

Opens big hole in head

Steve Reich's mellow sound

Adrian Iwachiw

I first read about Steve Reich in an article in *Penthouse*. Amidst phrases like "music of the future" and references to consciousness-altering, Reich was said to be (along with Terry Riley, Phil Glass and Lamonte Young) one of the new generation of composers supposedly influential in the developments of such acts as Pink Floyd and Tangerine Dream. They were supposed to be comrades of, or at least well-respected by, David Bowie and Brian Eno, among others. I figured I had to investigate further.

That was a couple of years ago. A couple of weeks ago I got my chance to see one of Reich's pieces performed live, in U. of T.'s Walter Hall. Three other works by young Canadian composers preceded Reich's "Octet", and ranged from interesting to less-so. "Octet", however, brought back the familiar magic of his music, with its overlapping rhythms and melodic figures repeated in hypnotic ever-changing interwoven patterns, all based around a strong tonal center. The piece, scored for two pianos, two flutes, two clarinets and string quartet, came off pretty well, though not much different from how it would have sounded on record; with my personal dislike of the uncomfortable confinement of the New Music Concerts, with their well-mannered, fashionably-dressed, politely-applauding audiences, I would have preferred hearing in on record.

Back to Reich himself. He's a native of New York. He's done all the usual contemporary music training, studying music at Mills College and Juilliard, as well as philosophy at Cornell. Since then he has augmented his studies with African drumming, Balinese Gamelan music, and most recently, traditional Hebrew cantillation ("Tehillim", his latest work, is a setting of psalms in the original Hebrew). Since Reich's experiments with tape loops in the late 60's, he's stuck to purely acoustic instrumentation, the number of performers ranging from one violinist with tape in "Violin Phase" (1967) to

fairly large mixed ensembles of instrumentalists. *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, a 1978 ECM release, has sold over 45,000 copies to date—not exactly a bestseller by popular standards but quite successful for its type of music.

I asked Reich about his influence on Eno, Bowie and others working in a more popular stream. He said he was flattered by their respect for him, and mildly interested by the current situation. "When I was younger I was influenced by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. Now people 10 years younger than me are influenced by me; today the influence is not going from pop to classical, as in my case, but from classical to pop."

"But," he added, "it should be quite clear to anybody who's a musician that what pop people are doing is basically exploiting a pre-existing musical discovery made by people in serious music and making ten times as much money at it." Reich refuses to call these people "composers", but rather refers to them as "pop musicians".

Reich is no longer interested in his earlier predictions of an emerging "world music tradition". He refers to his music as "classical" (in the larger sense of its having come out of the western art music tradition) as opposed to "popular". Unfortunately these categories seem hardly sufficient today other than for someone whose concept of music holds only those two categories, and even then it seems to me that both Reich's music and that of Eno or his associates (such as Robert Fripp) should be considered outside these categories. (It's interesting that Fripp once said that Reich's music "takes me to a point at which something interesting could happen, but doesn't quite make that jump because it is preconceived and orchestrated.")

So, Reich is just an average guy doing his job working out of, and in the process, enlarging, his musical tradition, while others worry about impending doom, or else, like Eno, playing their part in the emerging planetary communications-culture. And yet, listening to "Music



Roman Paulyshyn

for Eighteen Musicians" or "Violin Phase" is enough to bring back a sense of clarity, purity. Reich's music has been called "trance music" but it doesn't drug you into confused, soporific stupor. It calmly lets you open a hole in your head that allows the bad air out, the fresh in.

I used to hate violins; such an easy prey for my vengeful reaction against oppressive classical culture that was this little wooden box. "Violin Phase" changed all that. On first listen it sounds like a record skipping, but then you realize that rhythms are shifting, new patterns are emerging; context becomes content. The music is a constantly changing fabric of motion and space like watching the co-evolution of all nature and being part of it. A sense of mystical wholeness united with a feeling of being brought back down to earth in all its clarity and colour. A laudable accomplishment for this age. □

At Toronto Free Theatre...

Mr. Hyde twangs

Elliott Lefko

Sex and drugs may be the apple pie and ice cream for most rock 'n' rollers, but for 29-year-old Californian David Lindley, a bad guitar is all that is needed to have fun.

Lindley is principally noted for his 10-year stint with Jackson Browne, with whom he played Hawaiian guitar, dobro, and sang back-up vocals. His most celebrated moment came singing those legendary falsetto bits on Browne's hit single "Stay".

"I'm usually a reserved guy, singing in the shadows playing my guitars," he says into a phone somewhere in America. "But when it came time to play 'Stay' I became a Mr. Hyde and just went wild."

When Lindley and producer Browne recorded Lindley's debut solo LP *El Rayo X*, Lindley remembered the *Running* album and tried to recreate the vitality of those sessions. "It didn't take a long time to record. I mean, we didn't work it to death. A lot of albums are so perfect that something gets lost."

"I like the way it turned out. I wanted to have fun," Lindley explains. "There's nothing worse than making it a chore. You've gotta get drunk once in a while and get weird."

On the subject of guitars, Lindley says that his first influence was Django Reinhardt. Through the famous Belgran, he began to appreciate such diverse musics as Persian, Middle Eastern, Turkish, as well as a lot of Flamenco and North American Indian.

"I try to approximate sounds or even get the real instrument myself. I love terrible guitars. I've got one I've been playing for a while and it has this horn sound."

"I take wrecks and work on them. The vega-matic knobs, the bad pick-ups." In fact, before hanging up on me to finish fixing the air-conditioning, Lindley described his latest acquisition: "It's

got three pick-ups that look like a dinette set. It has a formica top and a mother of a diving board edge—it looks like something from a cafeteria that you eat off of."

