

Shades of Pretty

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Even in Lentz's most languid arpeggios you end up noticing that weird chord progression.

photo: Daniel Lentz

One night many years ago, following a certain number of judgment-impairing libations, I and a friend of mine—who will probably be relieved to remain nameless in this connection—noted between ourselves that all the major minimalist composers were heterosexual. From this rather unfruitful-seeming coincidence we evolved a theory of the sexual origin of aesthetics, our initial distinction being between the kind of music men write to intimidate other men (Charles Wuorinen being our textbook example), versus the kind of music men write to attract women.

Whatever the merits of this dubious line of speculation (and believe me, you won't see any learned articles issuing from *my* computer on the subject), it has always struck me that, when it comes to attempts at musical seduction, Daniel Lentz's music is way out in front.

West Coaster Lentz writes pretty, pretty music, but of so many kinds that you find you never realize how many shades of pretty there are: comfy pretty, orgasmic pretty, weird pretty, disturbing pretty, aggressive pretty, chaotic pretty. Having followed and been seduced by his music myself for almost 20 years now, I realize with some shock that I've never before had an opportunity to devote a column to him—though highly regarded in some circles, he is little performed in New York. But now he's started his own CD label, [Aoede](#), and suddenly seven CDs of his music have appeared in recent months, with another due in June. John Cage once said that the key to a composer's success is longevity, but self-sufficiency is equally essential, and digital technology keeps granting it to one person after another.

So now after a long dry spell we have a slew of Lentz's works to assimilate. The discs bring back into print some of the music from his early minimalist period on the Cold Blue and Icon vinyl labels, notably "Point Conception," a rollicking process piece for nine overdubbed pianos in which his characteristic chord changes are already evident. He's reissued (on a disc called *Wild Turkeys*) "The Crack in the Bell," a musing on e.e. cummings whose jaunty bouncing chords should have made it one of the most popular pieces in the entire American large-ensemble repertoire; and his even more astounding *wolfMASS*, an actual liturgical mass in the form of a stream-of-consciousness collage, weaving together 14th-century music by Guillaume de Machaut with "Yankee Doodle" and "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

ADVERTISING

But if you want to be shocked and stirred by Lentz's latest music all at once, get the *Voices* disc, with its pretty string chords that sound calm and almost Muzak-y until they begin to glissando ominously. And when the bluesy voice of Ellis Hall, sometimes leaping into falsetto, emerges above the synthesizers, sounding as out of place as a halibut on a pastry cart, you at first think it's one of the occasional lapses into bad taste of which Lentz is capable. Inure yourself, though, and it melts into yet another of his unsettling brands of prettiness. Less jarring is "Temple of Lament" on the same disc, in which Megumi Hashiramoto's ethereal voice floats above writhing but transcendently calm harmonies, like an ecstatic diva in a slow-motion opera performed underwater.

Tied as my other favorite in this Lentzian cornucopia is his ambient disc *huit ou neuf pièces dorées à point*. This is music written to be played during dinner, each cut actually inspired by a specific meal he had in Paris in 1998. The curmudgeonly will call it New Age, but even in Lentz's most languid slow piano and harp arpeggios, in his most aimless wordless vocal melodies dotted with chimes, you end up asking, Where did he get that weird chord progression? How did he string the melody into new territory after his material had seemed exhausted? How did he get that bitonal dissonance, that unexpected rhythmic change, to work in this mellow, inertia-laden context?

Lentz wrote years ago that his music had more to do with becoming than with being, and these new discs extend that thought. Unlike New Age music's predictability, every note seems freshly composed, every chord seems to wipe the slate clean and offer a possibility of endless new direction. Postminimalist he may be, but radical stream of consciousness is his game. The sudden doubling of the available Lentz disc catalog may finally drive that fact home.

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