Philip Glass / Toby Twining

Rehearsal Pays

BY KYLE GANN

MUSIC

On one of my pilgrimages to the Hopi village of Kykotsmovi, a woman in a crafts shop told me how her village rehearsed for six months before a ceremony. The next day, I saw the Butterfly Dance: a hundred or more people, ages three to 70, moving all day to hoarsely chanted tunes so convoluted that no amount of repetition sufficed to get them in my memory. And not a single misstep.

I think of that dance every time I hear the Philip Glass Ensemble. For even in a piece as bristling with crazy rhythms as *Music in 12 Parts*—written from 1971 to 1974, revived February 3 at Avery Fisher Hall—the ensemble's power transcends the music's content. There's no substitute for rehearsal. Glass enjoys the luxury of working with players he's rehearsed with, in some cases (Jon Gibson, Richard Peck), for more than 20 years. They've given his every piece hundreds of hours of woodshedding, they can catch a signal from his eyelash. They skirt mind-boggling patterns of nine, 10, 11, 12, 16, and 22 16th notes, and though they grab an occasional breath, they never miss a lick. Those rehearsal hours wind up like a spring; released, they knock you back. By union mandate, not an orchestra in America can pull off a performance one-twentieth that intense.

Four-hour-plus *Music in 12 Parts* (due soon for its first American release on Virgin) is more than just the best piece Glass has written: it recaps his early work and anticipates almost everything worth hearing in what he's done since. Part 9's irregular scales top *Music in Fifths* for rhythmic novelty, then end with an ecstatic fluttering wilder than electrified Messiaen. Part 12, based on an elegantly Webernesque (and hexachordally combinatorial!) 12-tone row, beats out the Spaceship scene from *Einstein on the Beach* for harmonic weirdness. Part 1, its repetitions veiled in silken counterpoint, seems the most inspired moment in Glass's output. The materials are less banal than the everlasting scales and doodle-y arpeggios he's used in more recent works; they outline structure without sounding like finger exercises.

Aside from the surefooted precision, Glass's best music also reminds me of Pueblo Indian music for its tempo-bending rhythms, its illusion of a flexible beat. Part 5 in particular stretches and contracts a slow trill until your concept of beat becomes elastic, tempo ceases to be a constant. And, lacking dance movement to aid rhythmic subtlety the way the Hopis do, he's achieved that flexibility in an idiom Westerners can master, and in so doing added a thrilling new term to the classical vocabulary. Why hasn't he (or anyone else) followed up on that linguistic potential? Possibly because it's labor-intensive. Next to *12 Parts*, listen to the anemic piano solos Glass has been touring with, and you painfully realize how incommensurate the hard work Great Art requires is with a capitalist society.

Alongside *Music for 18 Musicians*, *The Well-Tuned Piano*, and any piece by Terry Riley, *Music in 12 Parts* is the magnum opus that both defines a revelatory nodal point in music history and still wears brilliantly 16 years later—as was reflected in Saturday night's lengthy standing ovation. But the Glass Ensemble itself is the real achievement, for Glass has turned out to be a one-instrumentation composer. His worst piece for his own ensemble packs a greater wallop than his best orchestral attempt.

MEAD HUNT

His power transcends content.

In Glassian tradition, Toby Twining's got his own ensemble, too, the a cappella vocal group Mouth Music. January 25 and 26 (I attended the latter) they performed a handful of Twining's recent works at Dia Art Foundation. Twining's amazing virtuosity as a baritone/countertenor is obviously his music's basis, and he's found people (he met some of them at a Bobby McFerrin workshop) who can keep up with him. He studied with Ben Johnston, and the pieces bore the slight impress of Johnston's shamanistic theater in *Visions and Spels*. Far more, however, they extended the vocal sound effect games of Meredith Monk into an ambitious chamber repertoire.

In "Shaman," the first movement of a Suite, Twining yelled an agile yodel as bass Mark Johnson tapped fingers and tenor Paul Zimmermann kept up an energetic percussion rap on "katickaticka-BOONga." Twining's lip-imitation of a trumpet could fool the ear, and in the "Dreaming" movement he organized laughter, lip farts, hyperventilation, filter sweeps, and Sarah Noll's parrot squawks into an engagingly rhythmic chorus. It sounds silly, it brought guffaws, but it added a well-wrought sense of form (one piece was called Sonata) to Monk's and McFerrin's infectious pop style.

Twining's most surprising work was a three-movement duet with choreographer Gus Solomons Jr. called *Quasi-Satie*. Billing themselves as the Gut Boys, the pair sang while rocking on the floor, echoed each other in hilariously unpredictable hocket, droned while slapping each other's backs, and relinquished control over their own vibratos by twanging each other's cheeks. Twining, though, is one of those rare creatures for whom the Three Stooges are only a step away from High Art; his chromatic solo setting of Theodore Roethke's *The Waking* was as stately as a Gregorian chant. And a final work, *Hee-oo-oom-ha*, mixed noise into soulful jazz harmony.

What made everything sound serious and sincere was—Tada!—ensemble precision. There were sloppy moments, but Twining's singers broke from noise into glistening five-part harmony in a fraction of a beat, and zipped notes in an ostinato from one mouth to another faster than the eye could follow. Even good play takes hard work. ■

SONGWRITERS

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