

Beyond the Climax

By Kyle Gann
Margaret Leng Tan

Classical music simulates the male sexual response. If you can listen to, say, Liszt's B-minor Sonata without registering that, you're in denial. The piece stalks up and down the keyboard in agitation, grabs a harmony whose resolution makes the climax inevitable, relaxes a moment *before* shooting its wad in glorious ritardando, then sags quickly into silence before resuming the next undulating crescendo. So embedded is that paradigm in the classical mind that the listener scoffs at music that fails to express it. Then, when that nonclimaxing music becomes too prevalent and popular to ignore, we set it apart from "real" music with an exculpatory term: *minimalism*.

Margaret Leng Tan's "Minimalism Redux" marathon at Roulette November 7 and 8 showed that the M-word isn't the whole issue. Composers she played—Erik Satie, Morton Feldman, Alan Hovhaness—were too far-flung to fit beneath the same umbrella, but their grouping seemed intuitively correct. They shared a negative, the renunciation of European music's aggressive goal-orientation. As an unprecedented family portrait of several generations of proto-, post-, and big-M minimalists, the concert revealed surprising resemblances and differences, and made the point that our accusations about minimalism actually

apply to a larger realm.

For example, most of John Cage's music is spiky and noisy, yet we connect him with minimalism; we say, "he made minimalism possible," because he swept aside with one stroke Europe's demand that every piece climax (a demand that such composers as Debussy seemed to satisfy only reluctantly). Leng Tan played the subdued *A Room* for prepared piano, and followed with *Root of an Unfocus*: still limited in its materials, but sharp, bangy, and dotted with silences. There's a kind of musical homophobia in the resentment some listeners have toward silence and chance in Cage's music, a feeling that the composer ought to sustain control rather than throw the listener back into his own mental processes. Leng Tan is the Cage interpreter par excellence, not only because she worked closely with him, but by temperament. She savors silence unselfconsciously and makes the audience wait, and her *Unfocus* was timbrally scrumptious, meditatively violent.

This isn't to say that minimalist music is asexual or unsensuous, nor that all the pieces avoid climax. The dainty arabesques of Hovhaness's *Jhala* ebbed and swelled in a sinuous, Middle Eastern fashion. *Incarnation II* by So-mei Satoh and *Paramell V a* by Stephen Montague both grew through anxious tremolos to cathartic epiphanies. But Satoh's orgasmic moments—shuddering, gradual, recurring—seemed more

female than macho (especially if he was faking it). From William Duckworth's *Time Curve Preludes*, Leng Tan chose three of the more dissonant movements, perhaps to balance the overall mellowness. Duckworth's Preludes, especially the Ninth, which subjects a Satie quotation to a Nancarrowian acceleration process, curve unidirectionally, but not toward a goal. They consume themselves, with no bang at the end.

A piece must go somewhere and come back, said Beethoven, but he was German. The ego may prefer journey and conquest, but those aren't the soul's only experiences. A piece can begin already there, as did Philip Glass's *How Now*, which hadn't been played since 1970 until Leng Tan resurrected it. Weighty yet simple, it was less linear than his other early music, and worth reviving. For 15 minutes, left-hand chords in 7/8 or 3/8 meter set off right-hand flurries, exploring a moody stasis. Yori-Aki Matsudaira's *Resonance* followed a straight line with a left turn: it built up sparkly textures over a harmonic-series chord held with the sostenuto pedal, then switched to a new chord in the final seconds. As a nice touch, Leng Tan had Lisa Hershey and Raphael Mostel read texts from Gertrude Stein and Thomas Bernhard to show that words can circle in place as well as notes and still drive home devastating insights.

There were historical surprises. Satie was followed by Meredith Monk's *Paris*, whose ambiguous



A Cage interpreter par excellence

ostinato fooled me into thinking I was still hearing Satie. But even aside from the program's ingenuity, Leng Tan proved herself minimalism's optimum pianistic advocate. Paying little attention to transitional features, she seemed least at home in Satie's *Gnos-siennes*—sensuous but lethargic—which begged for a more nuanced, French phrasing. She likes abruptness. Cutoffs and changes in *How Now* and John Adams's *China Gates* were blunt, but that unsentimentality complemented Cage, Duckworth, and the quickly grabbed staccato chords of Feldman's *Last Pieces*. In a perfect performance, she brought passionate lyricism to Cage's famous minimalist forerunner *In a Landscape*, one of his most gorgeous works. In her hands the sparest materials seethed; then, in Toshi Ichihyanagi's *Time Sequence*, she tossed off fiendishly athletic, out-of-phase ostinatos with easy grace.

We're unaccustomed to this type of performer in new music, one not only technically brilliant, but with a strong intellectual and interpretive point of view. Minimalism may have found its Glenn Gould. I'm not the first to see a parallel between the Republican paranoia concerning female, gay, and non-Euro sexualities and the reluctance of the academic-critical establishment to accept minimalist and post-Cage music. (See Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings* for examples of how classical-music gender construction forces women performers and composers into stereotypes.) Faced with alternate paradigms, mainstream critics lack evaluating criteria, and what they can't understand they kill. By exploding minimalism's aesthetic beyond its borders, Leng Tan forces a larger question: Which power images will be reflected in classical music, and which will be silenced? ■

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