



Julia Wolfe

by Kyle Gann

For years I thought of composer Julia Wolfe in terms of two characteristic, yet mutually contradictory works. One was a 1989 orchestra piece *The Vermeer Room*—a themeless, pulseless interplay of chords and sonorities, arrhythmic splashes of color. Like certain moments in Messiaen, I thought, but more unchanging, mystical, marginally rooted in tonality. The other was *Lick* of 1994, one of the most raucous, vernacular-tinged

works of the vernacular-worshipping 1990s. Fascinated by the energy of James Brown, Wolfe had spread some of his licks out among sax, electric guitar, percussion, piano, cello, and bass, with a jerky, “pow! pow!” momentum that grew ever more rhythmic. Everyone was running around New York back then shouting, “To be authentic, new classical music must be drawn from pop influences!” Appearing at the moment it did, *Lick* seemed like the relevant manifesto. But which was Wolfe: a thoughtful colorist, or a macho rock-appropriater?

Of course, she’s both, and thereby is coiled the tension of her life’s work. Wolfe is well known as one of the trio of composers who founded New York’s Bang on a Can Festival in 1987, along with David Lang and her husband, Michael Gordon. Bang on a Can started as a politics-free attempt to expose the best new music of all idioms, but its most potent side effect was to showcase the fertile new styles that had evolved from

minimalism, which hadn’t yet been given a wide public hearing. The festival’s annual marathon concerts migrated to Lincoln Center, MassMOCA, and around the world, and are still going strong today, more imprinted now than they originally were with a distinctively feisty, yet post-minimalist aesthetic. Bang on a Can works tend to be pop-influenced, minimalist in form and performance technique, and yet punchy and often rhythmically complex.

As this description suggests, Wolfe's music fits right in—is central, in fact. Her music often begins in stasis and starts changing by tiny increments, suggesting a gradual sense of minimalist process. And yet, there's an inner rebellion against minimalism, too; and few Wolfe works fail to burst into some sudden transformation. *Four Marys*, for string quartet (1991), starts as a web of drones drawing tiny glissandos around a B/F-sharp open fifth; after ramping up the tension by minute amounts, it finally breaks into a jumpy texture of repeatedly sawing sixteenth notes. *my lips from speaking*, for six pianos (1993), opens with quiet (and then explosive) chords bouncing around, eventually giving way to a syncopated bass line in B-flat drawn from an Aretha Franklin song. Something initially troubles each piece, and by the end the underlying hidden object of desire is nakedly exposed. Even *The Vermeer Room* finally gives way to a quiet vibraphone pulse near the end.

At the heart of this music is a quandary that is not merely personal to Wolfe, but generational: the simultaneous attraction to, and distrust of, the prettiness and passivity of minimalist music among composers raised in a rock-and-roll environment. After decades of increasingly audience-averse music couched in 12-tone method, the public examples of minimalism by Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley drew crowds by the tens of thousands back to the concert hall with hour upon hour of diatonic prettiness. For composers born in the 1950s, minimalist flatness was the hip paradigm to follow, but prettiness seemed too easy. First of all, rock beckoned, with its powerful, drum-driven physicality and guitar-distortion dirtiness. Second, composers trained to analyze Bartók and Stockhausen really did come to love the idea of surface complexity, as long as there was an attractive beat and tonality to ground it

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in. The result was that Glass's arpeggios and Reich's repetitions, however seductive, infected an entire generation with a crisis of testosterone deficiency. The youngsters responded with electric guitars, propulsive beats, and tempo complexities. This was the musical force that Bang on a Can unleashed.

Wolfe's more recent works show how interestingly she is reconciling these energies in her own mind. *Girlfriend* (1998) is perhaps her best-focused work so far. Its continuous texture of gentle diatonic chords grows and recedes slowly throughout, and resists the need to develop. At the same time, the live instruments are accompanied by a noisy yet muted tape of sampled cars crashing, tires screeching, and glass breaking, with some electronic modification. Overlaid with nice diatonic chords in the strings, they render the piece calm but not restful, meditative yet hardly comforting. The sensuousness of *Vermeer Room* and the macho of *Lick* find a common space to coexist in. Wolfe's conceptual dissonance is sustained, dwelt upon, savored, not resolved; call it gritty post-minimalism. Something similar can be said for *Dark Full Ride*, for four percussionists (2002), whose relentless drumming of cymbals would have been a guaranteed prelude to violence in the 1990s; instead, the piece never explodes, but builds washes of sound from a nuanced patter of drumsticks.

Glass, Reich, and Adams are perhaps the most widely beloved composers around. Why is the next generation of composers so determined to flee from their overt influence? Not wanting to repeat the achievements of predecessors is an inevitable motivation; but there's more than that here—an appreciation of

noise and grittiness, a residually modernist desire to resist too-easy assimilation. The long, slow processes of minimalism created a new listening mode that younger audiences liked. The problem is, every departure from it, every attempt to make formal divisions or contrasts of material, seem like a dubious return toward the old classical music, with its articulated drama calculated for the concert hall. A new generation raised on records and ambient listening was not to be led back so easily.

If *Lick* and *my lips from speaking* marked a revolt from minimalism, Wolfe's recent work attests to a cautious new rapprochement—in terms of process and form, if not materials. She is hardly alone; among others, Lang headed back toward minimalist form with *Slow Movement* of 1993, and Gordon followed a soon afterward with *Trance* (1995). Wolfe's *Believing* of 1997 (for clarinet, electric guitar and organ, cello, bass, and rattly percussion), a perpetual motion of sixteenth notes marked by tambourines and guitar distortion, could be called a sustained piece of noise music. Unlike most music connoted by that marginal pop genre, though, it's notated and without improvisation, even perceptibly tonal. It's not an effortless piece to listen to; but it's interesting to follow, and there's certainly nothing old-fashioned about it. Wolfe's found a macho, hard-hitting minimalism of bottled-up energy that she can be at peace with—and hopes that we won't be—without a little ear work.

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