The biggest surprise on *El Rayo X* is Lindley's vocals. "I didn't know I could really sing lead for whole album until I tried it. Now I'm ready. I've got a lot of secret weapons lined up for future albums."

And as sure as ice cream melts and apple pie rots, there will be more albums—Lindley has now committed himself fully to his solo work. Last week he dropped into Toronto long enough to



introduce Toronto audiences to his band, which includes Rastafarian George "Baboo" Pierre on percussion and accordian, Jorge Calderon, who co-wrote the LP's title tune, on bass, Bernie Larson on guitar and keyboards, and drummer Ian Wallace.

"We've thrown away the scarab. The Samurai do that when they know they aren't coming back," Lindley decrees. "This is it. This is not a normal band." □

Jan Sheltinga

It is August 1945, and the reverberations of Nagasaki and the big band sound are just reaching small-town U.S.A. *Straight Ahead/Blind Dancers*, two one-act plays now playing at the Toronto Free Theatre, are studies of the morals and social consciousness of mid-Western America during this difficult period of confidence re-building. Thwarted dreams, feelings of desolation, unexpected bursts of energy, and "swing" all combine in the portrayal of an Ohio farm girl struggling to establish her identity in a male-dominated society.

In *Straight Ahead*, Louisa Potter is a post-war bandchick alone and proud on her daddy's farm. Upon discovering that she's pregnant, Louisa examines her relationships with the various men in her life. This is followed by *Blind Dancers*, set in a Toledo hotel room two years later. Louisa wakes up with a second-rate trombone player, an intent-to-marry certificate, and a hangover-induced case of amnesia, the layers of which peel to reveal the intricacies of a relationship that began as a one-night stand.

Written by Charles Tidler, these plays are rich in evocative language and popular jazz cadences, reflecting Tidler's poetic origins: he attempts to effectively work through imagery rather than direct statement. Although this results in colourful and original phraseology, it makes for stilted and unnatural speech patterns. Gradually, one becomes impatient with this roundabout means of expression and begins to lose concentration and enthusiasm for the actual message. Also questionable is the extent to which Louisa—the country heroine—could be emotionally affected by the dropping of the atomic bomb thousands of miles away, considering her own personal crisis.

Director Henry Tarvainen chooses to limit his highly polished production to only a small part of the stage—in direct contrast to the images of space that are evoked by the play's setting—and the audience is forced to contemplate his reasons for this.

Theatre that is based solely on one or two characters is amongst the most difficult to perform. Rosemary Dunsmore, as Louisa, accepts the

responsibility of this form, and rewards the audience with a vigorous and controlled performance. She is a player of remarkable warmth and energy. Mr. Trombone Man, the character opposite Louisa in *Blind Dancers*, is credibly portrayed by Michael Hogan. It is unfortunate that two

such talented actors be found performing in a play that is colourful but confusing, and with a message and direction that is lukewarm at best.

(*Straight Ahead/Blind Dancers* runs thru November 15 at Toronto Free Theatre, 26 Berkeley. Tues.-Fri at 8:30, Sat. at 5 & 9, Sun. at 2:30.) □

Stompable 'Incomparables'

Robyn Butt

One of the bizarre and misunderstood things about criticism is that the more important the work the more stringently it should be judged. No one confuses cabaret, for instance, with art. But an event like the Graduate Theatre Program's *The Incomparables In Africa* (which played this week in Mac Hall) is more than singing and dancing in cigar smoke, with its budget, student script, and guest director, not to mention its own aspirations to the Shakespeare Hall of Fame.

There are wonderful things in *The Incomparables*. Most Individually Wonderful is Rod Menzies as the pathological liar Velbar, a sustained double-edged performance which glides so smoothly it boggles. This actor even has expressive toes, and is comfortable enough inside the character to take outrageous risks.

Most Collectively Wonderful are the four clowns, led by Jennifer Higgin as a thrillingly vacant kind of Miss Chiquita Banana with a bosom. The other three clowns work beautifully with silence, and, in the case of the two scruffy Italians, with a foreign language (which, if you don't speak it, is a delightful variation on silence).

The characters strung on the "tragic" thread are not so fortunate. They include an old African ex-king and his foundling daughter, and to some degree a death-spirit call the Chi (a witty jester-type who looked ridiculous and thus became funnier and more interesting than his lines). Their drama is so heavy it makes the stage shake.

Henry Gomez as the old man survives because he has a nice body and a lovely voice and because old men are the most likely to pontificate with impunity; but Mauralea Austin's war-mongering virgin comes out like a grade school Lady MacBeth. Part of this is the fault of director Dean Gilmour, who at least might have invented some variations on Austin's stock pose—arms and legs wide and stiff. A lot of it is her own fault: she doesn't believe a thing she is doing.

And writer Graham Smith should bury Shakespeare as a stylistic mentor and read some Sam Shepard. The play's straight characters are labouring under ornamental language—Austin even declaims in Homeric metaphor when surprised—and frankly, serious talk about "the gods" and "wretched miscreant", have no business in a modern script except as a joke. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with deposed emperors, foundlings from the sea, and Electra complexes, but there can never be another *Tempest*. Nobody wants another *Tempest*. The real Lesson from the Bard has been missed here: words, however beautiful, never substitute for human passion. The most they can do is carry it.

Ultimately *The Incomparables* remains a play about its writer's brilliance foundering in his romantic vision. Smith is prodigiously talented. He should recheck his compass. Imagine what he could do if he found his way out of someone else's Africa into his own... □