

THE WAY OF LIVING

Reviews of contemporary composer recordings

There is a tendency to view only old recordings as being historical records but as T.S. Eliot pointed out, "history is now". There are new recordings being made and issued that are of such documentary importance that there is no need to wait until they enter, in Jonathan Miller's words, their after-life in order to establish their "historical" status. These are the recordings that composers make of their own music. They may not be good performances of the music, and time may show that some are indeed poor performances, but these recordings are of instant historical value.

O, that we had just one side of Mozart performing one of his own works!

Well, we may not have a Mozart among us, but we do have any number of talented composers who are skillful performers and who are making recordings of their own compositions.

This is the first of what I hope will be a regular column devoted to documenting composer performances on record. The emphasis will be on today's music, since this is an area of recording whose obvious importance is all too often overlooked. We all know that the cylinder of Brahms playing is an invaluable treasure, as are the recordings of Elgar, Ravel, Bartok, Britten, Lou Harrison, Robert Ashley. These latter constitute the musical history of today and we would do well to keep the words of John Cage before us:

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IS NOT THE MUSIC OF THE FUTURE
NOR THE MUSIC OF THE PAST BUT SIMPLY
MUSIC PRESENT WITH US: THIS MOMENT NOW,
THIS NOW MOMENT.

THAT MOMENT IS ALWAYS CHANGING.

LIKE LIFE IT CHANGES. IF IT WERE NOT CHANGING
IT WOULD BE DEAD, AND, OF COURSE, FOR SOME OF US, SOMETIMES
IT IS DEAD, BUT AT ANY MOMENT IT CHANGES AND IS LIVING AGAIN.

WE TEMPORARILY SEPARATE THINGS FROM LIFE
(FROM CHANGING) BUT AT ANY MOMENT DESTRUCTION MAY COME SUDDENLY AND
THEN WHAT HAPPENS IS FRESHER.

WHEN WE SEPARATE MUSIC FROM LIFE WHAT WE GET IS ART (A COMPENDIUM OF
MASTERPIECES). WITH CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, WHEN IT IS ACTUALLY
CONTEMPORARY, WE HAVE NO TIME TO MAKE THAT SEPARATION (WHICH PROTECTS
US FROM LIVING), AND SO CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IS
NOT SO MUCH ART AS IT IS LIFE

VERY FREQUENTLY NO ONE KNOWS THAT
CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IS OR COULD BE ART. HE SIMPLY THINKS IT IS
IRRITATING. IRRITATING ONE WAY OR ANOTHER,
THAT IS TO SAY KEEPING US FROM OSSIFYING.

FOR ANY ONE OF US CONTEMPORARY MUSIC
IS OR COULD BE A WAY OF LIVING.

Edited from Composition as Process in John Cage, Silence, Wesleyan
University Press, 1961.

Finally, by way of introduction I should point out that we seem to find it difficult to shed the inheritance of Aristotle and to keep on insisting on placing everything in categories. However, my criterion will be to deal with music that seems to me to be serious and significant (whether it be 'classical', 'jazz', or 'rock 'n roll') rather than with what seems to me to be popular entertainment and ephemeral. Indeed, as I write, much of the most significant activity in composition today seems to be taking place in musical styles and performances that defy categorization and to fall in areas that lie between, or straddle, the generally accepted musical categories.

The point is that all of these performances seem to me to be making - and oh! how wrong critics can all-too-often turn out to be - a significant contribution to the creative arts of our time.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Perfect Lives (Private Parts): The Park, The Backyard. Robert Ashley (voice), 'Blue' Gene Tyranny (keyboards), Kris (Tabalas). Lovely Music LML 1001.

These are two sections from Ashley's seven-part video opera that was commissioned by the Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance in New York. The music consists of a surreal text that is declaimed against an accompaniment of jazz/rock/pop music while multiple television screens show pictures of the performers and of the Midwestern landscape.

Poised between poetry and music, the tabala rhythms, words, piano and synthesizer sounds settle like sediment at the bottom of the listener's consciousness and builds slowly up until either the brain can stand no more and slams the perceptual door shut, or until it consumes the very existence of the listener. Of all the sections of Perfect Lives this has the weakest music; it borders perilously close to cocktail piano music. The words are clear but the recording quality is of the level of a good home recording.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Perfect Lives (Private Parts): The Bar. Ashley (voice), 'Blue' Gene Tyranny (keyboards), Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghen (voice and percussion). Lovely Music VR 4904.

