

KYLE GANN

Consumer Guide

Due to space problems beyond my control, this is my first guide in 14 months. The result, culled from more than 250 discs screaming for attention, is my "Best From What I Could Get Through Before They All Started Running Together." Interestingly, meditative minimalism and musique concrète both make comebacks this year, not just as reprises but by revealing new facets. I've been doing my browsing at Other Music, a new experimental-music outlet at 4th and Lafayette with a gratifyingly encyclopedic selection of weird stuff on obscure labels. And what obscure labels these are. Sony can take a leap, we'll all put out our own music.

JOHN ADAMS: Violin Concerto (Nonesuch) First, a necessary pan. This new concerto is exactly the kind of Bergian, Viennese-angst-filled, note-busy, themeless, unoriginal, uncommitted, idea-barren tripe that Schoenberg's imitators have been churning out since the '50s. Naturally, it won the Grauwemeyer Award. How can someone once enlightened enough to compose *Granà Pianola Music* and *Nixon in China* sink to this level of desiccated pablum for pretentious pseudointellectuals? Turn in your post-minimalist card, Jack: from now on the only important John Adams is the guy from Alaska. **D**

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN, NOAH CRESHEVSKY: Auxesis (Centaur) Amirkhanian's long

symphony of its hall-shaking guitar amplification, and you find where his compositional heart really lies. Deprived of the 120-decibel 4/4 beat, some fans will lose interest. But this is Branca's favorite among his own symphonies, and while I have trouble preferring it to 8 and 10, I revel in the great clouds of mystic counterpoint: horns, strings, wordless voices moving dreamily past each other like a Charles Ives adagio lumbering in search of its lost theme. The idea was to alter a seamless musical surface from within via quasimathematical algorithms, so the tonality and texture modulate gradually and subtly, through counterpoint as pure as a Renaissance mass. *Freeform*, a jaunty bit of orchestral postminimalism, is tacked on at the end. **A**

computer improvisation, and it all sounds so smoothly precomposed. Excellent percussionist Jan Williams plays vibraphone, cowbells, bottles, and such, while Chadabe, on his computer screen, employs sampled percussion so closely matched that you can't tell who's live and who's digital. And most of the eight pieces are takeoffs on old pop songs—"My Funny Valentine," "A Sentimental Mood," "Stella by Starlight." Chadabe sails so far from his sources that you rarely recognize an actual lick, but the light jazz base gives the whole disc a clever, glint-in-the-eye charm. One of those rare new-music discs suitable for parties.

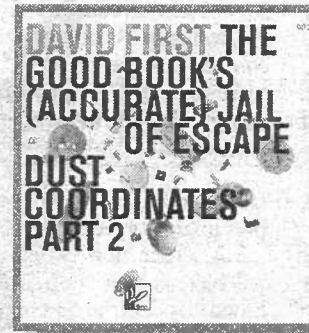
A MINUS

TONY CONRAD: Slapping Pythagoras (Table of the Elements) Conrad was the guy who taught La Monte Young the math of pure consonance. While Young's always given him credit for that, the two have quarreled bitterly over ownership of some of the '60s Dream House music, though Conrad mooted much of the argument by switching to filmmaking. Now, via this Georgia-based label, Conrad is making an aggressive comeback as a composer, releasing a quick handful of discs. *Slapping Pythagoras* is a hardcore assault on minimalist principles, the title referring to his approach to tuning, less purist than

intimacy nearly justifies Ferrari's ever present veneer of sexuality. The other concreters string noises together, but Ferrari paints situational tone-pictures so lifelike you want to creep into the loudspeaker to see what's going on. **A**

DAVID FIRST: The Good Book's (Accurate) Jail of Escape Dust Coordinates (O.O.) The only disc my dog has ever barked at (though Ferrari made his ears perk up), *Good Book* is First's largest, most characteristic, and best-recorded work yet. One moment you find his seething electro-acoustic continuum lushly harmonious, the next you notice it's abrasively discordant, and you didn't hear anything change. Some will prefer section 3, "Gallop," once the drums and wind instruments rev up their prickly rhythmic energy; I prefer section 1, "Drift," with its powerful beating caused by imperceptibly slow glissandos. There's something tragic about the postclimactic ending, as though First had purified the Roy Harris Third via La Monte Young to distill the essence of the Great American Symphony. Try maximum volume to re-create the mind-blowing acoustic disturbances of First's live performances. **A**

DANIEL LENTZ: Wolf Mass (Rhizome Sketch) Once again on another hard-to-find Japanese disc, here's a mass by Catholic-chant-trained postminimalist Lentz, at once



Pick hit: David First

the like, Mooke does for her five-string viola what Terry Riley once did for the soprano sax, building up silken spider webs of sound with melodic traces that hang in the air. She has an acerbic streak in her repertoire, but for this first disc she's strung together only her mellower pieces; if the haunting atmosphere veers slightly toward New Agey, there's never anything cheap or overstated. There are passages of old-fashioned fiddle virtuosity, amazingly lifelike rock-guitar distortion, one illusionistic duet with herself (*Terminal Baggage*), and a couple tunes that Ravel might have admired. **B PLUS**

