

KYLE GANN

Consumer Guide

Had Santa Claus asked me for a Christmas list this year, I would have never been so ambitious as to have presumed to deserve Feldman's legendary opera *Neither*, a long-awaited disc by that reclusive conceptualist David Mahler, John Luther Adams's heavenly new magnum opus, a batch of substantial new works by Kevin Volans, the years-overdue CD release of Ashley's *Atalanta*, and a slew of Harry Partch reissues—all in the same batch! "Santa," I would have negotiated, "give me *Neither* this year and I won't ask for another thing." Good thing I let Santa do the thinking, though one could take him to task for his male chauvinism. The three women's discs I review below are virtually the only ones I've received since last guide.

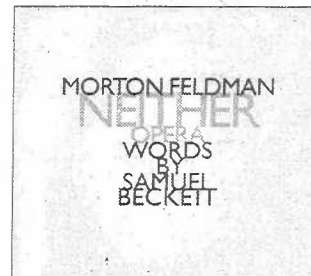
JOHN LUTHER ADAMS: *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing* (New World) This is a curious orchestral masterpiece for a still-young composer whose reputation has risen steadily over the last 10 years. On the surface, it seems obsessed with technical detail: it opens with a section called "Minor seconds, rising," and over the hour it runs through all the intervals, ending transcendently on pure, pianissimo octaves. Yet despite the "Clouds" of intervals, the title is from a 14th-century mystic text, and the piece is a 61-minute spiritual meditation: sensuous, yet devoid of melodies, tempo changes, or any but the most tenuous sectional divisions. Bells ring in clusters, featureless piano arpeggios ascend like sheer walls, and at one central point the orchestra is suddenly gripped in fortissimo ecstasy.

sensibility to computer-sampling technology, with results that are weird even by my standards. **B**

MORTON FELDMAN: *Neither* (Hat [now] Art) The story is, Feldman the truculent badgered Samuel Beckett the famous and elusive—love to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting—for an opera libretto, and finally, apparently to get rid of him, Beckett shoved 87 words at him that were all Feldman needed for a 50-minute masterpiece. No matter how sophisticated your preconceptions of Feldman, the work is one of his most surprising. First wonder is a chromatic, nine-note melody that repeats over and over, snaking its way through the music and refusing to leave for long; another is

But there's also a driving and rather harsh energy redolent of rock, as well as a cleanly classical (Western) melodicism. Motorically "snapped to grid," in computer parlance, the music's momentum and intricate cross-rhythms rarely let up, making the occasional infectious tunes that emerge all the more beautiful for the surprise. *A Visible Track of Turbulence* and *Relative Segments* are for classical chamber ensembles, but it's the slight microtonal piano retunings in the other works—*Fields Amaze*, my favorite, and *Everything Distinct: Everything the Same*—that give the music a highly original punch. **B**

ELEANOR HOVDA: *Coastal Traces* (O.O. Discs) It's worth spinning this disc at high volume just to see your neighbors come running, expecting bloodshed, when band two, *Shenai Sky*, suddenly blurts out with a high, unearthly wail. That's oboist Libby Van Cleve playing an Indian shenai, and providing the pungent voice crying out in lonely wildernesses created by Jack Vees on electric guitars and Hovda herself seemingly crawling around inside the piano. I feared that commitment to disc wouldn't serve Hovda's delicate, wispy music well, but actually her brushed-piano-string tremolos and low-frequency guitar drones set up a warm ambience you can meditate to or dance to as



Pick Hit: Morton Feldman's *Neither*

airline pilot who took her to dinner." It's a nice foil for an hour's moody stasis, electro-music for a thoughtful rainy day. No other East Coaster has come so close to the morose magic of Harold Budd, though from an entirely different route. **A**

DAVID MAHLER: *The Voice of the Poet* (Artifact) Like Nancarrow, Mahler's one of those people determined to remain hidden during his lifetime, then become a major name later. The Haydn of the sampler, he's got a wry, graceful sense of humor no other electronic composer can match. A lot of that humor is so theatrical that it's hard to see how a CD could ever capture some of his best pieces, but this overdue debut disc is delightful enough. In the title piece he pokes fun at his composer friend Ingram Marshall by reconfiguring a radio interview so that every other sentence refers to Nevada City—"not exactly the Bay Area." And just when you've pigeonholed Mahler as a trickster, *Wind Peace*, a 1972 tribute to Harold Budd,

MARY LEE ROBERTS:

6 Compositions (Open Space) A computer maven teaching in Minnesota, Roberts made these electronic pieces during a "romantic" period in which she was trekking in Big Sur, hallucinating sea nymphs, and thinking endlessly about Robert Schumann's fictional alter ego Eusebius. Given that the entire vocabulary is electronic noises, there is a sensuousness to the music, sometimes pretty, more often dark and threatening. Roberts details her sounds complexly, so that timbres are in constant flux, as sonically subtle as Laurie Spiegel's computer music (a high compliment), but less process oriented, more disruptive. Longer pieces like *Winter Cranes* are quite astonishing in their vibrant bells and filter-morphing buzzes that will shake your speakers; shorter ones, like the five *Madeleines*, are indebted to personal references that you won't figure out from listening. **B**