"Short ideas repeated / Massage the brain" intones Ashley, and it is an apt description of his own composition: layered words, music, chants and repetitions of all of these. The record defies categorization as to musical style, but its vitality speaks of a fertile and creative mind. The musical content has more substance to it than was the case on the previous record of excerpts from this magnum opus and the quality of the recorded sound is also better, even though it is clearly the product of an acoustically dead studio. There is no doubt as to the fascination of this surrealistic voice over music production. Just

relax and let the tale of Rodney and fine wine in half-pint glasses waft over you and you will soon get caught up in the flow of events.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Perfect Lives (Private Parts) - The Lessons: music word fire and I would do it again (coo coo). Ashley (voice), 'Blue' Gene Tyranny (keyboards), Peter Gordon (synthesizer), Jill Kroesen and David van Tieghem (percussion). Lovely Music VR 4908.

It takes some close reading of the liner notes to work out that The Lessons are 28 one-minute pieces for video derived from songs heard during The Bank, section 3, sequence of the video opera Perfect Lives (Private Parts) and that the whole lot seems to be subtitled Music word fire and I would do it again (coo coo). I am not sure whether Mr. Ashley's use of coo coo bears any relationship to Laurie Anderson's recent use of the same words during Big Science - since both are prominent members of the New York new music scene it would not surprise me to discover that there is a connection.

This selection has more vitality than that heard on the other parts of PP(PL) and is also free of the background piano noodling that detracted (especially) from the previous excerpts from The Bar. The vocal declamations are also more varied and have greater rhythmic bite. The prepared piano - sounding like Nancarrow's player-piano - is a positive addition to Mr. Ashley's soundscape and the haunting, strung-out recitations have a greater impact as they weave in and out of the wonderfully animated instrumental textures.

GLENN BRANCA: The Ascension. Glenn Branca, Jeffrey Glenn, David Rosenbloom, Ned Sublette (guitars), Stephan Winscherth (drums) 99 Records 001LP.

The list of performers begins to sound like a who's who of East Coast avant-garde composers and the music they make together is simply overwhelming. Although the music of Mr. Branca that has hitherto been recorded or broadcast has consisted of massed electric guitars building to dynamic and rhythmic tension-filled climaxes - interspersed with stunning, deafening silences - he has also composed works that are more varied in their instrumentation. Recordings of these latter works can only be waited with eager anticipation since Mr. Branca has certainly used the electric guitar in ways that could not have been imagined by Clarence Brown and T-Bone Walker during their battle of the blues guitar.

The Spectacular Commodity track is instantly gripping and, in its development section, chilling and frightening; yet the harmonic resolution towards the end made me smile. The huge rolling crescendi of The Ascension track speak of a whole new world of experience, with

silences more solid than much other music. The effect is today what The Rite of Spring must have been seventy years ago.

The recording would have benefited from greater clarity of sound and separation of the individual instruments.

DAVID BYRNE: Catherine Wheel. David Byrne, Brian Eno and others (guitars, bass, synthesizers etc.). Sire SRK 3645.

Punk becomes graceful art. Almost gazelle-like in its elegance, this music from the Twyla Tharp-commissioned Broadway production is clean-cut and instantly attractive. With Brian Eno aboard, the arrangements and sonic effects cannot help but be attractive. Formally a member of the Talking Heads, Mr. Byrne has a fertile creative mind, both for music and for the written word. His lyrics have been called self-referential, but whatever the stylistic label, the lyrics are as full of stimulating verbal imagery as is the music of sonic fantasy. The problem is that the aural kaleidoscope diminishes in interest because of the similarity of tempo and pulse of most of the individual pieces; there is too little sense of development, either within each song or between songs. Nevertheless, this is a gorgeous confection even if it does cloy the appetite.

PHILIP GLASS: Glassworks. Ensemble conducted by Michael Riesman, with Philip Glass (electric organ). CBS FM37265.

While Philip Glass is making a name for himself as one of the foremost opera composers of our day, perhaps of the last half-century, the record companies seem to be interested only in issuing a lollipop here and there. Perhaps Glassworks might more accurately have been called a suite based on the music of Satyagraha. The lovely music contained on this record is clearly related closely to the magnificent music of that opera. There seems often to be a feeling amongst commentators, especially of new music, that avant-garde music cannot be beautiful and attractive and instantly likeable. Perhaps that accounts for the mixed reception that this album has received because the music is all of that. Who cares whether this is or is not minimalism. Let the small-minded argue about labels and categories. This record proves that new can also mean beautiful.

ELLIOTT SHARPE: Ism. Ensemble including Elliott Sharp (guitars, basses, reeds and voice). Zoar 7.

The style of music seems poised midway between the monumental electronic rhythmicism of Glenn Branca and the vigorous popism of Robert Ashley or maybe it is a completely new-ism or is an anti-ism. These are exercises in abstractions of pop-based sounds that produce

a series of tracks of atonal rock. Rhythms are simple, but heard in a new context they probe the meanings of the basis of pop and rock so that the whole thing comes off sounding like experiments in jungle disco.

