

Artists hate labels, or claim to. The only American composer who calls himself a minimalist is Tom Johnson, and since his music can be more minimal than the most diehard minimalist could stand to listen to, he makes the term seem downright mischievous. So when Ramón Farrán, the Barcelona-born composer who performed at Symphony Space October 18 and 19 (I attended the latter), puts the words "minimalist opera" on the program in explanation of his *Un Toro Suelto en Nueva York*, you wonder whether the gesture is naïve, opportunistic, or ironic. But Farrán, 49, once toured with Tete Montoliu, used to run a jazz club in Mallorca, and has written music for Spanish TV; despite being European, he's no theory-monger, but a practical musician. That's the refreshing side of his music. The stale side is that he's a little too comfortable being a card-carrying minimalist.

Not that he's doctrinaire. The vigor in his music comes from incursions of Spanish melody, Neapolitan harmonies that hint of exotic climes, and forays into pop styles that are charmingly sincere. Like many recent minimalists, Farrán is more interested in the formal potential of patterns than in repetition, and he approaches that interest from the vernacular side. "Air" and "Water" from Farrán's electronic ballet *Elements*, played on tape to accompany a dance by Julia Simonne, inhabited the narrow area between pattern music and simple song forms. Five-beat digitized melodies came and went, modulated, and changed rhythm in meandering episodes that exchanged one placid atmosphere for another. Meanwhile, Simonne and her partner Scott Hunt gracefully swam, flowed like waves, blew in the wind, and drew subtle analogies for the forces the music intended to depict. It was a pleasant, evocative piece.

But before it finished it occurred to me that, minus the dance the score would have been too meandering to listen to,

## Ramón Farrán

# Card-Carrying Minimalist

BY KYLE GANN



Farrán: "air," "water," "opera"

and "A Bull on the Loose in New York" confirmed that fear. Even by the haywire standards we've become used to, this was an odd "opera": it had neither stage action nor text, only a wordless vocal line, Colby Thomas's throbbing soprano. Another enigma was that, though ostensibly based on García Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*, the piece's drowsy patterns at no point illustrated the anguish and sarcastic anger that seethe on Lorca's every page. Farrán, who conducted from the piano, miscalculated in having his musical forces—voice, electric keyboard, the obligatory guitar, cello, flute/saxophone, and computer tape—too far away from him to achieve much in the way of elegance. The most damaging problem was architectural; the work was divided into

## MUSIC

six acts, further broken into 12 scenes, and though some had expressionistic titles like "The Passage Where the Multitudes Piss and Vomit," the music was so uniform that there was no way to follow where you were in the work, nor any sense of emotional progression.

Farrán could solve that formal difficulty with some editing or visual additions—dancers, slides, even puppets. And as minimalism, the music's style had a lot to recommend it. Quasi-improvised moments such as Farrán's solo tapping on tuned flower pots allowed fresh air into the texture, and the Spanish-modal melo-

dies added exotic flavor. At first, Farrán's tendency toward five- and 11-beat patterns took the edge off his repetitions, but halfway through, when a piano soliloquy settled down into triplets grouped in fours, *Un Toro* started sounding suspiciously like a composer only three years Farrán's senior: Philip Glass. Five throws you off balance, six gives an unexpected symmetry, seven startles you, even three makes your feet dance, but four lulls the mind to sleep. From this point on, *Un Toro Suelto* was soothing and pretty, but gray, with no tension to lead you from one unidentifiable episode to the next.

I'm not immune to the argument that soothing and pretty are sometimes sufficient musical virtues. But the composer who blows a whole in that formulation is Mozart. He was a master at creating the illusion of squareness without actually using four- or 16-measure phrases. Messiaen, one of the most rhythmically inventive composers alive, has listed his study of Mozart's phrasing as one of his three formative influences, and many of Glass's followers could stand to spend some time counting half notes in the D minor Concerto. Irregularity beneath the surface makes *apparent* regularity a lot more interesting. It's called art.

We expect structural complexity in classical music. What we don't expect, what we rediscover through ethnic music, is the microcomplexity—timbre, pitch-bending, rhythmic interplay, 11-beat patterns—that classical music sacrificed when it invented notation. But the Euramerican attempt to reapproach Third World music has spawned some curious hybrids, and *Un Toro Suelto* was a prime example. To the extent that Farrán brought an unfamiliar ethnic element into his cyclic patterns, he had something individual to say, but he lost it as soon as he took the rhythmically easy way out. What do you get when you cross ethnic music's structural simple-mindedness with classical music's textural blandness? Unfortunately, minimalism. ■

C.M. HARDT

Saturday ★ December 3

JIM FAITH PRESENTS  
NEW YORK'S CREAM

Friday, November 11 '88, 8 PM

THE WAILERS

"A Union of Two Legends — The Founders of Reggae & The Heart of The Woodstock Festival..."

LIGHT  
WAVES

