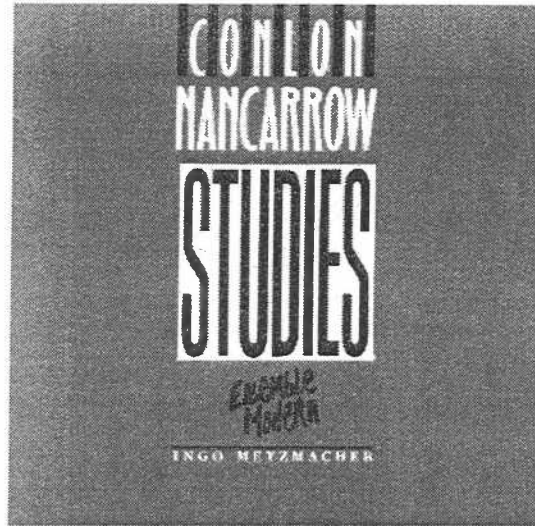


Deny inherent sex differences as you will, there is a specifically female aesthetic rooted in the voice's potential for externalizing the inner spirit. At least, that's the conclusion forced by Monk, Leach, Shields, and the Dice compilation below. After being thrown by the recession, women have made a stunning comeback on CD. Recommended but not available by deadline: Annea Lockwood's hair-raising *Thousand-Year Dreaming* (Nonsequitur), based on cave drawings.

John Luther Adams: *The Far Country* (New Albion) Although he's a Southerner, J. L. Adams's austere, Nordic textures destined him for Alaska, where he's new music's official representative. For years I've expected his landscape-obsessed forms to catch fire, and on this disc they do, as his natural minimalism merges with a Morton Feldman-derived harmonic complexity. *The Far Country of Sleep*, in fact, is a Feldman memorial, its rich, indistinct orchestral sonorities dotted with funereal drumbeats. *Night Peace* for chorus gets a little wispy with its tinkling wind chimes (a device I learned to loathe in the '70s Midwest), but *Dream in White on White* for harp and strings is a gem, glowing chords beneath graceful plucked lines drawing images you can't forget. **A MINUS**

Arraymusic: *New World (Artifactual)* Toronto's Arraymusic is one of North America's more astonishing founts of new music, comparable to Relache or the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Like those ensembles, it leans toward postminimalism with a dissonant edge. Half the disc is devoted to *Cactus Rosary*, a strange new work of glissandos, jingling rattles, microtonal keyboards, and chanting by—you'd never guess it—Terry Riley. The Canadians



Pick Hit: Conlon Nancarrow

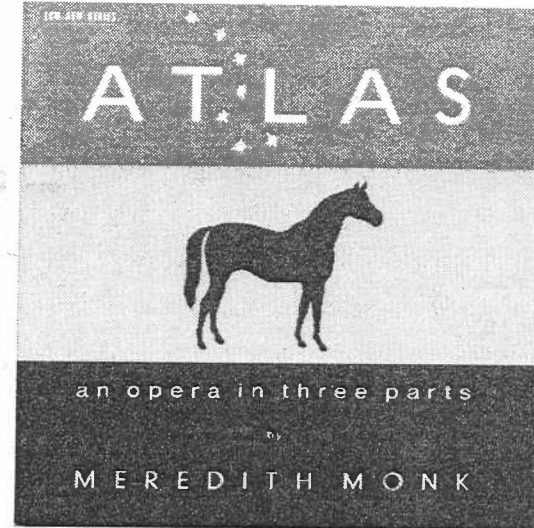
recordings. **A MINUS**

Dice: *A Collection of Contemporary Women Composers (Ishtar)* Curated by Elise Kermani and engineered by New York's Studio PASS, this vibrant anthology promises to be the first of a series. Most distinctive are a "colloquial operetta" sung over children's tunes and chants by Christine Baczewska, and the Qube Chix' "Bald Boyfriend," a melody-less rock song with just drums and clarinet: "I want a guy who's well-behaved/Who's neat and clean, whose head is shaved." Other works exploit finely tuned vocal techniques over repeating harmonies, sound effects, or rambling bass, the most mysterious being Kermani's overdrubbed wailing with bells. A shrill tantrum by LaDonna Smith provides a caricature of the genre, but most of *Dice* captures something wild, primal, and outside the world of male-dominated musical categories. **A MINUS**

