

Consumer Guide Kyle Gann

Here's my traditional August guide to the nontraditional, slightly late. The CDs I'm listening to over and over these days are David Rosenboom's *Systems of Judgment* (Centaur) and Carl Stone's *Four Pieces* (EAM), as well as the Tyranny below. But I've written at length about the first two, and won't recap them.

Austral Voices (New Albion) The common denominator of this first compilation of experimental Australian music is its delicate overtones and other acoustic effects, mellow enough to remind you that Australia is on the *other* side of California. The refreshing exception is the hyperenergetic twittering of Alistair Riddell's *Fantasia* for microcomputerized piano. The other pieces, if too similar in immobility and laidbackitude, can be scrumptious, especially Warren Burt's glowing, seemingly nondecaying tuning forks. Ros Brandt plucks modal tunes on a psaltery in a reverberant underground cylinder, Ross Bolleter coaxes plinks from an environmentally disintegrated piano, and Sarah Hopkins recaps her charming *Cello Chi* (see below). **B**

David Borden: *The Continuing Story of Counterpoint, parts 5-8 and 9-12* (Cuneiform) I wish Philip Glass had continued writing in his early style. Borden did—continue writing in Glass's early style, that is. Mother Mallard, Borden's once innovative synth/sax/guitar ensemble, plays eight parts of his magnum opus on two CDs, with the other four scheduled for fall release. I enjoy feeling Borden's asymmetrical rhythms (7/8 and 5/8 are a fetish) and following his simple melodies that suggest Renaissance music with a sprightly beat. Part 10's pseudojazz, with sax solos over a few New Age chords, irritates the hell out of



PICK HIT: "Blue" Gene Tyranny

lous ROVA Sax Quartet, occasionally improvisatory, and Curran's colorful MIDI transformations of their notebursts. Despite the chamber resources, the scale is symphonic, and over 66 minutes the piece wanders through a universe in which the listening demands modulate continuously. A homage to Scelsi circles a pitch in different octaves, the saxes belt out huge Xenakis-like repeated chords, silences occur, radio-show tunes jump out—anything can happen, and the music just pushes forward. Before him, only Cage, Stockhausen, and Ives traversed a space this galactic. **B PLUS**

Fast Forward: *The Caffeine Effect* (Ear-Rational) He's a hell of a steel drum player, but his concepts are so naïve and '60s-redundant I have trouble taking him seriously. His group stuff results in more interesting noise layers than his solos, which is why I prefer this to his pretentiously simplistic new *Panhandling* disc on Lovely Music. One cut here, *Ma-*

ing Corporation) Call Hopkins the Pauline Oliveros of Australia. Her meditative cello playing is elegant and natural live; on this CD, minus her theatrical poise, it diminishes to slightly New Agey. It's harmonic-series music: she melodizes over the drones of long, abandoned telegraph wires that composer/scientist Lamb has amplified to capture their vibrations due to wind, sun, and birds. The marketing concept is aimed at the crystal-and-Tarot-card set, so the first couple of cuts are hokey. Go past them: Hopkins's tone is as rich by itself as the N.Y. Phil string section, and her solos swell with honest warmth. The later drone pieces have the dark edge this music needs. **B**

The Hub (Art) Six West Coast computer music geniuses—John Bischoff, Tim Perkis, Chris Brown, Scot Gresham-Lancaster, Mark Trayle, and Phil Stone—screw around with each other's noise-spewing computer algorithms. This is state-of-the-art computer group improv, but if



MUST TO AVOID: Fast Forward

ers—well, you had to be there. If you were, this'll jog the memory. **B**

Orchestral Works by Korf, Davidovsky, Wright (New World) It's hard these days to write a lucid, listenable orchestra piece that neither looks backward nor sells out, but Anthony Korf and Maurice Wright have each done it. Korf, conductor of the Parnassus ensemble, subtiles his Second Symphony "Blue Note"; what you hear, though, is neither jazz, nor tonal, nor dissonant, but transparent harmony couched in clean, Stefan Wolpean rhythmic energy. The second movement, "Solitary Waltz," becomes one gradually, and, after a dashing synthesizer solo, the finale dissolves in a pensive ostinato. Wright's *Night Scenes* is less focused, more polished. A savage opening leads to sad woodwind lines mingling in early-Sessions dissonance and Wright's always elegant textures. Davidovsky's Divertimento is uptown's usual pointillist virtuosics. George Rothman leads the River-

