

# Tyrannize Me

By Kyle Gann

Michael Gordon  
Philharmonic

Say as a teenager you encounter the early music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. It happens. Man, the stuff grabs its audience, but it's not enough. First, all those instruments don't have to tootle the same melody; split 'em up into contrapuntal lines. And rather than career through whitebread C major, those lines could clash in dissonant chords. And you could jazz those dah-dee-dah-dee rhythms by realigning them in triplets against dotted notes, 8 against 9, 16 against 21, jerking tempos everywhere. And you could... but stop! You're already a totalist.

If you heard the Michael Gordon Philharmonic at Roulette February 24, 26, or 27, you found that totalism only retained one thing from minimalism, and that one thing was crucial: the ensemble concept. Glass's and Reich's supreme achievement, for which history will never forget them, was figuring out how to write symphonic music for chamber groups. Chamber music nuzzles up to its performers, with lots of detail and little repetition. Symphonic music doubles and amplifies and reiterates its lines to project them out to an audience. By the turn of the century, chamber music had acquired such intellectual prestige that Schoenberg, in his Op. 15 orchestral pieces, was writing chamber music for orches-

tra. By the 1950s, all serious music was chamber music, regardless of medium. None of it communicated to a large audience. Aside from the last vestiges of big-band jazz, the only symphonic music was pop.

How to make music symphonic again shouldn't have been such a mystery. In grad school in the '70s I read dense academic articles that analyzed Mozart to reach the unaccountably disturbing conclusion that in order to be audience-intelligible music needed a considerable level of redundancy. Redundancy on all levels: sectional repetition, perceptible return to previously heard pitches, a steady reference beat, and, most relevant to totalism, melody or rhythm played by diverse instruments in unison. (The last is an old jazz fusion trick, too.) Redundancy is merely a feature of well-conceived musical design. You're up on-stage, we're way the hell out here in the balcony: speak slowly and don't mumble. But academics and free improvisers alike feel that to repeat or double anything is to weaken, to surrender to what David Schiff, in his book on Elliott Carter, calls "the tyranny of the audience." (Please, you merciless audience, set composers free to go their own way! What's that? You already did? Uh-oh.)

The Michael Gordon Phil submitted to that tyranny with rousing servility. Todd Reynolds played violin, John Lad viola, Mark Stewart guitar, composer Evan Ziporyn clarinet, and Gor-

don himself played keyboard, which often emitted sampled percussion. For one thing, having just returned from a European tour, they were rehearsed right down to the 1024th note—a fine minimalist habit. Just as important, instead of succumbing to the heady professional temptations of intricate counterpoint and endless variation (chamber music attributes), Gordon and Ziporyn repeated every lick, sustained every image, doubled every significant rhythm or line. In Gordon's *Strange Quiet*, guitar and strings kept up a 7/8 pattern over a fierce drone on G, while Ziporyn played an E-major tune at a pulse 2/3 as fast, over and over until that incongruous image burned into your ear. Later, dissonant (though barely tonal) tutti chords pounded out rhythms of four to nine beats, an amazing reiterative noise. The composer Jason Stanyek says that Morton Feldman's music proved the difference between repetition and reiteration; that's a difference between minimalism and totalism, too.

Gordon's more recent music stripped down to a few pitches to concentrate on rhythmic effects. Dividing the ensemble against itself, *Yo Shakespeare* ground out triplets against dotted eighth notes in patterns that would run for measures without coinciding. The group bobbed up and down like carousel ponies to keep the beat they were playing off of, a beat we never actually heard. In *Change of Life*, Gordon gave us the beat via presequenced drum track, pounding beneath the ensemble's dots of melody. Dramatic silences between phrases, sliced out in split-second timing, fused the ensemble with the drums.



MARK MORELLI

Composer Evan Ziporyn isn't afraid to repeat himself.

If Ziporyn's music used to be less focused and more academically meandering than Gordon's, those traits are now gelling into a welcome versatility. His *Pay Phone* set a violin-viola duet above the other instruments in a meter writhing around a steady pulse. I couldn't figure out how he produced the piece's startling final glissando, which sank slowly through a shimmering texture. *Be In* burst out in fortissimo rhythmic unisons, totalism's most reliable strategy. By stepping outside the style, though, his *Esto House* supplied the evening's best effect: abruptly, in midgrind all those squirming crossrhythms ceased, opening up into lush quadruple stops that flowed slowly back and forth between the violin and viola. It pointed to the fluidity and breathing room that totalist music still lacks.

If you believe in historical synchronicity and the collective unconscious, you can see how this minimalist-totalist ensemble concept points toward the inevitable merger of aesthetics with economics. In neither sense can we afford to drag those thimble-brained orchestral brontosaurus around much longer. The orchestras of the future will be mixed ensembles of five to 12 instruments—not only composer-run ensembles like Gordon's, but noncomposer groups like Continuum, Relache, California Ear Unit, the Bang on a Can All-Stars. If you don't want to be limited to a tiny audience of elites, you learn how to write for them in a nonchamber way. We've got a lot of sophisticated musical ideas to get across to big audiences in a permanently strapped economy. Totalism's figured out a way to do it. ■