Tom Johnson: *Music for 88 (XI)* Eighty-eight is divisible by two four eight 11 22 and 44, as

soft as velvet. *Feu de Joie* for multiple bassoons and *Green Mountain Madrigal* for voices show a fondness for prolonged half-step dissonances, but mostly in a tonal context that resolves into consonance, or at least ambiguity, by work's end. Despite its staticness, Leach's choral writing is effective enough to find fans outside new music circles. **B**

Sasha Matson: *Steel Chords/i-5 (Audioquest)* A former student of John Adams (the *Nixon in China* guy, not John Luther Adams above), Matson is the surprise newcomer of the year, a laid-back, Terry Riley-ish postminimalist with moments of Stravinskian vigor as well as unabashed Copland folksiness. *Steel Chords* combines string septet with pedal steel guitar, and when that thing comes twanging in, new music gains a resource it shoulda thought of before. Matson's a film composer and a slick orchestrator, but his forms are thoughtful and unpredictable. His dancelike *i-5* (referring to the interstate) for harp and string quintet is an odd blend:



Pick Hit: Meredith Monk

with charm and accuracy, their hairpin turns sharply negotiated by the Ensemble Modern. Nancarrow's first 12 studies are among his best, especially No. 6 with its deceptively nonrepetitive bass line and No. 7 with its thicket of tuneful isorhythms. Also included are some nonmechanical works: *Tango?*, Piece No. 2 for small orchestra, and Trio No. 1 with its newly discovered second and third movements. Here's a gold mine for people who love everything about Nancarrow except the prickly timbre of his hammer-hardened pianos. **A**

Michael Nyman: *The Piano (Virgin)* Much of Nyman's minimalist music has been tritely mechanical. His score for *The Piano* is a welcome improvement, though in trying too hard for sincerity, simplicity, 19th-century Realism, and hipness all at once, it wavers repeatedly between mystic poignancy and New Age dippiness. The best piano pieces are immeasurably gutsier and more sophisticated than Philip Glass's keyboard trifles. Then the strings come in, flooding your heart with

over's, her alleged electronic "rock" doesn't swing. The story is a vague dialogue between the Woman and some kind of ur-feminist Seaweed (both sung by Shields) who speak via the *Bhagavad Gita*. I want to like the piece; half the text's in Gaelic, Shields keeps her textures simple, and she even includes a virtuoso burping cadenza. There's a sincere feminist statement frozen here, but it's all done through the brain, and she never lets loose. **C**

Mathias Spahlinger: *Extension (Hat Art)* Think of a crazy, Downtown, kitchen-sink five-minute improv slowed down to one-tenth speed. In his existentialist philosophy-laden way, Spahlinger subverts his serialist background by ordering musical entities that resist ordering. The piece starts out like generic 1950s note-picking, but 16 minutes in, a Romantic bass line flies by, then violinist Dimitris Polisoidis laughs, pianist Hildegard Kleeb crumples something up, and we hear bits from Riley's *In C* and Messiaen's *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*. It reminds me of Nam June Paik's Fluxus improves, only with a dour sense of humor. I don't buy the liner notes' circuitous justifications, but *Extension* is typical of recent German music's attempt to escape its Brobdingnagian traditions. **B MINUS**

