

RECORDS



THE WELL & THE GENTLE
Pauline Oliveros
Hat ART 2020 (two records)
THE DEATH OF DON JUAN
Elodie Lauten
Cat Collectors Productions CC713
By Kyle Gann

Far be it from me to raise controversy regarding that flea-bitten pseudoissue, the gender of creative artists. It does strike me, though, that women composers have both an advantage and an obligation with regard to the current new music scene. Being generally outsiders in a centuries-old male-dominated field, they have the freedom, if they want it, to reintroduce into music values that the tradi-

compulsion to prove their macho in the dubious world of pitch analysis remains a chance to reintegrate into music what it most desperately lacks: a sense of spirituality, and an appeal to higher consciousness. These two albums are outstandingly beautiful illustrations of that attempt.

Fans of that amazing accordionist/composer Pauline Oliveros will find nothing surprising in *The Well & The Gentle*, and yet in comparison with her previously recorded works this represents a broader and more social path. Some of the music here, as usual, could be used for meditation, but most of it is too interesting, too extroverted in its bittersweet joyousness. With one brief exception, each work or section is based on a hexagram from the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese oracle, examination of which provides valuable insight into Oliveros's methods and intentions.

For instance, "The Well," hexagram number 48, gives the following image: "Thus the superior man encourages people at their work./And exhorts them to help one another." The commentary, in Wilhelm's classic translation, adds: "The well from which water is drawn conveys the further idea of an inexhaustible dispensing of nourishment... We must go down to the very foundations of life... Carelessness is also disastrous... And every human being can draw in the course of his education from the inexhaustible wellspring of the divine in man's nature." *The Well* (created to accompany a dance by Deborah Hay) apparently consists of little more than some scale indications, a loose rhythmic framework, and five guide words as instructions for the performers (who

This writhing, hesitant continuum slowly increases in thickness and intensity, adding new layers of soft modal improvisation like a chorus of Terry Rileys playing in mesmerized ecstasy. Occasional sliding tones add to the music's Eastern flavor. Is this what 12th-century troubadour music sounded like? Ancient Arabic music? Is there a Yiddish influence from Klezmer music? Or is it just California zazen?

The Gentle begins even more strikingly, with the syncopated clicking of woodblocks. Hexagram number 57, "The Gentle (The Penetrating, Wind)": "Winds following one upon the other... Thus the superior man/Spreads his commands abroad/And carries out his undertakings." "Penetration produces gradual and inconspicuous effects... If one would produce such effects, one must have a clearly defined goal... The penetrating quality of the wind depends upon its ceaselessness." "Gentle" and "penetrating" are indeed the words for this companion piece to *The Well*. Over this soft but irresistible Latin beat the accordion inflects its drone with exotic half-steps, and the other instruments begin repeating their delicate melodies on the C-major scale. This repetition, though, has nothing to do with that of minimalist music: the articulation of the woodwinds almost sounds accidental, and the subliminal manner of the whole makes the melodies sound peripheral to the fact of the scale itself. This is no hard-edged mathematical structure, but a ghostly dance of the subconscious.

Oliveros is working here with *Relâche*, which is the kind of new music group I always wish we had

cello, piano, accordion, and percussion. Their sympathetic understanding of Oliveros's meditative aims is clearly audible in both the inventive variety and the quiet seamlessness of their playing.

The Well and *The Gentle* together last 40 minutes and occupy one record of this two-disc set. Side 3 includes an alternate, live-recorded combined version of the same work, sped up into 13 minutes; the texture is much more intense, the pounding beat in *The Gentle* is jazzier and more exhilarating, and the only drawback is that one really wants the piece to last longer. The remainder of the album consists of accordion solos by Oliveros, more reminiscent of her earlier records for Lovely Music, and nicely recorded in a cavernous underground reservoir in Germany which had been temporarily drained. *The Receptive* (hexagram number 2: "The earth's condition is receptive devotion") is once again meditative, its harmony proceeding at such a subtle pace that one is hardly aware of the changes, although Oliveros's right-hand melodic decorations provide an appearance of movement that sets up a disarming dichotomy between appearance and reality. *A Love Song* is a brief meditation in mixolydian mode on E, the composer's droning voice sliding between B, A, and F# over a sustained fifth. The album ends with yet another realization of *The Gentle*, and it is remarkable that Oliveros can conjure up the same rhythmic excitement with her accordion alone as with her ensemble of woodwinds and percussion. Swelling up within such a continuous and homogeneous sound as that of the accordion, the syncopated rhythms have a vibrant, scin-

who started out as merely a classic example of immorality, was turned into an incorporeal symbol of a basic universal force by Kierkegaard and Shaw, and in *The Death of Don Juan* Lauten has taken him even farther. The entire 50-minute chamber opera takes place not only in his head, but within his transpersonal Self. In the liner notes Lauten explains that the instruments used correspond to different planes of Don Juan's consciousness: electric guitar for his ego, the Fairlight digital synthesizer for his mental plane, the cello, trombone, and lower voices for his emotions, and for his soul the soprano voice and the "Trine," a triangular electro-acoustic lyre (so named, one suspects, for the word's astrological connotations of grace and ease).

