

**A**vant-garde music isn't yet weaned from its wannabe-a-science phase. To follow music's "official" life, you'd think that any connection between spirituality and the avant-garde was an antique from the 1920s, hardly a living, serious tradition. But an argument could be made that it was the figures with a spiritual purpose—from Scriabin, who invented new sonorities trying to make the piano sound like Buddhist gongs, through Ives, Schoenberg, Webern, Cage, Feldman, Oliveros, and Young—who invented modernism's innovations, which were demoted to mere technical devices by conservatives who came after. Any of these names could be quoted in support, but Dane Rudhyar was most explicit: "The 'revolution in consciousness' hoped for in avant-garde music," he wrote in *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music*, "represents an attempt, however inchoate, to revive the feelings human beings once had for the magical and the sacred."

You'd hardly know it from concertgoing, but those words have never been more relevant than now. Luckily, the declining cost of CD production (less than \$4000 including recording studio and performers, half that if you can make music by yourself) is bringing dozens of institutionally ignored composers out of the woodwork, and eight CDs that have crossed my desk in recent weeks suggest that a spiritualist tradition is not only alive, but at the unseen center of things. To label any of them New Age would be misleading; they make far from easy listening, some are dissonant, others theatrical. That term has been regrettably usurped, but this music shares the feeling that it's creating a spiritual environment for a new age.

Since Scriabin, Western composers have looked Eastward for that age's new foundation, and many still do. Eliane Radigue's *Mila's Journey Inspired by a Dream* (Lovely Music) is another installment of stories from the Tibetan epic *Songs of Milarepa*. For 62 minutes the stories are read and sung over a rich drone, first in melodically inflected Ti-

# God on a Compact Disc

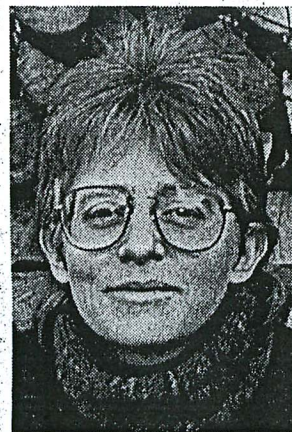
BY KYLE GANN



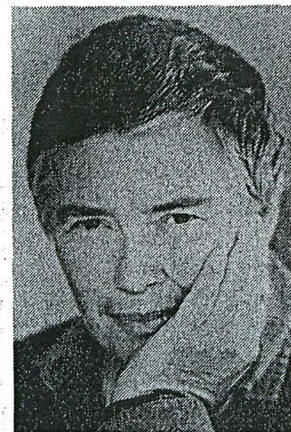
JULIAN LEE



DON STIRLING



MODE RECORDS



PAULA COURT

**Holy rollers, on CD. Clockwise from top left: Margaret Leng Tan; Alan Hovhaness; Pauline Oliveros; Janice Giteck**

energy and controlled violence of her playing, though, which she achieved

ous pentatonic scales, it's pretty music, but hardly gentle: "Gedulah" clatters

god Huitzilopochtli as a hummingbird. Both this and *The Cloud Will Break* constitute a well-controlled, rhythmically satisfying continuation of a concrete poetry tradition that one thought had disappeared. *The Canticle for Brother Sun*, however, turns back to European mysticism to set the words of St. Francis—again translated by Rothenberg—in more chantlike, but still vigorous, lines that echo syllables from one voice to another. Like Giteck's, it's more a confrontational than an easy-listening CD, but one laced with unpretentious humor.

Equally European in its origins is *Pie Jesu*, from the CD collection "Another Coast (New Works From the West)" (Music and Arts), by Laetitia de Compiegne Sonami, a French Californian who studied with Radigue. Part of an ongoing work entitled *Sounds From Empty Places*, *Pie Jesu* superimposes a Theremin-like line, radio sounds, and a Messiaenish dominant seventh chord over the enraptured (or anguished?) chant of what sounds to be old women; the irreducible elements in this tape-poem waver between loneliness and ecstasy. Maggi Payne's *Airwaves* on the same disc (which also includes enchanting computer works by Paul DeMarinis, Paul Drescher, and Carl Stone) may require its accompanying video of Nevada landscapes for full enjoyment, but its processing of car and airplane sounds into a scintillating harmonic continuum captures some part of that comfortless contemplative attitude the desert inspires.

