

Arts & Entertainment

Local composers pick favorite modern works

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Composers may have a reputation as reserved, thoughtful types, but that was far from the case when I gave six prominent local composers a most difficult task: Pick the three best compositions written since 1975.

You could almost hear the groans when reading the e-mails. "Man, you're tough! Only three? Impossible!" said one. "What a shame. The last quarter of the much-maligned 20th century had TOO MUCH good music!"

Nonetheless, the constraints were necessary to prove a point -- that there is contemporary music as great as any in the past. Shostakovich is perhaps the most recent composer who elicits name recognition with casual music lovers. He died in 1975, so it's appropriate to see who has been filling the void. There are plenty of worthy contenders, but we had to draw the line somewhere.

Now the only question is: Will we see these works in the rotation of top American symphonies such as the Pittsburgh Symphony?

For the record, I would add the following to the lists below: Einojuhani Rautavaara's Symphony No. 7, "Angel of Light" (1994), Henryk Gorecki's Symphony No. 3 (1976) and Michael Torke's "Four Proverbs" (1993).

On to the lists:

Leonardo Balada, Carnegie Mellon University

- **Alberto Ginastera, Cello Concerto No. 2 (1980):** Though the Argentine composer is most known for his musical nationalism, this piece stems from his neo-expressionist period.
- **James MacMillan, "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" (1992):** Written for Evelyn Glennie, the piece finds the famed percussionist playing a battery of instruments.
- **Aribert Reimann, the opera "Bernarda Albas Haus" (2000):** Here the judgment is based on a compendium of drama and music. Although I am not generally crazy about serial [12-tone] music, this was an exceptional work.

Nancy Galbraith, CMU

- **John Adams, "Harmonielehre" (1984):** Adams has managed to create a successful combination of traditional form with minimalist techniques. This blend is particularly evident in his "Harmonielehre," where the orchestra builds to a dramatic and powerful climax.
- **Arvo Part, "Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi" (1982):** In his own unique language, Part has created a work of profound spiritual beauty.
- **Alfred Schnittke, Triple Concerto for Violin, Viola and Cello (1994):** An extremely evocative, dramatic and exciting work, his writing for strings is superb.

Eric Moe, University of Pittsburgh

■ **Lee Hyla, "Howl" (1993):** A stunning setting! [Poet] Allen Ginsberg reads his American epic (unabridged) while the Kronos Quartet provides a parallel musical universe.

■ **Judith Weir, "A Night at the Chinese Opera" (1987):** An amazing music theater work containing every kind of narrative imaginable set to music of ravishing, sometimes acerbic beauty. Look for the opera-within-an-opera.

■ **Steve Reich, "Tehillim" (1981):** One of the supreme achievements of classic minimalism. The piece, a setting of Psalms in Hebrew for voices and small ensemble, is taut and propulsive, harmonic without being simple-minded, imitative without losing its drive.

Mathew Rosenblum, Pitt

■ **Pierre Boulez, "Repons" (1981):** This work is a masterful blend of live orchestral music and computer-processed orchestral sound. It's in many ways a culmination of Boulez's work since the '60s and points the way to the future as well.

■ **Lee Hyla, "Pre-Pulse Suspended" (1984):** The music is rhythmically, formally and timbrally rich, and skillfully incorporates elements from a variety of American and European sources. His music is always emotionally powerful. One of the most powerful voices of the younger American generation.

■ **Morton Feldman, "False Relationships and the Extended Ending" (1968):** This piece is also one of many amazing pieces by this pioneer of American music. His works have a unique sense of time and motion, unlike any other composer from the past and present. A true American original.

David Stock, Duquesne University

■ **Steve Reich, "Music for 18 Musicians" (1976).**

■ **John Adams, "Shaker Loops" (1978).**

■ **Arvo Part, "Tabula Rasa" (1977).**

I chose works of Reich, Adams and Part because they are among our finest living composers. All three works were written around 1976-78, in the early stages of what I call "The Rediscovery of the Audience" (following the "Who Cares If You Listen" Period). All three are important examples of the renewal of tonality, pulse and repetition, all qualities shunned during the postwar time. They still sound fresh and *personal* after a quarter of a century.

Reza Vali, CMU

■ **Olivier Messiaen, "Illuminations of the Beyond (Eclair sur l'Au-Dela)" (1987-91):** The following statement by Myung-Whun Chung, who conducted the Opera Bastille Orchestra's recording of this piece, aptly characterizes the essence of Messiaen's music: "All of its technical complexities and difficulties have but one goal: to express from the heart the most sincere of messages -- that of love, devotion, belief."

■ **George Crumb: "A Haunted Landscape" (1984):** For me, Crumb's music is full of beautiful colors, mysteries and mysticism.

■ **Conlon Nancarrow: "Study No. 45 for Player Piano" (1977):** Nancarrow's music is an astonishing display of mathematical complexity without being dry or academic. It is upbeat, joyful, passionate and jazzy.