This music is tangibly minimalist, and yet Lauten's ends seem very different from those of Glass and Reich. Despite all the repetition of diatonic melodies, her emphasis is less on structure and contour than on the communication of states of mind. The overture, for Fairlight and amplified harpsichords, repeats Glassian pentatonic patterns in a blank way that is tonally and emotionally neutral: mental plane. By contrast, Scene II of Act I, with its inexorably minor tonality and subtly pulsating rhythm, sounds extremely and unaccountably sad, almost as though Lauten were taking a new approach to the baroque doctrine of affections. Four voices, two droning, one slightly melodic, and one speaking, chant similar, never-quite-perceptible texts in English, French, German, and Italian: "I am your Death," "Faithful Death your Death," "Pleasure death am I." Over and over again, rather

have both an advantage and an obligation with regard to the current new music scene. Being generally outsiders in a centuries-old male-dominated field, they have the freedom, if they want it, to reintroduce into music values that the traditional musical establishment has too long ignored. Today mainstream American music, under the intimidating influence of the academic/scientific community, puts tremendous emphasis on purely technical considerations: pitch collections, frequency modulation methods, and a thousand other devices which have no higher purpose than the testing of perceptual limitations. Many, many women composers have already been seduced by the same bland left-brain mindset. But to those who feel no

divine in man's nature." *The Well* (created to accompany a dance by Deborah Hay) apparently consists of little more than some scale indications, a loose rhythmic framework, and five guide words as instructions for the performers (who change from one performance to another): "listen, merge, match, support, and soar."

And the resulting music sounds both soaring and inexhaustible. Oliveros begins, as usual, with a slowly transforming drone on her accordion overlaid by delicate modal arabesques. One by one, the other instruments join in: echoing filigree-work in the piano, answering drones and finally melodic fragments in the lower woodwinds, joined by the amazing little vocal trills of soprano Barbara Noska.

pheral to the tact of the scale itself. This is no hard-edged mathematical structure, but a ghostly dance of the subconscious.

Oliveros is working here with *Relâche*, which is the kind of new music group I always wish we had here in Chicago. Founded and based in Philadelphia by a remarkable group of composers and performers, *Relâche* takes an admirably inventive, eclectic, and flexible approach to new repertoire, tackling virtually every style presently found within contemporary music, and yet their unity of purpose and approach is such that one can virtually recognize the group no matter what they're playing. This recording uses the core of the group, an attractive ensemble of flute, clarinet, two saxophones,

same rhythmic excitement with her accordion alone as with her ensemble of woodwinds and percussion. Swelling up within such a continuous and homogeneous sound as that of the accordion, the syncopated rhythms have a vibrant, scintillating, and yet still calm effect, like starlight sparkling on a lake under a cool breeze. Here Oliveros's unusual virtuosity on the instrument slides into focus as she creates a wealth of contrapuntal variety within a texture of seeming immobility.

If spirituality is implicit in Oliveros's entire output, Elodie Lauten's approach to higher consciousness is much more self-consciously explicit, more structured, and ultimately dependent upon rational cognition. Poor Don Juan,

one slightly melodic, and one speaking, chant similar, never-quite-perceptible texts in English, French, German, and Italian: "I am your Death," "Faithful Death your Death," "Pleasure death am I." Over and over again, rather than sing, the opera mumbles, like a Catholic half-consciously repeating his catechism. The analogy is not derogatory for Lauten seems to be creating Don Juan's internal ritual, his attempt to come to terms with something in himself that lies below the threshold of conscious thought.

Within the opera, each individual section is utterly static, a frozen moment in Don Juan's spiritual and mental development. This leaves much to the imaginations of

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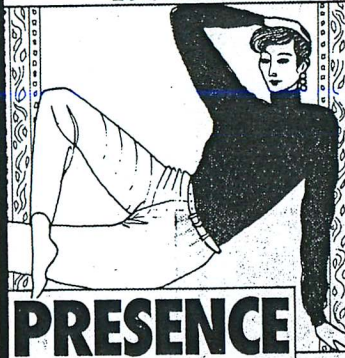
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