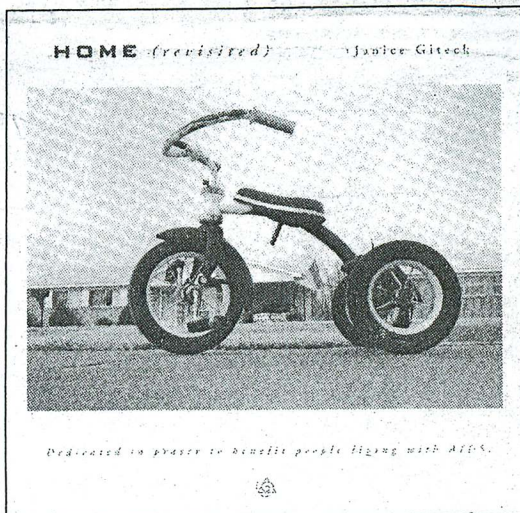


CONSUMER GUIDE Kyle Gann

Classical critics make their reputations by often reminding you that music ain't what it used to be. I'm doomed. I'm nuts about lots of recent discs, hardly sating myself with one batch before the next arrives. You'd have to go back to the '20s for a decade whose music suits my taste as well as the '90s does (though the '70s comes close). So this is virtually a best-of selection, no sub-B's. I've already praised Todd Levin's postminimal rock album *Ride the Planet* (Point)—a better debut than any young composer deserves to put out—else it would join Giteck and Ashley in a tough three-way tie.

Robert Ashley: *Improvement* (Don Leaves Linda) (None-such) I'd assumed Ashley couldn't write anything different from *Perfect Lives* that would be as good. But *Improvement*, if less quotable, is a tighter, deeper, more mysterious opera in a hypnotic, less vernacular idiom. Don abandons Linda at a roadside restroom on the way to the airport. "For the sake of argument," Ashley draws, "Don is Spain in 1492 and Linda is the Jews." The liner notes spell the allegory further: tap dancing equals the Renaissance art of memory, left-handed golf is Giordano Bruno's cosmology, Mr. Payne's mother is the Catholic Church. You can spend months figuring this out, but the opera charms by second hearing, and you'll catch more detail—the "Tarzan" song, Linda's psychoanalytic interrogation—in this pristine recording than you might have at its New York premiere. Jacqueline Humbert is a meltingly vulnerable Linda, Tom Buckner a stalwart Don, and Ashley is Ashley. **A PLUS**

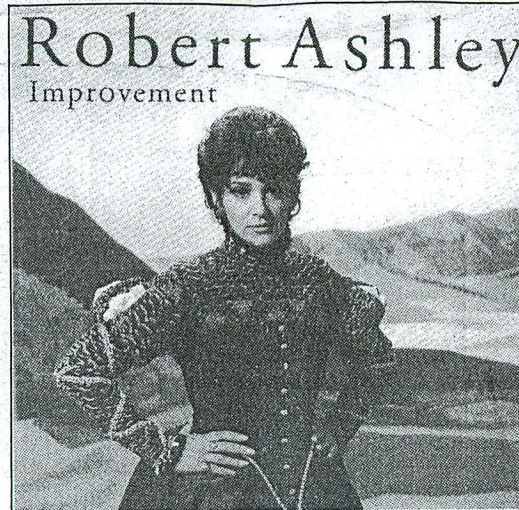


PICK HIT: Janice Giteck

Memento Mori mixes microseconds of pop songs with strings and brass in search of "a recognition of our collective identity, and the inevitability of our common destination." There's a naive excitement here typical of new technology exploration, like early musique concrète; there's also a love of abstraction and mystification you won't find in more pop-oriented sampler-pioneers like Carl Stone and John Oswald. **B PLUS**

