

Grand Old Youngster

BY KYLE GANN

TUESDAY, JULY 13, 1999 AT 4 A.M.

In honoring Steve Reich as the featured composer for this year's festival, Lincoln Center performs a very different service than in past years. Morton Feldman, featured in 1996, was an underground figure whose reputation had swelled to the point that public recognition could wait no longer. Ornette Coleman, honored the next year, had been famous for decades, but the facets of his work had rarely been brought together in such a way, filling him out in several dimensions. Reich, on the other hand, has been retrospected to death. The concerts that take place this week—including *The Cave* performed Thursday, *Drumming* and a new work for the Kronos Quartet Saturday, and *The Desert Music* and *Tehillim* Tuesday—are a nod of the head to an artist who may now be considered, by general acclamation, America's greatest living composer.

It seems odd to end this noisy, high-tech century with Reich, music's sweet-sounding eternal youngster, as the leading available Grand Old Man. And yet there are enough parallels with Aaron Copland to suggest a ready-made slot for his reputation to fall into. Both New Yorkers, they started out in the avant-gardes of their generations before undergoing highly public reactions against modernist complexity and discovering their own crowd-pleasing diatonic idioms. Each remains loved not for his entire output, but for a handful of works written in his thirties and for ties that captured the public imagination: *Drumming* versus *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Music for Eighteen Musicians* versus *Appalachian Spring*. Both are technically competent enough to please musical experts; neither is thought of as a primarily technical composer. Both...well, you can play this game yourself.

I never heard Copland called the best living composer, but Reich has less European competition. A nonmusician recently asked me point-blank to name the greatest, and with Feldman, Cage, Messiaen, and Nancarrow now dead, I couldn't blurt out a credible candidate. Robert Ashley flashed to mind, but he is too *suigeneris* in his approach to compare, and too far outside the mainstream for the view to find resonance; similarly with La Monte Young (who was actually once considered as a Lincoln Center Festival dedicatee). A few years ago Mark Swed threw Lou Harrison's hat in the ring—he's certainly a composer of masterly and often accessible works, though perhaps too variable in style and quality, and too tied to Javanese gamelan, to achieve

sufficient general acclaim. The most popular European names since Reich—Arvo Pärt and Louis Andriessen—seem indebted to him. Of course, musicians Uptown have no end of names to suggest—Boulez, Carter, Babbitt—all of whom would swim against the tide of waning tolerance for serialist complexity. I can't imagine any of these names drawing as many people to Lincoln Center as Reich will.

More objective data come from William Duckworth's new book, *20/20: 20 New Sounds of the 20th Century* (Schirmer Books). Duckworth polled his colleagues for lists of the 20 20th-century works that mattered most to them personally, and boiled the list down to 20 finalists; the resulting book, laced with Duckworth's reader-friendly historical/philosophical commentary, is an exemplary amateur's introduction to new music. The short list, though—which includes "O Superman," *I Am Sitting in a Room*, and Pärt's *Miserere* as well as *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *Rhapsody in Blue*—is less informative than what Duckworth calls "the long list," the original 86 pieces his friends' overlap ping lists provided.

Of the 29 still-living composers on the list, nine appear for more than one work (surely a strong criterion for considering someone one of the greats): Stockhausen, Ligeti, Terry Riley, Xenakis, Meredith Monk, Pärt, and Ashley each twice, and Reich and Philip Glass tied at three works each. Glass as the world's greatest composer? Well, cognoscenti of all stripes would shout that one down, a little unfairly in my opinion. Most of ten heard, perhaps, but not for the best reasons. One could argue, and should, that this specific-composition-based poll handicaps composers whose life's work is more of a continuing process, like Young and Pauline Oliveros; but the public clings to products, and has difficulty perceiving process.

If music were a merito-democracy in which musicians' votes counted for a little more than nonmusicians', Reich might well be elected the greatest at the turn of the century. What's lacking about this week's tribute is a sense of excitement, an anticipation that his recent music may have burst through to a new level of profundity (as has been so true of Feldman, Nancarrow, and Ashley). Copland, in his late years, found his populist middle style unsustainable and timidly crept onto the 12-tone bandwagon; I feel Reich has sometimes failed via an opposite response, clinging too stubbornly to an early style that seemed perfect only for its historical moment. Hopefully, Reich's new *Triple Quartet* for the live and prerecorded Kronos Quartet will make us feel like we're celebrating a master entering his last, greatest phase, rather than thanking a once-young revolutionary for the breakaway he made 30 years ago. But the best thing about a Reich tribute is that he fits perfectly the criterion Duckworth asked for: his music matters to us personally.



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