

Los Angeles composer Harold Budd spoke in Chicago a few weeks ago. He's hardly a man of words, but he gave a definition that belongs in the music dictionaries: "Minimalism," he said, "is simply not using everything you have available." I could wring a half-dozen sermons from that phrase, and probably will. Budd's pungent characterization points to an ecology of music, a sane attitude of preservation and moderation that will allow music to continue to be meaningful. In the '70s it was typical to define a musical system (Stockhausen started this) and then go through every possible permutation within it. That abdication of choice indicated a fear of commitment, a willingness to invoke technical desiderata rather than intuition. We need to detrain our young composers, whether rockers, digital technicians, or 12-tone matrix rats, away from the "because it's there" mentality. Minimalism means *meaning* everything we do.

Keeping that extended sense in mind, minimalism may be yet another of the things America invented and Europeans have taken over and done better. You wouldn't know it from concert-going here, but Europe already has an impressive list of works written under minimalism's renewing influence: Otto Ketting's riveting *Symphony for Four Saxophones and Orchestra*, Zygmunt Krauze's sensuous *Piano Concerto* (not recorded, sadly), Arvo Part's moving *Fratres*, Per Norgard's *Gilgamesh*, Zoltan Jeney's process pieces, Laszlo Dubrovay's delicate *Harmonics II*, Iancu Dumitrescu's atmospheric *Movemur et Sumus*, several pieces by Ligeti—and if one may admit Japanese to the list, a few more by Jo Kondo. One notes that all these composers hail from countries peripheral to the European mainstream; like American universities, France and Germany seem too snooty to acknowledge the style. But while the "new romanticism" remains an isolated American phenomenon, minimalism's "new tonality"—clean, consonant, and purged of its classical harmonic syntax—is a quickly expanding international movement. If America is the catalyst, Europe is pointing the way toward a music in which both mind and ear can intelligently cooperate.

Intercontinental Minimalism

Ear and Mind

BY KYLE GANN

minimalism, in contrast to the American form's usual bland diatonicism. Bryars's String Quartet No. 1, played by the incomparable Arditti Quartet, is the treasure here, a patterned fantasia of gradually accreted and released tension that holds the listener despite its wandering.

Stabat Mater's angry *ritornelli* evince an affinity for 17th century liturgical music. This may be an example of Soviet post-modernism, for Part, possibly in reaction against Marxism, is attempting to declare history irrelevant.

European "new tonal" music seems



rhythm of California minimalism creates its own charming genre.

Odd that some of the most structurally-oriented minimalist music is also the most embarrassingly pretty, that on Daniel Lentz's *The Crack in the Bell* (EMI). I love this music, but listening to it all at once is a little like overdosing on marshmallow Easter bunnies. Lentz's tolerance for a bouncy 16th-note pulse and Renaissance-simple harmony seems endless, but his simple premises allow for a constant element of subtle surprise. In retrospect the music seems predictable, but give it a sixth listening and you realize you never know where it's heading. Lentz's indefatigable ensemble (the L.A. Phil led by John Harbison) switches timbres with disconcerting frequency, and is overlaid with the sexy blond voice of Jessica Lowe: not a terribly good singer, but one perfectly suited to this California-happy music.

Harold Budd's music used to manifest this kind of prettiness, and his expressed aim is "to make my music as beautiful as possible at every moment." That goal is far more complex than it sounds, for if a sound's beauty is in its passing, beauty is something impossible to sustain. Budd's *Lovely Thunder* (Editions EG) does a heroic job of trying. This is his darkest music, if not his most austere (*Abandoned Cities* was that): tragically simple guitar melodies rise above a devastated musical landscape like a timid wind over the Mojave Desert. The least rational of minimalists, Budd works more with moods than theories. As a result, he not only writes some of the most gorgeous of minimalist music but is the least fettered to any particular technique.

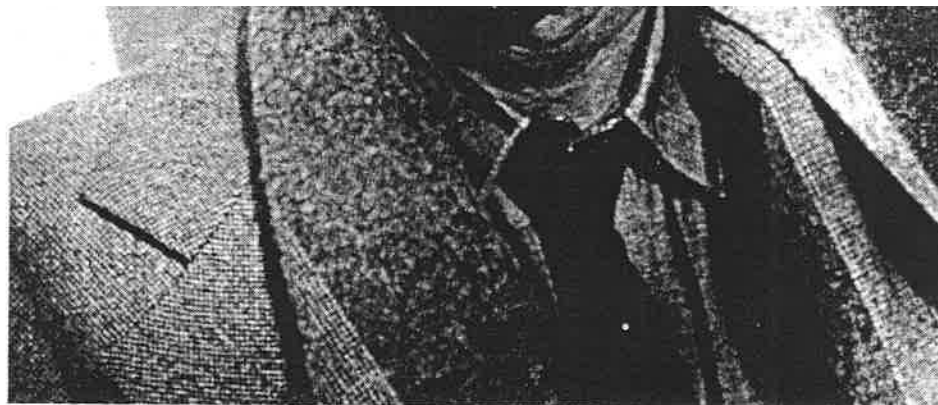
Other American offerings are less convincing, partially because there is so little theory to guide what minimalism's trying to do, partially because it's a hot commercial ticket now and much of it sounds insincere. Morton Subotnick's tracing of history through quotations of romantic music and Scarlatti in *Return*, a homage to Halley's Comet (New Albion), is predictably hokey, though *The Key to Songs* on the same release (on the CD only) combines Lentz's unremitting energy with a grittier, more violent ensemble sound. An inconsistent composer, Subotnick's electronic music is often fearless

