

KYLE GANN

Consumer Guide

It seems that my generation has gotten tired of being brushed off and is determined to grab some attention by making Grand Statements; that's the impression given by philosophically portentous, disc-length works by Gordon, Beckley, Dun, Schanzer, even Jordanova. You've got to hand it to CRI, once headed for academic vanity-label status; I feared Downtown tokenism in their "Emergency Music" series, but they've reinvented themselves as the label to watch.

CONNIE BECKLEY: *The Aquarium* (CRI) Apparently better known for visual art, Beckley appeared at the historic New Music New York fest in 1979, then as far as I can tell spent 18 years on Neptune before suddenly reemerging with *The Aquarium* at Lincoln Center this summer. Lacking fuller context for her work, I hear the text-delivery style as Robert Ashley-ish with its sudden electronic enhancements and simultaneously spoken and sung phrases, while the clear, repetitive synth accompaniments recall Laurie Anderson. Sweetly drawn images (an old lady as Moses stopping construction on Broadway, a seduction fantasy in a restaurant) conjure up an everyday Manhattan (check out the piece's Web page at <http://www.hardpress.com>). Seems like another minimalist opera 20 years late, but one so charmingly unpretentious you can't help welcoming it. **B PLUS**

THEO BLECKMANN AND BEN MONDER: *No Boat* (Songlines) Compare this to a Cathy

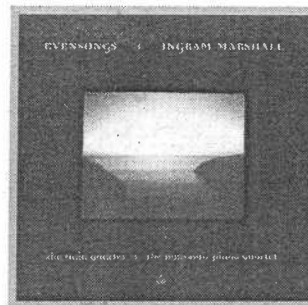
Me, I find Mahler's Sixth barely gloomy enough, and I soak up self-indulgence from Bryars's muted arpeggios and bitter chord progressions: C&W for postminimalists. Even so, I can't say I find his new, searingly neoromantic Cello Concerto for Julian Lloyd Webber as inwardly vibrant as his *Four Element* on ECM that I raved about a few years ago, nor do the pieces on this disc (also *One Last Bar*, *Then Joe Can Sing* for the Nexus percussion ensemble, and *By the Vaar* for the ensemble-accompanied, inimitable pizzicato of great jazz bassist Charlie Haden) seem as tightly written. Luscious in small doses, but by disc's end you're thinking music cannot live by chromatically interlocked minor triads alone. **B**

TAN DUN: *Symphony 1997 (Heaven Earth Mankind)* (Sony) Tan Dun was commissioned to write a mammoth opus to commemorate Hong Kong's transfer to China, and man, what a wild half-elephant, half-hyena beast it turned out to be. It opens with Dun's

denly can't remember what you're listening to. **B MINUS**

MICHAEL GORDON: *Trance* (Argo) Gordon has fashioned his gear-shifting rhythmic speed bumps into a stark, brooding, 51-minute monument, an attempt to give totalism its *Drumming*. The huge Dutch Icebreaker ensemble pounds away melodic motives with minimalistic relentlessness (even the title seems to resurrect early Reich and Glass), but in rich fields of counterpoint, and at the half-hour mark the crescendo reaches orgasm in a drone filled with chaotically blended samples of Sufi, Moroccan, and Buddhist chanting—sort of the archetypal fusion of sex and religion. There's an old strategy that if you pile up enough replicants of your central idea, the critical mass may break into transcendent territory. My jury's still out on whether that works here, but I'm giving it Pick Hit for chutzpah. "Bonus remix tracks" attempt to repackage parts of the work as dance fare; if club monkeys fall for that, *In C* with a disco beat is next. **A**

LOU HARRISON: *Rapunzel and Other Works* (New Albion) Conductor Nicole Paiement and the Ensemble Parallele have drawn together works from the odd corners of Harrison's output, but few composers can bring out their miscellaneous tidbits with such justified pride. The centerpiece, a 1952 opera



Pick Hit: Ingram Marshall

overtones of C and then with movements played in the keys of D and E for some mind-bendingly out-of-kilter harmonies. The Sonata (1964) is grittier material, twelve-tone-based in a tuning that contains virtually no consonant octaves. Pianist Philip Bush, playing with power and emotion, also includes an early equal-tempered work, *Saint Joan*: intended for ballet, and neoclassically setting the saint's martyrdom as a passacaglia. It's a must-have disc not only for its refreshing tuning departures, but for the pure Johnston sensibility heard in the Suite's "Blues" movement: bittersweet, Southern, and heartfelt. **A**

VICTORIA JORDANOVA: *Dance to Sleep* (CRI) Yugoslavian harpist-composer Jordanova develops her music through improvisation, then writes it down and refines it. The result, on this harp-and-electronics disc, is almost ambient, with a wide and individual variety of plucked and scraped strings, unlocatable thumps and bounces,

hymn quotations—"Abide With Me," "Jesus Loves Me"—treated to canons and other devices, while the surprisingly lush piano quartet *In My Beginning Is My End* has a second movement based on "Rock of Ages." The Muir Quartet plays luminously, creating music of tremendous early-American warmth, like Ives with all the rhythmic complexity cleaned up. **A PLUS**

