

Chicago Tribune

Streamlined 'Marimba' and 'North Star' recall minimalism's early days

By Sid Smith, special to the Tribune

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"In the mid-'70s, there was a club on Bleecker Street in New York called the Bottom Line, where I'd go to see Betty Carter, but on alternating nights, **Philip Glass** would perform," Lar Lubovitch recalls. "I was always looking for music back then, and this record store I visited a lot was run by this guy who recommended **Steve Reich**."

At the time, the music of Glass and Reich was revolutionary. Serious composers had spent preceding decades exploring abstract, dissonant experimentation, from Stravinsky's groundbreaking compositions to **John Cage**'s street-tinged cacophony. But here was a return to basic, rudimentary melody and harmony, albeit with an almost meditative simplicity.

"They represented a fascinating shift in two directions," Lubovitch says. "They demystified music that had moved farther and farther from the public ear, that had become so dry people couldn't quite follow it," Lubovitch says. "They explored that forbidden taboo — accessibility — and that attracted me. I'm a sucker for beauty." "

The back-to-basics rhythms, meanwhile, were another jolt, dreamlike to some, an endless elevator ride to critics.

"But, structurally, theirs was music that could be danced to," Lubovitch argues. "You're always looking for a visceral, kinetic response in dance, and this music is so rhythm-driven it's almost ritual."

Minimalism, as it came to be called (Lubovitch says Reich always hated the term), became a dance mainstay, embraced by Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Eliot Feld, **Twyla Tharp** and many more through today. But Lubovitch was there first.

"I can safely say that 'Marimba' (in 1976, set to Reich) is the first repertory concert dance to minimalist music," he says. (Childs provided dance for Glass' "Einstein on the Beach" that year, but that's opera.) "We were also touring a lot, so in many places, our concerts were some American listeners' first exposure."

Lubovitch's troupe returns next week to the Harris Theater, and the two-day lineup includes revivals of "Marimba" and the 1978 "North Star" (to Glass) Wednesday and "North Star" and the 1980 "Cavalcade" (to Reich) Thursday.

"One early critic remarked that there were no steps," he recalls. "Instead, I used the ensemble as a mass, creating this evolving new vocabulary. Theoretically, it's complicated, but it enters the ear and eye very simply, even hypnotically."

ctc-live@tribune.com / **When:** 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday / **Where:** Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St. at **Millennium Park** / **Tickets:** \$45-\$75; 312-334-7777 / or **harristheaterchicago.org**