

A Special Section

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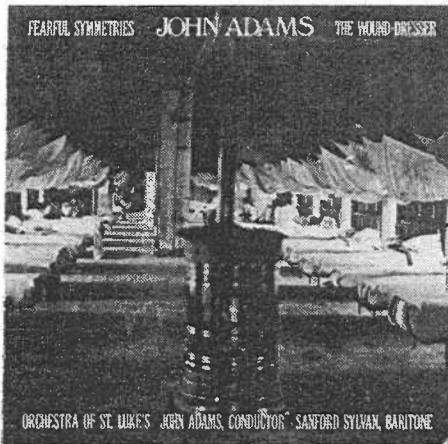
Old and New Music Consumer Guide

By Kyle Gann

John Adams: *Fearful Symmetries*; *The Wound-Dresser* (Nonesuch) Is he the mainstream minimalist, or a latter-day Samuel Barber? Is minimalism a virus whose victims eventually lose the ability to write in any meter besides 4/4? I'm *Nixon in China*'s second biggest fan (my kid's the first), but I have trouble with the Barberish blandness of *The Wound-Dresser*, a Whitman setting for tenor and orchestra. And *Fearful Symmetries* is in the impressionist train-ride mode we've heard Adams do several times over: great for children's concerts. Paradoxically, the more he repeats himself the more his music renounces its personality and slides into Ravel. I try to hold Adams above the category of neo-romantic style-plagiarists like Stephen Albert and George Rochberg, but he's getting heavy.

Arditti String Quartet: *Arditti* (Gramavision) The world's premier avant-garde quartet sets the tone for a rich program with a propulsive reading of the *Grosse Fuge*, the piece that, among other things, proved that Beethoven was the first European to realize that white people were clapping on the wrong beat. Next, the second String Quartet (numbered 3) by

player/piano experimenter Conlon Nancarrow, a series of canons at tempo ratios of 3:4:5:6; he wrote it for the group because the players so easily sight-read his hair-raising First Quartet. *Coconino... a Shattered Landscape*, one of conceptualist Roger Reynolds's most dynamic and lucid scores, is a winner, as is the brilliant 1931 String Quartet (its last movement palindromic) of Ruth Crawford, music's first woman genius. Xenakis's *Tetras*, concluding the disc, is an ugly series of glissandos and grunching

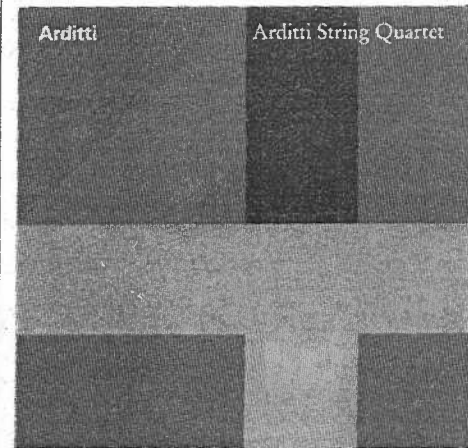


John Adams: *Fearful Symmetries*/*The Wound-Dresser*

noises that makes the beautiful Arditti sound like a 1960s synthesizer—no mean achievement.

Morton Feldman: *Piano* (Hat Art) Swiss pianist Marianne Schroeder must be a mystic herself: she's got the patience, tone color, and centeredness needed to make Feldman's and Scelsi's spirituality glow. Here, three early Feldman works show how closely pointillism and repetition were intertwined in his music from the beginning. But the payoff is the first recording of Feldman's long, late solo masterpieces. *Piano* (1977) is a 29-minute treasure-house of layered sonorities, mostly soft, sometimes booming. *Palais de Mari*, nearly his last work (1986, 24 minutes), is thinner, repetitive, and consummately intuitive (though recent analyses of Feldman reveal more system than he 'fessed up to). John Cage's latest piano opuses show that even he can't resist those sensuous Feldman piano decays.

The Hilliard Ensemble: *Perotin* (ECM) The 12th century's greatest composer, music-master at Notre Dame Cathedral, wrote swirls of melody around harmonies that hang in the air forever. The liner notes are more evocative than scholarly, but this is



Arditti String Quartet: *Arditti*

supposedly the complete surviving Perotin, not only the well-documented "Viderunt omnes" and "Sederunt principes," but three other organum examples, a conductus, and some anonymous pieces Perotin *could* have written. The 1960s style for this music was brusque and nasal; the Hilliard Ensemble opts for the opposite extreme: smooth, blended, and highly resonant (recorded in the warm acoustics of the Boxgrove Priory, Sussex, England). I could have stood something in-between, but

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CELLIST

there's no faulting the Hilliard's perfect intonation and velvety phrasing. Steve Reich credits Perotin as an influence (ECM wants you to know), but to recast Perotin as a protominimalist is to concentrate on harmony and risk missing his elegant melodic sense. If you have only one medieval disc in your collection, it might as well be this.