THE CAFFEINE EFFECT

But it's amazing how well the recording captures the different tones, how ostensibly immobile buzzes leap from one speaker to the other, how the room shakes at subaudible frequencies. In *Godel, Escher, Bach*, Hofstadter explained Godel's proof with an allegory about a record that contained frequencies that would make the turntable explode. This is almost it. **B PLUS**

Tod Machover: *Flora* (Bridge) Mellowing from his serialist training, Machover showed in *Nature's Breath* that he's loaded with digital and compositional chops. In his multimedia opera *Valis*, he discovered how to win friends by peppering his electronics with pop clichés, and this follow-up makes his opportunism obvious. The title work is high-tech New Age froth, and *Famine* (featuring the expert vocal group Electric Phoenix) returns to European avant-garde vocals à la Berio. *Towards the Center* and *Buğ-Mudra* combine instruments and live computerization into gorgeously crystalline textures, but when his form sags he plops in a hectic, incongruous rock bass. Great moments, but the forays into academic minimalist rock (*there's* a hot genre) make you wish he'd study a Yes album. **C PLUS**

Steve Martland: "Babi Yar" and "Drill" (Factory) In this young Liverpool composer's *Babi Yar* for brass and percussion, lush sonorities hang suspended in air, then launch into fierce rhythmic battle. Messiaen might have written music like this if he had been a macho English Protestant instead of French Catholic. But Martland's most distinctive piece is still *Drill* for two pianos, a relentless, neo-Futurist machine-jazz suite whose rhythms and sonorities never cease to jar the ear.

ensemble, plays eight parts of his magnum opus on two CDs, with the other four scheduled for fall release. I enjoy feeling Borden's asymmetrical rhythms (7/8 and 5/8 are a fetish) and following his simple melodies that suggest Renaissance music with a sprightly beat. Part 10's pseudojazz, with sax solos over a few New Age chords, irritates the hell out of me. Borden's compulsion to write multimovement forms may be his undoing, but judicious use of the program-select button will salvage some pleasant listening. **B**

Church of Betty: West of the East (Fang) Nepalese folk tunes meet art rock and—they hit it off! Chris Rael plays sitar, synths, Indian horn, and sings with Terry Rileyish twang, now and then backed up by Jan Kotik, Elliott Sharp, Kevin Miller, and Adam Cohen. Rael's got sitar chops. He puts a crisp rhythmic edge on a Ladakhi folk song called "Autumn," his Himalayan environmental tapes enliven the backgrounds, and his civilization-stinks-but-life-is-beautiful-anyway lyrics conjure up an irreverent Buddhism for the 1990s. "Whiny Art Song" is the best title; "Mountain Rain Shadow" claims, "Everyone has a private hell/But those flames keep us warm." It's a treat to hear expert Asian-derived music that can laugh at itself, and the perfect rock/folk/Indian/noise fusion begs for a sixth listening. **A MINUS**

Alvin Curran: Electric Rags II (New Albion) At 2:53 the comfortably familiar voice of John Cage enters beneath Curran's synthesizer chords, signaling *Rags II*'s third and most Curranesque layer: sampler collage. The first two layers are the gritty growling of the fabu-

Fast Forward: The Caffeine Effect (Ear-Rational) He's a hell of a steel drum player, but his concepts are so naive and '60s-redundant I have trouble taking him seriously. His group stuff results in more interesting noise layers than his solos, which is why I prefer this to his pretentiously simplistic new *Panhandling* disc on Lovely Music. One cut here, *Machine Guns*, mixes random rhythms with a steady beat and steel drum riffs to intriguing effect. *The Dream State*, though, is the junk-percussion equivalent of recent Philip Glass: repeated patterns with loads of energy and no brains. People have been throwing hubcaps in the air for 15 years, hitting found metal for 60, and simple is not necessarily, like, profound, ya know? Push the button with his name on it. **C**

Five Voices (Intakt) Well, muni-mamunimamunima and oowee-yoowee-yoo to you too. David Moss, Shelley Hirsch, Carles Santos (*there's a name from the past*), Greetje Bijma, and Anna Homler team up to offer an aggressive cross between concrete poetry and rap. Nothing but voice here; nor is there much recognizable language, though they spiel away like the Balinese monkey chant I reviewed recently. The ensemble pieces, involving split-second ensemble shouts and grunts, are the most ingenious. Bijma's pseudo-electronic twang in *Electric Ego* defies belief, Hirsch's emotive vibrato in *Song* sounds heartfelt. The grade is an average: **A** for energy and inventiveness, **C** for thinking people want to listen to CDs of weird vocal sounds. **B**

