

## Rumblings from the Dustbin: A “Great Day in New York” Post-Mortem

John Halle  
Yale University  
john.halle@yale.edu

February 19, 2001

Even those of us who were left out of the party held by Fred Sherry at Merkin and Tully Halls for a chosen 52 New York composers ended up feeling a lot better about the series of concerts than we might have been expected to. Gore Vidal’s adage that every time a friend receives acclaim, something inside the heart of a true artist dies was, of course, part of the mixture of emotions. But these feelings were balanced by the awareness that a lot of us were doing a lot worse- that more than a few were contemplating suicide, mayhem or worse at being excluded.

Beyond the inevitable bruised (and salved) egos and petty politics, there were larger issues at stake in the “great day” concerts. In particular Sherry’s list marked a clear and possibly decisive victory for those who have been advocating a broader conception of what can be considered within the boundaries of musical high culture. The set of attitudes which led the Pulitzer Prize committee to perennially refuse to recognize Duke Ellington or which allowed the academic uptown to refuse to include among “serious music of the mainstream” that which was not composed according to twelve-tone principles is now nothing more than history. And since Sherry is making his choice now he is able to cast his net far wider than would have been acceptable over the course of decades. The attractive result, from the listener’s standpoint, is that the “great day” selection of composers made for varied and provocative programs, with surprising juxtapositions that have the effect of making even the more traditional pieces and familiar composers sound fresh and in some cases even wonderfully strange. Milton Babbitt’s music never made a better case for itself than it did adjacent to Meredith Monk-and vice versa, and the same held for Ned Rorem being placed next to John Zorn.

Equally important was the overview the concerts provided of the schools of composition which have been allowed to flourish since the musical glasnost of the early 80s. While the past two decades may turn out to be historically anomalous or even unprecedented, one historical truism has been largely validated: what had been on the fringe has now moved comfortably into the mainstream. Glass and Reich were, as is to be expected, featured prominently in the series not as anti-establishment lone wolves but as working within a tradition carried forward by the second generation minimalists (or post-minimalists) David Lang and Michael Torke. The downtown school did-as usual they will claim- get less attention than they deserve. However augmenting Zorn and Monk by the rather lesser-known Jerome Kitzke and Scott Johnson made the presence of downtown uptown more than a token one. In contrast to the downtowners who might have been left out under less enlightened stewardship, there was virtually no danger that jazz would be ignored having been established at Lincoln Center for more than a decade.

Pulitzer winner Wynton Marsalis was thereby assured a place, but Sherry's deft choices of Anthony Davis, Oliver Lake, Paquito deRivera and Fred Ho, were much more than pro forma exercises in political correctness. A nod to eastern/world music traditions, albeit a highly selective one was provided by a substantial Shanghai contingent, consisting of Zhou Long, Chen Yi, and Tan Dun. Given that the latter two are currently among the most visible and successful composers in New York (Tan Dun is said to have earned over a million dollars during 1999), this representation was inevitable. Still, the in-your-face ethnic "difference" of their compositions, as well as their patent virtuosity made the presence of an immigrant Chinese community of composers as conspicuous in the festival as the Chinese presence in lower Manhattan.

In short, Sherry's list is a tangible reflection that more than lip service is given to eclecticism in establishment circles, that the bumper-sticker slogan "celebrate diversity" is no longer to be found only on the nose-ringed, dreadlocked fringes. It is accepted within the halls of one of New York's notoriously buttoned-down institutions, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Still, it would be an exaggeration to claim that every style has equal access to "great fifty" status-that stylistic hierarchies have been flattened. All musical styles may be equal, but that some are more equal than others is apparent in the near exclusion, to take one example, of the one style which is entirely indigenous to New York, namely Broadway. With the utterly necessary exception of Sondheim, none of the living masters of musical comedy, Marilyn Bergman, Marvin Hamlisch, Jule Styne, Jerry Herman, Maury Yeston were in the picture, nor were the younger generation of post-Sondheim Broadway composers, John LaChiusa, Adam Guettel and Rick Ian Gordon and others. Similar questions were raised by the ambiguous status of the gigantic monolith of rock and pop. That which for most of us under the age of fifty constitutes music, was in some sense in the mix as an influence, but its shadowy presence was in the form of crossover composers Steve Mackey and Scott Johnson. Those with more of a claim to rock authenticity-Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, John Cale or for that matter Suzanne Vega, Carly Simon or Paul Simon-didn't make it to Sherry's list. (Or perhaps he the Chamber Music Society couldn't afford them). In any case, to keep at bay precisely the style which constitutes the musical lingua franca of our day will strike some as anachronistic.