KEVIN VOLANS: *This Is How It Is, Walking Song, Leaping Dance, Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments, Untitled* (Chandos) Committed enemy of the one-idea piece, South Africa-born Ireland resident Volans is running away from minimalism as fast as his interlocking hockets will carry him. Interestingly, the more he chops up the continuity in *This Is How It Is* and the piano concerto, the more he sounds like neoclassic Stravinsky. But he still gets

wail and float above the monotony. Uptowners would slit their wrists rather than endure the whole 41 minutes, but I couldn't take it off: there's a savage, ecstatic beauty here such as Erik Satie might have ventured were he around for the digital age. **B**

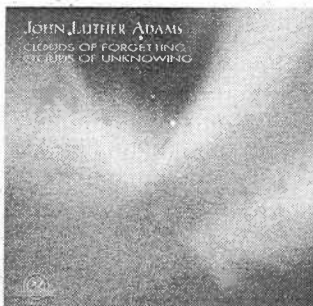
Consumer News

It's been reissue city. David Garland's *Control Songs* (Review) are now digital, signaling (one wishes) the return to public consciousness of the best songwriter of my generation, bar none. Filled with remarkable poetry of both words and notes, the songs draw humorously unsentimental insights into the realities of emotional life: "I think I'll probably be/Here for you when you need me/Just give me the word, I'll come right away/Unless, I guess, I'm busy or something." He's added six songs not on the original LP, too. Robert Ashley's *Atalanta*, recorded at the end of the vinyl age, is finally on CD, too (Lovely Music). New Yorkers mainly know it through chamber-version excerpts he's performed (I saw it in mid-'80s Chicago), but it's central to his operatic universe. "Who could speak, if every word had meaning?" is only one of its great lines. And if Harry Partch's music were water, we were all drowned. CRI has issued everything they could get copyrights on, including all

surface, it seems obsessed with technical detail: it opens with a section called "Minor seconds, rising," and over the hour it runs through all the intervals, ending transcendently on pure, pianissimo octaves. Yet despite the "Clouds" of intervals, the title is from a 14th-century mystic text, and the piece is a 61-minute spiritual meditation: sensuous, yet devoid of melodies, tempo changes, or any but the most tenuous sectional divisions. Bells ring in clusters, featureless piano arpeggios ascend like sheer walls, and at one central point the orchestra is suddenly gripped in fortissimo ecstasy. How can a work be so gorgeous and inviting, yet so difficult to grasp? **A**

BEN AZARM: *Neoapplicata* (Artifact) Looks like a CD, doesn't act like one; rarely has so much purported information revealed so little. Pieces, with titles like <p>r 362 are explained in liner-note statements like "yjr bpovr etoyrtd lovl yjr fst;omh," and that's about how the music sounds, too. Connected with San Francisco's radical Cactus Needle Project, Azarm enlists his cohorts Sam Ashley, Bob Gonsalves, and Jim Horton, plus K. Atchley and others, in song-length works that make you suspect the computer killed its masters and is playing the sampler itself, shooting out incoherent phonemes, stomach rumblings, and electronic burbles with the harsh edge of cutoff samples. Every now and then Ashley the younger whispers a monologue of indistinct references. A nice application of a kind of pop

Feldman the truculent badgered Samuel Beckett the famous and elusive—love to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting—for an opera libretto, and finally, apparently to get rid of him, Beckett shoved 87 words at him that were all Feldman needed for a 50-minute masterpiece. No matter how sophisticated your preconceptions of Feldman, the work is one of his most surprising. First wonder is a chromatic, nine-note melody that repeats over and over, snaking its way through the music and refusing to leave for long; another is



Pick Hit: John Luther Adams's *Clouds of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing*

chords that repeat with almost *Le Sacre*-ish insistence. Soprano Sarah Leonard is locked between high F and A to sing, "From impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither," and other witty observations. Never have librettist and composer been so perfectly attuned, and in pursuit of nothingness. **A PLUS**

PATRICK GRANT: *Fields Amaze* (Silent Treatment) Grant's music is clearly Balinese-inspired, and he's helped out on this disc by musicians from Gamelan Son of Lion.

neighbors come running, expecting bloodshed, when band two, *Shenai Sky*, suddenly blurts out with a high, unearthly wail. That's oboist Libby Van Cleve playing an Indian shenai, and providing the pungent voice crying out in lonely wildernesses created by Jack Vees on electric guitars and Hovda herself seemingly crawling around inside the piano. I feared that commitment to disc wouldn't serve Hovda's delicate, wispy music well, but actually her brushed-piano-string tremolos and low-frequency guitar drones set up a warm ambience you can meditate to or dance to as you wish. This is the music George Crumb might have written if he hadn't been so damned Euro, and it's high time Hovda, quite popular these days among younger composers, had a disc devoted to her. **A MINUS**

