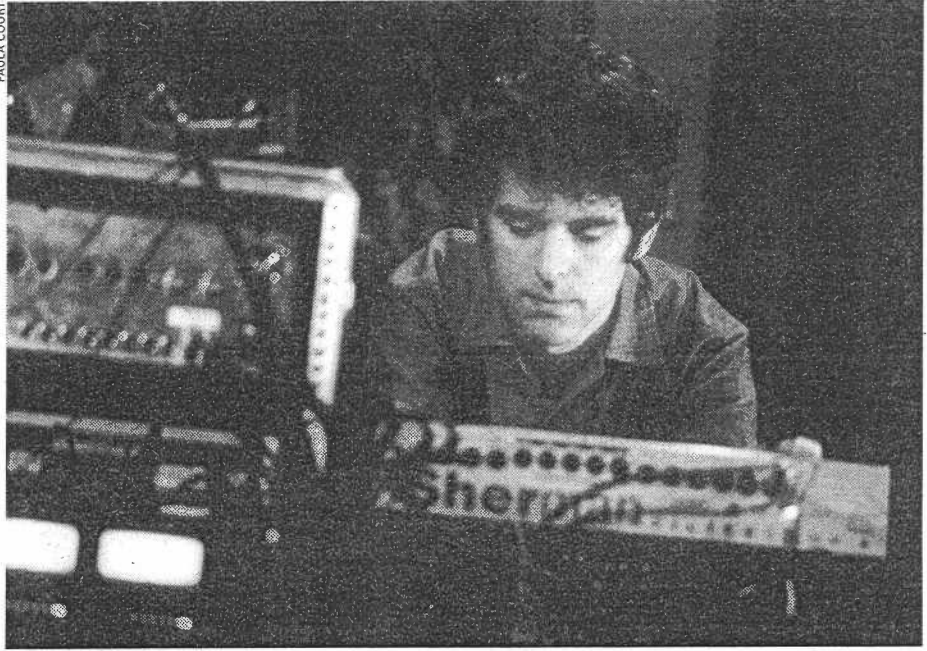


Music Boxes and Photocells in a Land Beyond Time

MUSIC FOR UNWINDING

BY KYLE GANN



STEPHEN VITIELLO'S MUSIC IS LIKE DRIVING PAST A CITY NOISESCAPE ALMOST OUT OF EARSHOT.

Given Conlon Nancarrow's exploration of the player piano and John Cage's appropriation of the record player, the arrival of the music box to serious music was inevitable—but why did it take so long? *Outlier*, the recent CD of new music-box works by New York composer John Morton (Innova, www.innovaRecordings.com), presses that question and strikes you as a music that should have existed years ago. Being repetitive and variable in speed, the music box is conducive to a thread that runs through American music from Henry Cowell on, the structural use of out-of-phase phrases. You find it in Nancarrow, Carter, most obviously in Steve Reich, in Mikel Rouse, Ben Neill, and other recent figures, and when Morton attaches 17 music boxes to a board and sets them going, you get it again with a delicately chaotic quality.

