Scott Johnson / Philip Glass

Making Music Useful

BY KYLE GANN

MUSIC

While granting that New Age music is generally short on imagination, the genre at least follows an essential impulse that few recent composers satisfy: the urge to be useful, to express something higher than the performer, to deny that 19th century lie *ars gratia artis*. Apart from dancing and drinking, for which rock is sufficient, present society doesn't offer music many opportunities to fulfill a function, and, lacking a well-defined aim, art music tends toward diffuseness. Sometimes so simple a stimulus as polka is enough to stir creativity (as proof, hear the polkas accordionist Guy Klucevsek has commissioned for BAM, November 17 through 19). Such unexpected flowerings suggest that the problems of today's music stem not so much from a talent deficiency as from collective misassumptions about freedom and originality.

Seriously approached, the accompaniment of a film or theater piece can provide the requisite discipline. I wouldn't have thought, for example, that New York composer Scott Johnson would have been prepared to take on a film score such as that for Paul Schrader's *Patty Hearst* (Nonesuch); Johnson's fusion of a rock guitar idiom with modernist structures has often been compelling, but so idiosyncratic and formless that it needed to attend to its own formal problems, I thought, before tackling those of another medium. But as it turns out, the demands of subject and story line more strongly justify the gestures Johnson was making anyway. As a result, his music has thinned out, tightened up, and been forced through the funnel of necessity into flattering concision. (Wish I could report on what the soundtrack did for the movie, which bombed before I had a chance to see it.)

Especially effective is the opening segment, in which the latent melody in Hearst's mumbled phrases—"I'm not being starved, or beaten, or unnecessarily frightened," "What are you going to do to me?"—is picked up by the rock-punctuated string quartet. Johnson first developed that melody-from-words trick in his earlier record *John Somebody* (also Nonesuch), and has now lucked into a spot where it is more dramatically effective than it was in purely musical terms. This reverses the 19th century process: Wagner first used atonality to depict the Flying Dutchman's aimless wandering, and the technique made its way into absolute music. Elsewhere, Johnson's been forced to dilute his textures to a level swallowable by a film audience, but the score still derives grit from his unexpected harmonic movement.

Johnson scored *Patty Hearst*.

Contrariwise, when a film leaves too much to the composer's imagination, as *Powaqqatsi* apparently did to Philip Glass's, the result may accentuate the flab. But in *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, the stage piece Glass's musicians are touring without him in Vienna, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and at Centre East in Skokie, Illinois (where I heard it), the composer was forced into a more circumscribed background role. A sort of minimalist Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (if those words don't explode in each other's company), *1000 Airplanes* is a psychodrama by David Henry Hwang that chronicles one person's contact with aliens who teach him/her (Patrick O'Connell and Jodi Long have alternated the part) the true interconnectedness of being, from which the return into everyday reality seems like a voluntary descent into insanity.

Given that volatile subject, the contrasting inertia of Glass's patterns becomes an asset; like Wagner's sluggish sequences, the music steamrolls the emotions of the text into consciousness, comes up from behind and gives it a psychic urgency without which Hwang's text would have been left unconvincing. Spurred by a dramatic situation foreign to his own stylized sensibilities, Glass abandons his usual arpeggio seesawing and indulges in some quintuple meters instead of his recently ubiquitous 12/8. Still fairly bland, the music rarely attracts notice beneath Long's hysterics, yet it accomplishes what Michael Byron's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* score was reputed to do and didn't: it provides a psychological analogy for Hwang's dialogue between reality and unreality.

Until nondance music reintegrates into society, or at least until composers feel it safe to return to more standard formulas like canon and theme-and-variations, such clinging to the forms of other media isn't a bad idea. Especially in Soho, where most audiences for new music are heavily packed by the composer's friends, the *self*-expression tendency encourages too many performers to collapse into what Charles Ives called the Byronic fallacy: "... that one who is full of turbid feeling *about himself* is qualified to be some sort of an artist [emphasis: Ives's]." Society abets such crimes, because those of us in our twenties and thirties grew up in an era in which art teachers encouraged us to slap paint around, to "express ourselves."

As a corrective, we could revive interest in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the Boston Museum of Fine Art's curator of Indian Art, who 40 years ago led a one-man crusade against art-for-art's-sake. He demonstrated, in the series of essays *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (reprinted by Dover), that a society in which useful things are not beautiful, and beautiful things are not useful, is poverty-stricken. Coomaraswamy (often quoted in Cage's early writings) knew that art was an objective, not subjective, matter: "The free man is not trying to express himself, but that which [is] to be expressed.... it is never Who said? but only What was said? that concerns us." But until we concede that what is lovely should also be useful—that *it*-expression is more interesting than *self*-expression—the collective unconscious is bound to channel the art-for-man's-sake impulse through archaic phenomena like New Age. ■