

A gamut of texts & textures

During intermission at Philip Glass's concert at Loeb Student Center on November 15, I found myself talking to an older woman with a heavy accent, probably German.

"That music sure is loud," she began.

I still had some ringing in my ears from listening to the electric organs and amplified saxophones and flutes, and could not very well disagree with her. "It's loud all right. But not really painful or unpleasant. I think it's wonderful music."

She wasn't willing to go that far, but she found something good to

say. "It sounds like Bach."

I was glad she felt this, because Glass's Music in 12 Parts reminds me of Bach, too. But I am not at all sure why, and I couldn't think of any intelligent replies, so I simply answered, "Yes, I think so too," and waited for her to go on.

"The music would be better if it changed more often."

"You mean like that big change when it shifted from waltz time to four-four."

"Yes. That was beautiful."

"But there are a lot of smaller changes all the time."

"There are?"

I wasn't particularly anxious to play the teacher role, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to make a point. "Sure. If you focus on one of those little melodic patterns, you'll notice that he changes one of the notes every once in a while." I wasn't sure whether she believed me or not, but she seemed relieved to know that there might have been more going on than she had heard.

"Anyway, I liked the voices," she went on. She was referring to Glass's Music for Voices, a 15-minute piece for five male and four female singers, which had been presented as a curtain raiser.

"It's probably a good piece. But the Mabou Mines singers couldn't keep in tune with each other."

"It sounded a little off to me too. But I liked the rhythms."

"They were interesting," I agreed, remembering how they had sung such interesting rhythms on single notes, simply by changing the vowel sounds.

"You know," she said, with a fresh bewilderment in her eyes, "they don't have music like this in Europe."

She was not quite right about that, because Glass, and others like him, are beginning to have quite a large following in Europe. But I didn't have time to go into this, because the lights were flashing us back to our seats for the second half, which featured Part VII, the latest addition to Music in 12 Parts. The new section is similar to the others, except that it uses a sort of harmonic minor scale, rather than the simple white note scales of the other parts. It also has more unison writing, the amplified flutes and the electric organ sometimes playing repeated phrases exactly the same, except for a couple of notes.

I'm sorry I didn't see the woman after the concert, as it would be interesting to know if her impressions had changed. I would also feel better about this review if I had gotten permission to quote her. But she was very friendly, and I doubt that she'll mind.

THE NOVEMBER 13 concert at Alice Tully Hall, presented as a benefit for the Thorne Music Fund, featured a number of the finest performers of contemporary music in the area. The music was not always up to the caliber of the people playing it, but every piece stood out in some way.

The most sensitive piece was Robert Helps's "The Running Sun," a song cycle with texts by James Purdy. The piano accompaniment captures many moods very accurately and supports the vocal line and the text very well. The song cycle is a very old form,

and there is nothing particularly fresh about Helps's approach. He just did it better than most composers do.

The most sonorous piece was Mario Davidovsky's "Synchronisms" No. 5. A large battery of percussion begins the piece with sustained sounds. After a while, the mood is suddenly interrupted by electronic sounds, and the percussion music begins to break up into fast things, little solos, and a variety of textures, many of which are quite attractive.

The most enjoyable piece was Lester Trimble's "Panels II" for 13 players. Two clarinets doodle on repeated notes, a flute scurries around, three string players play dramatic chords, an electric guitar picks out lazy atonal

out how he wove all those threads together into such dense music, but never managed to get beneath the surface. And like most of Wolpe's music, the surface is not very interesting.

The most disappointing piece was Lou Harrison's "Festive Movement." It is a brand new work, but it sounds more like Prokofieff than like anything of Harrison's I have ever heard. It is difficult to understand how he could write such a banal piece after turning out so many highly distinctive and beautifully colored ones.

The most academic piece was David Diamond's Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, which follows the classical four-movement formula to the letter, with tedious results. The Concord String Quartet broke two strings trying to get something out of it, but their efforts were to no avail.

I WENT TO THE KITCHEN on November 18 for a multi-media program put together by the electronic composer Gil Trythall, with choreography by Judith Scott. Most of what I saw and heard has been done better by other artists, but it was an interesting evening nonetheless, and provided a sort of survey of multi-media possibilities.

"Echospace" combines dancers, projections of dancers, and electronic music, and, as often happens with multi-media, more goes on than one can possibly absorb. I spent most of my time focusing on the attractive electronic music, which sounds a little like an ensemble of organs, all playing fast, sweeping melodic patterns. It is reminiscent of some of Terry Riley's music, but it doesn't progress as smoothly.

I hardly noticed the music in

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Philip Glass concert.
 Thorne Music Fund benefit concert, Gil Trythall and Judith Scott at the Kitchen (Johnson)
 Concerts by London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra; Alicia de Larrocha (Kerner)

melodies, and a trumpet plays fanfare gestures. All these materials, and a few others, pop in and out in different combinations, forming a collage which is delightful, though perhaps too rigidly structured.

The most personal piece was Ben Weber's Two Songs, Opus 53, neither of which I was able to understand beneath the most superficial level.

The most abstruse piece was Stefan Wolpe's String Quartet, a work in two movements written in 1969. I tried for a while to figure

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"Breathing Bag No. 4," which focuses on dialogue, read by Trythall and Scott. Against a film background extracted from tv commercials, they deal aphoristically with sex, dreams, "Waiting for Godot," the audience, politics, music criticism, and other topics. They also ask members of the audience for spontaneous answers to absurd questions.

"One Full Rotation of the Earth," the most recent work on the program, combines electronic music with dance. The music is all on one note, but the overtones fade in and out quite abruptly. It is a kind of sledgehammer approach to the idea of one-note music. The seven dancers took the entire 15 minutes or more to shift a few feet from one position to another. Their movements were supposed to be imperceptible, but were actually rather jerky.

—Tom Johnson