New Yorker Bernadette Speech's *Without Borders* (Mode) may find itself in odd company on this list, but her quieter works, such as the Piano Sonata, *Pensees* for guitar, and *Shattered Glass* for percussion (expertly performed by Anthony de Mare, Jeffrey Schanzer, and Michael Pugliese respectively), inherit the ruminative side of the modernist tradition, which centered the mind through repetition of dissonant gestures—think of Ives, Varese, Ruth Crawford. One moment in the sonata (at 2:23) gave me chills the first time I heard it: merely a note in a pattern changing octave the

Since Scriabin, western composers have looked Eastward for that age's new foundation, and many still do. Eliane Radigue's *Mila's Journey Inspired by a Dream* (Lovely Music) is another installment of stories from the Tibetan epic *Songs of Milarepa*. For 62 minutes the stories are read and sung over a rich drone, first in melodically inflected Tibetan by Lama Kunga Rinpoche, then in mellifluous English by Robert Ashley. (Ashley is only on the left channel, so if you listen with headphones, his voice feeds to the right brain, which in most people is less verbally acute; switch the headphones, and the narrative is easier to follow. Is this Radigue's subtle attempt to defuse the left brain's logic, creating a more sound-aware state of mind?)

By comparison, Pauline Oliveros's similarly meditative *The Roots of the Moment* (Hat ART) is a symphony of emotions. This is Oliveros's most dynamic solo recording to date, equal in rhythmic and textural interest to her *The Well and the Gentle* album with Relache (also on Hat ART). It's also her first work to use her new justly tuned accordion with an interactive electronic environment created by Peter Ward; she sets up sounds, and they spin around her as she plays something else. In a gorgeous, 58-minute "texture-melody" (by analogy to Schoenberg's timbre-melody), Oliveros improvises modally à la Terry Riley, pays subtle homage to her instrument's ethnic background, sets off on uncharted stretches of dissonance and fragmentary melody, and finds repose in sensuous major-scale clusters. Both this and the Radigue disc encourage interiority, and are best enjoyed in solitude. But where Radigue's narratives stay at dead center (as Oliveros's narratives used to), Oliveros now continually shifts her focus, so gradually that the minute your mind wanders the piece is different from what you thought it was.

Another Eastern sensibility unifies *Sonic Encounters* (Mode) by Margaret Leng Tan, although that doesn't seem to have been the intention. Probably the world's premier string piano virtuoso (to use a 1940s term for playing inside the instrument), Leng Tan aimed for maximum diversity, choosing works from five consecutive decades. The tightly wound

**Holy rollers, on CD. Clockwise from top left: Margaret Leng Tan; Alan Hovhaness; Pauline Oliveros; Janice Giteck**

energy and controlled violence of her playing, though, which she achieved through studying Butoh dance, unify the disc. The most striking pieces are two brutally repetitious (and hitherto unrecorded) prepared piano works written by Cage in 1942, *Primitive* and *In the Name of the Holocaust*. The latter title was a weak pun on "Holy Ghost," but the work's bleak repetitions of gonglike sonorities could depict either a speechless reaction to the atrocities that were then occurring in Europe or the austerity of a Zen temple. Never have Cage's roots in Japanese thought been more audible.

Alan Hovhaness's melodies in *Orbit No. 2* and *Jhala* draw near-Eastern arabesques from superficially 12-tone procedures, while *Cosmic Womb* by Japanese composer Somei Satoh makes a more direct attempt to induce mystical experience via a digitally-delayed series of tremolos. And if Cage achieved Scriabin's goal of wringing a gong from the keyboard, Gan-Ru's *Gu Yue* (*Ancient Music*) makes the piano resemble several Chinese instruments, grouping gestures in movements to evoke the Chinese zither (by strumming the strings), Pipa or lute (tapping and plucking damped strings), and drum (clusters, playing damped strings from the keyboard).

