

Orpheus Unplugged

Unaided by electronics, Ingram Marshall's latest orchestral work will have a new sound.

by Kyle Gann

Ingram Marshall is a famous composer—but not in the orchestra world. At age 64 he is writing his fifth orchestral work, *Orphic Memories*, which is due for performance by the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra in April, both at Carnegie Hall and in several other East Coast venues. Marshall has been slowly becoming a rare crossover success, a composer well-loved in the small arena of electronic music and avant-garde chamber performance who has finally worked his way into the attention of the more mainstream classical world. At one time, however, it looked like his name was going to become more of a household word than it is. I'll tell you the story.

It was the 1970s, when the idea arose that music had been reborn and all things were possible. A cool, hypnotic little movement called minimalism had intercepted the ball from twelve-tone serialism, bringing an end to the greatest crescendo of complexity and dissonance in the history of music. There were a lot of minimalists. La Monte Young and Terry Riley get credit for starting the movement, but by the mid-1970s two composers had emerged as pre-eminent: Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Reich's *Drumming* appeared on the Deutsche Grammophon label, Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* raised eyebrows at the Metropolitan Opera, and twin stars were born. By 1981 the opera world

had discovered Glass, the orchestra world Reich, and music, in the public mind, had officially changed course.

New classical music was on a roll. Who would be next? It so happened that in the mid-1970s in San Francisco, the same city



Thomas McDonald/The New York Times

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where Steve Reich had played in Terry Riley's groundbreaking *In C* and ignited the minimalist movement, there were two composers living in different apartments in the same house. One was Ingram Marshall, the other a friend of his named John Adams. Younger than Reich and Glass—Marshall was born in 1942, Adams in 1947—they were in position to leap on the

minimalist bandwagon and push it a little further. Both composers made some interesting experimental pieces—Adams his *American Standard*, Marshall a work called *Sibelius in His Radio Corner*, which was inspired by a photograph of an aging Sibelius listening to his own music at home on the radio, and employed samples from a recording of that composer's Sixth Symphony. Then Adams composed *Shaker Loops*, a churning opus for strings, minimalist but with significant differences. Marshall wrote a soft, windy piece with brass and recorded foghorns called *Fog Tropes*. These were their breakthrough works. Those of us who were following the scene cried, "This is it, the next two big names after Reich and Glass!"

Marshall, who was looking to record *Fog Tropes* and a companion piece called *Gradual Requiem*, heard a rumor of interest from the German label ECM, which had launched Reich's famous *Music for 18 Musicians* and would later record Adams's *Harmonium*. Much to his disappointment, ECM ultimately turned him down. But Marshall soon discovered that Foster Reed, the mandolin player who'd performed in *Gradual Requiem*, had some family money to invest, and at the composer's suggestion Reed started a new label, calling it New Albion (an old alternative name for California). As it turned out, New Albion launched Marshall's

career—but not quite as much as Marshall's music launched one of contemporary music's most celebrated and influential record labels. Marked by a suave postminimalist aesthetic, New Albion has been known for a quarter-century now as one of the most prestigious labels with which a composer can be associated.

Adams, of course, went on to become perhaps the most widely performed living American composer of orchestral music. Marshall's music, on the other hand, was bound up with electronics, nurturing a cloudy indistinctness not always easy to achieve with acoustic instruments alone. As a master of such

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techniques as digital delay and reverb, he in fact became the go-to guy for orchestras interested in playing highly accessible works that complemented their own sounds with electronic tape. "You get a certain reputation, and everyone wants you to do that," says Marshall. Another factor contributing to his relative obscurity is that he's not terribly prolific. "If I write one big piece a year," he admits, "that's it."

If Marshall lacks the name recognition of Adams, listeners who do know his music evince an approval rating that is probably higher than that of his longtime colleague; Marshall's cult following remains consistent. And orchestral performances, though rare, have slowly become more frequent, as orchestra fans are learning what many of us have known for 25 years: Ingram Marshall's music is seductively beautiful.

