

# The World in Little Bits

BY KYLE GANN

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Amirkhanian at Merkin Hall

*photo: Cary Conover*

Recently a young composer, analyzing a post-minimalist piece by William Duckworth, asked me what the piece *meant*. There are plausible narratives for a Shostakovich symphony, but we haven't yet collectively teased out what post-minimalist music says about the world. Days later, virtual-audio artist Henry Gwiazda explained postmodernism to me as the premise that there's more to the world than we can understand, and that that's fine, we don't need to understand. I found myself responding that post-minimalism is the assertion that we can understand the world and need to, and the way to do it is a little bit at a time. Then, on May 5, I heard the "Interpretations" concert of Charles Amirkhanian and Paul Epstein at Merkin Hall, and a little bit of the world became clearer. I think I'm onto something.

At first glance, Amirkhanian and Epstein were odd composers to pair: Epstein writes little besides acoustic chamber music, Amirkhanian makes polyphonic text poems and collages of environmental sounds. But as Amirkhanian pointed out, both were influenced in their early years by Gertrude Stein, who was sort of a proto-post-minimalist writer. Stein could write for pages using a small number of words in ever new and surprising combinations.

Minimalism, broadly speaking, is a music of linear process, carried out with only a few elements; post-minimalism is also a language of few elements, but not of linear process. Like Stein's texts, it follows a logic felt but not evident.

As luck would have it, the pieces in this concert were diverse in materials but similar in Steinian technique. Amirkhanian spoke several text poems accompanied by tapes of his own and other voices, the first, *Ka Himeni Hehena*, based on place names he found in the Hawaiian language, which (I bet you didn't know) uses only seven consonants, and thus must repeat many syllables—post-minimalistically—to carry any meaning at all. "Pi hoi hoi," he repeated rhythmically, "wa hala kani meme," sounding like a murmuring gaggle of Pacific islanders. *Varsity Pewter* was more typical of his text pieces from the early 1980s, a stew swimming with favorite words: "drifter factoid," "cruel Liverpool stool," even names of composers like "Babbitt," "Bazelon," "Thomas Oboe Lee." Words bounced playfully from live voice to tape. *Dumbek Bookache* (as in books that ache) was more ambitious, with sampled phrases from old presidents: "The business of America is business," "The world must be made safe for democracy."

If you took Amirkhanian's phrases and substituted for each a small melodic motif, you might end up with something like Epstein's music. His *Palindrome Variations*, played by flutist Cynthia Folio, cellist Jeffrey Solow, and pianist Charles Abramovic, was a river of small tunes. Twisting and turning, those tunes would repeat for a while, then switch backward, then turn inside out. Newer pieces like *The Great Valley No. 4* (same instruments) were more atomized, hopping through note permutations too ornate to figure out. The music had the same quiet but vibrant energy as Steve Reich's early music (and Reich's *Piano Phase* was a formative piece for Epstein), but was more mysterious. After a while one quit trying to hear beneath the surface and could only swim along, grooving to the rippling momentum.

What post-minimalism inherited from minimalism was an engaging tension between reality and appearances. This music was saying to me, "Things happen for reasons. You can't quite catch what they are, because they're not linear or obvious. But listen: The same elements keep coming back, and while it's not important that you figure out when and why, it's enough to sense, deep down, that nature has its processes." It's a soothing message, but hardly mindless. I kept feeling, with both composers, that if I could only listen a little harder, I could catch the music's logic in midtwist, and I wanted to call that young composer back and tell him what it meant.

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