

Dumbing Down DG

By Kyle Gann

Todd Levin's *De Luxe*

Brace yourself for the most tedious musical controversy of the '90s. Todd Levin's new CD, *De Luxe*, raises dozens of major questions facing the new generation of composers and the culture into which they are struggling to integrate themselves. Problem is, the disc makes the answers painfully obvious. *De Luxe* is 70-odd minutes of technopop clichés, up-tempo and fortississimo, played by the London Symphony Orchestra ostensibly conducted by David Alan Miller, though really driven by a rock drummer. Brain numbingly repetitious pop cadences and glitzy Hollywood orchestration dominate, and even the press releases attack preemptively by comparing Levin's tunes to the kitsch art of Jeff Koons.

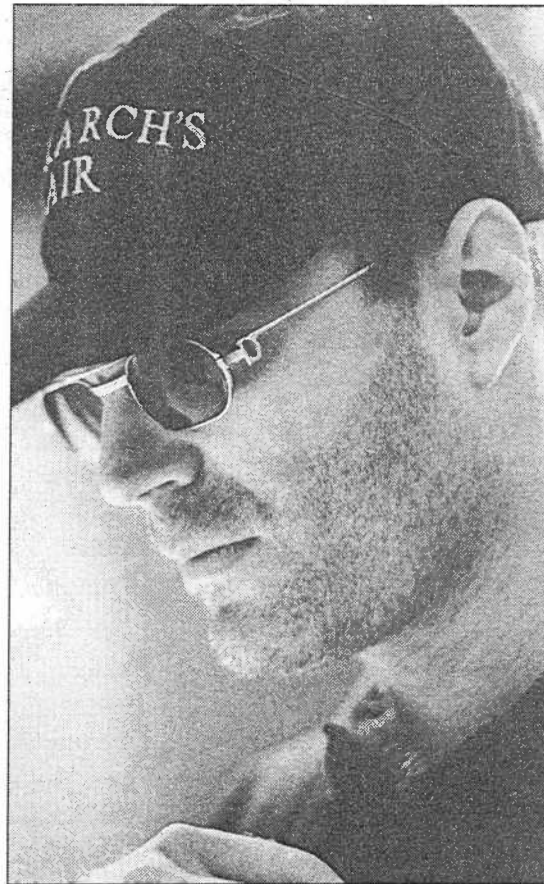
What makes the disc an astonishing gesture is that it's being not only issued but aggressively marketed by once prestigious Deutsche Grammophon, which used to symbolize the high modernism of Stockhausen and Nono, and which has more recently released *Mad About the Monks*. *De Luxe's* centerpiece is a half-hour work for Levin, soprano, and orchestra, entitled—appropriately, as it turns out—*Todd Levin*. When the soprano asks him, "Oh, you're a composer? What kind of music do you write?" Levin launches into a tirade against his teachers' generation:

"... I was taught as a composition student by academic professors who saw themselves as carrying the modernist torch... of a continuing

avant-garde. I quickly found out that an almost puritanical academic music ethic exists, in most cases used to declaw potentially threatening people and ideas. Sometimes it seemed like this congregation of composers should form a church, Our Lady of the New Complexity. Their vision of music history... was a linear, one-directional, well-manicured highway. The problem is that they drove right off the road because they couldn't get their eyes out of the rear-view mirror. The music I heard being composed was so complicated that it couldn't be comprehended without permission... [B]etter to give [the next generation] a nice, fat, juicy target than to leave them wandering aimlessly in the aesthetic void handed down to my generation."

And so on for 34 minutes, over a sort of disco chorus: "what kind of mew-sic, what kind of mew-sic." Levin lambastes professors who found him "not serious," identifies himself with Generation X by savaging the term, and sarcastically growls actual reviews of his music. (My rave about his first disc, *Riding the Planet on Point*, didn't make the cut.) It's refreshing, the way it's refreshing to see a drunk stand on a table and yell obscenities at Newt Gingrich. I've written a few similar diatribes myself and feel like a dunce that it never occurred to me to set one to music. The irony (intended or otherwise) is that Levin attacks from a musical standpoint hardly more honest than the one he despises. Rather than transcend Eurocentric academicism, he's defected to its

complementary antipode, commercialism, and his critique, true as it is, has no moral potency. I like hearing



Todd Levin: Don't ask him what kind of music he writes.

Kissinger trashed, too, but not by Andrew Dice Clay.

The disc isn't devoid of musical interest. One piece, *Blur*, offers mild-

ly titillating polytonalities and cross-rhythms over its pop beat, and *Swirl* pauses for some nonchalantly glissando string textures. But it's the other works that are fascinatingly repellent. We live in an era, after all, in which the *Times's* chief music critic, a writer disdainful of serious Downtown composers because they

don't follow European rules, spends a Sunday think-piece defending Arthur Fiedler. Having too long misidentified seriousness with upper-class pretensions, we now feel compelled to glorify the nonserious. So before the classical hand-wringing starts, I want to get a jump on some of the questions Levin's coup brings up:

Q: Will thousands of rock fans discover new music thanks to Levin?

A: With mass culture anything can happen, but probably not. When I played the disc for a rock class and asked

them if they'd want to own it, one youth replied: "I don't think so. It sounds like a lot of stuff I've already heard." No one has yet advanced a

reason why rock fans should listen to pop written by classical composers and played by orchestras when the real thing is easily available and better produced. Nor will pop listeners have the faintest notion what Levin's attack on the avant-garde is about.

Q: Will this advance Levin's career?

A: Unquestionably.

Q: No, I mean in the long run.

A: If he can put out third and fourth discs as thoughtful as his first one was, *De Luxe* may one day be remembered as an audacious prank.

Q: Have we fully surrendered to corporate capitalism, agreeing to make money the sole criterion for every decision?

A: No. DG have, and did the day they were founded. All they've done is switch strategies. And like every institution that formerly prided itself on elitism, DG have never attempted to map the infinite gradations that exist between iconoclastic creativity and simple silliness. Like giants, the second they move from their established spot they go ridiculously too far. Meanwhile, lots of little labels closer to the ground, like Lovely Music and New Albion, could have steered them to music that would have been interesting to record.

Q: Doesn't music have to be mindless to be successfully mass-marketed?

A: The record industry creates bestsellers in its own image, simply by putting tens of thousands of dollars into blanket promotion. Content is virtually immaterial. Within certain limits that have hardly been tested they could do it as easily with good music as with bad.

Q: But isn't populist stupidity the only alternative to sterile elitism?

A: If you think so, you're part of the problem. ■

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