MIKEL ROUSE: Failing Kansas (New Tone) You won't necessarily follow the story of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in Rouse's mono-opera loosely based on the murders the book relates. But Rouse's word images, underlined by arithmetically elegant counterpoint whose background rhythms grow more complex with each listening, creep in your mind and take root. (For starters,

"Val," and so on. Never before has Stone brought so many strategies to one piece, running the gamut from letting the noises speak for themselves to drawing their inherent cadences into foot-tapping rock. Perhaps his best work ever. Also check out (if you can) Stone's *Nyala*, a sensuous, new, 50-minute continuum of drums and pulsed sounds on the British em:t label. **A MINUS**

AKI TAKAHASHI: Aki Takahashi Plays Morton Feldman (Mode) At Lincoln Center's Festival '96, Takahashi convinced me that the modestly titled *Piano* may be Feldman's greatest keyboard work, even richer and more mysterious than *Triadic Memories*. It's 26 minutes of images carved from big, dissonant chords, and she plays them with such velvety evenness that they drop like snowflakes into Walden Pond. But *Palais de Mari* is a close runner-up: longer, even more meditative, tiny melody fragments repeated like pearls on a necklace. The surprise is the disc premiere of *Illusions*, a growly, 1949-50 early work that predates Feldman's pianissimo mature personality. **A**

KEVIN VOLANS: The Ramanujan Notebooks/Dancers on a Plane/Movement for String Quartet (Collins Classics) Don't know why people get excited about Pärt and Gorecki with Volans around. He's

tripe that Schoenberg's imitators have been churning out since the '50s. Naturally, it won the Grauwemeyer Award. How can someone once enlightened enough to compose *Grand Pianola Music* and *Nixon in China* sink to this level of desiccated pabulum for pretentious pseudointellectuals? Turn in your post-minimalist card, Jack: from now on the only important John Adams is the guy from Alaska. **D**

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN, NOAH CRESHEVSKY: *Auxesis* (Centaur) Amirkhanian's long and luscious natural-sound assemblages haven't gotten the attention they deserve. Usually they center nostalgically around a remembered figure—Percy Grainger, Beckett, Brahms—but *Politics as Usual*, here, is more sensuous than programmatic, its form leisurely and playful. After an

Classical Music

A SPECIAL SECTION

opening of coffee-grinder noises and a Latino priest, the music settles into richly ringing bells and gongs, buzzy with overtones and boomy with bass resonances. Creshevsky's tape collages of voice and instrument samples—*Borrowed Time*, *Private Lives*, *Coup d'état*—are strange even for him. Except for a brusque, clipped quality to the electronic sound that you have to get past, they sound like human musicians impelled into impossible rhythmic and textural feats by a tuneful evil scientist. **B PLUS**

GLENN BRANCA: *Symphony No. 9* (Point) Strip a Branca

among his own symphonies, and while I have trouble preferring it to 8 and 10, I revel in the great clouds of mystic counterpoint: horns, strings, wordless voices moving dreamily past each other like a Charles Ives adagio lumbering in search of its lost theme. The idea was to alter a seamless musical surface from within via quasimathematical algorithms, so the tonality and texture modulate gradually and subtly, through counterpoint as pure as a Renaissance mass. *Freeform*, a jaunty bit of orchestral postminimalism, is tacked on at the end. **A**

ALLISON CAMERON: *Raw Sangudo* (XI) In Allison Cameron's music, time becomes tangible. Metaphorical clocks tick; the piano hits a chord every few beats, a wood block taps slowly, and even when a hammered anvil breaks a long silence, it feels as

though its time has come to crash. One of Canada's most talented young composers, Cameron writes chamber works, five recorded here, with no themes, few gestures, rarely a rhythm aside from slow, steady beats. Fragile and suspended, underlaid by long, long chords, they would be almost metaphysically gloomy if they weren't so colorful. My favorite, *A Blank Sheet of Metal* (1987), starts off like slowly pulsating Feldman before dissipating into near stillness and a chord repeated at surreally extended intervals. The music reminds me of the painter de Chirico's sad surrealism.

