

RECORDS



DANIEL LENTZ:
MISSA UMBRARUM
New Albion Records NA 006

By Kyle Gann

Want to hear a really enchanting new piece in an old, old genre? The *Missa Umbrarum* (Mass of Shadows) by west coast composer Daniel Lentz is a sensuous, subtle work that will appeal to members of the growing audience for meditation music, though it is also consistently interesting enough to intrigue those whose musical concerns are closer to the mainstream. Most immediately intriguing is its scoring: "for eight voices with wine glasses and 118 sonic shadows," the wine glasses being played by the chorus rubbing the rims with wetted fingertips, just as you so obnoxiously did at your senior prom.

Lentz (born 1942) is a difficult composer to locate both aesthetically and stylistically. In the 60s he achieved some notoriety with his nihilistic equations of music

and war; his early *Anti Bass Music* was scored for, among other things, at least 25 laughing machines and included the reading of a list of American composers not killed in Vietnam. Since then he has written some music in a style very derivative of that of Steve Reich, but while *Missa Umbrarum* might loosely be described as minimalist, it exhibits enough dramatic effect, formal complexity, and refreshing unpredictability to really remove it from that rubric's application.

Odd, too, that any composer should emerge at this point in history with so radical and successful a reworking of the mass text. Since Mendelssohn, such large religious choral forms have been the exclusive province of what G.B. Shaw called the "professorial class," and denoted ultra-ultra-conservatism of musical style. The one avant-gardist to attack such forms did so without delicacy, and with a simplistic "noise/evil versus consonance/good" duality inimical to any truly religious sensibility. I mean, of course, Penderecki. Lentz's mass is quite different in spirit, and I hope I am not scaring off any atheistic potential listeners when I say that I could imagine some broad-minded Episcopal church putting it to quite profitable liturgical use. Oddly enough, though words of the text are often split between voices, and though the sections of the mass are overlapped and intermixed (a first in the history of the genre, as far as

I know), the text remains much more understandable than in most masses. Even the pope would be pleased.

From the first arresting chord the music is riveting, and never loses its hold on the attention. Individual syllables of the mass text are sung with sharp attacks on mildly dissonant but diatonic chords, and gradually the rubbing of the wine glasses creates a shimmering, resonant background. (In 1978 Chicago musician Dan Perz privately released an album containing his composition for wine glasses *Glass Landscape*, and George Crumb had asked a string quartet to bow wine glasses in his 1970 *Black Angels*. Alternating with these chords are more consonant chanting passages, the energetic intoning of the text displaying a powerful, Stravinskyan appreciation of syncopation. It is difficult to describe the understated energy of the clanging bells and clinking wine glasses, whence the ethereal melodies arise, or how the lengthy quotation from a 16th-century mass is seamlessly integrated into the work without disturbing its mood or progression. Suffice it to say that *Missa Umbrarum* conjures up a sensuous mysticism worthy of an earlier Christian church than the pale, compromised

reflection we possess today, a spirit that perhaps could only have been recaptured in California.

The performance, if solid, is far from exquisite. I am less than enchanted with the sound—ill-blended and rather harsh—of this apparently ad hoc chorus directed by Kerry Burtis. Nor is there a delicate enough precision of either pitch or chordal attacks (the opening chord, for example) to give the work the incisive power for which it clearly has the potential. But the word "clearly" attests to the fact that this performance has its virtues: the manner of singing is impeccably stylistic, and the participants bring enough finesse to provide more than an idea of the work's ravishing charm.

On the flip side, *O-ke-wa* is simultaneously a smoother and more disturbing work. The title is a Seneca word for the tribe's "dance of the dead," and similar forces are used: 12 voices, singing a brief text by Kit Tremain, accompanied by bells, rasps, and drums. Though outwardly similar to *Missa Umbrarum*, this work's languid melody, unmitigated consonance, and incessantly loping drumbeat eventually force the description "easy-listening," and many (including me) may find the combination a little

cloying by the work's end. Less structural listeners may hear little difference in the shimmering beauty of the two works.

The piecemeal way in which Lentz's work has received attention outside California makes it difficult to discern the consistency of the quality of his work and his direction as an artist; we await further recordings and performances. In the meantime, it is worth noting that his program notes provide copious and accessible insight into his compositional procedures (these concern the "sonic shadows," the pattern of echoes of previously presented text fragments). A composer who can be forthright in such matters gains my automatic respect.


A word should be said about this young record label with the Blakean name. New Albion Records is turning out a reliably good product while providing a national venue for a number of fine young west coast composers, including Ingram Marshall, Stephen Scott, and the better-known John Adams, whose work (with Lentz's) exhibits enough similarities to constitute a new west coast, postminimal, structurally oriented style. In short, New Albion is doing for California what Lovely Music Records is doing for New York. The difference is that a healthier musical energy seems to be emanating from California than from New York these days. Ten years ago I would have said just the opposite. (Seventeen years ago, the midwest had a significant lead over both.)

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pressroom as a maze of ink covered equipment and remember when the canteen in the mailroom sold coffee

walk these lines. On the contrary, I sympathize with the other nonunion employees of the *Tribune* who like myself have been called names and profanity. I sympathize with the nonunion employees who have had their tires slashed. I sympathize with the nonunion employees who have



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