Kecak: A Balinese Music Drama (Bridge)

If David Lewiston's Monkey Chant excerpt from the old "Music From the Morning of the World" album (Nonesuch) whetted your appetite, his complete 1987 recording of the group Kecak Ganda Sari is a feast. Over 75 half-naked men act out a story from the *Ramayana* about a girl's kidnapping and rescue. They chant, shout, quack, joke, argue, make mouth noises to imitate a gamelan (no instruments here), and rattle off tongue twisters like "chakachakachakachaka" and "tut-dag-tut-tut" with deafening speed and in exact unison. The group's uninhibited energy is as infectious as the music is intricate. Superb liner notes explain that this drama, created in 1932, contains elements of older Balinese trance rituals. Strange as hell, but you'll get off on it first time around: guaranteed.

Kronos Quartet: Black Angels (Nonesuch)

Three powerful works make this one of the Kronos's best. Most unusual is *Doom. A Sigh* by Istvan Marta, an intense chorale overlaid on a plaintive tape of Romanian folk songs (old-timers who sang for Marta were later punished by the government). *Black Angels* is one of George Crumb's few compelling works, and its ecstatic cello over the bowing of tuned wine glasses has never been more starkly recorded. Last is one of Shostakovich's most political, deeply felt quartets, No. 8. As usual, the program-selector button will help bypass examples of Kronos's arrangement-mania. A rendition of Thomas Tallis's 40-voice *Spem in Alium* motet is pretty enough, but then Kronos, the collective egotism of its members intact, desecrates a historic 1943 recording by

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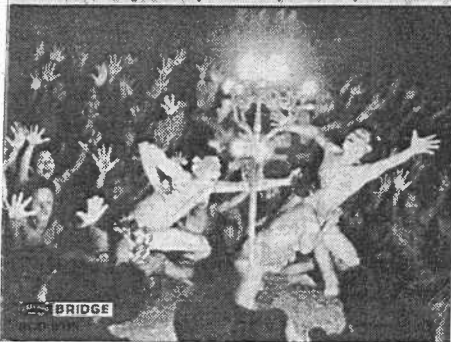
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dubbing themselves over Charles Ives singing his "They Are There!" I wish they weren't.

Ingram Marshall: Hidden Voices (Nonesuch)

Eight minutes into Marshall's *Three Penitential Visions*, I heard what I love about him: he doesn't get caught up in his own prettiness like so much West Coast new tonalism. He says, "Yeah folks, that's a real pretty chord change, but now we've got this dissonance over here to deal with." There's a darkness here, not just sadness or

KECAK from BALI
Kecak Ganda Sari • I Gusti Putu Putra, Director
First recording of a complete "Ramayana Monkey Chant"



Kecak Ganda Sari: Kecak From Bali

poignancy, but a sense of tragedy that infects his most ethereal patterns, and never lets you feel secure that the prettiness will last. *Visions* is cloudy, Neptunian. Yet it's *Hidden Voices*, Marshall's most clear-lined and conventional work yet, that sounds like Holst's "Neptune." "Keep going," repeats the sampled voice of a Bulgarian singer, reminding you, as the music does, that

beauty cannot be held onto.

Peter Mennin: Symphony Nos. 8 & 9 (New World)

I may be a card-carrying Glenn Branca-phile, but I still think the symphonies of Mennin, Schuman, Harris, Piston, and Siegmeyer are national treasures, treated with criminal neglect by our recording companies and orchestras. Mennin was the youngest and least distinctive. His music inhabits the stylistic corner the American school fled to when the serialist religion took over. Both Eighth and Ninth symphonies are in the tragic mode of Schuman's Eighth: chromatic lines, bittersweet harmonies, fierce brass triplets, and an irrepressible energy that seethes like a music forced underground. *Folk Overture*, an early work, combines big-muscled rhythms with Renaissance-inspired counterpoint, a Roy Harris legacy. Christian Badea leads the Columbus Symphony in stirring readings.

