



Nancarrow has a lot to offer the 21st century.

Rep on a Roll

By Kyle Gann

Conlon Nancarrow

Which living American composer now has the largest percentage of his work available on commercial recordings? The answer, I bet, is Conlon Nancarrow, the 78-year-old, Texarkana-born, Mexico City recluse who wrote the bulk of his music for the player piano. Wergo has just released the final two discs of *Studies for Player Piano*, and the Continuum Ensemble's recording of his nonmechanical works has come out on Musicmasters, turning Nancarrow from one of the most obscure composers into one of the most knowable. And what emerges is that, among 20th century composers, Nancarrow

is equaled only by Cage and Stockhausen in the wealth of new ideas, structures, and compositional devices he's created.

Those who haven't keyed in to Nancarrow's underground reputation of three decades may have missed that Nancarrow wrote for player piano because of his interest in rhythms—specifically, different tempos played at the same time—that no human could produce. Nancarrow wrote 47 or 48 player piano studies, though they're numbered to 50; No. 30 (for prepared player piano) was abandoned, nos. 38 and 39 got renumbered, and No. 2b, a one-minute jazz sketch, was added in between nos. 2 and 3 years after its composition. The range of styles and forms is incredible,

from poetic miniatures to out-of-tempo blues numbers, to structural experiments that anticipated Stockhausen and Boulez, to spectacular two-piano canons worthy of a latter-day Bach. Not a single study (with the arguable exception of No. 49) fails to include some tempo twist or canonic device that he'd never tried before. The instrument may remain the same, but rarely has a major composer so avoided repeating himself.

Nancarrow fans know the *Studies* up through No. 41 from the four discs 1750 Arch (now out of business) released between 1977 and '84. Wergo's set, which began appearing in 1989, has added nos. 42 through 50. Nancarrow's late style synthesizes his innovations into a flexible formal language, incorporating canon, ostinato, tone rows, isorhythm, and wild arpeggiation effects within a single work. The latest volume introduces cutely melodic Study No. 44, the "Aleatory Canon": in a Cage-inspired attempt to solve the problem of synchronizing pianos, its two parts can be played at any tempo relationship any number of times. Other Wergo volumes, which appeared in December, have premiered Study No. 43, a lightly textured 24-against-25 canon in an elegant near-palindrome, and Study No. 47, which puts a simple chant through a plethora of high-powered variation techniques, ending with huge rips across the keyboard.

Discs can't match the thrill of hearing Nancarrow's pianos live in Mexico City (though he thinks they can). Watching the rolls whiz by, seeing the brash diagonals of piano-roll dots anticipate the sweeping glissandos, hearing crisply piercing notes bounce off

the walls of his double-garage-size studio: these are pleasures you have to visit him down south to experience. (Some group ought to be working *now* to get Nancarrow's studio made into a historical monument after his death.) But Robert Shumaker's recordings are splendid, noticeably surpassing the old 1750 Arch vinyl disc recordings for brilliance of tone and intimacy of sustained notes.

In addition, the new recordings have given Nancarrow a chance to rethink tempos. His pianos have a wide range of speed control, and I've often felt that he recorded the 1750 Arch recordings too fast to hear the hundreds of wonderful ministructural details. It's satisfying, then, that on the Wergo recordings the speeds are slower by an average of 11 per cent, all of the studies decelerated except nos. 15, 20, 36, and 37. The extreme is Study No. 28, whose acceleration process is more fascinating to hear now that it's judiciously expanded by 33 per cent.

Continuum's disc contains mostly works written before 1947, the year Nancarrow visited New York to buy his first player piano and roll-punching machine. His early instrumental pieces are a little stiff and typical of other '30s ultramodernists, but they show that his love of canon and rhythmic clash was present from the beginning; the First Quartet contains in seminal form virtually every idea he's worked with since except for massive glissandos. The disc's highlight is its first recording of Nancarrow's orchestra pieces, one (jazzy and surprisingly smooth) from 1943, the other from 1986. The latter gets rhythms of 7-against-12 and 14-

against-15 by having different subdivisions and groupings of the conductor's beat in various sections of the orchestra. Continuum's performances, mostly superb, convey these rhythms with a spirit that belies their complexity.

Continuum doesn't include the Quartet No. 3, which the Arditti Quartet has recorded on Gramavision. (Quartet No. 2 is an unfinished fragment from the '40s.) All we lack on disc are a Sarabande and Scherzo (written at age 18) and the *Two Canons for Ursula* of 1988, which dedicatee Ursula Oppens will perform September 15 at Merkin Hall; also the second and third movements of a 1942 Trio for clarinet, bassoon, and piano, which were long lost and rediscovered last October, too late for inclusion on the Continuum disc. (There's also a short electronic tape work from the '40s that Nancarrow doesn't consider worth making public.) Altogether, we have over 95 per cent of his surviving music on disc. This may not be the end, for although he suffered a small stroke last year, recent reports say he's composing again.

It's great news. I increasingly feel that the three composers who have the most to offer the 21st century, in terms of technical frameworks and generalizable structures, are Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, and Conlon Nancarrow: Feldman for formal ideas, Young for pitch and its relationship to structure, and Nancarrow for rhythm and tempo conception. Only a few years ago their works were nearly unknown in record stores. Now, as they become available, you can hear the next era take shape before our astonished ears. ■

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