

Everybody Plays

BY KYLE GANN

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Come Together: Wolfe, David Lang, and Gordon.

photo: Peter Serling

Janice Giteck wrote an orchestra piece recently and showed it to a friend who's an Uptown, academic-type composer. The friend said, "It looks like you're trying to prove you can write for all the orchestra all the time." When Giteck relayed the story to me, my mind flashed back to the Philip Glass Ensemble's *Music in Twelve Parts* at Lincoln Center a few weeks ago: a wall of electronic sound. "Of course," I exclaimed, with that urbane, know-it-all air of mine that has invited so many comparisons with George Sanders in *All About Eve*. "That's Downtown orchestration."

The traditional European paradigm of orchestration is modeled after the painter's palette. You want a touch of oboe here, a highlight of trumpet there; strings are more neutral and can be used all over the place. It's an economically inefficient paradigm, redolent of a 19th-century largesse we can no longer afford. You keep that trombonist onstage for 45 minutes just so he can play in the chorus at the end, and the timpani player's most useful talent is her ability to count rests. The conductor, in control, cues in and out cogs who feel alienated because they hardly know what role they play in the overall machine.

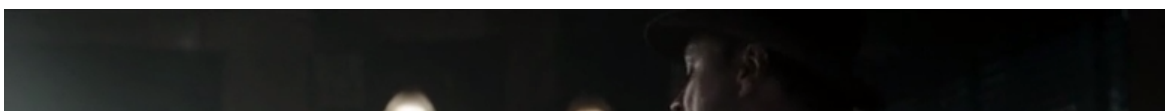
Just as Downtown music has its own approaches to notation and dynamics that the classical-music establishment will never, ever catch on to or take seriously, there's a completely different Downtown orchestration paradigm as well. It starts with the anti-virtuoso ensembles of the

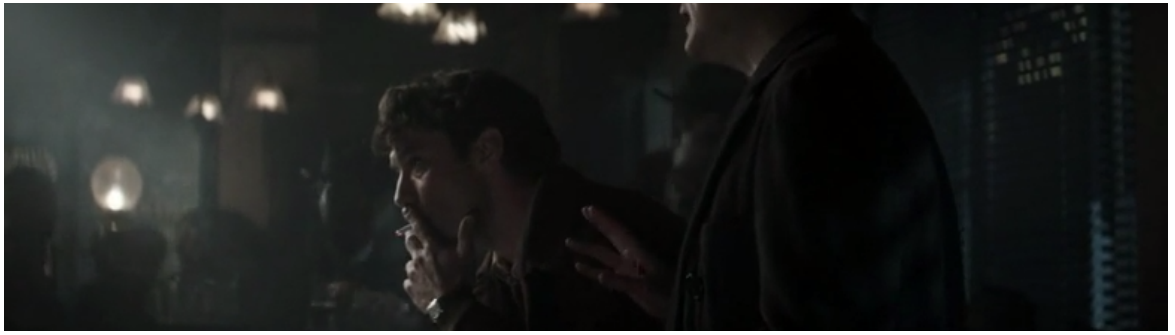
1960s, most famously Steve Reich's and Philip Glass's, which sometimes contained composers and other peripheral types whose instrumental skills were not superb. Minimalism was born as an idiom in which everyone was first playing in unison, and then with different pitches but in rhythmic unison, and then not in unison but all with the same pulse and the same momentum. Group dynamics made those pieces work; it would be ludicrous to hear a lone soloist play Glass's *Music in Fifths*. And thus the Downtown approach to instrumentation (at least in postminimalist camps) became, in a nutshell: Everyone plays, all the time.

For that paradigm is not the painter's palette but the ritual. In the music of Native American powwows, you don't have the flutes sitting out one section as the drummers add a moment of color: The entire tribe performs all together, all the time. In Indonesian gamelan music, each mallet-wielder has his own rhythmic cycle, but no one's just sitting there waiting to be called on. In a rock group, the drummer doesn't count measures until the lead guitarist needs special punctuation; and so on and so on. For most Downtowners, a piece of music is not an abstract sonic surface to be apprehended by ear and brain alone. It is a coming together of people in a certain kind of group energy, to which everyone contributes.

Of course, applied to the orchestra, "everyone plays all the time" isn't a very practical slogan, and now that Downtown composers are writing more and more orchestra pieces, some variation on the aesthetic had to emerge. You look through Downtown scores like Julia Wolfe's *The Vermeer Room*, Elodie Lauten's *Symphony 2001*, or Michael Gordon's *Romeo*, though, and it's remarkable for what long passages the entire orchestra *is* playing. Usually different sections of instruments articulate contrasting rhythmic figures, keeping the texture from getting muddy. Eve Beglarian, in *The Continuous Life*, turns a large orchestra into a virtual minimalist machine, all chugging along in quarter- and eighth-note patterns. John Luther Adams, in his *The Light That Fills the World*, keeps all the orchestra in play, sections changing chords in nonsynchronous patterns for an always-shifting color formula. Everyone contributes to the group energy, no one counts rests, and every role is more or less equivalent.

Will the orchestra world ever discover and understand this music? Probably not. The prestige of that painter's palette technique, knowing where to put the oboes and clarinets in a perfectly balanced chord, is a seductive element of the academic composer's elitist expertise. I have given up thinking that the people involved with orchestras will ever be smart enough to recognize a paradigm shift when they see it or socially conscientious enough to share their power or vary their programs. Nevertheless, by abandoning the painter's palette model for the ritual, Downtown composers have left European abstraction behind and rejoined the rest of the world.





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