ALVIN LUCIER: I Am Sitting In a Room. Alvin Lucier (voice). Lovely Music VR 1013.

What does a building sound like when it is played as a musical instrument? This utterly fascinating record consists of 32 iterations of a recorded playback of Lucier's voice, evermore distorted by the resonances of the room in which it is recorded. Listening to the record is a deeply moving experience, as the recognizable human voice increasingly succumbs to the acoustic characteristics of the room. As though receding further and further from reality, Lucier's voice appears to enter some other reality beyond that of the listener. Out of all this there evolves a disturbing and unique music that by the end sounds so lovely - as though some extra-terrestrial, as one runs a finger around the rim of a wine glass, ran his finger around the edges of a building and produced its harmonics.

ALVIN LUCIER: Music on a Long Thin Wire. Lovely Music 10011/12

In the Rotunda of the US Customs House in Bowling Green, New York City, Alvin Lucier sets in motion an 80-foot long, thin wire at a single frequency. This is repeated at four frequencies, one on each record side.

Nothing changes, Everything changes. The dance at the center, which is stillness.

How can something which is not changed, change?

How can nothingness be so expressive?

Perhaps the music of deep space - of eternity - is like this.

How does the Universe sound, when it vibrates in harmony?

Only a profound respect for the stillness at the center.

LUCIANO BERIO: Coro. Kolner Rundfunkchor, Kolner Rundfunk Sinfonie Orchester conducted by Luciano Berio. DG 2531 270.

HANS WERNER HENZE: Tristan. Homero Francesch, (piano), Kolner Rundfunk Sinfonie Orchester conducted by Hans Werner Henze. DG 2530 834.

It is, I believe, no accident that the records that have been described so far have in the main been produced by small, independent companies. The large record companies have done criminally little to support or nurture the young composer. Deutsche Grammophon has done as much as any of the larger companies, perhaps more than most, to bring new music before the public. Even so less than five percent of the company's releases are of contemporary composers. However we have to be thankful for what we do get.

Coro was released some two years ago and Tristan has recently (finally) been released in this country, and both works make interesting comparisons with the other works reviewed in this column. Both sound overblown and old-fashioned compared with the vitality and freshness of many of the releases described above. Both are very serious works, but both seem to confuse soberness with seriousness of purpose.

Coro is a major work by one of this century's major composers. It seeks to deal, through settings of folk poems, with life, love, death and the condition of man. But it does so with a quantity and complexity of forces that make it just sound hysterical and dull. Mr. Berio's cause is not served by an atrocious recording quality which does little to help clarify the music and the words, which appear to be of great importance to the composer, are all but unintelligible. Having said all that, though, everyone who is interested in living music should buy and listen to this record. It is after all an important statement by an important composer and requires a hearing.

Similarly with Tristan, which has the added advantage of being a little more inventive and on not quite so pompous a scale. Tristan is certainly a powerful experience, but also an ugly one, as though the composer found no joy in love. But there is no denying the emotional impact of the ending, with the heart-beat, reading of Gottfried von Strassburg's words and string chords from the introduction to act three of Tristan und Isolde. Unfortunately too little of the rest of the work is on this level of invention.

However, both records are a good deal more stimulating than the hundred-and-nth recording of Tchaikovsky plays Vivaldi's Four Seasons.

Finally two anthologies.

JUST ANOTHER ASSHOLE. (no record number). Available from Printed Matter Inc., 7 Lispenard St., New York, NY 10013.

REVOLUTIONS PER MINUTE (The Art Record). Available from Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31-33 Mercer St., New York, NY 10013.

Both these records contain short works performed by the composers themselves. JAA has 77, yes (!), cuts by 77 performing artists - about 40 seconds per person. Can't go wrong; by the time you realize that a track is a bummer, it has gone and the next one is a knockout. Many of the works are sophomoric attempts at being funny or "significant", but for the most part it is the soaring inspiration of Anne De Marini's Radio Song or Amy Taubin's Door Stop or Gregory Sandow's sad, plaintive flute that catch the ear. Any record where at one moment there is music by Sbullette, Branca and Sandow cheek by jowl, and by Rosenbloom, Rhys Chatham and Peter Gordon the next, can't be bad.

It is interesting, where Revolutions per Minute is concerned, to find how many artists turn out to have so little to say. However The Atomic Alphabet and William Burroughs make a strong start to side three of this double album, and Ida Applebroog's Reality is That a Fact is one of the few refreshing rays of humor on the record.

A mixed bag, then, on these two albums, But both are important historical documents for what they tell us about the creative arts today and that, after all, is what this column is all about.

Ifan Payne