PAUL LANSKY: *Things She Carried* (Bridge) Those smitten with the peppy minimalism of Lansky's *Idle Chatter* pieces will find this new eight-movement work more introverted and less infectious on first hearing, but attractive in a more original way. Lansky clearly loves the voice as an electronic trigger, and also the suspended ambience of leisurely speech cadences as we wait for a sentence to finish. Here he's written, with his wife, Hannah McKay, who reads it, a prettily poetic text describing an unnamed woman via "Things She Carried," "Things She Noticed," "Things She Remembered": "renting a car at the Denver airport, the

then become a major name later. The Haydn of the sampler, he's got a wry, graceful sense of humor no other electronic composer can match. A lot of that humor is so theatrical that it's hard to see how a CD could ever capture some of his best pieces, but this overdue debut disc is delightful enough. In the title piece he pokes fun at his composer friend Ingram Marshall by reconfiguring a radio interview so that every other sentence refers to Nevada City—"not exactly the Bay Area." And just when you've pigeonholed Mahler as a trickster, *Wind Peace*, a 1972 tribute to Harold Budd, draws a poetically sensuous meditation from the mellow tones of crystal glassware and aluminum pie pans. **A**

PAULINE OLIVEROS: *Alien Bog/Beautiful Soup* (Pogus Productions) If you have an affection, as I certainly do, for Oliveros's early, process-oriented analog synth works such as *I of IV* (flip side to the first recording of Reich's *Come Out*), then you'll want this disc to fill a historical gap. *Alien Bog* and *Beautiful Soup* were products of her first year working with the Buchla Box at the great old San Francisco Tape Music Center, and at half an hour each, they're major works. *Alien Bog*'s free-whirling sine and sawtooth waves, bouncing from speaker to speaker via tape delay, have a gritty honesty that little MIDI music can match. In *Beautiful Soup*, the tones are intertwined with droll readings of Lewis Carroll poems. Crank 'em up and enjoy shouting, "Beam me up, Scotty!" **B PLUS**

ONES, LIKE THE LIVE PERFORMANCES, are indebted to personal references that you won't figure out from listening. **B**

KEVIN VOLANS: *This Is How It Is, Walking Song, Leaping Dance, Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments, Untitled* (Chandos) Committed enemy of the one-idea piece, South Africa-born Ireland resident Volans is running away from minimalism as fast as his interlocking hockets will carry him. Interestingly, the more he chops up the continuity in *This Is How It Is* and the piano concerto, the more he sounds like neoclassic Stravinsky. But he still gets the most startling textures in the business, and the concerto's piano and winds dance back and forth in lock-stepped, African-influenced patterns that never stray within light years of a cliché. Two charming postminimal essays, *Walking Song* and *Leaping Dance*, will comfort fans of Volans's earlier mbira-driven works. By refusing to repeat himself or anyone else, Volans remains one of the planet's most distinctive and unpredictable voices. **A**

RICHARD YOUNGS: *Advent* (Table of the Elements) You often don't quite know what you're listening to with this label: an interesting fix. Here, Youngs recorded electric guitars, piano, oboe, and vocals on different days, mixing them afterward. The piano part is a mind-numbingly relentless repetition of a single, slow, three-beat, heavily reverbed ostinato, with here and there a note shifting. Oboes, vocals, and guitars (never all at once)

THE THE WORD, THE COMING AWAY/Unless, I guess, I'm busy or something." He's added six songs not on the original LP, too. Robert Ashley's *Atalanta*, recorded at the end of the vinyl age, is finally on CD, too (Lovely Music). New Yorkers mainly know it through chamber-version excerpts he's performed (I saw it in mid-'80s Chicago), but it's central to his operatic universe. "Who could speak, if every word had meaning?" is only one of its great lines. And if Harry Partch's music were water, we were all drowned. CRI has issued everything they could get copyrights on, including all the stuff Partch recorded between 1950 and '61 and released on his Gate 5 label (except what's since appeared on better recordings). Sadly, they had to settle for a less-than-exciting live performance of *Barstow* (CBS will never have enough sense to rescue the great old Columbia version). But the early recordings of *Eleven Intrusions*, *U.S. Highball*, and other works capture an intimate, brilliant portrait of Partch in his prime.

ADDRESSES

Artifact: 1374 Francisco Street, Berkeley, CA 94702; **O.O. Discs:** 261 Groovers Avenue, Black Rock, CT 06605; **Open Space:** R.d. 2, Box 45c, Red Hook, NY 12571; **Pogus Productions:** P.O. Box 150022, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, NY 11215; **Review Records:** distributed by No Man's Land, Gerhard Busse, Strassmanstrasse 33, D-10249, Berlin, Germany; **Silent Treatment:** 1173A Second Avenue, Suite 322, NY, NY 10021. **V**