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ΠΠÉ

FOUR AMERICAN COMPOSERS 'Music of the Mind' by John de Bono

The opening scene in Peter Greenaway's film on American composer John Cage (broadcast on 31st March) showed a church interior being demolished to make way for a performance of Cage's music. The occasion was the composer's 70th birthday concerts, but the crashing masonry (quite apart from any symbolic reference to the new order replacing the old) could quite easily have been one of Cage's "found sounds". Over the last forty years, his works have featured anything from an underwater gong to amplified plants. His pioneering efforts at "subverting sound in all its forms" have shocked many a purist but have also forced a re-evaluation of what we consider music to be. Further, his work has opened up the way for a whole generation of rule-breakers to work across the boundaries in the arts.

Film-maker Peter Greenaway is one of these rule-breakers. Although best-known for artistic subversion of a different kind (his Channel 4 / BFI film, 'The Draughtsman's Contract' was an inspired seventeenth century "whodunnit?") he has been fascinated with Cage's cultural anarchy since art school. No surprise then that 'The Draughtsman's Contract' featured a haunting score by English composer Michael Nyman - a protégé of Philip Glass and, indirectly, John Cage - nor that Greenaway should direct 'Four American Composers'. The series gives us a rare chance to judge for ourselves whether we consider Cage and his descendants' "avant-garde" a genuine eye-and-ear-opener or the musical equivalent to the emperor's suit of clothes.

The TV films are based on concert footage of John Cage, Meredith Monk, Philip Glass and Robert Ashley shot during the Almeida Theatre's New York Performance Season in 1982, intercut with interviews, rehearsals and film clips in a deliberately-experimental style. Greenaway has tried to get away from the "illustrative film" and "documentary interview" approaches, and what results is a collaborative effort between artist and film-maker where the join is hard to see.

Of the four composers, Philip Glass is the most popular and accessible. His debut album for CBS Masterworks 'Glassworks', after all, entered the US Top 40 a couple of years ago. Moreover, the likes of David Bowie and Talking Heads claim him as an influence. His musical style is based on repetition and the gradual development of rhythmic sequences rather than sudden changes in melody or key: in short, 'systems' or 'minimal' music. Yet Glass is merely the most melodic of Cage's offspring. By contrast, Robert Ashley, with his TV opera 'Perfect Lives' is the most visually arresting; while Meredith Monk comes across as a dance equivalent to Laurie Anderson.

All four composers could have had respectable careers in classical music. Yet all four chose to discard tradition and "find their own voice" in a "new music" which borrowed from both the East and the West. The literary and artistic themes grew out of European surrealism, while the musical inspiration was very often Oriental. All four composers echo in their music the contemplative mood associated with Indian ragas, for example. Indeed, it seems as no surprise to learn that Philip Glass worked on a film score with Ravi Shankar in 1965, nor that (on a lighter note) John Cage owed his macrobiotic diet to Yoko Ono; for the 1960s ~~are~~ ^{were} another influence. The spirit of "anything goes" and that of cross-cultural experimentation which pervaded that decade saw Monk, Glass and Ashley - then only just starting - their cue.

The focus was New York, and the performative-art scene: an ill-defined term but one which helps label the inter-disciplinary approach of Meredith Monk (originally a dancer) who, like Laurie Anderson (perhaps the best-known of this genre) combined music, movement and films in her shows. The two share a very sense of the absurd and a fascination with the human voice. Monk's humour comes across, for example, in her film 'Ellis Island', which shows New World immigrants at the turn of the century practising basic English like 'Empire State Building' and 'microwave'. However, it is her vocal characterisations - an extraordinary, wordless gibberish, at once funny and moving - which strike a primal chord.

Philip Glass too knows the power of the human voice. Many of his compositions employ Dora Ohrenstein's soprano to add texture to an already-dense 7 piece ensemble ^{sound} which, through rock-style public address systems, gives the impression of a full-scale orchestra. Indeed, Glass specifically uses synthesizers and modern-day studio technology alongside flutes and saxophones in order to show contemporary classical music moving with the times. (One interesting note - Glass' sound man, Kurt Munkasi, is considered part-enough of the ensemble to sit on stage in the 'conductor's chair!').

Yet Glass' grandiose musical operas pale alongside Robert Ashley's magnum opus, 'Perfect Lives' (which, in addition to Greenaway's hour-long documentary, is being aired in seven, consecutive evening half-hours on Channel 4, 23-29 April). Billed as, "An event recommended for video-tape recording" by the composer, 'Perfect Lives' is a TV-opera with a difference. It loosely involves two main characters - a singer and 'the world's greatest piano-player' (played by a keyboard-cowboy who rejoices in the real-life name of 'Blue' Gene Tyranny) - in a story about, "the core-belt and some of the people in it - or on it". Yet in various small-town settings (the Park, the Bitterroot, the Bank etc.) are metaphors for the whole of America. In the midst of a bank of TV monitors flashing-up images from the mobile mind of New York art-vid master John Gaylor, stands Ashley, an elegantly motionless 52 year-old who, but for the lipstick, resembles a dissipated business-executive. His vocals (faintly comic, faintly sinister non-secuiturs) punctuate a jazzy, electronic score. Obviously, Peter Greenaway enjoyed this film best of all for its inherently visual nature and it ^{certainly} comes across as most befitting re-examination with the video remote-control firmly in hand. Yet Ashley's serious intent the same as Cage's: by addressing his work to structures, words, images and music, he invites us to re-consider how we relate to each and all of them. This is the brain-tickling theme of all four composers indeed, and whilst the media may be varied and the outward face inscrutable, this is definitely "music of the mind".