Sonic Explorations

Born in Mount Vernon, New York, Marshall studied electronic music with Vladimir Ussachevsky and Morton Subotnick, then attended L.A.'s California Institute of the Arts during its free-wheeling first years, when the faculty included James Tenney and Harold Budd. In 1971 he traveled to Bali to immerse himself in that musical culture, and in 1975 went to Sweden on a Fulbright grant—ostensibly to study text-sound music, but in reality spending most of his time performing and composing his own music. Marshall has always had a particular kinship with Scandinavian music, especially that of Sibelius, whose work he has often quoted.

From 1985 to 1989 Marshall taught at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, then relocated to the East Coast with his wife Veronica, a poet who had decided to return to school for a law degree. The couple moved to New Haven so she could attend Yale, and they subse-

quently bought a house there and raised a son. Marshall now teaches one-quarter-time at Yale, and also as a sometime sabbatical replacement at The Hartt School in nearby West Hartford. Between commissions and light teaching duties, he has a lifestyle he seems comfortable with.

Marshall's first work for orchestra was written for the Oakland Symphony in 1981, but he considers it unsuccessful and has dropped it from his catalogue. The next waited until 1988: *Sinfonia "Dolce far niente,"* written for Leonard Slatkin and the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. A commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic for *A Peaceable Kingdom* followed in 1990, then came *Kingdom Come* for the American Composers Orchestra (1997) and *Bright Kingdoms* (2003), commissioned for the Oakland East Bay, Santa Rosa, and Marin symphonies through a consortium project called Magnum Opus.

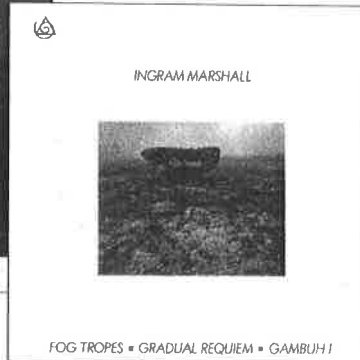
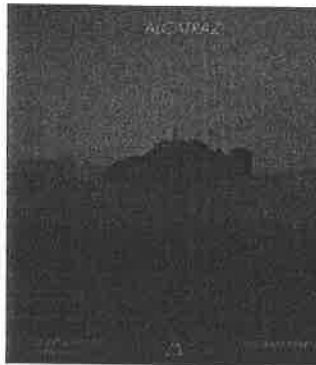
All four works are for orchestra and... well, what composers used to call "tape" but has now been replaced with a CD or computer-stored sound file. It is widely noted how human-sounding Marshall's electronic music is. Echewing synthesizers, he's more likely to use acoustic sounds with tape delay, environmental sounds, recordings of classical music, and even, several times, the voice of his son Clement as a little boy. *Alcatraz* is an evocative series of atmospheres dotted with the sounds of the gates opening and shutting at the eponymous prison. That work does employ syn-

Marshall owes his cult status largely to the New Albion label, which has released such electro-acoustic works as *Fog Tropes*, *Gradual Requiem*, *Gambuh I*, *Alcatraz*, *Dark Waters*, and *Savage Altars*.

INGRAM MARSHALL SAVAGE ALTARS



THE TUDOR CHOIR, SARAH CAHILL, JOSEPH KUBERA, BENJAMIN VERDERY



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thesizers, but also such natural sounds as buoys, birds, fog horns, singing, and a Balinese bamboo flute known as the gambuh.

Marshall makes his taped backgrounds as convenient as possible for orchestras. "Synchronization is not pinpoint-important," he says. "There's always a little wiggle room; I do that deliberately. But if you get too far ahead or behind, it's not going to work." Technology now makes it easy to provide the conductor with a video monitor that gives minute-and-second readouts of the CD, making the timing easy to gauge accurately.