These are not meant as quibbles or even criticisms. In fact, I am grateful both for most of Sherry's inclusions and his exclusions-with a few glaring exceptions of course. But beyond the usual platitude about tastes, there are deeper questions which are hard to ignore in the midst of the justified praise which has accompanied the "great day" series. To begin with what is, at least superficially one of the darkest, any discussion of the state of what Copland referred to as "our American music" must begin with the recognition that the days when it was taken as the most significant or even a significant form of American musical expression are long past. Whatever the virtues of Ken Burns's recent 17 part series on NPR the one point which millions of viewers now take as uncontroversial is that the jazz of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, not the concert music of Ives and Copland is America's classical music. Where this leaves the genre which most of the fifty-two composers practice is, to be blunt, nowhere at all. Burns' series has defined us out of existence, having linguistically installed in our comfortable

lodgings at the top of the art music hierarchy a musical kid hailing from the bordellos of New Orleans and the slums of Harlem. Poetic justice perhaps, but a tough pill for us to swallow.

Of course, Burns's documentary is not the only indication that classical music and what was once called contemporary music has ceded the high ground which it once occupied in the larger culture. A generation ago, radio stations which played "great music" were understood as specializing in classical music. For a decade or more, classic rock, country, or hip-hop stations have been promoting their playlists as "the world's best music," "the greatest music, all the time" or "the best contemporary music." That these characterizations are now understood as more than marketing hype but as conventional wisdom has also become increasingly apparent. For the transcendent greatness of commercial musics is taken as gospel not only by the low-brow media but given the blessing of all sectors of the cultural elite. In the most august cultural circles, rock and pop is routinely given much the same reception as that which was reserved for the "high" musical arts a generation ago. Mandarins such as Leon Wieseltier pen homages to Leonard Cohen, Alex Ross and Greil Marcus wax poetic on Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes, Tom Frank holds forth on the subtle transgressive strategies of the Yum Yums. A single artist, Madonna, has spawned a cottage industry of cultural criticism, provoking essays from Camille Paglia, Susan McClary and any number of post-modern scholars. While the New York Times still maintains a stable of "serious music" critics, its most serious and perceptive music criticism comes from the relative newcomers, pop music specialists Ann Powers, Stephen Holden and Jon Pareles. As the gray lady has donned her mini-skirt, so has the even more famously dowdy New York Review, as articles on the Beatles, Motown and Burt Bachrach have begun to displace the ruminations of Joseph Kerman, Charles Rosen, and Alfred Brendel on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European masterpieces and masters.

Whether rock or jazz will emerge as the leading contender for canonic status in American music or whether, as was argued by a distinguished scholar, multiple canons-as opposed to a single canon-will become necessary to account for the range of legitimate critical consensus is yet to be determined. But what is by this point largely beyond dispute is that "our American music" is simply off the map for the culture industry and for the manufacturers of culture. At best it is, in the words of one musicologist, "one style among many, and by no means the most prestigious." At worst, it is now so marginal that it cannot be said to exist as part of the "culture" in any meaningful sense. It is no more than a music of empty rituals which serve, like the spectacles staged for Pirandello's Henry IV, the sole purpose of maintaining the delusion of its own self-importance. For opinion makers and intellectuals inside and outside of the academy as well as for the public at large the notion of a classical music tradition setting the standards to which all other genres aspire is an archaic relic of utopianism from the distant past on the same dustbin of history as world socialism, Esparanto, and energy too cheap to meter.

\*\*\*\*\*

I must admit to have entertained these and other dark thoughts when I contemplated heading off to the first “great day” concert. The dreary reality of many, if not most new music concerts is no news, and it is enough to throw even the most enthusiastic “new music” proselytizer into fits of despair. While there was considerable hype given to the “great day” concerts, this was also not unprecedented, so I had no reason for believing that these would be any different from other over hyped events in the past. The performers were by and large from the same top-notch free-lance pool drawn on by Speculum Musicae, the New York New Music Ensemble, Bang on a Can, etc. and while the composers represented more of a mix than what one usually encounters, as well as, I must admit, a higher level of quality, none was unfamiliar to a new music regular such as myself. All things considered, what would appear on the stage was the usual fare, and there was no reason to expect that in the seats one would find anything other than the usual core of true believers and eccentrics.

The first indication that these were something out of the ordinary occurred when I called a friend to arrange complementary tickets. Not possible he said: the concert was sold out. When I got to the hall, I was, fortunately, able to wangle a ticket, and was then shocked to discover that those squeezing into the hall were for the most part unfamiliar to me and the other “regulars” in attendance. Of course, a six figure promotional budget probably had something to do with the numbers. But the palpable sense of excitement-even electricity- wasn't nor could have been purchased or manufactured. And while the level of audience engagement varied, at no time did one sense a descent into the unique realm of ennui which most new music veterans are more than a little familiar with-one which, I'm sure, even Fred Sherry feared. Nor did Tully Hall remain any less than nearly full throughout the series.

