

New World's five-disc set brings back memories of a music simmering with rebellion

I had an interesting experience with New World's historic five-disc set of recordings from the ONCE festival. I was alternating the set with another disc, Mode's new DVD of Elliott Carter. I kept forgetting that I was listening to the ONCE festival, kept thinking I was hearing new Carter works, and I'd start thinking, 'Hey, this is better than I expected—

Carter's music has gotten sort of playful and atmospheric in his old age." Then I'd realize I wasn't listening to Carter, but to the experimental cutting edge of early-1960s Ann Arbor.

Same spiky, atonal pointillism, but what sounds stuffy and relentlessly earnest in Carter's music circa 2000 sounded more naughty and subversive 40 years earlier in the hands of Robert Ashley, Robert Sheff, George Cacioppo, Roger Reynolds, Gordon Mumma, et al. Shrugged off by the music department at the University of Michigan, yet encouraged by visiting professor Roberto Gerhard, these young turks initiated, in 1960, a festival that would achieve international prominence, and that Ashley continued to direct through 1968. The ONCE festival—I have to consciously stop myself from preceding it with the word *legendary*, which became welded to its name—has the reputation of being the first time composers took performance into their own hands, presenting their own music in defiance of unsupportive local institutions: the original Bang on a Can. (Actually, La Monte Young's series at Yoko Ono's loft deserves to share that credit.) Some of the ONCE composers went on to fame, some didn't, and for 30 years I've wondered what those festivals sounded like.

So here comes New World with five

ONCE UPON A TIME

BY KYLE GANN



New World Records

discs selected from among some 170 works, accompanied by thorough, scholarly, often surprising liner notes by Leta Miller. To a large extent, ONCE sounds the way I remember (having attended Oberlin in the 1970s) the '60s Midwestern avant-garde sounding: abstract, noisy, too brainy for its own good at

**Music From the ONCE Festival
1961–1966**
New World Records

The ONCE ensemble at rehearsal

times, but brash and iconoclastic. A lot of the music is 12-tone, or virtually so: Robert Ashley's 1960 Piano Sonata is based on four nine-note rows, and abstractly atonal. But Midwestern 12-tone music never seemed to

be about pitch. Rather, it used pitch rows to remove pitch as a concern, freeing composers to play with density, sonority, gesture, and color. The pieces that sound most paradigmatic in an unfortunate way are George Cacioppo's: angular, histrionic, tense, rigorously counterintuitive in every phrase. Man, does that stuff ring a bell.

On the other hand, some pieces are absolutely *sui generis*, neither typical of the time nor much related to the composers' subsequent, more famous work. Here's our first chance in decades to hear Ashley's *in memoriam* . . . *Crazy Horse* (symphony), a score of enigmatic graphic symbols that produces a crazy, wheezing continuum of sustained dissonance. Here's *Track*, by now-electronic-composer David Berhman, a 1965 work for instrumental ensemble with television that is prescient of later sampling techniques. The most fun piece, and the only one to slightly foreshadow the minimalism that was soon to break, is *Music for Clocks*, by Texan Philip Krumm, starting with a cheerful *moto perpetuo* in athletic triplets on the glockenspiel; I've known Krumm's name for decades, never heard his music before. It was Krumm who enticed his friend Robert Sheff to Ann Arbor, a dynamite pianist who would later don the name "Blue" Gene Tyranny. Sheff's *Diotima* for flute and electronics has a quiet sensitivity that will linger into his future music.

Overall, however, *bracing* is the word here. This is not a set of discs to pop in and chill out to, but a documentary of young composers simmering with dissatisfaction and rebellion, a last flare-up of innovation before the birth of a new musical era. No better picture could be had of pre-minimalist American music in the restless JFK-assassination era. Some will want to hear the legendary early works of later-famous composers. But all will be reminded that there was once a music scene convinced that music could be both brainy and fun.