That was the case with *Bright Kingdoms*; and Alasdair Neale, music director of the Marin Symphony, agrees that working with the tape part in that work was not difficult. Neale had known Marshall's name long before actually hearing his music, which he discovered only through Magnum Opus—a project that venture capitalist Kathryn Gould founded as a way to bring conductors and composers together and generate performances of new works in multiple

Photo credit for all: Jim Bengtson

venues. The “complicating factor” in using tape, says Neale, “is that you have to follow along.” But by the time his orchestra performed *Bright Kingdoms*, “it was set up so that all I had to do was cue a percussionist, who pushed a but-

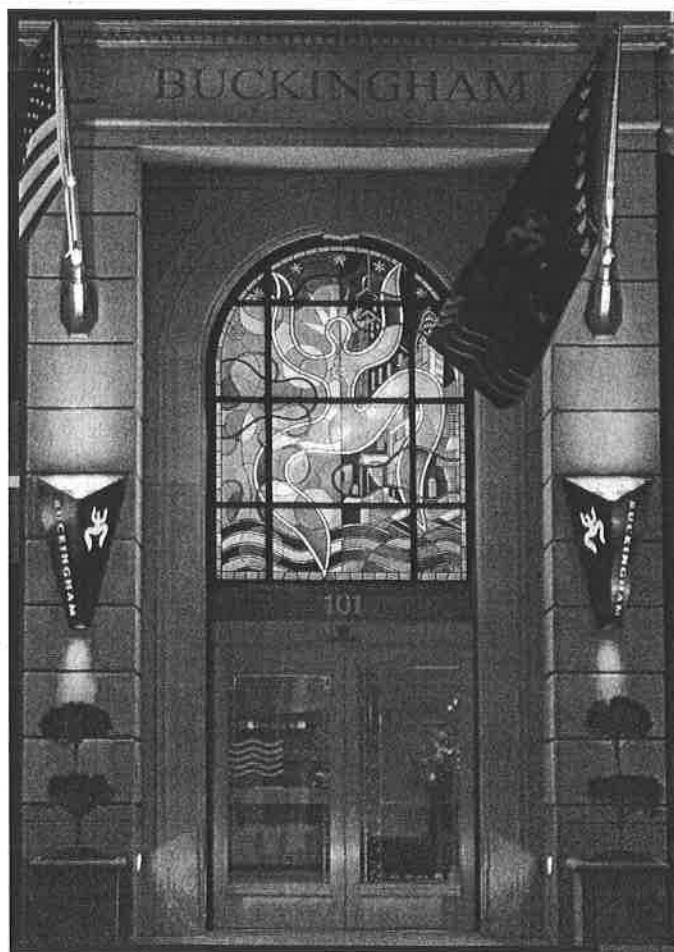
ton. I did have to adjust the tempo on occasion.”

Orphic Memories is Marshall’s first work purely for unaided orchestra. (See sidebar, page 57.) “I knew Orpheus was going to tour with it, and didn’t want

them to mess with that,” he says. The piece deals with the legend of Orpheus’s descent into Hades after Euridice. But, in typically atmospheric Marshall fashion, the piece doesn’t depict the action, but rather Orpheus in the process of remembering his ordeal. It has what Marshall calls “all kinds of hidden homages. There’s a little homage to Stravinsky at the beginning, a descending line reminiscent of the way he starts his *Orpheus* ballet. It’s hidden, but if you know it’s there you can’t miss it. There’s a bow to John Adams—a reminiscence of *Shaker Loops*—and a little Sibelius bit from the Sixth Symphony, something I’ve used before. This time I transcribed the actual notes for the string chords. There’s even a little Arvo Pärt, that kind of 6-4 chord that keeps going up in *Spiegel im Spiegel*.” Marshall’s works are usually slowly evolving forms, but *Orphic Memories* is a departure from



Self-portrait of the composer



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that. "This piece has episodes," he says. "It's not one continuous idea. But I think it flows pretty well."

Marshall has watched Orpheus in rehearsal, and he's enthusiastic about working on the premiere. "The great thing about Orpheus," he says, "is that they real-

ly are conductorless. They don't have anyone telling them what to do. I thought the concertmaster might be the guy in charge, but he's just one of many. They all jump in with their opinions, like a string quartet." When I ask whether he felt a need to limit his rhythmic style to accommodate the

lack of a conductor, Marshall notes that his music is not given to complex metrical changes anyway. "There are a few accelerandi and ritards they'll have to figure out," he says. "I don't think they'll have any trouble."

