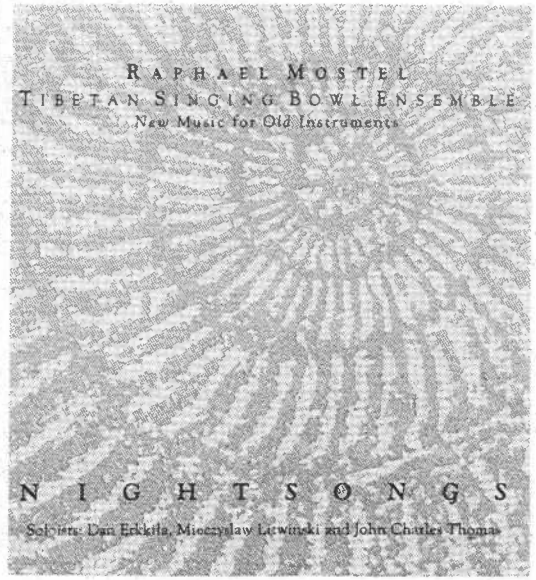
CONSUMER GUIDE Kyle Gann

I usually save discs for August's doldrums, but the current CD boom is incredible: the stack on my desk is four feet high and rising. I'm straying outside my beat here, because while Boulanger and Wolpe aren't exactly new, they're figures that new-music types will or ought to be fascinated by. Right now, collective insights are more exciting than individual contributions.

PICK HIT: Isang Yun



PICK HIT: Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble

Boulanger and Fauré: *Sacred Works* (Inaglio) Nadia Boulanger, who taught more than 600 composers from America alone, never ceased to champion the works of her sister Lili, who had died in 1918 at 25. Nadia's estimate of Lili's "sublimity of form" ("a little short of miraculous") needs a sisterly grain of salt; the three vocal/orchestral works here, from a London performance Nadia conducted in 1968, are dramatic and colorful, but also youthfully morbid and bombastic. *Du Fond de l'Abîme*, a stern, ambitious cantata on Psalm 130, is Lili Boulanger's best-known work, but I prefer the ethereally chromatic *Pie Jesu* with harp and organ. She might have become the first great woman composer, but who knows? Then Nadia leads the Requiem by her teacher Gabriel Fauré in a devout, Romantic-style performance. **B**

Neely Bruce: *The Plague & other vocal works* (Mode) Neely Bruce's *The Plague* of 1982, an eclectic rock cantata ostensibly dramatizing in *Decameron*-style Florence's 14th century bubonic plague, appears to have been the earliest large-scale musical work about AIDS, pre-Diamanda. With "Rock Island Line" as thread, Bruce sews well-chosen Biblical, medieval, and Enlightenment dance, that ought to offend rockers as much as classical fans. I love it. **A MINUS**

***Robert Erickson: Sierra & Other Works* (CRI)** Erickson's been an important figure at UC–San Diego despite the struggle he's fought against cancer for more than a decade. The treasure here is *Sierra* of 1984, a tense, percussive setting of a stream-of-consciousness text of western place names like Devil's Basin, Bogus Thunder. Philip Larson, hilarious Baritone of [THE], solos powerfully in a serious moment. Otherwise, this disc falls short as a tribute, not least because it's too distantly recorded. Erickson's '70s idiom—fragmented, gestural, grounded in information theory—is too dry for interesting solo works. Pieces for trumpet, contrabass, and flute showcase nice lip and finger tricks, but the gestures follow haphazardly, melting indistinguishably back into their bland genre. What we need is more of Erick- through DNA. Less acerbic than the Residents, never as surprising as Robert Ashley, Goldman and Lehrer scoop out their space with a soft, '90s irony. As THEY say, "if your goal is to attain it . . . if you want it . . . then you cannot have it." **B**

Malcolm Goldstein: *Sounding the New Violin* (What Next?) Goldstein's not just a violinist, he's an aesthetic by himself, and the scratchy solos he's collected from experimentalists over 50 define his peacefully sad atmosphere. He squeaks out the Thoreauvian aphorisms of John Cage's *Whiskus*, and in a Pauline Oliveros concept piece assembles his own spiky, amiable self-portrait. His *Sounding the Fragility of Line* just sustains notes, variations drawn from the tickle of each bow hair. The criss-crossing tremolos of James Tenney's *Koan* stand out as a thorny, ear-illusionary process piece, and lyricism enters in Or- of humor, and the pitch logic in his post-1960 music is Mozartean in its clarity. The Juilliard turns in a sparkling, well-detailed performance, though Wolpe got his inspiration from watching fish dart and turn in his fish tank, and the insouciance of the Concord Quartet's old Vox recording reminded me of that more than the Juilliard's heroism does. I can savor the smooth craftsmanship in the fugue-filled, pre–12-tone Quartet No. 2 of Roger Sessions (boo! hiss!—he forbade mention of Varèse's name and considered Wolpe a "tinkerer"), but Milton Babbitt's Fourth Quartet marries too colorless a medium to too arid a mind. **A MINUS**

