

# CONSUMER GUIDE

BY KYLE GANN

## Skimmed Cream

Since almost two years have elapsed since my last guide, there's no way to encompass the stacks of new discs rising like diminutive office buildings around my desk. I can offer *some* of the cream I skimmed, and note that, more and more, the most interesting music is on tiny little labels available from thecomposersbasement.com (a metaphor, not a real Web site). The traditional new-music labels should be ashamed at the amount of great stuff they turn down.

### ELLEN BAND *90% Post Consumer Sound*

(XI) Band's wonderfully tactile work could be disposed of as a pleasant exercise in natural sounds, but if you'll keep your ears open until the end of each piece, her layerings of locomotives, violin squeaks, canaries, and radiators accumulate until the sound is quite something else; she makes process pieces, not found objects, though the distinction gets blurred. The final track, *Minimally Tough*, is a binaural recording to be heard on headphones, and worth the trouble: Its multitudinous creaking of leather jackets will convince you that you're being slowly smothered in bubble wrap. **B**

### MARTIN BRESNICK *Opere della Musica Povera*

(CRI) Bresnick's music is tough, thorny, clear, elegant, thoughtful, and difficult to pin down. So it's an overdue luxury to have such a sumptuous two-disc set devoted to 12 different works of his for different ensembles, though the pieces are unified and linked by cross-referenced pitch relationships. His gestures can be murky at the same time that his pitch logic, often couched Brahmslike in hovering thirds and sixths, can be luminously transparent. Some timbres suit him better than others: The Copland piano sonorities of *The Dream of the Lost Traveller* (played by Lisa Moore) and the massed winds of "Follow Your Leader" are strikingly unusual, the orchestra pieces more modestly conventional. In short, this is music not to sum up in a few words, but to sink your teeth into and reflect upon at length. **A PLUS**

Aleksandra Vojcic—are powerful singers and energetic keyboardists, and they fuse their diverse elements with a highly original sense of folk-influenced noise. Slavic dances and quiet dirges mix with minimalist patterns, birdsongs, electronic continua, and rampages of virtuoso piano drumming. Here, the Divaz play down the political overtones that electrify their live performances and make only minimal use of those stunning voices. The remainder, still, is darkly atmospheric and unsettling. **B**

### MARIA DE ALVEAR *World*

(World Edition) New York heard De Alvear's mammoth double piano concerto—surely one of the longest, largest single-movement works ever written—in Merkin Hall in 1997 (not '91 as per the liner notes), and here's that performance closely captured on disc. It seems more than a planet: a cosmos of rhythmic layers, pulsing chords, clouds of string harmonics, tonal piano chorales punctuated by percussion, philosophical woodwind melodies, with truly Ivesian panoramic variety, some vulnerably thin textures amid the uproar, and a sure-footed intuitive sense of progression. Hildegard KleeB and Joseph Kubera are the well-mic'd pianists, Petr Kotik the conductor of the S.E.M. Orchestra, moving heaven and earth to make De Alvear look very much like Europe's best young composer. **A**

### PETER GARLAND *The Days Run Away*

(Tzadik) Enjoying the underfunded expatriate's life down in Mexico, Garland has written a ton o' piano music, and the superb Aki Takahashi, who plays seven pieces here, is devoted to it. It's such simple stuff: a bass motive, a chord, the motive again, the chord again, a different chord . . . but it's so exquisitely right, as ecstatic as Messiaen without all the baggage about birdsongs and the baby Jesus. The most translucent piece is the recent one, *Bright Angel-Hermetic Bird*; most of the others, including two gently repetitive 20-minute works, date from the early '70s, and it's amazing how little his style has changed. Garland is our own desert mystic saint, and an agnostic to boot. **A**



## PICK HIT

### BANG ON A CAN

*Renegade Heaven*

(Cantaloupe) You wouldn't have expected that totalist

Bang-on-a-Canners Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon would blend so well with minimalist twang-on-a-stringers Arnold Dreyblatt and Glenn Branca, but somehow all these composers, plus Phil Kline, have converged on a momentary common idiom.

