

CONSUMER GUIDE

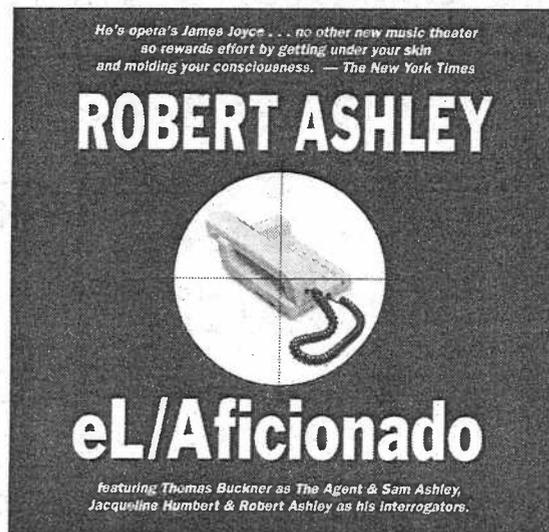
Enough already! I just had my office floor rebuilt because it was buckling under the weight of my CD collection, partly due to the recent deluge of new music discs. To make matters worse, I'm late with my spring Guide, and my hardcore "to listen to" stack had grown taller than I am—common enough for pop critics, unprecedented for me. I couldn't even finish skimming the cream. I'll try to get back on schedule, so if I missed your disc this time, please don't call to check whether I received it.

Act of Finding: Act of Finding

(OO) Take baritone Thomas Buckner's knack for smooth text-improvisation, add bass ostinatos by Ratz B. Harris, color them with atmospheric effects from Bruce Arnold's guitar and Tom Hamilton's antique analog synthesizers, and you've got a fun, varied improv CD. Some pieces ramble too long and some premises seem old-fashioned in their conceptual vagueness (in one piece, whenever a player finds himself in a solo or accompanying role, he's supposed to switch to the other). Text focuses the best pieces, however, such as Hamilton's *Another Family Resemblance* and Harris's *To Dick Dickson*, with its funny, randomly excerpted instructions for refusing to pay income tax. **B**

John Luther Adams: Earth and the Great Weather (New World)

Adams's "opera" (I use quotes because it has the intimacy of a bedroom tryst) meditatively celebrates nature and natural materials, and while that's nothing new, he's raised the shtick to a '90's level of sophistication. The only Alaskan composer known in the lower 48, he effects his critique of modern culture via a recitation of Eskimo place names: "Trees almost cover the top," "Place where caribou can easily be caught," reminding us that there are more earth-friendly ways than usual



Pick hit: Robert Ashley

gil Moorefield pounding those drums, what sends me in Branca's supposedly final symphonies for massed electric guitars is the monumental plasticity of the larger-than-life contrapuntal lines gliding through space with the insouciance of icebergs. No. 8 features a thoroughly recontextualized Bartókian chromaticism. No. 10 is diatonic and harmonically upbeat, but the screaming major sevenths in its second movement are even more diabolical in their shimmering purity than his early noise clusters. Hearing this on disc is totally different from live performance; one is like looking down on Notre Dame as from a helicopter, the other is like being a mouse inside Notre Dame, trying to comprehend its vastness. **A**

Nick Didkovsky, Steve MacLean, C. W. Vrtacek: Flies in the Face of Logic (Pogus)

The year's best title. Three guys who don't play piano set out to make piano pieces, and the disc opens with the dulcet tone of a piano dropped from a hundred-foot crane. MacLean hit, scratched, and

en's apocalyptic hypermodernism so transcends what the 20th century had in mind that it opens up a whole new realm. **A**

Forrest Fang: Folklore (Cuneiform)

