwind melodies of consonant intervals will appeal to anyone who likes the *Third Symphony* of Aaron Copland. The last movement is the most conventionally tonal, full of blasts of brass and percussion, and it finally breaks into a trumpet theme of Beethovenian simplicity: mi-MI-fa-MI-DO, in a grandiloquent triple rhythm.

Adams still seems a little timid about working out his ideas past the minimalist arpeggio-pattern phase; and while his slow-moving harmony exhibits a compelling logic (though I take exception to the melodramatic move from tonic to subdominant seventh at the third movement's climax), one still waits for the melodic and rhythmic aspects to become as convincing. But the direction in which the work points is an exciting one, perhaps the first breakthrough past Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*; and the music is so powerful and ingratiatingly joyous that, for the first time in years, a new work seems both destined and deserving to enter the standard repertory. This performance, conducted by virtuoso flutist Ransom Wilson, is careful and well controlled without sacrificing sonic power, though in the absence of other recordings it is difficult to tell whether conducting or orchestration is responsible for an occasional muddiness of sound.

With other major works by Adams still unrecorded, I'm not

and pretty obvious melodies in the flutes and clarinets. A certain element of danger found in Reich's earlier works is missing here, as he attempts to consolidate his earlier achievements in a more respectable and monumental (and commissionable) form. The early works—*Come Out*, *Piano Phase*, *Drumming*—closely risked becoming boring, and, paradoxically, now that Reich no longer takes that risk the work is less interesting.

The difference between the two recordings of *Eight Lines* (*Octet*) is not great, but I suppose I slightly prefer this disc to the ECM: the recording sounds more live, better differentiated between registers, and the performance seems a little more intense, even if it does take half a minute longer. Both effects have something to do with Ransom Wilson's fuller orchestration, made under the composer's supervision.

My pressing was quite clean, and the digital recording, if not terribly resonant, allowed subtleties to come through nicely. Those desiring a first acquaintance with Reich are advised to go back to the old three-record set on Deutsche Grammophon (3-DG 2740106), of which the records are now being released separately. But those who want to hear the most joyous, original, accessible, and sensuous new work to be recorded in quite some years should rush out and find John Adams's *Grand Pianola Music*.

No sooner had I penned the above words than I heard the dulcet ping of a glockenspiel, and lo! glowing behind me was this new ECM recording of another major John Adams work (which the Grant Park Orchestra played here in 1982): *Harmonium* (1981) for chorus and orchestra. Less tuneful and less individual than the later *Grand*

Reich has yet imagined.

The texts, "Negative Love" by John Donne and "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" and "Wild Nights" by Emily Dickinson, are an unquestionable departure from the intent of minimalism, and are so well treated by the vocal setting as to perhaps herald a renaissance in the grateful musical handling of the English language, which has suffered so much since Handel died. The placidly angular setting of the lines "We passed the school where children played/At wrestling in a ring" is particularly beautiful, reminiscent of the more tranquil parts of Copland's opera *The Tender Land*. Best of all, the performance, by Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (who premiered the work), is stirring to the point of being inspired, and these choral parts have been brought off with a limpid elegance that melts on the eardrum.

Both halves of *Harmonium* begin so softly that the listener is likely to suspect that his speakers are not switched on. Unfortunately, ECM has not quite risen to the challenge, and when the volume is turned up loud enough to hear exactly how the piece opens, the accompanying hiss is quite disturbing. My pressing was fairly clean but less than pristine, and considering that the entire record contains less than 33 minutes of music (the economy-conscious be warned), one would think that the result could have been a little more exquisite. Balance is not terribly good either, and the crashing bass sounds (the dynamic range is tremendous) can overwhelm the rest of the work.

Nevertheless, the record is highly recommended because the piece is: mellower than *Pianola*, perhaps less original, but equally beautiful.

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