

Reich On

The Steve Reich Ensemble

February 10
Alice Tully Hall

BY KYLE GANN

It's been a couple years since a concert sparked such eloquent bar-hour debate as did Steve Reich's one-man show at Alice Tully. As usual, the crowd had given Reich an ovation remarkable for its warmth and enthusiasm, and in those responses I always sense (or perhaps imagine) an el-

music then imitates and flows with. *City Life* was a new, if hardly startling, departure. Its five sections integrated not only shouts Reich taped on the street ("Check it out!," "It's been a

of the new technology over his instrumental pieces in a way that strikes Downtown ears as a little dilettantish. He takes advantage of none of the amazing transformations of texture and continuity that the medium has made possible for others, and—an unforgivable faux pas for someone so

ture white-note tonality (is he the Copland of the '90s, or what?), the counterpoint was surer and more surprising than in the other works, with biting minor ninths affectively sustained for 10 beats or more. Henryk Gorecki should give his right arm to write music this sumptuous that still has as



The Steve Reich Ensemble: dead-on precise

ement of gratitude as well as appreciation. It was Reich, after all, more than anyone else, who broke the stranglehold of creepy serialist music and made the new-composition world once again safe for music lovers. And the pieces with which he did that—*Come Out, Piano Phase*, *Drumming*—never quite cease to overshadow what he's done since. It was odd how often, even in his

honeymoon!," "Wha' were ya' doin'?"), but also sirens, car honks, doors slamming, pile drivers, and other audio cues that signify you're not in Kansas anymore.

This filigree of "real-life" noises layered over musical instruments permeates each piece with a perceptual duality that is wonderful or problematic depending on how you hear it. For me, *Thinking of You* and *The Cave* were an off-

famous—his samples are amateurishly hissy. "Can't you buy Steve a compressor?" I heard one techie yell to someone who knew the composer.

For all these reasons, my favorite of the evening's works by far was the least technological: *Proverb*, a world premiere lovingly conducted by medievalist Paul Hillier, with sopranos Andrea Fullington, Sonja Rasmussen, and Alice Tully, and tenors Alan Bennett

much backbone.

The technological issues are, admittedly, Downtown issues, and for much of the Alice Tully audience, this concert was as close to Downtown music as they plan to get. For the tiny minority who admire fierce originality and rigorous theoretical integrity, La Monte Young is minimalism's underground guru, Reich its aboveground, pragmatic, eager-to-compromise DP

MUSIC SLIP

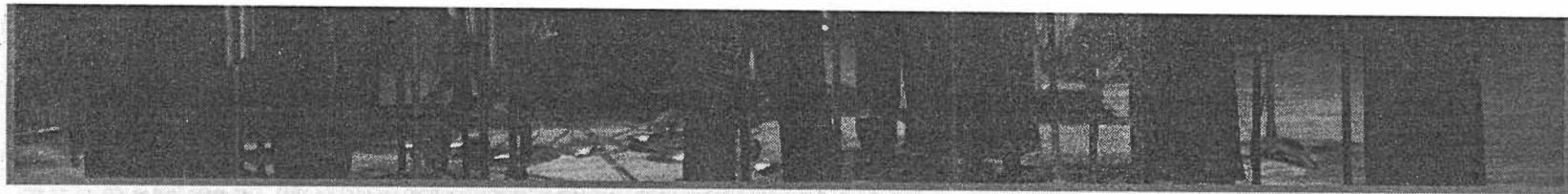
ROCKBEAT

Getting Hot

When underground hip hop DJ Stretch Armstrong hit the airwaves February 9, it wasn't to do the usual spinning of that unreleased rap records or to play an obscure demo of some hip hop luminary—a job he has done for 5 years on 89.9 WKCR (Columbia University). It was to give a 10-minute response to listeners' cries of "sellout." The criticism directed toward Armstrong and his cohort, Bobbito Garcia, stemmed from the duo's agreement to take an offer from mainstream "home of hip hop" Hot 97 to play its Sunday/Monday 12 a.m. to 2 a.m. time slot. Their first show aired February 11.

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ement of gratitude as well as appreciation. It was Reich, after all, more than anyone else, who broke the stranglehold of creepy serialist music and made the new-composition world once again safe for music lovers. And the pieces with which he did that—*Come Out, Piano Phase*, *Drumming*—never quite cease to overshadow what he's done since. It was odd how often, even in his own preconcert lecture, he referred to them to the exclusion of subsequent, more ambitious ventures. As one composer remarked afterward, "You know, I think Steve's been as influenced by *Come Out* and *Piano Phase* as any of us."

The concert had set us up for that comment with a brief 1994 duo called *Nagoya Marimbas*, played by longtime Reich percussionists Bob Becker and James Preiss. Though scintillatingly virtuosic, its repeated patterns so obviously referred back to *Piano Phase* and *Drumming* that Reich admitted the fact in his program notes. The irony was that the piece was indistinguishable from a thousand competent student imitations of Reich that you heard at campuses all over the country through the '70s and '80s.