Most Asian-American composers seem to study 12-tone music at Columbia so they can write glissando-serialism, but Fang has come up with a compelling Asian new-music sensibility all his own. He's a multiculturalist's dream: the Chinese folk-song quotations enveloped by electronic continua; the jazz tinge to the Chinese zither and Thai mouth organ solos; the rock momentum; the Mideastern, African, and Central American percussion. And yet unlike all those opportunists making hay off the left's ideology-of-the-month, Fang blends his heterogeneous sources into rich, overpowering sonorities, with rhythmic ostinatos that won't let you sit still. Even the rock beat of *The Bridge of Chiuan-Chou*, pounded on Moroccan tambourine and Chinese *gan kuo* drum, has more the tranquil, objective feel of ritual than of frenetic individuality, and there's too much rigor, austerity, and rumbling

FREDERIC
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Pick hit: Frederic Rzewski

The early works tinkle with note cascades that practically melt before they reach your ear, the later music is harmonically sturdy in his recent style, and the disc's loveliness is more consistent than his *Crack in the Bell* album. The stuff can be syrupy sweet, but it's also eccentric, quirky, harmonically counterintuitive, a combination weird enough to make me think something deeply artistic is happening. **A**

Ben Neill: Torchtower (New Tone)

You haven't boogied, new-musically speaking, until you've heard Neill's *Money Talk*, which hilariously takes an auctioneer's spiel as the rattling drone for its virtuoso repeated-note trumpet textures. The five works here predate Neill's recent ambient period, and while several feature a backbeat, they ride the experimental side. Along with Neill's own Munt-trumpet computer electronics, he's got Don Yallech on drums, Nic Collins on digital circuitry, and others in a larger-than-life band. The energy crescendos through German trumpet calls, rock ostinatos, and

want this version played and spoken by Rzewski or Anthony de Mare's disc on OO. I find Rzewski weightier, more dramatic, qualities Wilde's self-searching surely deserves, while others might prefer de Mare's quicker, more conversational, but no less angry reading. Rzewski's 1991 Sonata, also present on both discs, is a kaleidoscopic, Ivesian quote-fest: "Ring Around the Rosy," "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," a melancholy slow movement based on "Taps," and the finale a set of "L'homme armé" variations. Rzewski is our Beethoven as pianist-composer of brooding, complex, yet approachable works, and the German master would have given his *recht Hand* to have written *De Profundis*.

A PLUS

Sound Pressure: Pressure Points (Soundprints)

Despite widespread recognition that he's one of our most original musical thinkers, none of James Tenney's major works has made it to disc. On that count alone, this Toronto ensemble's rendition of *Tableaux Vivants* is a seminal premiere, Tenney's longest, most beautiful, and most recent (1990) work on record. Gorgeously flowing yet devoid of foreground, vaguely minimalist but harmonically intricate, the piece offers a particularly clear example of his complex structural conceptualization beneath a lucid surface. The surrounding ensemble works by younger Canadians reveal a new Northern interest in postminimalism. David Mott's *Oh! Mysterious Magnum*, *Such Magenta Vintage*, an essay in totalist orchestration, weaves a writhing chord-melody for six players, while Bruno Degazio's dark but jazzily modal *Digital Rituals* is one of the few non-cerebral works based on fractal geometry.

A MINUS

David Tudor: Neural Synthesis

room (tryst) meditatively celebrates nature and natural materials, and while that's nothing new, he's raised the shtick to a '90's level of sophistication. The only Alaskan composer known in the lower 48, he effects his critique of modern culture via a recitation of Eskimo place names: "Trees almost cover the top," "Place where caribou can easily be caught," reminding us that there are more earth-friendly ways than ours to conceptualize time and space. Underneath, prickly tremolos and gliding overtones merge with thunder, water, and birds, and the highlights are intricate drum trios whose time-shifting rhythmic counterpoint speaks more eloquently than the verbal passages. **A MINUS**