Maria De Alvear: *En Amor Duro* (Hat Art) Europe keeps its women composers under a basket (name three), so to come across one as unknown and individual as Spain's De Alvear is enough to make one suspect conspiracy. Her reiterated notes and motives are patently Feldman-esque (hence Hat Art's interest, maybe), though they burn with a devout Mediterranean emotionality absent from the music's obvious affinities. *En Amor Duro* is about pain, transmogrified into glowing sonorities

when I rave about Seattle's Giteck. Her debut recording, *Breathing Songs From a Turning Sky* (Mode) was a mixed bag of dashing styles, but this new disc is more consistent and even more glorious. For a postminimalist, Giteck traverses a wonderful range within each piece, surging from darkness into light, from sorrow into sexuality, from stasis into dance. *Om Shanti*, a prayer for PWAs with chanting soprano Thomasa Eckert, weaves intricate modal threads into a heartfelt, ecumenically religious fabric. Balinese gamelan influence renders Giteck's string solos especially plaintive, both in *Om Shanti* and *Tapasya* for viola and percussion. *Home* gets interesting vocal tunings by combining men's chorus with gamelan. A devotee of Eastern religions, Giteck isn't afraid to express a spirituality that, let's face it, underlies a lot of the greatest music, and that we don't hear much these days. And royalties for this disc will be donated to AIDS victims a gratifying way to



PICK HIT: Robert Ashley

ly Ives had assimilated impressionism, as well as his 1896 campaign song for William McKinley (relax, he switched to Democrat after college). Complete, the set promises to be an absolute must. **B PLUS**

Ira J. Mowitz: *A la Memoire d'un Ami* (New Albion) Studying at IRCAM is usually the kiss of death, but Mowitz (b. 1951) survived not only Boulez's musical Sahara but Princeton as well. The three pieces on this disc were created by crunching numbers on a mainframe IBM computer, but they sound piped in by sad, benevolent aliens. Death is the title piece's subject, and the sense of space and loneliness is astounding. Mowitz's rich, booming, unidentifiable tones weep in some vast acoustic of the imagination. Not much happens, or needs to. *Darkening* and *Shimmering* synthesize the wind in an impressionism of pure timbre. Snobs may mistake it for New Age, but there's nothing cheesy about

frenetic accordion band. *Chao Nue* is a crescendoing evolution of industrial noises, like the Eno/Fripp *An Index of Metals*, but more uplifting. *Gadberry's*, on the other hand, is merely cute, if expert, technopop. The disc rereleases *Shing Kee*, Stone's minimalist classic stolen from a recording of Japanese pop star Akiko Yano singing Schubert's "Die Lindenbaum." **B PLUS**

James Tenney: *Selected Works 1961-69* (Artifact) As an experimentalist respected by both academics and Cageans, Tenney deserves more recordings, but these pioneering computer pieces don't make an ingratiating first exposure. Tenney realized most of them at Bell Labs, and while the logic involved was blinding for its time, the pieces sound like 12-tone music executed with blips, squeaks, and white noise. Exceptions: Music for Player Piano is a delightfully Xenakisian, stochastic piano roll, *For Ann* (*Rising*) is the first of Tenney's ecstatic conceptual sound-processes, and the earliest piece, *Collage #1*, fragments Elvis Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes" into a presciently postmodern mosaic (see Creshevsky, above). Musical masochists like myself can find beauty in these relentlessly counterintuitive textures, but this disc is unlikely to turn the unconverted on to a great musical mind. **B**

ADDITIONAL CONSUMER NEWS: ● Since his death, there are too many great John Cage recordings to list individually. The Smithsonian has rereleased *Indeterminacy* on CD, his classic 1959 album reading his deadpan stories while David Tudor makes noises. Wergo's selling an eight-disc set of Cage reading his *Diary: How To*

out the opera charms by second hearing, and you'll catch more detail—the "Tarzan" song, Linda's psychoanalytic interrogation—in this pristine recording than you might have at its New York premiere. Jacqueline Humbert is a meltingly vulnerable Linda, Tom Buckner a stalwart Don, and Ashley is Ashley. **A PLUS**

