

CONSUMER GUIDE Kyle Gann

My Consumer's Guide is split up this summer, and will be continued with a half-page next week. Given the glut of recent new-music CDs, I'm ignoring the barrel's bottom, and reviewing only A and B efforts. The paucity of women composers this year is a shame, but don't blame me.

Luc Ferrari: *Matin et Soir* (Adda)

Ferrari once aimed to out-Cage Cage with anti-art nonchalance, but circa 1971 he seemed to drop off the planet. This and the next disc reveal that his style's flowed with the times, but he still thumbs his nose. *Matin* includes his first recorded full-orchestra work, *Histoire du plaisir et de la désolation*, which disappoints its title; full of serialism's superb color effects, its 35 minutes are impersonal and uncharacteristic, despite some hot drumming and Berio-style collage moments. More Ferrari-esque is *A la recherche du rythme perdu*: jazz spread sotto voce over light electric percussion, mysterious and sexy despite its European technique. **B**

Luc Ferrari: *Cellule 75, Collection 85* (Adda)

"I was searching the intimate," Ferrari says in *Matin's* notes, but it applies better here. The once erotic postserialist is now an ironic postminimalist, the Truffaut of music, the Stockhausen of sex. The transforming patterns of *Cellule 75* (introducing impressive pianist Paul Dubuisson) move gradually but with lunatic eclecticism, from ominous cocktail music to 12-tone gestures over an Arabic beat to a deadpan fanfare. *Collection 85* squeezes 23

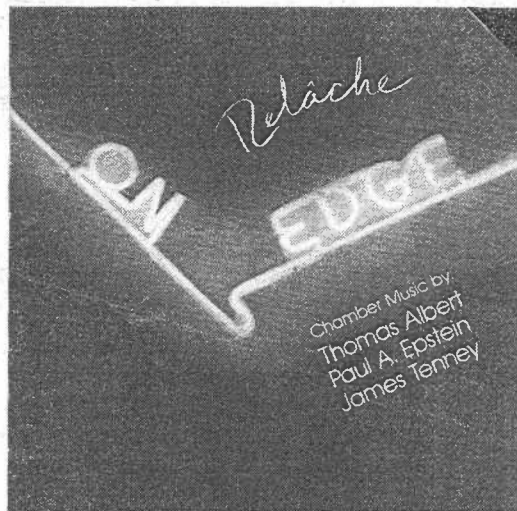
filmic piano-and-tape vignettes into 24 minutes: tongue-in-cheek tributes ("Les Brahms ou la vie"), a whispered "pourquoi?" from a sultry brunette, environmental noise, self-interrupting waltzes, a slapstick joke on *Also sprach Zarathustra*, permeated with a re-appearing theme and a *sec*, Gallic humor. Every gesture is a sign. The quotation marks, subtitles, and footnotes are almost audible. **A**

Guy Klucevsek: *Flying Vegetables of the Apocalypse* (XI)

The year's most wonderful title, but though this disc on Phill Niblock's label may be a "greatest hits," it's not quite "best of." This is music for dance (art, not social); Klucevsek's in his post-polka vein, and his mordant wit isn't given free rein. Still, he can't play a rhythm simpler than two-against-three, he skewers the beat even in an oompah piece like "Fez Up," and his criminal infractions on "The Blue Danube" deserve to replace the original. Klucevsek's written longer, more contrapuntal, more original works than these, but even his blandest stuff is heartfelt and intensely musical. **B PLUS**

Paul Lansky: *Smalltalk* (New Albion)

Lansky is one of the hip presences that is allegedly transforming the Princeton Mus. Dept. into a more ear-friendly place. His computer-sampler works have the grit of blues, the naturalness of conversation, the abstractness of Varésian timbre exploration. *Smalltalk* and *Late August* are ambient; their filter-sweeping plucked sounds shaped by no-

**PICK HIT: Relâche**

longer-audible human speech tickle the ear gently. *Not So Heavy Metal* is the disc's powerhouse, a dark, wrenching, noise-distorting poem melted from Stephen Mackey's searing rock guitar licks. And *Guy's Harp* extrudes Guy DeRosa's twanging harmonica into a thin blue line of delicious contours. It's a candidate for crossover. **A**

Newband: *Microtonal Works by Partch, Cage, LaBarbara, Drummond* (Mode)