Robert Ashley: eL/Aficionado (Lovely Music) Because of its non-narrative abstractness, I found this the least gripping opera of Ashley's tetralogy—*Now Eleanor's Idea* on stage, but it's seductive on disc, partly thanks to Tom Hamilton's elegant sound design, which is making Ashley's recordings the envy of Downtown. The deceptively calm air of menace that's been key in Ashley's output since *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon* climaxes in this extended adagio waltz about espionage in which the Agent, Thomas Buckner—the perfect baritone in the perfect role—is tasked to describe people he sees in personals-ad language. Enveloped in warm synthesized tones, Buckner's earnest vulnerability contrasts with the whispered, sinister omniscience of his questioners (Ashley, Sam Ashley, and Jacqueline Humbert). The multi-linear text needs many listenings, but Ashley aficionados will pick up sly references to his other operas right off. **A**

Glenn Branca: Symphonies Nos. 8 & 10 (Atavistic) If you have long, unkempt hair, swing it toward the ground while playing along on air guitar. Far beyond Vir-

comprehend its vastness. **A**

Nick Didkovsky, Steve MacLean, C. W. Vrtacek: Flies in the Face of Logic (Pogus) The year's best title. Three guys who don't play piano set out to make piano pieces, and the disc opens with the dulcet tone of a piano dropped from a hundred-foot crane. MacLean hit, scratched, and plucked an upright, sampled the results, and computer-sequenced a delightfully brash, Antheil-esque romp of perky tunes and pseudo-Balinese textures. Vrtacek "prepared" an electric piano by screwing it up via computer, overdubbing, and so on. His 13 wide-ranging movements with titles like "Why Buildings Fall Down" are joyously manic, dense with notes and clock-like ostinatos but always viscerally textural. *The Twittering Machine* by Downtowner Didkovsky is the only abstract work, filling in abrupt landscapes with statistical distributions, like improvised Xenakis. **A**

Paul Dolden: L'ivresse de la vitesse (Empreintes Digitales) Dolden, a Canadian sampling fanatic, makes "crash music" on tape, overlaying hundreds of simultaneous overdubbed tracks for an astonishing and utterly original complexity of timbre. This two-disc set of nine works, split between pure tape and pieces for soloist and tape, ranges chronologically back to *Veils* of 1984-85, whose walls of sound with up to 280 tracks of the same instrument seethe slowly and loudly as though the gates of hell are opening. The harrowing title work (the well-named "Intoxication by Speed") features multiple virtual choruses making strange vocal sounds and several orchestras devolving into military rhythms, rock, and tape loops, while *Beyond the Walls of Jericho* boasts forests of plucked instruments, impossibly extended glissandos, and armies of percussion. As weary as I am of modernism, Dold-

en's repeated-note trumpet textures. The five works here predate Neill's recent ambient period, and while several feature a backbeat, they ride the experimental side. Along with Neill's own Mutantrumpet computer electronics, he's got Don Yallech on drums, Nic Collins on digital circuitry, and others in a larger-than-life band. The energy crescendos through German trumpet calls, rock ostinatos, and bitonality to *Abblasen House*, the penultimate work, and though it often sounds improvised, if you listen carefully the tempo structures are amazingly intricate, like Conlon Nancarrow live at the Knitting Factory. These totalists have every base covered. **A**

Leroy Jenkins: Themes & Improvisations on the Blues (CRI) The balancing act composers from the AACM go through to write notated music is always tricky, sometimes veering between Bartók and Ellington measure by measure. Jenkins, a master overdue for recognition, makes it seem like a breeze. The title cut, played with infectious verve by the old, preschismatic Soldier String Quartet, has the developmental pacing of a classical quartet, and if it weren't for the title you'd never guess that it's 30 per cent improvised; the pervasive blues influence, the grounding of intervallic complexity in tonality give it a gutsy joyousness that no similarly modernist classic can boast. Jenkins solos as violinist only in *Monkey on the Dragon*, a Wolpe-esque tone poem jauntily tinged with jazz cymbals. Otherwise, it's good to hear, for once, his imagistic and energetic compositional aura defined aside from his playing style. **A**