Olivier Messiaen: Saint François d'Assise (KRO, available through Allegro imports)

The Catholic/mystic ornithologist/composer wrote his only opera about the saint who spoke to the birds: naturally. *Saint François*, the magnum opus of Europe's greatest living composer, combines the melodicism of *Turanglila* with the discontinuous, non-contrapuntal asceticism of *From the canyons to the stars*. . . . No more striking French music exists than Scene 6, the Sermon to the Birds, in which, after hours of austere tritones, the orchestra (seven flutes, 36 percussion instruments) explodes in a cacophony of bird songs from New Caledonia. The two recordings, both live, each have their advantages. This maturer Utrecht performance under Kent Nagano's baton isn't marred by the instrumental looseness of the Ozawa reading (Cybelia). As His Saintliness, Nagano's Phillippe

Rouillon has a more open tone than Ozawa's Jose van Dam, and Nagano has by far the more mellifluous angel in Maria Oran. Cybelia's main advantage is an English libretto.

Ursula Oppens: American Piano Music of Our Time (Music & Arts) I am sitting with the score of Elliott Carter's *Night Fantasies*. I see the 175/216 cross-rhythm, the opposition of treble C against bass F-sharp, and so



Alvin Singleton: Shadows/After Fallen Crumbs/A Yellow Rose Petal

on. But when I put the score down, the piece's complexities dissolve back into gobbledygook, even in Oppens's colorful rendition. Luckily, she also plays John Adams's *Phrygian Gates*, and brings to it a pearly smoothness that Mack McCray (on New Albion) can't quite match. I used to find *Phrygian's* modal pattern changes arbitrary, but they've aged well. There's an abstract blues by Julius Hemphill, and the rest of this odd disc Oppens fills with tangos, ranging from charming to portentous. Nancarrow's self-questioning *Tango?* has Oppens keeping track of three changing tempos at once. As with all the other demands this music makes, she simply does it, and does it brilliantly.

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CARNEGIE HALL - FOUR PERFORMANCES
Sat. Aft. & Eve., Dec. 15; Sun. Aft. & Twilight, Dec. 16

Centenary College - Hackettstown, NJ, Sun. Aft, Dec. 9 at 4:00

Sandra Darling, Judith Nicosia, Louise Wohlafka, Sop; Antoinette Hardin, Charlotte Surkin, Mez. Sop;
Michael Gorman, Harp; James Wilson, Ten; Michael Rind, Kevin Deas, Mark Moliterno, Bass

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highlight will be Tod Machover's *Bug-Mudra*, in which plugged and unplugged guitars have their pitches, melodies, and timbres reshaped by an electronic, magnet-infested glove on conductor Machover's left hand. A Japanese video of the rock-and-adult-harmonies threw many of us for a loop at Tanglewood, and I lust to hear it live. October 11.

6. Les Arts Florissants, the Paris-based baroque-plus ensemble headed by a feisty American named William Christie, works both for polish and emotional power, and succeeds like no one else. They show up at Tully Hall October 14 with an ambrosial double-bill pairing Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Actéon* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. October 14.

7. Autumn at the Metropolitan Opera includes a new production of Verdi's often underappreciated *Un ballo in maschera*. Director-designer Piero Faggioni, a first-class theater man, as Zeffirelli used to be, sets the opera this time in the historically correct Swedish court, rather than the Colonial Boston that censorship forced onto Verdi. James Levine, one of the best people for the job, conducts a cast headed by Luciano Pavarotti and Aprile Millo. First night is October 25, but I recommend that you come back on November 14 or 17, when the heroine, Amelia, is sung by the young Andrea Gruber, whose Verdi performances in Europe have been making very large waves.

8. Hans Werner Henze's opera, *The Bassarids*, always raises a ruckus. That's small wonder since librettists W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman heated up the liberality-repression conflict of Euripides's *The Bacchae*. The electrifying Anja Silja sings Agave; and Christoph von Dohnányi, who conducted the 1966 Salzburg world premiere, leads the mighty Cleveland Orchestra at Carnegie October 27.

9. Over to Merkin Hall for a concert by the velvet-voiced, theatrically electric Angelina Réaux, serving up Kurt Weill, the composer who brings out her talent at its strongest. The territory this time is Weill's

American music, including big stuff from his last work, an uncompleted musical about Huck Finn. Robert Kapilow conducts the Music Today ensemble in all the original orchestrations, by Weill himself. December 5.