Asmat Dream: New Music Indonesia, Volume 1 (Lyricord)

Jody Diamond and Larry Polansky commissioned nine pieces from Indonesian composers, and five are here, all improvisationally developed. My favorite is *Diya* by Dody Satya Ekagustidiman: a thick ensemble piece with precisely out-of-tempo gestures, unnotable rhythms, and layer replacing layer with a leisurely time-sense. Suhendi Afryanto's *Mbuh* chants softly over drums and low bells, Harry Roesli's spooky *Asmat Dream* lays wild voices over taped crickets and running water. *Ostinato* zither performances by Nano S. twang more traditionally. Although the music pulses physical, the considerable overdubbing suggests it's designed primarily for recording. It's good enough stuff to influence us back; the whole disc has a deliciously complex, ever-changing atmosphere, exotic in its tunings and timbres, comfortably loose in its constructions.

B PLUS

Noah Creshevsky: Man & Superman (Centaur) Iguanalike, the sampler compositions of this reclusive Cage devotee and Brooklyn College professor dart and twist with spiky disregard for whether you follow them or not. In place of notes, Creshevsky uses sampled gestures, noises, and radio snippets as his textural atoms, playing dodecaphonist with bits of our lives. His sampler is a means toward not only superhuman virtuosity, but a new universality:

one as unknown and individual as Spain's De Alvear is enough to make one suspect conspiracy. Her reiterated notes and motives are patently Feldman-esque (hence Hat Art's interest, maybe), though they burn with a devout Mediterranean emotionality absent from the music's obvious affinities. *En Amor Duro* is about pain, transmogrified into glowing sonorities that accumulate, modulate, explode, and die away with an elegant sense of timing. One could call this (though I'm gonna regret it) a feminine minimalism: impassioned, hesitant, nonliteral. Pianist Hildegard Kleeb keeps the work's unrhythmed continuity taut, intense. **A MINUS**

Double Edge: U.S. Choice (CRI)

With all the piano duos around, why has only Double Edge dragged the medium into the late 20th century, bringing us a diverse but inner-directed repertoire where none seemed to exist before? There's not a bad piece here, from Meredith Monk's slow-swinging *Phantom Waltz* to the cool syncopations of *Tonk* by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn to James Tenney's 12-tone minimalist *Chromatic Canon*—a clearer process piece than you'll find on his disc below. Even the serial textures of Mel Powell's *A Setting* thin whimsically from a wall of sound into a delicate entropy of isolated notes, and Paul Bowles's *Night Waltz* is steamily exotic. The most exciting premiere may be "Blue" Gene Tyranny's *The De-Certified Highway of Dreams*, its jaunty melody surrounded by an Ivesian periphery of dissonance. And Double Edge doesn't homogenize, but enters into the spirit of every piece.

A MINUS

Janice Giteck: Home (revisited) (New Albion) It's time East Coasters quit asking "Who?"

Tapasya for viola and percussion. *Home* gets interesting vocal tunings by combining men's chorus with gamelan. A devotee of Eastern religions, Giteck isn't afraid to express a spirituality that, let's face it, underlies a lot of the greatest music, and that we don't hear much these days. And royalties for this disc will be donated to AIDS victims, a gratifying way to help out. **A**

Iconoclast: The Speed of Desire (Fang)

Julie Joslyn plays sax, violin, and electronics, Leo Ciesa plays drums and keyboard. Their 17 pieces last 40 minutes, and each is a perfectly sculpted rock vignette with as much structural integrity as any two-minute workout could need. Their hard-edged energy is nonstop, but, refreshingly, doesn't slide into ruts; it jumps, turns corners, and changes tempo with finer attention to detail than you expect from such Downtown noisemakers. Sometimes, as in "The Cheese You Left Behind," the sax melody can wax surprisingly nostalgic. They don't do much, but they do it intelligently. **B**