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Given the present state of intercontinental performance, one must turn to records to compare these worlds, and I'd like to breeze through some of the ones I heard this summer. One of the most exciting recent additions to this canon is a new Hungaroton recording of three works by Laszlo Sary. More than any other composer, Sary is engaged in applying the detailed logic of serial method in a comprehensible tonal context. The result is a texture nuanced and intricate enough to satisfy the most demanding intellect, couched in a surface pretty enough to seduce the untutored ear. *A Continuity of Rotative Chords* weaves a subtle tapestry of tonal motives between two flutes and two pianos, while *Pentagram* plays with constant tempo modulation in an otherwise simple melody for prepared piano and percussion. The most stunning piece, though, is *Five Melancholic Songs*, a smooth collage of romantic song fragments too tiny to sound like quotations; charmingly sung by Magda Tarko, the piece infuses modern stream-of-consciousness with the poignancy of fin-de-siècle lied.

The one deficiency of Sary's music is its failure to develop, to move past the situation it initially sets up. Particularly in *Continuity*, the ear keeps expecting the subtle textures to shift focus. The problem suggests that minimalism in Europe is at the same stage dodecaphony was circa 1927: a partially defined style waiting for a large scale constructive principle to emerge.

As in philosophy, the line between European and American music usually lumps England on the wrong side of the Atlantic. Gavin Bryars began his career in association with his American counterparts, but his *Three Viennese Dancers* (ECM) does examine the role chromaticism and dissonance play in continental



Harold Budd: pointing to an ecology of music

The remaining works for horn and percussion are filled with an exotic beauty more ambient than structural.

I include Arvo Part only as an example of historical coincidence, for his music is too intuitive, its impetus too spiritual, to qualify as minimalist; coming from the Soviet Union, it doubtless arises from radically different social conditions. Part has been called "the Estonian Steve Reich," but I think of him instead as the belated Tolstoy of music, a mystic expressing his yearning for the Brotherhood of Man in an intense, simple, people-unifying idiom. It's difficult to tell how much that image has been sculpted by ECM, who package his music in quasi-concept albums, at one point even repeating a piece for effect. Part's early, pre-ECM music was tense and dissonant, though already preoccupied with simple melodic patterns. The fervent religiosity that shines through his more recent work may be the cause of ECM's interest, but sounds suspiciously like its effect.

In Part's second album, *Arbos*, the influence of medieval plainchant and organum becomes not only apparent but obsessive. The first album, *Tabula Rasa*, was full of subdued fury, barely contained by the fiery fiddling of Part's countryman Gidon Kremer. *Arbos* resembles that album only in its ascetic refusal to climax, and its stately modal rhythms and mournful counterpoint are far calmer. Except for the jaunty opening fanfare, the music could have been written at any time in the last 700 years, though the

dedicated to the proposition that intellectual rigor and an ingratiating sonic surface are thoroughly compatible. American music, by contrast, is neurotically split into two camps, one for whom theory is everything and sound irrelevant, another who wouldn't touch a theory if it was covered with chocolate. Distrustful of this obsessive mind/body distinction, European composers deride American serialism as an exercise in futility, though they do seem attracted to American mini-

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malism as a source of raw ideas. Recent record releases of minimalist-oriented American music, most of them from west coast composers, usually enchant the ear, but unlike their continental counterparts they rarely cause one to marvel at how they were made.

The one exception I've heard to that latter statement is Joyce Lightbody's *Bear Ears and Other Songs* (Fonetik, available from NMDS), whose fluid chromaticism in a new tonal context is akin to that of European music. Lightbody uses the uncharacteristic (for minimalism) sound of a small chorus, sparsely accompanied by drum and keyboard, for a fresh approach to an old aim: the comprehensible setting of poetic and journalistic texts. Her up-to-date madrigals, taken from Ashbury and *Times* editorials, treat the language with wit, and her infusion of that style with the cheery, loping

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John Adams's *The Chairman Dances* (Nonesuch) is an over-revealing release. The best piece here is from 1973, an ironic collage called *Christian Zeal and Activity* whose uncompromised flatness reminds us that minimalism used to be the the objective alternative to expressionism. Compare this to the album's title fox-trot, with its plunge into Ravel-orchestrated-by-Grofe Hollywood glitz, and you'll feel how far the ship of minimalism lurched leeward in the '70s. At least Lentz's cotton candy harp-and-bell textures are his own personal quirk, but Adams is happy to switch from sounding like Reich to Mahler to Gershwin and back. The album is justified by *Common Tones in Simple Time*, which represents a more palatable in-between stage.

Meredith Monk's voice and piano miniatures on *Do You Be* (ECM) bring to new music an uncomfortable intimacy. The infantilism of her squeals, vocal sounds, and nonsense syllables, shouted over the simplest of piano ostinati, evokes a childlike delight with sound, precluding the left brain's participation with true feminist zeal. But when, in *Astronaut Anthem*, 12th century organum gives way to upward shrieks of ecstasy, the imagery becomes too overbearing. There's so little content, and one gets the idea so quickly, that I'm not tempted to listen twice.

I'll conclude with Philip Glass's (partially) new *Dancepieces* on CBS, a neo-Baroque music-minus-one record in celebration of 4/4 meter. As Wittgenstein said, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." But one could note that it's possible to use too little of what's available. ■