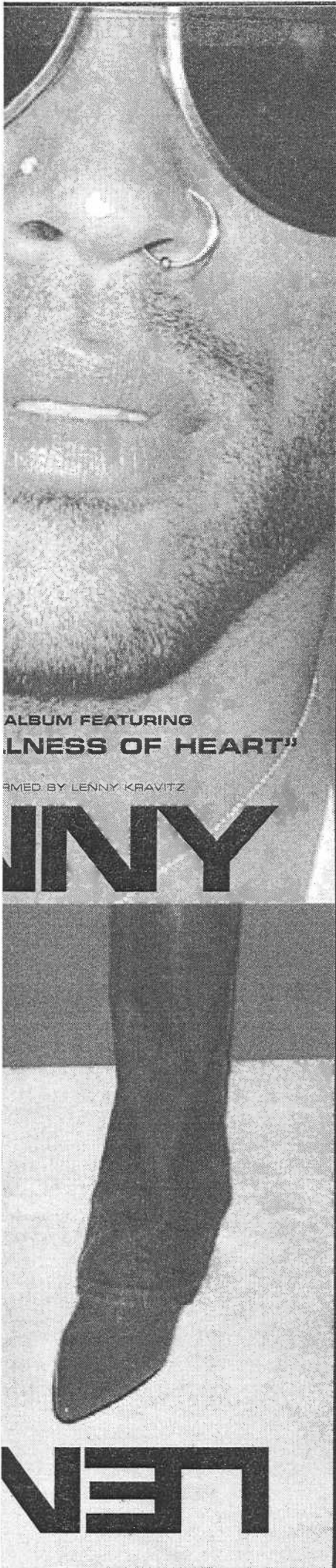
Morton doesn't just let the things run, however. A former Subotnick student, he electronically processes them to bring out their mbira-like characteristics, combines them with similarly decaying timbres like twanging electric guitar and vibraphone, and—most surprisingly but with elegant results—makes a music box the central ostinato of a gentle jazz improv with vibraphonist Ted Piltzecker. It's a great disc for those who like their new music pretty, but neither clean nor predictable.

Sound-installation scholar and artist Stephen Vitiello, on the other hand, plays with photoelectric cells on a New Albion disc, *Bright and Dusty Things* (www.newalbion.com). Vitiello started working with light in his 91st-floor studio in the former WTC; he waves a photocell, like the kind photographers use, at various light sources, and the computer translates the signal into gritty continua like laid-back Xenakis, a little noisy but smoothed by background harmonies. Following Vitiello's hand, presumably, the music is constantly in motion, but transforming gradually from one ambient texture to another, as though you're driving past a city soundscape almost out of earshot. Like Morton, Vitiello doesn't rely on the conceptual value of pure processes. A series of performers including Pauline Oliveros on accordian and David Tronzo on guitar add their own acoustic enhancements of the sound, but their contributions are so subtly interwoven that you'll hardly notice them.

Another electronic disc similar in effect but very different in mood is *Obsolete Systems* (Electronic Music Foundation, www.emf.org) by Laurie Spiegel. Spiegel was, of course, a major presence in the electronic world of the 1970s and early '80s, before chronic illness forced her into relative inactivity. Indeed, there are no new pieces on this disc—they range from 1971 to '83—but they haven't been released before, and they remind you how deeply rich, detailed, and luscious her synthesized timbres always were. She makes two kinds of pieces: the gradually evolving, unarticulated sonic landscape and the more plunky, quasi-minimalist algorithmic piece springing from her folk-music background as a mandolin plinker. Female archetypes abound. I've kidded her that her glacially moving sound masses follow the contours of the female orgasm, and I actually took a nap with this disc playing and half-consciously felt enveloped in a warm womb of sound.

The same kind of timeless, open-ended feel is achieved acoustically by Canadian composer Linda Catlin Smith in her works on *Memory Forms* (Artifact, www.interlog.com/artifact). She works with a sense of musical space inherited from Morton Feldman, but her music is darker, leaner, and she makes gorgeous pitch choices. Gestures inexactly repeated are her generative device, but usually give way to languid melody. The title work, an orchestra piece, starts with what seems to be the ethereal opening chord from Charles Ives's *Unanswered Question*, but keeps stopping to start over, and unlike Ives, Smith never attempts to answer the question, but rather sidetracks to its darker implications in two-note woodwind motives, meandering brass chromatics, and a restless melody that won't resolve into the chords that try to comfort it.

More radically, Smith's *Moi Qui Tremblais* dwells for its entire length on one tormented and slightly nuanced piano chord that never relinquishes center stage despite commentary by percussion and violin. It's easy to make electronic music that sounds like it could run on forever, but that this thoughtful postminimalist could do the same thing with conventional instruments and notation shows how much nondirectionality has become a mode taken for granted in the 21st century. And all four are among the best discs I've heard in recent weeks. **V**

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