No one denies Reich the right to join the crowd cashing in on his early successes. The postconcert debate centered around his use of prerecorded samples in his recent music, the basis of three of the evening's works: brand-new *City Life*, familiar *Different Trains*, and his Israeli-Arab-relations extravaganza *The Cave*. (Actually, *The Cave* was represented here only by one brief, nonelectronic excerpt, but the whole thing's recently appeared on a splendidly produced Nonesuch two-disc set.) *Trains* and *The Cave*, of course, are generated from the contours of spoken phrases taped in interviews, which the

honeymoon!" "Wha' were ya' doin'?"), but also sirens, car honks, doors slamming, pile drivers, and other audio cues that signify you're not in Kansas anymore.

This filigree of "real-life" noises layered over musical instruments permeates each piece with a perceptual duality that is wonderful or problematic depending on how you hear it. For me, *Trains* and *The Cave* present an off-putting figure/ground confusion. We habitually focus on the words in a composition with text, but here they flit in and out too sporadically, inserted as footnotes to explain where the music originated. Listening to these pieces on disc, I find the music engaging and the spoken phrases intrusive, their arrangement annoyingly arbitrary. Both pieces work better live; *The Cave* gets its real continuity from the counterpoint of video interviews with Israelis and Arabs, and, live, *Trains* almost allows the illusion that the string players are generating the words. (That illusion works only when the performance is dead-on precise and bristling with energy, which this one by Elizabeth Lim, Todd Reynolds, Lois Martin, and Jeanne Le Blanc certainly was.)

The larger issue, though, is that Reich isn't pushing the envelope on sampling technology the way he did with the tape loop. For younger composers like Carl Stone, Mikel Rouse, Linda Fisher, Nic Collins, Joshua Fried, Annie Gosfield, Henry Gwizda, and John Oswald, not to mention a roster of hip hoppers and trip hoppers, sampling has opened up a whole new aesthetic world, just as the tape loop did in 1966. Reich—a Juilliard-trained classivist with roots more in Bach and Stravinsky than in the electronic studio—is applying a thin veneer

famous—his samples are amateurishly hissy. "Can't you buy Steve a compressor?" I heard one techie yell to someone who knew the composer.

For all these reasons, my favorite of the evening's works by far was the least technological: *Proverb*, a world premiere lovingly conducted by medievalist Paul Hillier, with sopranos Andrea Fullington, Sonja Rasmussen, and Allison Zelles, and tenors Alan Bennett and Paul Elliott, backed up by vibraphones and (sampled) Baroque organs. The first Reich piece in years to play entirely to his strengths, it strung a lovely harmonic stasis out of one phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*: "How small a thought it takes to fill a whole life!" (Reich's undergrad thesis at Cornell was on Wittgenstein, and at the lecture, interviewer Rob Schwartz seemed to take Reich aback by mentioning how appropriate the motto was for a minimalist.) The sopranos would draw the text out more slowly with each repetition, and in between the tenors would sing patterns patently reminiscent of 12th-century organum. Underneath, the vibraphones tapped soft, telegraphic syncopations, while the organs underpinned the whole with long bass notes of the kind Reich used in *Variations* and *Octet*.

This was the piece you might have hoped would be written 20 years later by the same person who penned the gorgeous *Music for Mallet Instruments*, *Voices*, and *Organ*: the textures still velvet, but the repetitions replaced by a more subtle logic. The directionlessness that started to plague Reich's music after he abandoned gradual processes wasn't a problem here, for the harmonic images among which the music floated were complex and self-contained. Even within Reich's signa-

much backbone.

The technological issues are, admittedly, Downtown issues, and for much of the Alice Tully audience, this concert was as close to Downtown music as they plan to get. For the tiny minority who admire fierce originality and rigorous theoretical integrity, La Monte Young is minimalism's underground guru, Reich its aboveground, pragmatic, eager-to-compromise PR man: Aaron to Young's Moses. *Come Out* and *Drumming* drew attention to minute acoustic phenomena, but today, as Reich pointed out in his lecture, he settles for approximating fluid vocal inflections with the 12 notes on the piano because "our ears are programmed that way in this culture." (Actually, it's easier to reprogram ears than instruments.) You don't become one of the world's best-recognized composers by standing on purist principles.

And Reich gives audiences abundant reason to love his music. All my quibbling aside, the program was free from both obscurantism and pandering, those polar-opposite sins that half our composers accuse the other half. Within Reich's tonality, the melodies invariably echo and transform on a level the audience can enjoy on first hearing. Rarely does one hear a harmony more disturbing than a momentary augmented triad or tritone, and even in *City Life*, where the sampled bangs and squeals hinted at darker realities, the mildly syncopated sonorities of Bradley Lubman's ensemble continually reassured us. Yet for all its transparency, the music never descends to the obvious, never betrays its principles for merely visceral effect. Reich makes a feat seem simple that used to be the goal of every composer's art, but which is so no longer: holding an audience. ❖

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Less than a month ago, the duo was approached by Hot 97's program director, Steve Smith, about bringing their show—considered by hardcore fans as hip hop's "secret treasure chest"—to 97.1. Smith hoped that Armstrong and Garcia would bring aboard their own hefty listenership and further add to Hot 97 street authenticity, something many hip hoppers question. Two years ago, the station overhauled its image, ditching its format of Latin pop and house music to become hip hop-centric. Hot 97's parent company, Emmis Broadcasting, also bought soul station KISS FM and changed its format to include classic as well as contemporary r&b to lock down the 25- to 35-year-old demographic. In its race to capture the 16- to 27- ➤

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