

Steve Reich

Beyond the Unmasterpiece

BY KYLE GANN

It's gotta be difficult being Steve Reich. You come of age in a decade whose rallying cry is "The masterpiece is dead, no more masterpieces!" While others fumble, you hit upon the perfect nonmasterpiece idea: repetition, a generator of exciting but climaxless music in which the *sound*, rather than the composer's personal language, is the focus. You get famous. Then, one day you realize (or perhaps you knew it all along), "Damn it, I really *want* to be writing masterpieces." You're slapped with the double-bind: you must stick with the idea that established your identity, but you're driven to subvert it to write exactly the kind of music it was created to exclude.

Nothing shows what an artist is made of as accurately as how he handles celebrity that hasn't been earned. Stravinsky vaulted over the double-bind, changed idioms twice while laughing at the discomfiture of his admirers, and on the road from *Le Sacre* to *Threni* changed from an ingenious composer into a great one. Boulez choked, pretended he hadn't, and channeled his public energy into conducting and reworking earlier compositions, as in relative secrecy he coalesced a method (in *Rituel* and *Repons*) far superior to that of his early successes. Crumb, flushed with the enthusiasm granted *Echoes of Time* and *the River*, prematurely declared his bag of tricks full, and in 20 years has never added a new gesture. Stockhausen believed his own hype and went bonkers.

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More highly charged performances could have covered a variety of sins. Reich's music is difficult, and he's been known to pressure performers to get the notes right. Perhaps Nagano, who had never conducted Reich's music before, erred in being overcautious, perhaps he had his own ideas about tempo, but the whole concert seemed to take place in slow motion. The obvious strategy of *Three Movements* was to sweep the listener up *Bolero*-like in its long-crescending momentum, but it was grounded by Nagano's plodding. Even more, *Four Sections* cried out for a Slatkin or Bernstein, for every time the texture thinned, the energy vanished. Each solo was note perfect, but at this pace the Bartók piano syncopations intended to build tension thumped along like a kid moseying to school.

Electric Counterpoint, Reich's "collaboration" with Metheny, felt more like a misguided PR venture. Like so many pragmatically motivated solo works (though not *Violin Phase*), Reich's *Counterpoint* series seems disposable and infinitely extendable. (*New York Counterpoint*, *Vermont Counterpoint*: can *Lunch Counterpoint* be far behind?) Any other composer would have given such a celebrated jazzier some leeway, but Reich straitjacketed Metheny into the usual little repeated motives in counterpoint with his prerecorded tape; only a few jazz harmonies near the end paid homage to his performer's reputation. Predictably disengaged, Metheny glued his eyes to the score, and only on the last chord managed a flourish to justify all the inevitable

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Reich's response, less brash than Stravinsky's, less shrewd than Boulez's, has been nonetheless honorable. He hasn't shrunk from working out his compositional problems in public, and while he clings to the idea of repetition with enigmatic loyalty, he has taken risks far outside the bounds of his early style. As of his November 5 concert at BAM with Kent Nagano and the Brooklyn Philharmonic, those risks haven't yet paid off. All three works—*Three Movements*, *The Four Sections*, and a solo for jazz guitarist Pat Metheny—ultimately failed, and not only because of tepid performances. Reich's repeating motives allow for exquisite textures, but he hasn't yet figured out how to generate logic with them. As a result, these European monuments built of African folk-rhythmic units were marred by a structural incongruity of ends and means, like cathedrals made from straw. On the other hand, both orchestral works exhibited partial solutions to the problems of *The Desert Music* (1984), and indicated that Reich's creative midlife crisis may end to the satisfaction of both his admirers and detractors.

There's something morbid about the timing of Nonesuch's release of two recordings of Reich's early works coincident with this concert, as though remembering the good old days might distract attention from the fact that Reich's recent music isn't doing so well. We needed to have the tape-loop pieces, *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*, back on disc again, but the more important event is Nurit Tilles's and Edmund Niemann's sparkling recording of *Piano Phase*, an influential work that up until now had only been available on record in a marimba arrangement. Also, in a spectacularly vivid recording that eclipses the 1974 Deutsche Grammophon album, Nonesuch has released *Drumming*, the piece that expands *Piano Phase's* procedure to major length, if not breadth.

But for all its impact, *Piano Phase* is, let's face it, a 12-note trifle. It is to minimalism what *Structures* (another 12-note

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exercise for two pianos) was to serialism, a promise of breathtaking sound worlds to come. No one dreamed that we would forever sit around listening to the miracle of phase-shifting (identical phrases played at slightly different speeds), and we haven't. The catch is that minimalism, possibly for lack of theory, reneged on its promise. The new recordings are embarrassing reminders that *Drumming* and *Piano Phase* make for more riveting listening than any of Reich's post-*Tehillim* music. What looked at first like a hesitant beginning now sounds like minimalism's unproblematic golden age.