Gerhard Stabler: *Strike the Ear (Koch Schwann)* Stabler, a political composer from the Ruhr Valley who's gallivanted around the States, is the only German who's brought any new ideas across the Atlantic. The title work, a quartet played by the Arditti, seethes with the same mercurial violence as Wolfgang Rihm, but is clearer in its gestures, less pompous and self-obsessed. In *For the Garbagemen of San Fran-*

one of North America's more astonishing founts of new music, comparable to Relache or the Bang on a Can All-Stars. Like those ensembles, it leans toward postminimalism with a dissonant edge. Half the disc is devoted to *Cactus Rosary*, a strange new work of glissandos, jingling rattles, microtonal keyboards, and chanting by—you'd never guess it—Terry Riley. The Canadians whet my curiosity, especially Rudolf Komorous, a Czech émigré who has become an influential teacher. His *Dame's Rocket* is a complexly tonal essay original in its fragmented mallet, brass, and piano textures. More postminimal, Michael J. Baker's *Columbus* evolves from chordal patterns into fluid, nonmelodic textures. James Tenney fans who buy the disc for his *Three New Seeds* will find it two minutes long (where's the multisc set of his major works we're waiting for?). **B PLUS**

A Chance Operation: The John Cage Tribute (Koch) Asking big names to perform homages is already a chancy business, but this collection is tasteful. Laurie Anderson's stories about Merce Cunningham stick out most, and even those (given over low-key rock backgrounds) sound like an update on Cage's *Indeterminacy* lectures. The late Frank Zappa (if it's indeed he) seems self-conscious performing "4'33", breathing near the mike and drumming his fingers, while Yoko Ono's *Georgia Stone* includes obligatory peace sound bites from Lennon and Martin Luther King. James Tenney's pioneering *Ergodos I* for tape is included, and the final track captures for posterity the noise outside Cage's apartment at 18th and Sixth Avenue. The two discs are divided into 183 bands so you can let your CD player's "shuffle" button do service for the *I Ching*. Cage, of course, hated

bass, the most mysterious being Kermani's overdubbed wailing with bells. A shrill tantrum by LaDonna Smith provides a caricature of the genre, but most of *Dice* captures something wild, primal, and outside the world of male-dominated musical categories. **A MINUS**

Tom Johnson: Music for 88 (XI) Eighty-eight is divisible by two, four, eight, 11, 22, and 44, as the *Voice's* former voice says on disc before going through every possible keyboard partitioning. Other pieces spin exotic melodies around Mersenne's prime numbers, or express Pascal's Triangle in dense chords. With a minimalist's disdain for hidden structure, Johnson explains every compositional strategy before (or while) playing; I sometimes prefer his music with more mystery (try *An Hour for Piano* on Lovely Music). But, knowing what's going on, you expect nothing, and the patterns blossom into surprising beauty. *Rational Melodies*, a similar disc on Hat Art with Eberhard Blum on flutes, allows more conventional listening but not quite as much fun. Either will provide wit so dry that merely playing them in your apartment next August should reduce your humidity to under 60 per cent. **B PLUS**

Mary Jane Leach: Celestial Fires (XI) The title notwithstanding, Leach's droning, slowly growing tone-complexes won't set your blood boiling or your foot tapping. Her aesthetic is a survivor from the mellow '70s, drawn more from Phill Niblock than from Feldman. But if you've got the patience, her smooth choral and multiple-instrument continuums accumulate into radiant sonorities pulsing with overtones and a delicately tuned personality. In *Bruckstuck* the New York Treble Singers stretch a Bruckner passage into otherworldly undulations as

or as well as unabashed Copland folkiness. *Steel Chords* combines string septet with pedal steel guitar, and when that thing comes twanging in, new music gains a resource it shoulda thought of before. Matson's a film composer and a slick orchestrator, but his forms are thoughtful and unpredictable. His dancelike *i-5* (referring to the interstate) for harp and string quintet is an odd blend: California neoclassicism. There are makings here of a warm and distinctive personality, some assembly required. **B PLUS**