Sarah Hopkins and Alan Lamb: Sky Song (Australian Broadcast-

ing pieces have the dark edge this music needs. **B**

The Hub (Art) Six West Coast computer music geniuses—John Bischoff, Tim Perkis, Chris Brown, Scot Gresham-Lancaster, Mark Trayle, and Phil Stone—screw around with each other's noise-spewing computer algorithms. This is state-of-the-art computer group improv, but if you want music to sink your teeth into, wait for the art to evolve a little. The sounds are sensuous and chilling, the idea for each piece neither too obvious nor too elusive. They've got their texture and continuity strategies nailed down. Stone's *Borrowing and Stealing* and the *Hot Pig* collaboration are as happily chaotic as a Dubuffet tape collage, Perkis's *The Minister of Pitch* is atmospheric. All the music lacks, as music, is finesse, a discipline that will force it to say something astonishing. **B MINUS**

Imaginary Landscapes (None-such) Remember that great *Imaginary Landscapes* festival Nicolas Collins curated at the Kitchen in 1988? Now you can buy it, or bits of it. The disc's a sharp photo of New York's electronic music life circa 1988, though not all the pieces make the transition to CD excerpt gracefully. Shelley Hirsch's *On the Swing* is dreamy, riveting, and incomprehensible, like a Broadway hit from another galaxy. Laetitia deCompiegne Sonami's deadpan monologue of unrequited loves is classic, and the segment from Maryanne Amacher's *The Music Rooms* captures its most frightening moments. "Blue" Gene Tyranny's song about a spaceship full of dead aliens, sung by Tom Buckner, is touching. Some of the oth-

er, becomes one gradually, and, after a dashing synthesizer solo, the finale dissolves in a pensive ostinato. Wright's *Night Scenes* is less focused, more polished. A savage opening leads to sad woodwind lines mingling in early-Sessions dissonance and Wright's always elegant textures. Davidovsky's *Divertimento* is uptown's usual pointillist virtuosity. George Rothman leads the *Riverside Symphony*. **B**

Takehisa Kosugi: Violin Improvisations (Lovely Music) The use of reverb in these 12 brief 1989 improvisations is disconcerting: repeatedly, the tone will be rich and enveloping, then the reverb will suddenly click off, making you aware that the warmth is just an electronic trick. Otherwise, the purity of these undirected violin lines is endearing, both as background music and for intent listening. Kosugi traces an aural line in the air the way Thoreau took walks, with an unspecifiable discipline that comes from within, rather than from without as in Cage's music. I think what I like most about his improvs is, unlike everybody else, he uses no unusual instrumental techniques whatsoever, not even pizzicato. **B PLUS**

Alvin Lucier: Crossings (Lovely Music) If you think La Monte Young is sensory deprivation, forget this disc. In *In Memoriam Jon Higgins* a sine wave spends 19 minutes on one three-octave glissando, as a clarinet creeps along to create acoustic illusions by playing extremely close pitches. By comparison, *Crossings* is a scherzo—the sine tone shoots up seven octaves in only 16 minutes, as an orchestra anticipates its every step. OK, it's a document of pieces that ought to be heard live.

for brass and percussion, lush sonorities hang suspended in air, then launch into fierce rhythmic battle. Messiaen might have written music like this if he had been a macho English Protestant instead of French Catholic. But Martland's most distinctive piece is still *Drill* for two pianos, a relentless, neo-Futurist machine-jazz suite whose rhythms and sonorities never cease to jar the ear. Incredible Dutch duo Van Zeeland and Bouwhuis maneuver through the most intense give-and-take as if driven by the same piano roll. Right now you can only get it in Europe, though it will probably be available here any minute. **B**

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: Free Delivery (Lovely Music) God plays the piano through this man. Science cannot explain the speed with which trillions of inspired brain impulses zip through his stubby little hands, resulting in multilayered, note-perfect works whose sketchy outlines barely exist on paper. Included here is *The Intermediary*, the 1988 Kitchen improv-with-delay that I called "the most inspired piano performance I've ever heard." It still is. Tied for first place is *Five Takes on the Nocturne With and Without Memory*, "Blue"'s irrepressible rethinking of a piano piece he wrote for Lois Svard. Use of taped background in *Country Boy Country Dog* and elsewhere frees him for ever higher flights, but the CD ends in the middle of nowhere, as though the tape ran out before inspiration did. At his schmaltziest—say, *Sunrise or Sunset in Texas*—he's like Keith Jarrett on an extremely good day. At his best, it's like listening to Ives improvise "Hawthorne" from the *Concord* sonata. Whew. **A PLUS**