For me, the pieces that define the extremes of Reich's compositional dilemma are *Musik for 18 Musicians* and *The Desert Music*. *18 Musicians* is the *unmasterpiece*, the one work that consistently engages the attention without highlighting its composer's personality. To extend the analogy, it is minimalism's *Pli selon Pli*, the piece that at once transformed and transcended the genre. Its pulsing chords, a striking sound mass out of which figures could emerge and recede, covered the seams in minimalist form. Reich temporarily abandoned that device, but most of his recent works (including *Desert Music*) show that he came to realize how much more versatile those swelling chords were for building continuity than phase-shifting was.

Reich's crisis crystallized in *Desert Music*. It was a laudable attempt to turn repetitive music toward a more varied, less gradual form, but it failed to address minimalism's unprecedented inertia. Once you've set up a gently swinging, repetitive texture that could conceivably continue forever, any nongradual texture change or new motive sounds jarringly arbitrary. Too, the romantic harmonies with which *Desert Music* expanded Reich's vocabulary created directional expectations, but rather than resolve they simply drifted awhile and stopped. (Stravinsky had the same problem in his middle period, how to actually move instead of merely create the illusion of motion, but his materials weren't so charged with 19th century teleology.) "Stuck in the

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At BAM *Three Movements* (actually three motions in *one* movement) took its starting point—the pulse—from *18 Musicians*, and its sonic ontology from the mixer. As pulsing chords died away in the pianos, they crescendoed in the strings, as though Nagano were controlling each instrumental group from a mixing board. (Most postwar instrumentation stems from electronic technology: serialism assumed the filter and envelope generator, phase-music the tape loop.) In *18 Musicians* the mixer scheme had succeeded via the well-controlled crescendi of clarinets, but here the edges were a little too exposed. Instead of floating as intended, the music hopped from group to group, and the attention was continually shocked from its lull. Harmonically, though, Reich was far more in control than in *Desert Music*, and his impres-

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sionist sonorities achieved a balance that hovered lightly rather than cried out for resolution.

The Four Sections (Reich should hire someone to write his titles) took greater risks, eschewing the pulse and moving instead through three- to five-note melodies. Here Reich plunged into terraced dynamics; in four instances the music suddenly dropped from orchestral tutti to a solo instrument—vibraphone, flute, clarinet, trumpet—to build steam again almost fugally. The progression wasn't instrumentally imaginative, and the carefully accumulated momentum took a beating every time. Stravinsky survived his corresponding period with superb orchestration, but minimalism, with its emphasis on bland smoothness, still lacks a convincing instrumental concept. Reich's own percussionists and pianists (Tilles, Joe Kubera, Niemann, Russ Hartenberger, James Preiss, Gary Kvistad, Bob Becker) joined the Brooklyn Phil, and the music slipped with relative ease into

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Given a string of such problematic pieces from a celebrated composer, you've ultimately got to ask Reich a very 20th century question: Why such loyalty to an idea? Even Schoenberg, late in life, admitted "There's a lot of good music left to be written in C Major," and he proved it by writing some. Serialism has something minimalism doesn't, a theory as to why it's supposed to work, so that the attempts that fail are still justified. Minimalism's only given is accessibility, and in that department pop music runs circles around it. So unlike a serial piece or pop song, a minimalist piece that doesn't knock your socks off inspires the question, "Why write it?" Reich could say tomorrow, "Screw repetition, I'm writing a theme and variations," with all confidence that his name, like Stravinsky's, implies a continuing audience. In fact, in *Tehillim*, his closest approach to a traditional masterpiece, it looked as though Reich had abandoned repetition, and no one lost interest.

But I'm playing devil's advocate. You find the answer to "Why write it?" in Blake: "If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise." Had I been present at the premiers of *Orpheus* or *Explosante-Fixe*, I would have bet that Stravinsky's and Boulez's best years were behind them (in fact, I heard the latter's American premier and *did* say that). I'm not going to make that mistake with Reich. This concert may have been the snooze of the year, but it showed that Reich learns from his mistakes as well as his successes. The straw cathedrals feel transitional. Besides, I hear in these failures an idealism that I can't help but respect. Unlike John "I want the fame" Adams and Phil "I want the money" Glass, Reich is resisting easy solutions. "I want immortality," strikes me as the noble posture.