Charles Ives: The Complete Songs, Vol. 1 (Albany)

Dora Ohrenstein, Mary Ann Hart, Paul Sperry, and William Sharp have recorded all of Ives's 150-plus songs, to be released on four CDs over the next year. Since the set will be an indispensable reference work, the performances are scrupulously accurate (to the startling inclusion of a kazoo choir in "Son of a Gambolier"), but also loving, warm, and imaginative (save for Sperry's inability to zero in on a pitch). I find no previous recordings for 15 of these 36 songs. As they're being released chronologically, parlor-song-filled *Volume 1* is the least interesting, but it does include French chansons that reveal for the first time how expert-

piece's subject, and the sense of space and loneliness is astounding. Mowitz's rich, booming, unidentifiable tones weep in some vast acoustic of the imagination. Not much happens, or needs to. *Darkening* and *Shimmering* synthesize the wind in an impressionism of pure timbre. Snobs may mistake it for New Age, but there's nothing cheesy about Mowitz's timbre, nor simple about his haunting melodic forms. **A MINUS**

Giacinto Scelsi: Bot-Ba (Hat Art)

Despite "scandalous" allegations that this Italian aristocrat sometimes got help in notating his scores (so what?), the image of his music grows ever more complex. His recorded piano music so far has been quiet, meditative, minimalist, but *Bot-Ba* shows a different picture. First, there are two sonatas from 1939: expressionistic, virtuosic, lyrical, though still with Scelsi's capacity for hammering on one or two notes. (They're probably 12-tone, though the self-indulgent notes don't say.) Melodic passages are sumptuously mystical, like excellent Rudhyar or even Ives. Then, *Bot-Ba* of 1952 evokes Tibetan rituals with bell sounds, massive chords, cathartic shimmerings. It's some of Scelsi's most impressive music, and Marianne Schroeder's virtuosity is again colorful, her pianism ecstatic. **A**

Carl Stone: Mom's (New Albion)

Still named after restaurants (title cut included), Stone's sampler pieces fragment noises of life into pop-tinged soundpieces. His tones are exotic; his processes seem too simple, until you realize that your perception of the sound-source is changing before your ears, and that microseconds make a difference. *Mom's*, the most complex work, begins with gentle *poings* that turn out to be part of a

ADDITIONAL CONSUMER

NEWS: ● Since his death, there are too many great John Cage recordings to list individually. The Smithsonian has rereleased *Indeterminacy* on CD, his classic 1959 album reading his deadpan stories while David Tudor makes noises. Wergo's selling an eight-disc set of Cage reading his *Diary: How To Improve the World* (recorded in 1991) for the price of three. I got it as a sentimental curiosity, but find I'm playing it over and over, newly enchanted by the non-random side of Cage's personality. "Europeans," he muses coyly, "understand tragedy but life itself (and any art that's like it) puzzles them. . . ." A three-disc set by the Barton Workshop (Etcetera) includes three world premieres, among them *Hymnkus* of 1986, Cage's gorgeously repetitive continuum in response to minimalism; also *Seven²*, a major "time-bracket" work of his Feldman-esque late period. . . . ● And if you're perplexed as to which recording of Morton Feldman's masterpiece *For Samuel Beckett* to get now that there are two, the one by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players (Newport Classic) is more distinctly recorded than the newer disc by the Ensemble Modern (Hat Art). With the Newport recording I can distinguish the piano, vibraphone, and harp, hear the ensemble chord alternations, and follow the dense score; none of that is true with Hat Art's fuzzy disc. That's not to deny that Hat Art's Feldman series is the decade's greatest recording event. . . . ● Addresses: Lyricord Discs Inc., 141 Perry Street, NY 10014. Fang Records, Box 652, Stuyvesant Station, NY 10009. Albany Records, P.O. Box 5011, Albany, NY 12205. Artifact Recordings, 1374 Francisco Street, Berkeley, CA 94702. ■