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recorders, he sat out the early '90s, he says, mourning the loss of tape, but has recently become resigned to digital technology. So he did interviews with four creative artists, put them in his computer, and he takes the dancer's (Sandy Silva's) voice and makes it dance. The quarter-tone composer's voice (Thomas Peterson) is broken up into quarter-tone melodies. And like that. It's obvious, any kid with Pro-Tools could do it . . . but it's so charmingly done. **B PLUS**

### JAMES SELLARS *Piano Works*

(CRI) Reprogram these six sonatas and a sonatina (each played by a different pianist) in chronological order of composition, and you'll hear Sellars progress from a mild-mannered postserialism to a breathtakingly masterful postminimalism. Sellars has a superb ear for postminimal tonality and textures and no patience for minimalist process or any linear rhetoric. His post-1983 sonatas flutter and dart and ask odd questions; though absolutely smooth, they never make a common or predictable gesture, yet are consistently charming. If the most beautiful is the *Sonata Brasileira*, the most peculiar is the *Sonata Dada*, a seamless, Satie- and Cage-inspired continuum of non-sequiturs in A-flat major. Since the pieces also remain a little abstract, Sellars may turn out to be a composer's composer, but he has raised the style to new, idiosyncratic heights. **A**

### PAUL STURM *The Diplomat's Shadow*

(Turnstyle Media) Once one of the Midwest's most original and unsung figures, now living in Arizona, Sturm is a tenderhearted conceptualist whose concern is personal politics, but whose music remains very musical. The title cut is a symphony for electric guitars, but with Brancaesque macho replaced by gentle poetry. *Ascent of the Deer Ghost* was made as a quasi-Native American ritual to help Sturm deal with the atrocities of mid-American hunting culture; *Eye of the Panopticon* springs from Foucault's analysis of prison structures. Live performance would probably clarify how the sounds relate to the ideas, but Sturm's lively rhythms and his paradoxically delicate use of noisy and weird timbres (including power drills and string-pull talking dolls) reach levels of bizarre loveliness. **B PLUS**

### 'BLUE' GENE TYRANNY *Go, Blue*

(O.O.) Much about this disc doesn't sound very Tyrannyesque: It's performed by the U. of

leather jackets will convince you that you're being slowly smothered in bubble wrap. **B**

**MARTIN BRESNICK** *Opere della Musica Povera* (CRI) Bresnick's music is tough, thorny, clear, elegant, thoughtful, and difficult to pin down. So it's an overdue luxury to have such a sumptuous two-disc set devoted to 12 different works of his for different ensembles, though the pieces are unified and linked by cross-referenced pitch relationships. His gestures can be murky at the same time that his pitch logic, often couched Brahmslike in hovering thirds and sixths, can be luminously transparent. Some timbres suit him better than others: The Copland piano sonorities of *The Dream of the Lost Traveller* (played by Lisa Moore) and the massed winds of "Follow Your Leader" are strikingly unusual, the orchestra pieces more modernistically conventional. In short, this is music not to sum up in a few words, but to sink your teeth into and reflect upon at length. **A MINUS**

**MICHAEL BYRON**

*Music of Nights Without Moon or Pearl* (Cold Blue) A blast out of the past in more ways than one. Byron was a West Coast minimalist fixture in the '70s, but dropped out of the music scene for many years, and here's his long-awaited re-debut. The pieces are half-ambient, half-minimalist process pieces lovely in their cloudy string textures and abrupt piano riffs, but changing cumulatively without going anywhere. The third cut, "Entrances," is less soothing, a dense continuum of growly piano interlockings, but it all breathes the air of pre-Silicon Valley California. **B**

**NIC COLLINS** *Sound Without Picture*

(Periplum) Of all the post-Lucier, tech-subversive conceptualists, only Collins has a knack for making electronics poignant. The seven well-contrasted works here are all stories about sensory experience or the lack of it—a man who lost and regained his sight by separate strokes of lightning, a blind woman describing knowing her baby by touch. As Collins narrates, his voice triggers electronics, and it's an odd touch that, although there are hardly any pleasant or pretty sounds on the disc, the static, buzzes, and CD skip-repeats nevertheless create a bittersweet atmosphere of sadness. Fuzzy noises have never seemed so moving. **A MINUS**

**D'DIVAZ** *D'Divaz*

(Bruka) You'll think you're hearing Baltic folksinging until the twangy electronics burst in. The divas of D'Divaz—Milica Paranosic, Danijela Popovic, and

Joseph Kubera are the well-mic'd pianists, Petr Kotik the conductor of the S.E.M. Orchestra, moving heaven and earth to make De Alvear look very much like Europe's best young composer. **A**

**PETER GARLAND** *The Days Run Away*

(Tzadik) Enjoying the underfunded expatriate's life down in Mexico, Garland has written a ton o' piano music, and the superb Aki Takahashi, who plays seven pieces here, is devoted to it. It's such simple stuff: a bass motive, a chord, the motive again, the chord again, a different chord . . . but it's so exquisitely right, as ecstatic as Messiaen without all the baggage about birdsongs and the baby Jesus. The most translucent piece is the recent one, *Bright Angel-Hermetic Bird*; most of the others, including two gently repetitive 20-minute works, date from the early '70s, and it's amazing how little his style has changed. Garland is our own desert mystic saint, and an agnostic to boot. **A**