Meredith Monk: Atlas (ECM) By the time the dance, theater, and classical critics have their way with Monk, all that's left for me is the CD. For now, that's consolation enough. Loosely inspired by the life of Alexandra David-Neel, *Atlas* is the best of the minimalist operas, purer and more original than *Nixon*, more human, emotive, and consistently gorgeous than *Einstein*. Monk has an impeccable ear for rhythm, weaving ostinatos into patterns rarely as simple as they sound. Her sense of humor in the companion-choosing scene is charming, and she expresses as many specific emotional nuances with her wordless crooning as Mahler did with an orchestra. Her glissandos over a poignant bass in "Forest Questions" give me chills. Stockhausen should envy the third act's weird choral sonorities. Robert Eén, Dina Emerson, and the other singers are superb, and excellently recorded. Wish I had a higher grade. **A PLUS**

Conlon Nancarrow: Studies (RCA Victor) The late pianist Yvar Mikhashoff, who died of AIDS last year, arranged 11 of Nancarrow's early player-piano studies for instrumental ensemble. Others had tried and failed, but Mikhashoff's arrangements are as satisfying as the originals, done

charical. His score for *The Piano* is a welcome improvement, though in trying too hard for sincerity, simplicity, 19th-century Realism, and hipness all at once, it wavers repeatedly between mystic poignancy and New Age dippiness. The best piano pieces are immeasurably gutsier and more sophisticated than Philip Glass's keyboard trifles. Then the strings come in, flooding your heart with a yearning to wander across distant, fogbound beaches, wrenching uncontrollably. **B MINUS**

Bob Ostertag: All the Rage (Nonesuch) When gay activists set fire to the state office building in San Francisco in October of 1990, after Governor Pete Wilson vetoed a nondiscrimination bill, Ostertag was there with a tape recorder. The noise of that riot pounds unnervingly in the background as the Kronos Quartet plays motives drawn from shouted slogans: "We're Not Going Back" and "Burn It." Between sections, Eric Gupton reads a text about growing up queer, as the Kronos mimics his speech inflections in a Steve Reich-ish technique. The melee of breaking glass and protection whistles is frightening, and the Quartet's music deliberate and introspective enough to provide a powerful distancing effect. This is only a 16-minute single; Ostertag's made equally effective electronic music with the same material that could have filled out the disc nicely. **B PLUS**

Alice Shields: Apocalypse (CRI) I first knew of Shields from photos of her at the Columbia electronic studios with Babbitt and Davidovsky. For all the Hindu and Greek influences on this rock opera (her *ninth* opera!), there's a layer of academicism she can't shed, a portentous emotionalism that's too calculated and overly reverbed. Like Tod Mach-

er (Roch Schwann) Stabler, a political composer from the Ruhr Valley who's gallivanted around the States, is the only German who's brought any new ideas across the Atlantic. The title work, a quartet played by the Arditti, seethes with the same mercurial violence as Wolfgang Rihm, but is clearer in its gestures, less pompous and self-obsessed. In *For the Garbagemen of San Francisco*, the Ensemble Modern shouts and bangs repeated chords in explosive rhythms: funny, angry, and musically impressive. Stabler's tonal passages, not American-influenced and often using such lowbrow means as whistling and the accordion, are parodistically sad and interrupted by noises, depicting a civilization suffering from a lingering disease. Like Rzewski and Wolff, his social critique seduces you into listening. **B PLUS**

ADDITIONAL CONSUMER NEWS: Einstein Records (Roulette's publishing arm) has just completed *Einstein's Guide to the Musical Universe*, an annotated and prioritized database that lists, with addresses and contacts, every presenter, record store, radio station, newspaper, and magazine in America that has ever unwittingly expressed an interest in new, experimental, or weird music. I was amazed to find 42 presenters in Texas alone. The glossary is invaluable; Cage called *experimental* "any music of which the composer cannot predict the outcome," but the guide's version is "cannot predict the income." (400 pages, \$38, Roulette Intermedium, 228 West Broadway, NYC 10013)...
● Addresses: Artifact, 925 Longfellow Avenue, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L5H2X9; Audioquest, Box 3060, San Clemente, CA 92674; Dice, MiShinnah Productions, 343 Sixth Avenue 2R, Brooklyn, NY 11215. ■