KYLE GANN

Steve Reich's Birthday Present Is Stronger on the Past

On Second Thought

'A Celebration of Steve Reich's 60th Birthday'
Walter Reade Theater
December 9

The Electra Fugues
Tiny Mythic Theater
HERE
December 6

newest Nonesuch CD reflect a second high point in his career, it is via a different set of virtues.

For me, the concert's most fun moment was the earliest of all, a famous work I had never heard: 1968's *Pendulum Music*, perhaps the purest process piece ever made that can still fascinate. Reich and the Bang on a Can directors—Michael Gordon, Julia Wolff, David Lang—picked up and then dropped microphones that then swung back and forth suspended over loudspeakers, causing feedback with each pass near the speaker. Then, no longer being needed, they left the stage. As the swinging microphones slowed to a gradual stop, the sound metamorphosed over three minutes from a chaos of irregular and out-of-phase chirps to an anxiously pulsating drone, whereupon Reich came back and pulled the plug. The piece could have been longer and perhaps more interesting, I thought, with higher stands and longer mike cords, but I suppose Reich knows how long the swings should

good. *New York Counterpoint*, played by clarinetist Evan Ziporyn along wth taped clarinets, and *Nagoya Marimbas*, played by percussionists James Preiss and Thad Wheeler, show what happens when Reich keeps the sensuousness but loses the logic: the music is as elegantly pleasant as ever, but no more filling than New Age. One work is a poor relation of *Violin Phase*, the other of *Piano Phase*, both lacking the incisive bite of those early works.

Perhaps that tentative fusion of logic and sensuousness was only the result of a moment in history not repeatable at will. The Nonesuch CD, containing Reich's most convincing recent works, suggests as much, for it tries a different tack than his self-repetitive music of the '80s did. In *Proverb* and especially *City Life*, the pretense of logic has been abandoned in favor of a Stravinskyan faith that enough confidence, momentum, and repetition will carry the listener unquestioningly through the discontinuities. *Proverb*, scored for voices, vibraphones, and synthesized baroque organs, takes its sole text from Wittgenstein: "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life."

For all life's brevity, that sentence may not be true. For despite its similarity to medieval motets, *Proverb* is just about the first Reich work since *Tehillim* that doesn't display even a trace of nostalgia for the good old days when minimalist music seemed to write itself. As in his early *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, the form spreads out in everlengthen-

her father angry. It turned out that Agamemnon was on camera from offstage, not on tape. But the energy built up by that seeming loop, a dynamic too eerily familiar to all who have been trapped in neurotic relationships, exploded into maniacal verbal energy.

The work was well named, for it was not so much a piece of theater as a series of theatrical events musically structured, with little regard for stage conventions. The loops that the dialogue would occasionally fall into were one such structure. Another was the polyphony of independent voices in which several characters would simultaneously pour forth monologues at once with the vocal endurance (if not always the control) of a quintet of Diamanda Galases. The weaving of such diverse strands made the elements seem less like actors than like instruments with unmatched tone colors. Abigail Gampel was a raucous Electra; Mercedes Bahleda played a waiflike, usually wordless Cassandra who would suddenly break into TV vernacular; Justin Bond, in convincing drag, was a sleazy Clytemnestra—a thoroughly rotten mother capable of sneering at the smallness of her daughter's breasts and then laughing, "Get a sense of irony, girl, and then get back to me."

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TIM MANER

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How brief an artist's public career is! It is difficult to fathom that Steve Reich wrote *Drumming* and Philip Glass wrote *Einstein on the Beach* while I was in college, and now that I've reached the age they were then, a mere 20 years later, they're starting their 60th birthday celebrations. Reich, whose birthday was October 3, is an awfully chipper grand old man, and Bang on a Can's celebration for him was more affectionate than dignified or even meaty. The concert boasted at least one piece each from the '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, but it was still front-loaded, weighted toward those early days when the old codger's music achieved a perfect fusion of logic and sensuousness. If Reich hasn't achieved that fusion again since 1979, neither has anyone else. And if the pieces on his longer being needed, they left the stage. As the swinging microphones slowed to a gradual stop, the sound metamorphosed over three minutes from a chaos of irregular and out-of-phase chirps to an anxiously pulsating drone, whereupon Reich came back and pulled the plug. The piece could have been longer and perhaps more interesting, I thought, with higher stands and longer mike cords, but I suppose Reich knows how long the swings should be for authenticity's sake. He didn't need to worry about taxing the patience of this audience of raving Reich fans.