**JEAN HASSE** *Kinkh*

(Visible Music) Remember Hans Otte's *Book of Sounds*? If you liked that, you might also like Hasse's slightly jazzier, less dryly conceptual *Pocket Pieces* for piano. She's fortyish, American, living in England, and her postminimalism is dreamy but not without backbone; she ups the tension before you can settle into anything. There's a little improv, a lovely piece for reverbed and echoed flutes, and a gentle, Earle Brown-inspired percussion piece, but most of the disc is small, thoughtful piano pieces of often Satie-esque melancholy. **B**

**PAUL LANSKY** *Ride*

(Bridge) Tied only with Robert Ashley, computer-maven Lansky continues to put out the best records in the new-music business. If *Ride* doesn't quite duplicate the sonic luxury of his last disc, *Conversation Pieces* (Bridge), it's only because he's revisiting some old concepts with better software. *Idle Chatter Junior* is here, fourth in a series of boppy, voice-triggered, postminimalist pieces, plus the title track, which transforms traffic sounds on a New Jersey highway into a whooshing soundtrack of portentous harmonies. There's even an homage to his alma mater, the High School of Music and Art, in which he morphs his own singing of the school song. Lansky in a light mood has more tricks up his sleeve than most composers do in a frenzy of ambition. **A**

**DAVID MAHLER** *Hearing Voices*

(Tzadik) In sharp contrast to his Austrian namesake, Mahler's got the best sense of humor in new music. Once the genius of funny things to do with tape

**BANG ON A CAN**

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(Cantaloupe) You wouldn't have expected that totalist Bang-on-a-Canners Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon would blend so well with minimalist twang-on-a-stringers Arnold Dreyblatt and Glenn Branca, but somehow all these composers, plus Phil Kline, have converged on a momentary common idiom. It's a new phase in postminimalism: busy music sans repetition, melody, or identifiable harmony, but with easily characterizable textures, an attempt to make abstraction pleasant. Wolfe's "Believing" is her first credible rock-influenced piece. The stunner, though, is Branca's "Movement Within," a densely sliding texture of microtonal strings that'll make you seasick. Kline's "Exquisite Corpses" ends the disc with a lighter jam session feel, and the whole thing's a brilliantly vivid photograph of music right this second. **A**

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**'BLUE' GENE TYRANNY** *Go, Blue*

(O.O.) Much about this disc doesn't sound very Tyrannyesque: It's performed by the U. of Michigan's Digital Music Ensemble, who bring their own take. So while we do get some of "Blue" 's transcendent pianism, virtuosic and reticent at once, we also get Terry Rileyish versions of his *Decertified Highway of Dreams*, bopping along with high energy and poppy tunes over an endless three-note ostinato. Well, OK; we can afford to expand Tyranny's world into a direction not so infinitely subtle and acknowledge connections to minimalism we had forgotten were there. Maybe not deep "Blue," but it's infectiously joyous. **B PLUS**

**JACK VEES** *The Restaurant Behind the Pier*

(ReR) Vees is an electric bassist, and so is my son, Bernard. The Hendrix and Beatles covers on this disc, Bern says, "make you think, well, so he figured out how to play Hendrix on solo bass. But the original pieces are really interesting." I agree. It is remarkable how many diverse sounds and textures Vees can dredge up: gamelan-like textures of harmonics, harsh electronic buzzes, twangy sitar melodies. And each piece has a strong, clear concept, making this a varied and listenable disc for a humble solo instrument. **B**

**ADDRESSES:** Bridge Records, Inc., 200 Clinton Avenue, New Rochelle, NY 10801; Bruka Production, 281 West 19th Street, #5A, New York, NY 10026; Cantaloupe, 222 East 5th Street, #12, New York, NY 10003; Cold Blue Music, P.O. Box 2938, Venice, CA 90294-2938; Periplum, P.O. Box 9369, Fort Worth, TX 76147; ReR Megacorp, distributed by Cuneiform, P.O. Box 8427, Silver Spring, MD 20907; Turnstyle Media, 8405 North Rancho Catalina Avenue, suite 3, Tucson, AZ 85704; Tzadik, 61 East 8th Street, pmb 126, New York, NY 10003; Visible Music, www.visible-music.com; World Edition, Werderstrasse 21, D-50672 Köln, Germany, www.world-edition.com. **V**