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: *Jefferson/Antigone-Legend* (CRI) Rzewski's *Antigone-Legend*, a 53-minute monodrama based on an epic poem by Brecht, has been out on vinyl for awhile, and I've never warmed up to its starkly Greek, through-composed idiom. CRI has paired it, though, with a riveting composition not heard since the early '70s: Rzewski's *Jefferson*, a setting of the first few sentences of the Declaration of Independence. Based on additive processes that my ear can't quite pick out, the piece's vibrant tonality reminds you of his early minimalist works *Attica* and *Coming Together*; Carol Plantamura, who has worked with Rzewski since the early MEV days, sings Jefferson's revolutionary sentiments in a stately chant over sparkling and mercurially changing piano ostinatos. One of this master's most potent political statements, it shoulda been on disc long ago. **B PLUS**

JEFFREY SCHANZER: *No More in Thrall* (CRI) Schanzer's father

more ideological than musical. **B PLUS**

STUART SAUNDERS SMITH: *Wind in the Channel* (O.O.) Maine-bred, Midwest-educated, and Maryland-based, Smith could be music's Thoreau if he were a little more plainspoken, his methods less abstract. Tonality and text bring him down to earth somewhat and get his message across, and both appear sporadically on this disc of solo and chamber pieces. Tonality makes a delicate appearance at the beginning of *Family Portraits: Brenda* (played by pianist Thomas Moore), which fades from genteel arpeggios to Stockhausenish Klavierstück textures and finally to radio snippets. A similar metamorphosis underlies the text poem *California Driving* (read by Sylvia Smith), which begins with a driving manual for foreigners and disintegrates into singing, nonsense syllables, and transposed phrases. The philosophic fun of Smith's music, which depends on similar processes acting on a wide variety of materials, increases in a wide-ranging collection like this. **B PLUS**

YASUNAO TONE: *Solo for Wounded CD* (Tzadik) Tone, a diehard Fluxus conceptualist whose musical processes get maimed by being frozen on a disc, looked for some way to subvert digital recording technology and found that by putting pinpricked Scotch

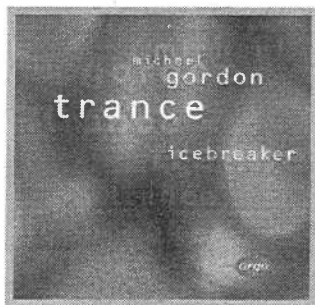
nancements and simultaneously spoken and sung phrases, while the clear, repetitive synth accompaniments recall Laurie Anderson. Sweetly drawn images (an old lady as Moses stopping construction on Broadway, a seduction fantasy in a restaurant) conjure up an everyday Manhattan (check out the piece's Web page at <http://www.hardpress.com>). Seems like another minimalist opera 20 years late, but one so charmingly unpretentious you can't help welcoming it. **B PLUS**

THEO BLECKMANN AND BEN MONDER: *No Boat* (Songlines) Compare this to a Cathy Berberian or Bethany Beardslee disc circa 1969 and you'll hear how far modernism's pet tricks have mellowed. Bleckmann is an improvising vocalist of impressive jazz chops, Monder a virtuoso with a slick array of effects units. With bassist Skuli Sverrisson and drummer Jim Black, they've put together a disc of improv pieces marked by an imperturbable cool worthy of the Bill Evans Trio—even when their ostinatos are atonal and their vocal techniques peculiar. Bleckmann matches Monder note for note in the hectically angular guitar licks of "Gemini," and his ultrasmooth yodeling doesn't call any other singer to mind. He whoops, burbles, and croons, and while the music occasionally seethes and boils over, it never hits a harsh note. **B PLUS**

GAVIN BRYARS: *Farewell to Philosophy* (Point) My wife won't let me play Bryars's music while she's home because it's too depressing.

1 MEN JOE CAN SING FOR THE NEXUS percussion ensemble, and *By the Vaar* for the ensemble accompanied, inimitable pizzicato of great jazz bassist Charlie Haden) seem as tightly written. Luscious in small doses, but by disc's end you're thinking music cannot live by chromatically interlocked minor triads alone. **B**

TAN DUN: *Symphony 1997* (Heaven Earth Mankind) (Sony) Tan Dun was commissioned to write a mammoth opus to commemorate Hong Kong's transfer to China, and man, what a wild half-elephant, half-hyena beast it turned out to be. It opens with Dun's trademark weird percussion, lurches into a hand-clappingly syncopated chorus, creeps into a gong-accompanied, *Schelomo*-like solo by Yo-Yo Ma, and finally plops down in



