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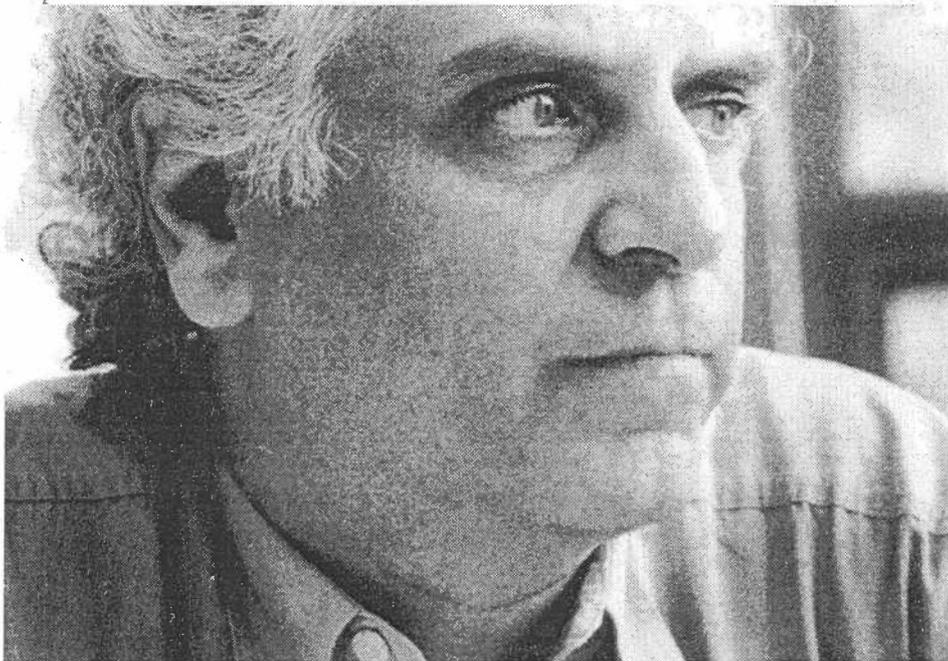
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MUSIC



BETTY FREEMAN

LANSKY'S TECHNIQUE IS LIKE TAKING A DIGITAL PHOTO OF A SONIC PHENOMENON AND MAKING IT GRAINY.

Paul Lansky's Conversation Pieces Translate
 Speech Into Atmosphere

HOW DO I QUANTIZE THEE?

BY KYLE GANN

I have a nodding, amateur's acquaintance with computer music software—people demonstrate it for me, and I try to raise my eyebrows and mutter, "Hmm, yes" at the appropriate moments. So it's rare that I hear music and have no earthly idea how it was made. But it happens occasionally, and when it happens with a piece that I find absolutely gorgeous, it drives me nuts. So I finally called up Paul Lansky and asked him to explain to me how he made *Conversation Pieces*, the most ravishing new compact disc I've heard in years. I had to know how he did it.

What he achieved was to simulate an impossibly fast, yet suavely mellow, improvising pianist, a kind of Keith Jarrett-cum-Conlon Nancarrow. The way he did it was so complicated in software terms that a year later he can't quite remember the process, but the concept is simple, based on the digital principle of *quantizing*: breaking up a fluid, analog input into discrete bits by mapping it to a grid. Every 13-year-old who got notation software for Christmas knows about quantizing these days, so I could follow. Lansky derived three pieces on the disc from a recording he made of a conversation with his wife.

As he explained it, "You take the contours and rhythms of the conversation and quantize them in two ways. You quantize them rhythmically so that your stresses come out at some subdivision of the beat. Then you do the same thing in the pitch domain. My voice goes up and down within a certain range, so I'll stretch the speech over a wider range, then impose a grid in which the contour triggers the nearest pitch." It's like taking a digital photograph of a sonic phenomenon and then intentionally making it grainy.

In the first piece, *For the Moment*, that graininess results in fluid, natural-sounding phrases swept up and down the piano register as a distant reflection of the voices of Lansky and his wife, Hannah McKay. There's an enchanting quality of intuition in the music, preserved from the languid contours of quiet speech. In another piece, *Now That You Mention It*, the voices trigger Keith Jarrett-y chord progressions as well, and Lansky admits that's

who he had in mind. The piano starts and stops over mellow string sonorities, because, "When I listen to myself speak, I start and stop a lot, it's kind of a halting thing. I thought it would be cute to translate that into the piece."

In the breathy synth gestures of *Same Scene, Nine Years Later* you can almost make out the original conversation. Fascinatingly, the disc opens with the music furthest abstracted from the source material, then renders it progressively more recognizable. In between, there are other pieces for atmosphere: *Andalusia* is developed algorithmically from an Andalusian folk song, while *Clouds* and *Shadows* are mellow continuum pieces "composed," as Lansky tells me, "straight from the heart." Yet the progression of ambiences slides smoothly from piece to piece, giving the disc an emotional and textural unity.

If all Lansky had done was transfer speech patterns to music, it might have been an interesting experiment like Steve Reich's *Come Out*, Charles Dodge's *Speech Songs*, or, even more elaborately, Reich's *The Cave*, which likewise draws all its melodies and rhythms from recorded speech. But *Conversation Pieces* leaves conceptualism far behind. All those algorithms are diffractioned through Lansky's own sense of tonal harmony; a lot more intrinsically musical composition goes into these pieces than I've made evident in my description so far. The intricate patterns of speech are the base material the music starts with, but the elegant, detailed surface colorization is all done by hand.

All of which gives *Conversation Pieces*, for me, something of an ambient feeling—in fact, it's the most eloquent ambient disc since Brian Eno's heyday. But Lansky disagrees with me about the ambient part. He feels that if you let your attention wander while you're listening, it doesn't make as much sense. It's less open to debate that Lansky is about the only classically trained composer besides Robert Ashley who knows how to put out a compact disc as an artistic end-in-itself. Computer music's most optimistic promises are completely fulfilled here in a disc so richly textured and lovely that I'd recommend it to anyone. **V**