But Eastern influence has become one of criticism's catchall clichés, and it's refreshing to find other composers acknowledging that Europe and the New World have their own mystical traditions. New music needed the contrast, for while Buddhism inspires a music of stationary centeredness, Native American spirituality, the Qabalah, and Catholic mysticism encourage more externally active aesthetics. Janice Giteck's Qabalah-inspired *Breathing Songs From a Turning Sky* (Mode) devotes one meditation apiece to the *sephiroth*, the 10 circles on the Jewish mystical Tree of Life, which, since they have astrological connotations, makes this a kind of chamber-music answer to Holst's *Planets*. Couched in vari-

ous pentatonic scales, it's pretty music, but hardly gentle: "Gedulah" clatters with rattles, "Gevura" opens with a cymbal shimmering in maximum crescendo. The latter reverses the usual figure-ground relationship with brooding woodwind melodies beneath a louder accompaniment of Steve Reich-y bell and drum patterns. Still stranger, perhaps, is "Hod"'s 36-second "silent meditation" (highlights from Cage's 4'33"?), leading eventually to the noble major triads of the kingdom of earth, "Malkut," the Qabalah's lowest, most accessible point.

Giteck and Charlie Morrow have turned to Native American myths, both of them via the translations of poet Jerome Rothenberg. Giteck's *Thunder, Like a White Bear Dancing* sets a text based on an Ojibwa initiation ceremony to voluptuous, thoroughly Western music for flute, piano, and percussion that sounds like tonal serialism. Her *Callin' Home Coyote* is a raucous, Harry Partch-ish burlesque setting, for tenor (John Duykers, distinguishing himself in a vernacular idiom), steel drums, and string bass, of a poem by Louis MacAdams about the American Indian Coyote trickster figure, treated with a Beat poet's Buddhist irreverence. The trio of works shows tremendous stylistic versatility, though everything on this disc is rough-hewn, unpolished. That will make it difficult to approach for some—there's no using it as background music—but it's good to see an imaginative composer resisting the knee-jerk slickness that these 1980s have come to expect.

The least slick of New York composers, Morrow used Aztec rather than North American sources for his *The Birth of the War God* (Laurel). He draws from the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble a mixture of modal folksinging and strange noises in which voices effectively take the place of rattles and other small percussion. The subject matter makes such mouth sounds eerily appropriate: a buzzy humming, for example, evokes the disguise of the war

Anthony de Mare, Jeffrey Schanzer, and Michael Pugliese respectively), inherit the ruminative side of the modernist tradition, which centered the mind through repetition of dissonant gestures—think of Ives, Varese, Ruth Crawford. One moment in the sonata (at 2:23) gave me chills the first time I heard it: merely a note in a pattern changing octave the second time. Speech's delicate feel for register makes it clear that she's not working with patterns in a minimalist way, but rather with groups of tones sustained through reiteration. Her tendency to impress a musical object on the listener over a period of time comes close to

## MUSIC

the use of *tone* (as opposed to notes) that Rudhyar felt was essential to a spiritual music, even if no specific tradition is implied.

Perhaps the quintessential European pioneer of musical spirituality is the late Italian Giacinto Scelsi, whose exposure to Sufi music and Coptic chant during early travels in the Middle East led him to create a music based on the intense articulation of a few pitches. Given his microtonal, sustained-tone style, I'd wondered what his piano music must sound like, and the remarkable Swiss pianist Marianne Schroeder gives us a vivid picture with two suites from the 1950s: *Ttai* of 1953, and *Ka* of 1954 (Hat ART). Like Speech, Scelsi relies on repetition of pitches, sonorities, and ostinati to draw us into his sound-world; he frames sonorities and figures in silence, yet he never loses a hint of momentum, and he defines tonal centers through perverse repetition rather than hierarchy. Such ontologically unconventional music requires a performer rightly attuned, and Schroeder possesses the perfect combination of power and calm, bringing a wonderful array of tone qualities to vignettes in which color is everything. Little known before the last decade, Scelsi is now regarded as one of the most profound of 20th century composers, which, when the smoke finally clears, may well turn out to be the case with the other spiritual composers whose works now come to us only on small-label CDs. ■