Pick hit: Michael Gordon

a swamp of some of the era's most shameless orchestral-film-music clichés. Perhaps some cultural viewpoint that eludes me makes this Carl-Orff-meets-George-Crumb-meets-the-Peking-Opera pastiche the perfect expression for the Hong Kong moment. I enjoy the climactic folk-song-like choruses more than Dun's usual strident fare, but every few minutes you sud-

into transcendence territory. My jury's still out on whether that works here, but I'm giving it Pick Hit forchutzpah. "Bonus remix tracks" attempt to repackage parts of the work as dance fare; if club monkeys fall for that, *In C* with a disco beat is next. **A**

LOU HARRISON: *Rapunzel and Other Works* (New Albion) Conductor-Nicole Paiement and the Ensemble Parallele have drawn together works from the odd corners of Harrison's output, but few composers can bring out their miscellaneous tidbits with such justified pride. The centerpiece, a 1952 opera based on Rapunzel, is a mostly tonal if expressionistic chamber opera whose angular recitatives (reflecting a penetrating psychological characterization rare in Harrison's tuneful aesthetic) are surrounded by intermittent passages of beauty underlaid by drones and ostinatos. *Songs in the Forest* is a set of languid Chinoiserie pieces preceded by Harrison poems read by himself (he's won awards as a poet), and two "Airs" from 1947 and '87 are similarly exotic. A libretto would have been nice, since not all the singers are notable for clear diction. **B PLUS**

BEN JOHNSTON: *Microtonal Piano* (Koch) Microtones take on a pungent, inescapable weirdness on the piano that they get on no other instrument, and along with La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*, Johnston's Suite and Sonata for microtonal piano are the medium's most revealing classics. Dating from 1977, the Suite is especially delicious, tuned to

Sam's martyrdom as a passacaglia. It's a must-have disc not only for its refreshing tuning departures, but for the pure Johnston sensibility heard in the Suite's "Blues" movement: bittersweet, Southern, and heartfelt. **A**

VICTORIA JORDANOVA: *Dance to Sleep* (CRI) Yugoslavian harpist-composer Jordanova develops her music through improvisation, then writes it down and refines it. The result, on this harp-and-electronics disc, is almost ambient, with a wide and individual variety of plucked and scraped strings, unlocatable thumps and bounces, enlivened by the occasional flourish. Dance moments come and go as the rhythm falls into mysterious grooves. The wispy sound world might call George Crumb to mind, but the aesthetic is much more Cagean, continuous, dramatic only in the atmospheric sense. **B PLUS**

INGRAM MARSHALL: *Evensongs* (New Albion) Unless you're prejudiced that spirituality has to be non-Protestant, Marshall packs more of the stuff into this disc of deeply felt chamber music than all the "holy minimalism" of Part, Gorecki, and Taverner put together. He's in an uncharacteristically clear-edged mode here, more contrapuntal than in his usual misty cross-fade techniques, but as mournfully pretty as ever. *Entrada (at the River)* is a classic, pretty minimalist statement with repetitions, poignant harmonies, and tape delay. *Evensongs* is more collage-like, a string quartet with sampled elements and

few sentences of the Declaration of Independence. Based on additive processes that my ear can't quite pick out, the piece's vibrant tonality reminds you of his early minimalist works *Attica* and *Coming Together*; Carol Plantamura, who has worked with Rzewski since the early MEV days, sings Jefferson's revolutionary sentiments in a stately chant over sparkling and mercurially changing piano ostinatos. One of this master's most potent political statements, it shoulda been on disc long ago. **B PLUS**

JEFFREY SCHANZER: *No More in Thrall* (CRI) Schanzer's father survived one of the death marches from Buchenwald concentration camp, and to commemorate heroism shown by resistance fighters there, Schanzer has written *No More in Thrall* (a phrase from "The Internationale") for percussion and the Soldier String Quartet. There's some kind of rule that communists writing music about social evils have to adopt the bitter-sweet, dissonant tonality of Hans Eisler, but given that, Schanzer has fashioned a powerful five-movement work of clear structures, compelling processes, and distantly quoted political songs. The second movement "Shlof in der Ruikeit" (Sleep in Peace) weaves its Feldman-tinged glockenspiel process into the strings with lovely subtlety, while "Which Side Are You On?" makes a nod to a 1979 KKK massacre of black sympathizers with a rock beat and more glissandi than usual. Occasionally, the music stands still for an improv moment, which seems in itself a move

begins with a driving mantra for foreigners and disintegrates into singing, nonsense syllables, and transposed phrases. The philosophic fun of Smith's music, which depends on similar processes acting on a wide variety of materials, increases in a wide-ranging collection like this. **B PLUS**

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ADDRESSES:

CRI, 73 Spring Street, Suite 506, NYC 10012;
Koch, 2 Tri-Harbor Court, Port Washington, NY, 11050;
New Albion, 584 Castro Street, #525, San Francisco, CA 94114; **O.O. Discs**, 261 Groovers Avenue, Black Rock, CT 06605-3452;
Songlines, 1003-2323 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6K 1J4;
Tzadik, 61 E. 8th Street, Suite 126, NYC 10008. **V**