The Human Element

Marshall has acquired a national reputation that is as vague and difficult to bring into focus as the mystical incense of his music. He's probably best known in the "downtown" world of postminimalist electronics. Until 1985 Marshall was the primary performer of his own music, but since then he's been championed by such solo artists as oboist Libby Van Cleve and pianists Sarah Cahill and Joseph Kubera. Unlike most composers on that circuit, Marshall has one foot in the door of regional orchestras, though he continues to feel like something of a stranger there.

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"Professionally it's great, because the musicians are usually all quite good," he says. "What's missing is this kind of camaraderie, or artistic or aesthetic solidarity, that you get when you work with smaller groups or with people you really know. When you work with a professional orchestra there's always a bit of a barrier." Marshall notes that while individual musicians are sometimes very sympathetic to what he's trying to do, "my feeling about conductors is that they really don't like composers to communicate directly with the orchestra. I've never had a conductor say, 'Why don't you come up here and talk to the orchestra and tell them what this piece is all about?' I like the idea of having a first-class orchestra playing my music wonderfully, but it's not as much fun as writing a piece for Libby Van Cleve and working with her one-on-one."

Perhaps Marshall's music has been



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slower to catch on in the orchestra world than that of Adams because its qualities remain closer to minimalism and aren't as fashionable. He avoids the big climaxes and propulsive percussion that some people think are necessary to impress a concert-hall audience, and also the tension and dissonant touches that some composers feel are crucial to prove a work's modern bona fides. Sometimes

Orphic Memories On Tour, On Air, On the Web

Ingram Marshall's first work for purely orchestral forces—double winds and brass (minus tuba), harp, strings—is destined for wide exposure at the hands of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. *Orphic Memories* is the second commission from the Cheswaty New Music Initiative, a partnership between Orpheus, the American Music Center, the Cheswaty Foundation, National Public Radio, and New York's WNYC Radio. The first fruits of this commissioning project came in February 2006, when Orpheus premiered *Brick*, a work by the 40-year-old composer Marc Mellits.

By the time Orpheus brings Marshall's *Orphic Memories* to Carnegie Hall on April 14, this conductorless orchestra will have performed it in Greenville, S.C. (April 9); Chapel Hill, N.C. (April 10); and in Newport News and Charlottesville, Va. (April 11 and 12). Cheswaty's broadcasting partners will add greatly to that geographic exposure, and *Orphic Memories* will have a Web presence as well: Marshall stalwarts and newcomers to his music will find interviews, rehearsal and tour photos, and blog entries regarding the work at www.orpheusnyc.blogspot.com.

—Chester Lane

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his music sounds intentionally naïve, such as the string quartet *Evensongs*, based on hymn tunes and rarely departing from a stately quarter-note momentum. More often his music floats in arrhythmic clouds of unabashed tonality, with occasional repetitive gestures fading in and out. But Jeffrey Kahane, who conducted *Bright Kingdoms* at the Santa Rosa Symphony, calls Marshall “a composer who has forged a unique language that draws on many different influences and resources—minimalism, the music of Sibelius, the music of Bali and Indonesia, to name a few. And he has found a beautiful and powerful way of amalgamating all of these into a very personal whole.” Neale adds, “One of the strengths of Ingram’s music is that it is accessible. His language is something people can relate to.”

“I want people to like my piece,” Marshall admits. “I expect that. If people don’t

come up to me afterward and tell me they enjoyed it, something’s wrong. It may sound a little egotistical, but I do write music that I think is going to be appreciated by a sizeable number of people. It’s my intention. I’m not ‘solving problems,’ as Roger Sessions would like all composers to do. The music is meant to be *consumed* on some level.” Then, after a pause, he says, “Sorry”—as though he’s failing to live up to some composer stereotype. But it’s because his music does not live up to stereotypes that Ingram Marshall, long an underground phenomenon, is being taken more and more seriously in the outer world. ∞

Composer Kyle Gann is a frequent commentator on contemporary American music and an associate professor of music at Bard College. His last SYMPHONY article was a profile of composer Mason Bates in the March-April 2006 issue.

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