He's listed last, but 32 minutes out of 54 here are by Newband's director, Dean Drummond, luckily one of the most interesting younger microtonalists. Drummond's works use his zoomoophone, an instrument of 129 aluminum tubes tuned to a 31-note just-tuned scale. The lithe melodies of *Then or Never* show the tuning to audible advantage,

and the odd flute, percussion, and synthesizer doublings in *Incredible Time (to live and die)* clearly outline microtonal structure. All Drummond's music lacks is a readily identifiable voice. Harry Partch's *Two Studies on Ancient Greek Scales* is a gorgeous tidbit showing his debt to antiquity, and Joan LaBarbara's *Silent Scroll*, with its glissandoing

chords, is starkly effective. **B**

Phill Niblock: *Four Full Flutes* (XI)

Like Feldman's, Niblock's tone assemblages beg for CD, and he's finally created his own new label for them. Nothing but flutes here, droning tone clusters so austere that not even a mood is suggested. For example, *P K* (featuring flutist Petr Kotik overdubbed) starts from several shades of E-flat, and over 20 minutes adds A, then G. Seems simple, sounds static, and you may miss the films that form the visual factor of Niblock's work; but the textures are rich and well recorded, and it's usually ambiguous whether what you think you perceive is really there. Scores—number charts—are included in the notes, if you can figure 'em. **B PLUS**

Relâche: *On Edge* (Mode) The Relâche Ensemble's first full CD

is like them: smooth, hip, understated. Paul Epstein's *Chamber Music* is already a postminimalist classic. His flowing melopatterns hide their arithmetic, and the letter-texts Barbara Noska chirps flit between non sequiturs with a Gertrude Stein-ish grin. Thomas Albert's mid-'70s *A Maze (With Grace)* and *Devil's Rain* mark the edge where minimalism seeped into its postgenre, but they transcend either style, the latter with a bopping tune in 13/16 rhythm that you can't stop humming. The disc anticlimaxes reverently with *Critical Band* by conceptualist James Tenney, which blossoms from single tone to harmonic series in exquisite slow motion. That four pieces this good didn't hit disc earlier shows an important movement overdue for recognition. **A**

Erling Wold: *I Weep (Spooky Pooch)*

Here's a delightful insouciance, from the opening keyboard number's off-key tuning to the titles (*I feel a little worse today than yesterday*) to the inclusion of a tiny, eight-minute, three-movement piano concerto by Wold's teacher, Vsyayukh Minyetchik (1916-'83; you almost suspect she's an alter ego). Wold, the Erik Satie of Berkeley surrealist/minimalist electro-artrock, employs a mid-'70s Eno format—brief, electronic character pieces—except he develops his aphorisms. The naïveté of his synthesized timbres contrasts nicely with his sophisticated tunings and nicely honed counterpoint. A weird pleasure. **A MINUS** ■

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A theme emerges from the summer's discs: free melody spun off of repeated patterns, a hesitant truce between postminimalism, improvisation, even serialism, a recognition that no aesthetic can survive one-dimensionally.

Louis Andriessen: *De Staat* (Nonesuch) It's a great idea, setting the musicopolitical lines from Plato's *Republic*. The style is Stravinskian Eurominimalism with horn parts straight from *Le Sacre* (listen at 10:49), though the text enters on a very John Adams-ish seventh chord, and digs into its harmonies with Steve Reich-ish insistence. As usual, Andriessen's trademark is quick alternation between instrumental groups; his patterns and brass fanfares are damnably difficult, and Reinbert de Leeuw's Schoenberg Ensemble rips through them with computer-sequenced accuracy. The piece'll bring other composers to mind, but its Dutch minimalism—stern and abstract, never pretty—has an edge the grouchy old Greek might have approved of. **B**

Paul Drescher and Ned Rothenberg: *Opposites Attract* (New World) As their title acknowledges, Drescher's loopy minimalism and Rothenberg's spacious wind improv complement each other, and their irrepressible freedom/structure friction makes this the best disc I've heard by either of them. They worked over four years on *Opposites*'s fusion, with remarkably smooth results considering the diverse elements involved: bouncy vocal repeti-

tions, soaring guitar riffs, Riley-ish delays, rock beats, Eastern-sounding flute calls. Over 54 minutes, the solo-over-a-loop format begins to pale, but unlike so many working in this ethno-rock vein, they rarely sit on their ostinatos; the disc invigorates within a mellow ambience. **B PLUS**

Loretta Goldberg: *Soundbridge* (Opus One) Goldberg's fearless pianism respects no boundaries, outgrowing the piano toward MIDI synthesizers and quarter-tones. There are astounding surprises on her disc of women composers, chief among them an aggressively eclectic sonata subtitled "The Peyote" by under-celebrated sexagenarian Tui St. George Tucker. Tucker's crazy quarter-tone fantasy on "My Melancholy Baby" is also here, as well as Annea Lockwood's *Red Mesa*, as dry, quiet, and wild as the desert it depicts, and among her best works. Sorrel Hays's *A Calendar Bracelet* commemorates various women's birthdays with inventive MIDI hookups, pitch bendings, and retunings. Obscure repertoire, but every piece is a gem. **A**