B PLUS

JOEL CHADABE: *After Some Songs* (Deep Listening) What a strange hybrid: half jazz, half

who taught La Monte Young the math of pure consonance. While Young's always given him credit for that, the two have quarreled bitterly over ownership of some of the '60s Dream House music, though Conrad mooted much of the argument by switching to filmmaking. Now, via this Georgia-based label, Conrad is making an aggressive comeback as a composer, releasing a quick handful of discs. *Slapping Pythagoras* is a hardcore assault on minimalist principles, the title referring to his approach to tuning, less purist than Young's. Violins rasp, drones bristle, and drums beat slowly, the sound reminiscent of gagaku but the energy tense, sometimes gratingly dissonant, in between Young and Branca. Intense stuff, but are the liner notes attacking Pythagoras's elitist posturing really aimed at someone else? **A MINUS**

LUC FERRARI: *Presque Rien* (Musidisc) Boulez and Stockhausen grabbed the headlines, but my favorites of the '60s Darmstadt crowd were Maderna, Pousseur, and Ferrari (b. 1929). So much musique concrète was interchangeable, but Ferrari was the medium's poet, and *Presque rien no. 1* (*Almost Nothing No. 1*, 1970) the genre's classic, a recorded day at the seaside enhanced so subtly that it's a virtual extension of 4'33". Plus, here for the first time are two sequels, *Presque rien no. 2* (1977) and *Presque rien avec filles* ("With Girls," 1989). The latter, over thunder, birds, crickets, and industrial noises, features a barely overheard conversation between young women whose

prefer section 1, "Drift," with its powerful beating caused by imperceptibly slow glissandos. There's something tragic about the postclimactic ending, as though First had purified the Roy Harris Third via La Monte Young to distill the essence of the Great American Symphony. Try maximum volume to re-create the mind-blowing acoustic disturbances of First's live performances. **A**

DANIEL LENTZ: *Wolf Mass* (Rhizome Sketch) Once again on another hard-to-find Japanese disc, here's a mass by Catholic-chant-trained postminimalist Lentz, at once more conventional and weirder than his *Missa Umbrarum*. The dreamily modulating harmonies, the hard-punching electronic-keyboard chords echoed in digital delay, and the cheery soprano (Jessica Karraker) are familiar from *The Crack in the Bell*. Lentz's best-known piece. Starting with the Sanctus, though, the piece breaks into a boldly eclectic collage, laced through with that old standard tune of 15th-century masses, the "L'homme Arme"! "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" jostles for space with Machaut and wolf howls, while "Dona nobis pacem" gets sung to the tune of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Lentz remains one of our great, underrated tone poets, unmatched for his joyous gestural chutzpah. **A**

MARTHA MOOKE: *Enharmonic Vision* (Maximum Music Connections) What a lovely debut album, and how little one notices that there's nothing here but an improvising solo viola. With her tasteful use of delays, loops, long reverb, and

fiddle virtuosity, amazingly lifelike rock-guitar distortion, one illusionistic duet with herself (*Terminal Baggage*), and a couple tunes that Ravel might have admired. **B PLUS**

MIKEL ROUSE: *Failing Kansas* (New Tone) You won't necessarily follow the story of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in Rouse's mono-opera loosely based on the murders the book relates. But Rouse's word images, underlined by arithmetically elegant counterpoint whose background rhythms grow more complex with each listening, creep in your mind and take root. (For starters, note the opening hymn text in 6/8 meter against a conflicting 4/4 beat.) "Yellow like a sunflower, taller than Jesus" is the bird that killer Perry Smith dreams will save him, but fellow murderer Dick continually pooh-poohs him: "Get the bubbles [rest] out of your blood." The way the harmonica prelude weaves together all the work's themes, and the layering of overdubbed voices increases in complexity with each movement, points to a masterful large-scale structure. I can't get the piece out of my head, though after many listenings I can't quite predict it, either.

A PLUS

CARL STONE: *Kamiya Bar* (New Tone) The king of sampling has made Tokyo dance. He began by recording environmental sounds of the chameleon city he describes so vividly in the liner notes, then sliced them into multicolored sound bits. He next sifted and rhythmicized them into seven well-contrasted movements: ambient "Gild," dancelike "Axis," intimate "Young Jump," busily urban "Cue," meditative

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KEVIN VOLANS: *The Ramanujan Notebooks/Dancers on a Plane/Movement for String Quartet* (Collins Classics) Don't know why people get excited about Pärt and Gorecki with Volans around. He's got the most original (there's the problem, originality) sense of continuity of his generation, musical modules abutted together like Stravinsky-does-minimalism with splashes of Feldman. His Fifth Quartet, *Dancers on a Plane*, is named after a Jasper Johns painting and draws analogies to Johns's visual quotations by lacing the string music with environmental recordings of the South African landscape Volans grew up in; you'll think birds and children are cavorting outside your window. Each piece is a journey in which you never know where you're going, yet somehow, at every point you've just arrived. **A**

ADDRESSES:

Deep Listening Publications, P.O. Box 1956, 601 Broadway, Kingston, NY 12401-0900; **Modem**, P.O. Box 1026, New York, NY 10116; **Musidisc**, INA/GRM, 116 Avenue du Président Kennedy, 75786 Paris, Cedex 16, France; **Maximum Music Connections**, P.O. Box 131871, Staten Island, NY 10313-1871; **New Tone**, c/o Robi Droli, Strada Roncaglia, 16 -15040 San Germano (AL), Italy; **O.O. Discs**, 261 Groovers Avenue, Black Rock, CT 06605-0603; **XI**, 224 Centre Street, New York, NY 10013. ❖