

Women Who Sing Like What Dances With Kevin Costner

THE WOLF WITHIN

BY KYLE GANN

MARIA DE ALVEAR*Libertad* World Edition

Among all animals, wolves hold a special place in the human psyche. "Man is an angry wolf," Custer is supposed to have said. No one makes films called *Dances With Lemmings* or writes books called *Women Who Run With the Swine*—both species, you'll admit, that human behavior frequently brings to mind. Despite our ever decreasing actual experience of the animal, the wolf appears again and again to symbolize the wild, instinctive, oft repressed parts of the human personality. And it is no coincidence that Maria De Alvear—Europe's most dynamic and original young composer, and one who is making the cognoscenti there nervous by posing a strong institutional challenge to the Euro-tradition of cerebral abstraction—has centered her newest disc around wolf imagery. Strikingly entitled *Libertad* and issued on her own new World Edition label, it is the most astonishing disc I've heard in years.

The circumstances of *Libertad's* publication are almost as intriguing as the disc itself. De Alvear, Spanish-born and living in Berlin these many years, is in many ways Europe's first true

Downtowner. As much performance artist as composer, she sings and speaks with feverish intensity in her own works, and has decided to publish her own books and CDs to circumvent the processes that keep new music in a kind of creative ghetto. She means to put out beautiful, attractive editions that will be marketed not just in CD venues but in book and gift stores, much the way some New Age music is, and as far as CDs go, *Libertad* is her maiden flight.

That's not at all to say that there's ever been a New Age note in a De Alvear composition, even though she does share with the New Agers a concern with spirituality and a passion for earthiness. *Libertad* is a disc calculated to drive your average New Age fan screaming from the room, though perhaps also to eventually entice him back with its mesmerizing pulsations. Over a bedrock of calmly insistent piano chords, lugubrious trombone lines, and muffled drumbeats, De Alvear wails in a mournful yet galvanizing duet with a flamenco singer, Enrique Lozano. ("This is my flamenco disc," she told me with a mischievous grin, handing it to me.) Most disconcertingly, there are two pianos in the background, played by John McAlpine and Tanja Mansanti, each piano tuned to Pythagorean tuning—that is, with



MARIA DE ALVEAR, EUROPE'S FIRST TRUE DOWNTOWNER

pure, beatless perfect fifths—and, between them, tuned a quarter-tone apart.

The text of De Alvear's and Lozano's Wagnerian wailings is a series of poems by Cherokee medicine woman Tsolagiu M.A. RuizRazo. For years, De Alvear has been visiting RuizRazo annually in the mountains of Tennessee to do

healing and spiritual therapy with her, and World Edition has also published RuizRazo's book, *Spirit of the White Wolf Woman*. "There is a wolf in every one of us, but we've never come to know," runs the central poem of *Libertad* (though in Spanish). And the voices wail and glissando-like wolf calls, though also like Balkan folksinging, Japanese Gagaku, and with a touch of flamenco. *Libertad* is primal enough to touch the wellspring of many world cultures, yet there is nothing in the least synthetic or collage-like about it; it springs full-blown from a deeply human impulse of anger, pain, and oneness-with-creation.

Meanwhile, not since Henry Mancini applied the effect in his film score to *Wait Until Dark* have we been so allowed to revel in the delicate, mistuned bounce of quarter-tones. The 82-minute work (on two discs) grows from a single pulsed low E on one piano, and soon consonant chords are echoing from piano to piano a quarter-tone off, like a blue pond seen through a mist that plays optical tricks on our perception. As Roland Dahinden begins to solo on trombone, the piano chords start to shimmer magically, and the growing intensity of De Alvear's singing gathers strength from the music's vibrant serenity. At last, after some 69 minutes, an amazing tonal chorale, with quarter-tones mixed in, arises in the pianos accompanied by drums and gongs, a riveting sound like nothing else I've ever heard. We need this unforgettable work performed in America, at some major venue worthy of it. Meanwhile, you can find out about Europe's most controversial young composer at www.world-edition.com. **V**

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The local YMCA.**