Ingram Marshall: *Alcatraz* (New Albion) After 15 minutes, the Alcatraz gate swings shut, and moments later, cell doors slam like thunderclaps. Marshall and his photographer/collaborator Jim Bengston set out to capture the legendary prison in tone and film, and their nocturnal collage conveys some chilling moments. What comes across, though, isn't the place's legendary cruelty, but

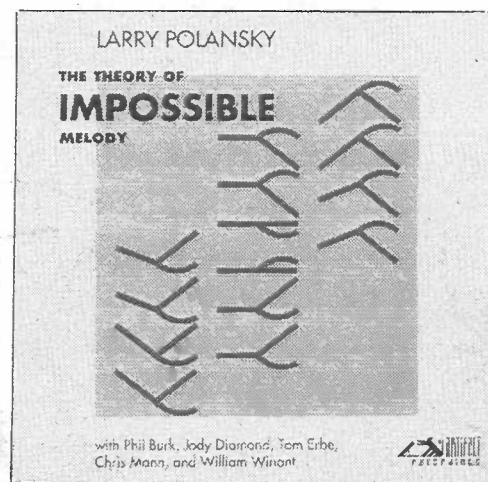
warm, romantic acoustics and the dark night of the soul that sensitive types might experience wandering the barren halls. Marshall, the foggy postminimalist, recreates a tragic tonality in his piano arpeggios, but he blurs all edges. The patterns never stay put, and slip endlessly through your mind's fingers. **A**

Larry Polansky: *The Theory of Impossible Melody* (Artifact) This first CD is enough to prove Polansky one of our major post-'70s experimentalists. *B'rey'sheet* (*In the beginning...*), with Jody Diamond chanting over an electronic bleep forest, sounds generically chaotic at first, but keep listening. Polansky's logic, like James Tenney's, gels elegantly by piece's end. The computer sometimes works out counterpoint, and *filtering* is the prevailing paradigm; as information gets added and taken away, beastly textures dissolve into lucidity. The four tempo canons are conceptual yet pretty, especially the last's surreal alternation of Anthony Braxton's rippling sax and sampled frog croaks. Aside from *Psaltery*, a glorious halo of psaltery harmonics, this is gritty stuff, but it satisfies because Polansky sticks with his material until his point's made. He rejects the '80s, and with them the short attention span. **A**

ROVA Saxophone Quartet: *This Time We Are Both* (New Albion) They've lost some edge as they've gotten slicker, but the ROVA sax quartet still boasts a tuneful/abstract dialectic that no other

improv group can match. In this disc of their last Soviet tour, they show how to riff off a theme, but I like them best when they veer away from jazz without telling you where they're going. In *Torque*, their splintered lines weave together like arcs in a Pollock drip painting. In *The Freedom of Information*, they free themselves from sax idiosyncrasies, interlocking in sustained tones that might be violins or clarinets. And in *What Was Lost Regained*, they evolve a thick, complex texture from within for minute after minute after minute without losing the thread. **B PLUS**

La Monte Young: *The Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer* (Gramavision) If all you hear in this seminal experimentalist's second CD is eight trumpets playing the pitches F, B flat, B, and C for 77 minutes, you're not tuned in. For one thing, the pure intervals diffract into a psychedelic interplay of upper harmonics if you can ignore the most obvious notes and aim your ears upward. For another, it's a game piece; intricate rules steer the (extremely slow) melodies away from the dissonant 17/12 interval (F to B) to create a dramatic, huge-scale form, as well



PICK HIT: Larry Polansky

as allowing for canons and choir alternations between trumpets. Calm your brain, exercise your ears. **A MINUS**

Jay Zelenka and Greg Mills: *Stranded in Paradise* (Leo) It's sort of just more hectic-virtuosity improv, and yet... The sensibility-clash here seems to be '50s European serialism versus Indian ragas, and, except in the frantically saxed *Outside the Gates*, Mills and Zelenka avoid the ethnic and jazz clichés. *Nocturne* sounds like Boulez's *Flute Sonatina* fast forwarded, and *Devotion* (my fave) is a nonsynchronous raga collage for piano and mild percussion, gentle but fervent. The few weird sounds they pick up along the way are turned into expression, not just tossed in for effect. *Sonaire: Forbidden Planet* is the nicest thing to happen to an irritated gong since Stockhausen's *Mikrophonie*. **B** ■

Sam Goody