Jonathan Kramer: *Five Compositions* (Leonarda) When a guy writes as insightful and influential a book on musical structure as Kramer's *The Time of Music* (Schirmer), you've gotta wonder what his music's like. Kramer's is jazzy, modal, cerebral yet accessi- mance; for all their energy, Lentz's singers never quite gel. Other works: *O-ke-wa*, loping like the sheriff of a cleaned-up town, charms and finally cloys with its sweetness, and the CD has added *Lascaux*, another happy, atmospheric wine-glass étude. **A**

Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble: *Nightsongs* (Scarlet/Infinity) Raphael Mostel rubs pretty hums from his Tibetan brass-bowl rims, but he avoids the slide into New Age with some harsh sounds and a firm sense of large-scale form: not linear form, but a succession of discretely contrasted sound worlds. After *Jacob's Ladder* begins as sad and mysterious as Holst's "Neptune," its didgeridoos soon growl sleepily, water trickles, things break, thighbone trumpets wail. *Nightsong*, with John Charles Thomas soloing on an obsolete wind instrument the *lyzarden* (lizard), is like a Thelonious Monk tune slowed down into *The Unanswered Question*. The Tibetan Bowls are a greatest hit on John Schaefer's "New Sounds" WNYC radio program, and this first appearance on disc may bring out their crossover potential. **A**

Isang Yun: Symphonies 1 & 3 (CPO) Yun, Germany's most famous Korean composer, suffered imprisonment and torture in his native land not once but twice: first during World War II at the hands of Japanese occupation forces, then in 1967–69 by the South Korean secret police, who kidnapped him from Berlin for suspected espionage and released him following international artist protests. If you can imagine Mahler or Nielsen writing in response to such hardships, you might come close to these soaring, impassioned, themeless symphonies. Symphony No. 3 (1985) explores

rock cantata ostensibly dramatizing in *Decameron*-style Florence's 14th century bubonic plague, appears to have been the earliest large-scale musical work about AIDS, pre-Diamanda. With "Rock Island Line" as thread, Bruce sews well-chosen Biblical, medieval, and Enlightenment texts into a tragicomic litany of fake and failed diagnoses. More courage here than pizazz; loose-knit and '60s psychedelic, *The Plague* demands an extramusical response. Musically, I prefer *Eight Ghosts*, an exquisitely weird setting of "ghost mantras" by Michael McClure. "ROOOR! MAH-ROOOR! GAHARR! NARGHHR!" croon the singers, jumping abruptly from madrigalisms to surreality, always with biting originality. The performers and dedicatees are England's astonishing Electric Phoenix ensemble, a vocal quartet of dynamic personalities—the Manhattan Transfer of the avant-garde. Worth hearing in any repertoire, their uninhibited precision will perk your ears up from the first zinging chord. **A MINUS**

Paul Dolden: *The Threshold of Deafening Silence* (Tronia) Dolden came to my attention via Michael Maguire of Bang on a Can notoriety, which says something. Noise. Dolden, another Vancouver wildman, samples plucks, bowings, and toots of real instruments and piles them into humongously unreal orchestras that wheeze and grind like electronic Penderecki, only better and with an attitude. *Below the Walls of Jericho* blows you away with 400 densely packed tracks, and *In the Natural Doorway I Crouch* unzips your inner ear by strumming oddly tuned galactic balalaikas. The sense of form shaping this fluid racket has a weird chutzpah, hovering between lethargy, chaos, and corded. Erickson's '70s idiom—fragmented, gestural, grounded in information theory—is too dry for interesting solo works. Pieces for trumpet, contrabass, and flute showcase nice lip and finger tricks, but the gestures follow haphazardly, melting indistinguishably back into their bland genre. What we need is more of Erickson's powerful ensemble works. **C PLUS**

Orlando Jacinto Garcia: *La Belleza del Silencio* (O.O.) No secret that Cuban-born Garcia studied with Morton Feldman, with the most haunting work here titled *On the Eve of the Second Year Anniversary of Morton's Death*. Garcia's post-Feldman aesthetic is lovely, small groups of sounds played against each other in varied permutations, but by disc's end you'll die for a change. *On the Eve* is striking, with the Gregg Smith Singers sustaining soft, sharp dissonances. Other pieces with metallic pings sound like improvised Feldman, enchanting at first but finally undisciplined and flabby. Intriguing new composer and label, but the dull grouping of too-similar pieces blunts the impact. **B MINUS**