All this was cause for more than a little sincere if somewhat bewildered celebration among the composers who were there. Depending on one's capacity for optimism, responses ranged from encouragement to euphoria. Discussions turned on whether the perpetual “crisis” of contemporary music and even, dare we hope, the tedium of endlessly discussing the crisis has finally come to an end. Others saw the “great day” concerts as the “tipping point” marking new music's ascendancy perhaps not quite as “the next big thing,” as a recent book would define it, but at least a viable option for those considering an evening out. The gloomiest among us saw them as an indication that we have hit bottom-a triumph, yes, but more of a marketing triumph than anything else in that anyone who has ever given more than a moment's thought to new music was successfully mobilized. Whether the concerts represent a sea-change or even a trend very much remains to be seen. A positive indication will be if they succeed in providing spin-off benefits to their poorer cousins-those numerous composers' groups and ensembles which account for the huge amount activity which goes on beneath the radar of the media and audiences. Another indication will be if the lost generation of composers, those under the age of fifty who have been claimed by Paul Griffith in the Times not to exist, will begin to receive the attention they deserve. While no one expects mass market status any time soon for new music, perhaps some unknown new music release will become a “novelty” hit-providing a boom to CRI or New World or another small record company the way the Gorecki's Symphony #3 did for Nonesuch some years back.

Putting aside these uncertain hopes for the future, there is some solid albeit circumstantial basis for optimism. For it is not only that, to everyone's amazement, an audience materialized for contemporary music seemingly out of nowhere. Rather, much more remarkable is that the sold-out halls for contemporary classical music occurred now, in the full-flower of, so the "new" musicologists tell us, the "post-canonic" epoch in which "classical music has lost the ability to define hierarchies of taste within the larger culture."

While it may come as a surprise, most composers are by no means altogether hostile to this reading of contemporary musical history. We no longer mourn the passing of an epoch when art music's aristocratic status compelled deference, attention, and attendance, if not love. But if it is the case that an audience no longer attends a new music event out of respect for its cultural authority what now compels or motivates audiences to fill the seats at Tully and Merkin? The only possible explanation for the turnout is that this series was providing an experience which audiences seemed to want, and even to need. If this is the case, it marks an important and hopeful shift and it is worth speculating on what this something might be.

Clearly, some of the explanation is superficial and points to nothing more than a change in fashion: perhaps spandex is out and tuxes are in-though those expecting formality at the "great day" concerts would come away disappointed. Perhaps the retro set has finally caught up with the space-age bachelor-pad aspect of the high-modernism of Davidovsky and Carter or Paul Lansky whose pre-digital electronic work from the 60s is sampled on Stereolab's new release. Less frivolously, perhaps audiences are coming to appreciate the relative absence of artifice within classical performance- they are bored with crotch grabbing, hip swiveling, with unapologetic misogyny and displays of gratuitous violence, with hoochie-cootchie and back-door men, mojos working and midnight rambling. Perhaps they are tired of the pretence of a hidden affinity for an idealized blue-collar (or perhaps-non-white) lifestyle allegedly free of "bourgeois" inhibitions. Perhaps they have begun to find a little silly affectations of proletarian forms of speech. Why are dropped r's, non-standard grammar, or "ebonics" taken as rock, jazz or blues authenticity but taken as an indication of limited education or intelligence for a job applicant at your firm? Why is being addressed as "you motherfuckers" as I was as an audience member a few years ago by a black-clad, leering, bearded hooligan on stage, a token of comradeship, solidarity, and bonding at a Metallica concert, but an occasion for sheer terror anywhere else? Why is discussion about music which passes off bland cliches for oracular wisdom, as is so consistently and painfully the case in Burns' documentary taken as acceptable when the subject is jazz, but considered tedious to the extreme if engaged in by a dinner companion or neighbor across the hall?

Moving towards the music itself, perhaps audiences are beginning to value the immediacy of new music performed at a reasonable decibel level in a small, acoustically satisfying space which allows instruments to sound like the millions of dollars paid for them. Perhaps they are beginning to value performers' interacting on stage with the sound they are actually producing, rather than a "mix" coming through monitors-one which itself

has little to do with that fed to the audience through the main house-speakers. Finally, perhaps audiences are beginning to appreciate- after decades of increasing musical illiteracy (in the literal sense of the term)-that only a relatively small fraction of music is entirely composed in the sense that a composer has actually chosen and decided on all of the events, (and presumably liked what s/he heard). It is impossible to know whether or not the audience response to the great day concerts was based on a sense of the possibilities in form, counterpoint and sound that composed music makes available. But while few audience members would articulate their enthusiasm for what they heard in this way, it is not impossible they sensed at least the ghost of musical dimensions which other music simply doesn't provide for them. That composers have any cause for optimism at all on this score is more than a little encouraging, and while those of us left out of the party will find it hard to admit, we have the Chamber Music Society and Fred Sherry to thank for it.