10. When Leonard Bernstein returns to the New York Philharmonic, it's TNT time at Fisher Hall. The mix of programs—check the hall for the various dates—will include Bernstein's funny, sad, silly, gutsy, and moving song-cycle, *Arias and Barcarolles*; a new piece by Bright Sheng, who orchestrated the cycle; Shostakovich's increasingly important Fifth Symphony; and Mendelssohn's oratorio, *Elijah*. About that last, don't expect Victorian dust or fuzz after Bernstein has explored the music to its innermost soul. December 6 to 22. ■

Gann

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P.A.N. Ensemble: *Ars Magis Subtiliter* (New Albion) Notation ran amok in the late 14th century, and the composers of the antipapal court at Avignon experimented wildly with septuple rhythms and chansons in which no two players played the same beat. The P.A.N. Ensemble plays up the milder side of "the subtler art" (side-stepping, for example, cross-rhythm king Matteo da Perugia), set in the most jovial performances this repertoire has had since David Munrow. The pieces (by Solage, Baude Cordier, Pierre des Molins, their daddy figure Machaut) are from the 1390 Chantilly Codex, and only five of 15 were recorded previously. Emphasis is on the liquescent singing that earned them the name Mannerist, but this remained Europe's most rhythmically complex music for over 500 years until Boulez, Stockhausen, and Nancarrow sailed past it in the 1940s.

Alvin Singleton: *Shadows; After Fallen Crumbs; A Yellow Rose Petal* (Nonesuch)

The near stationary pacing of *Shadows*'s opening makes you think it's got something important to say far down the road. And it delivers. The cellos dig their heels into an E drone, but the violins and winds beg to differ. By the time the music bursts (13:49) it's wound tighter than an idiot's watch, and crashes into consciousness with the righteous anger of a wrongly condemned man. Singleton has taken the gesture-repetitive Polish/'60s style of Penderecki and transformed it into something more compelling than that style ever produced. Robert Shaw, conducting the Atlanta Symphony, never pushes the music and doesn't need to: he lets its tension snap. Louis Lane conducts *After Fallen Crumbs* (as flashy as Adams without the clichés) and *A Yellow Rose Petal*, which, its gorgeous celesta solo interrupted by trombones, has the same quality of anger made potent by self-restraint. The last decade hasn't produced any symphonic-scale music more moving than this.

Stockhausen: *Mantra* (New Albion)

After 20 years, this 1970 piece for two electronically modified pianos remains my favorite Stockhausen, nearly my favorite serial work. Drawn from a 13-figure formula (the "mantra," at 0:19 to 1:34 on your CD counter), it makes the serial idea—the seed flowering into a complex plant—more audible than any other post-Webern composition. This new, first U.S., first CD recording, by American Yvar Mikhashoff and Rosalind Bevan from Denmark, lacks the taut energy, the humor, the intensity of DGG's wonderful old Kontarsky recording. It also underplays the exotic ring-modulation, letting the pianos sound too normal.

Nor does it helpfully include (as DGG did) the notation of the mantra. But: it's well recorded, the rollicking finale crackles, and the piece (as the liner notes say) marks the exact moment at which '60s serialism matured into '70s postserialism.

Iannis Xenakis: *Echange; Palimpsest; Waarg; Eonta* (Attacca)

Noise (random filling in of a musical space) has always been this Greek composer's guiding metaphor. In recent works, the metaphor has become more literal, and his music has lost the gritty, counterintuitive texture that once made it a refreshing antidote to serialism. *Echange* (1989), a growly grab bag of woodwind gestures, sounds more Midwest-academic than stochastic, and *Waarg*'s running eighth notes (1988) are similarly tame. However, *Palimpsest* (1979) is early enough to have that abrasive edge; its opening spastic string strokes bristle, and the single piano pings outlining the rim of its climax are yet another brilliant Xenakis sound concept. *Eonta*, the 1963 classic for piano and brass, is recapped with soloist Aki Takahashi. Amsterdam's ASKO Ensemble performs stunningly and is well-captured by this aggressive new Dutch label.

Bernd Alois Zimmermann: *Requiem for a Young Poet* (Wergo)

Zimmermann dedicated his second-largest work to three poets who had committed suicide (Esenin, Mayakovsky, Bayer) and, six months later in 1970, killed himself. Like his opera *Die Soldaten*, it's a multimedia extravaganza, but the music is limited to everlasting clusters, dissonant choral effects, rich electronic tones (he was the most subtle synthesist of his period), and *Tristan* quotations beneath thick overlays of spoken words. Appreciation takes work: the untranslated texts by Aeschylus, Joyce, Pound, Mayakovsky, Wittgenstein, Mao, Pope John XXIII, and others combine Russian, Greek, Latin, Czech among their many tongues. Those who make the effort will find an intense indictment of the world by one of the century's most disturbed musical minds. ■

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