At evening's end came the swan song of Reich's classic period, *Eight Lines* (1983, but based on his *Octet* of 1979), perhaps his most virtually perfect composition. Even the most intellectually macho antiminimalist can hardly resist its intricately echoing geometric patterns spreading out like the cross-hatching on an Acoma vase. Under Brad Lubman's baton, the Spit Orchestra gave *Eight Lines* a reading that was, given the circumstances, refreshingly unsentimental: sharp edged and more prickly than mellow, with the fiendishly difficult piano parts blurred into the background. Lubman also made more effective use of terraced dynamic contrasts than one is used to from the work's recordings, aggressively imparting light and shadow to a seamless canvas of Seurat dots.

Aside from *Four Organs*, the most austere of Reich's early successes, the rest of the box was filled out with bonbons, the small pieces Reich gets asked to write because his other music is so [illegible] music of the 80s did. In *Proverb* and especially *City Life*, the pretense of logic has been abandoned in favor of a Stravinskyan faith that enough confidence, momentum, and repetition will carry the listener unquestioningly through the discontinuities. *Proverb*, scored for voices, vibraphones, and synthesized baroque organs, takes its sole text from Wittgenstein: "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life."

For all life's brevity, that sentence may not be true. For despite its similarity to medieval motets, *Proverb* is just about the first Reich work since *Tehillim* that doesn't display even a trace of nostalgia for the good old days when minimalist music seemed to write itself. As in his early *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*, the form spreads out in everlengthening phrases, yet the mysteriously unfolding music seems freed of an obligation to wear its structure on its sleeve. In *City Life*, the busy figures derived from recorded samples of street talk are framed by through-written passages of ensemble chorale texture that transcend the incessant repetition of Reich's self-conscious trademark style. Perhaps in his fifties he found he needed a second thought. May he live to be 95 and finish his greatest work in his final hours.

As you entered HERE for the Mythic Theater's performance of *The Electra Fugues*, Electra, clad in black leather, was already talking to her father Agamemnon—a deus ex machina whose image shone from a TV inside a silvery pedestal. Despite her punk leather clothing she was regressively supplicating, while his answers were pseudocomforting and manipulative. "But I'm starting to cry again, Daddy. . . ." "You do that so I'll pick you up, to get my attention. . . ." "But I love this story and I love you and I hate my mother." As they talked these sentences recurred over and over, until you assumed that Electra was speaking to a video loop. But gradually the tone changed: Electra grew more assertive, [illegible] Galases. The weaving of such diverse strands made the elements seem less like actors than like instruments with unmatched tone colors. Abigail Gampel was a raucous Electra; Mercedes Bahleda played a waiflike, usually wordless Cassandra who would suddenly break into TV vernacular; Justin Bond, in convincing drag, was a sleazy Clytemnestra—a thoroughly rotten mother capable of sneering at the smallness of her daughter's breasts and then laughing, "Get a sense of irony, girl, and then get back to me."

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Keeping track of the lines in Ruth Margraff's cascading libretto was like trying to track the lines of a fugue, and when you failed, that only made the piece more universal—not just Electra's but Everywoman's dysfunctional family. Matthew Pierce's chamber-music accompaniment ranged between postminimalist ostinatos and rasping electric violin, always supporting the action but never calling attention to itself. It didn't need to: the more soloistic music was onstage. *The Electra Fugues* lost focus as its energy dissipated wildly in the final half-hour. But while it was often incomprehensible, it was never boring. ❖