Harvey Goldman and Warren Lehrer: *The Search for IT & Other Pronouns* (La La Music) Too many gadgets in the technopop, but Goldman and Lehrer are cool. Their persona is the faceless future, a locationless world music in corporate electronic tones, narrated in generic accents of unquestionable wisdom. Verbal clichés float innocuously through the sequenced melodies like the nightly news, soothing you with the meaninglessness of your life. The instrumentals permutate too cutely, but "It Just Might Work" is a technical, Gertrude Stein–ish text on the search for an AIDS cure piece assembles his own spiky, amiable self-portrait. His *Sounding the Fragility of Line* just sustains notes, variations drawn from the tickle of each bow hair. The criss-crossing tremolos of James Tenney's *Koan* stand out as a thorny, ear-illusionary process piece, and lyricism enters in Ornette Coleman's lovely, lonely *Trinity*, composed for Goldstein and poignantly tuneful. Tenney and Coleman collectors will want these rarities, and everything Goldstein plays is honest and personal. **B PLUS**

Barbara Held: *Upper Air Observation* (Lovely Music) Flutist Held is flawless in tone and fearless in her devotion to the new; her recent move to Europe is our loss. But the big point here is a long, sensuous work (with pianist Joseph Kubera) by a New Yorker who will someday be one of the greats. Nils Vigeland was another Feldman product, and his *Vara*, from 1979, is heavily touched by the master's hand, mainly in its seamless wandering among ideas. But also evident is the Vigeland craftsmanship, the oddly skewed, quasi-familiar textures, the rushes of passion resolved with an unerring ear; at 28 minutes, it's barely long enough. Further meditations by Alvin Lucier, Yasunao Tone, and Held herself mix flute with electronics in muted, listenable ways. **A MINUS**

The Juilliard String Quartet: *Sessions, Wolpe, Babbitt* (CRI) I'm wandering into Leighton Kerner's territory, but sorry: Stefan Wolpe was the greatest of America's establishment atonalists (so great that academia flinches at claiming him), and I'm excited that his 1968–69 String Quartet's back on disc. Only Wolpe could draw angular lines with a body-felt sense a mind. **A MINUS**

Jonathan Kramer: *Five Compositions* (Leonarda) When a guy writes as insightful and influential a book on musical structure as Kramer's *The Time of Music* (Schirmer), you've gotta wonder what his music's like. Kramer's is jazzy, modal, cerebral yet accessible, never minimalist, but with a reliance on quasiminimalist gradual processes, applied with elegant complexity and freedom. *Musica Pro Musica* (Farberman conducting the London Philharmonic) could be gamelan music by Alban Berg, and it makes you suddenly hear Berg's additive melodies (Chamber Concerto, Three Pieces for Clarinet) as protominimalist. The real fun is *Atlanta Licks*, a bluesy chamber romp. Every piece shows an affection for anticlimax, a retreat into poetic quiet after wild outbursts. Those are the best moments, for they escape the general premeditated quality of artificially simulated passion. Too smart for his own good and smart enough to know it, Kramer's one of those rare people whose very miscalculations will be enlightening. **A**

Daniel Lentz: *Missa Umbrarum* (New Albion) A CD rerelease of *Missa Umbrarum* isn't really news, for it's been on vinyl for years. But Lentz's "Mass of Shadows" has never gotten enough credit as a '70s classic (1973, score published in *Soundings*), and as the most beautiful and truly original mass of the late 20th century. It's all done with wine glasses, and as the singers drone with their fingers on the rims, they drink Christ's blood to alter the pitch. Syllables reappear in a shadowy, quasi-tape-loop process, with a momentum both insistent and devotional. We could have used a matured performance, but this is the real thing. **A**

Yun: *Symphonies Nos. 1 & 3* (Wergo) Yun, a Korean composer who lives in Berlin, was kidnapped from Berlin by the South Korean secret police, who kidnapped him from Berlin for suspected espionage and released him following international artist protests. If you can imagine Mahler or Nielsen writing in response to such hardships, you might come close to these soaring, impassioned, themeless symphonies. Symphony No. 3 (1985) explores the spiritual chasm Beethoven opened in his last piano sonata. Throughout, the violins hover five vertiginous octaves above the basses, straining to sustain a calmer psychic perspective. Within that disconcerting void, the brasses and percussion beat out textures mechanistic and violent, but not inhuman, and the hesitant attempts at dialectic outline an affirmational philosophy of life. Symphony No. 1 (1982–83) divides in more conventionally contrasting (if still themeless) movements. In these vibrant performances by the Pomeranian Philharmonic under Takao Ukigaya, Yun's symphonies might appeal more to fans of Nordic post-romantics like Allan Pettersson than to those of the serialists Yun was once associated with. I'm no fan, as you know by now, of Neo-Expressionist symphonies extending Euro-tradition, but these are so impassioned, so devoid of empty gesture, so urgently truthful, that they shoot a direct line to the soul. **A**

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