Daniel Lentz: b. e. comings (Rhizome Sketch) Findable in America? Don't know, but I consider Lentz one of the great postminimalists born in the '40s, along with Duckworth and Giteck, and all three have been incomprehensibly undervalued. Half of this disc is process pieces from the '70s (their processes completely inconspicuous), brought together as one work with a major new section added, all based on brief texts from e. e. cummings and oth-

er. The five works here predate Neill's recent ambient period, and while several feature a backbeat, they ride the experimental side. Along with Neill's own Mutantrumpet computer electronics, he's got Don Yallech on drums, Nic Collins on digital circuitry, and others in a larger-than-life band. The energy crescendos through German trumpet calls, rock ostinatos, and bitonality to *Abblasen House*, the penultimate work, and though it often sounds improvised, if you listen carefully the tempo structures are amazingly intricate, like Conlon Nancarrow live at the Knitting Factory. These totalists have every base covered. **A**

Larry Polansky: Simple Harmonic Motion (Artifact) Polansky has his conceptual and jazzy sides, and while this extremely quiet, uneventful disc mostly documents the conceptual end, it's lovely and varied nonetheless. *Movement for Lou Harrison*, for overdubbed basses, and a brief string quartet are both harmonic studies in sustained just intonation, while *Horn* for horn and computer draws slow melodic transformations from a harmonic series. The closest the disc comes to conventional continuity is *Another You* for justly tuned harp played by Alyssa Hess Reit, a series of 17 variations on a jazz tune that rarely materializes. The piece shies away from traditional virtuosity or harp idioms, but extends its pure tuning with difficult string harmonics. The stuff is both sensuous and brainy, but introverted, offering beauties of conceptual virtuosity if you're willing to listen closely. **B PLUS**

Frederic Rzewski: De Profundis (Hat Art) Rzewski's magnificent piano "oratorio" interwoven with Oscar Wilde's letter from prison had people holding back tears at this year's Bang on a Can festival. It's a toss-up whether you

feel more interest in postminimalism. David Mott's *Oh! Mysterious Magnum, Such Magenta Vintage*, an essay in totalist orchestration, weaves a writhing chord-melody for six players, while Bruno Degazio's dark but jazzily modal *Digital Rituals* is one of the few non-cerebral works based on fractal geometry. **A MINUS**

David Tudor: Neural Synthesis Nos. 6-9 (Lovely Music) Tudor is a seminal historical figure, first as an avant-garde pianist without peer, then as a pioneer inspiring a generation of live-electronics composers, and this two-disc set provides some way overdue documentation. That said, the charm of his music, to my ears, is hearing him in person, watching him elicit a stream of chirrupy, blurpy noise transformations from a table full of circuitry without getting a single visual clue as to how he's doing it. This set of four half-hour pieces issues from a neural-network synthesizer developed for Tudor by Forrest Warthman, based on a chip that "emulates neuron cells in our brains and can process many analog signals in parallel." The reiterative whistles and peeps that result, evocative of jungle fauna, seem primitive but honest in these digital days, translating Cage's chance methods into meditative gradual processes. **A MINUS**

Addresses: Artifact, 1374 Francisco Street, Berkeley, CA 94702. Atavistic, P.O. Box 578266, Chicago, IL 60657. Cuneiform Records, P.O. Box 8427, Silver Spring, MD 20907-8427. Empreintes Digitales, 4487, rue Adam, Montréal, Québec, Canada H1V 1T9. New Tone, c/o Robi Drolí, Strada Roncaglia, 16, 15040 San Germano (A1), Italy. OO Discs, 261 Groovers Avenue, Black Rock, CT 06605-3452. Pogus Productions, P.O. Box 150022, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0022. Soundprints, #7370 Woodbine Avenue, Markham, Ontario L3R 1A5. ■