Recordings

Rosenblum, LeBaron, Carl, Bevelander, Tsontakis: American Composers Alliance at 50

Opus One Records 137, available from Opus One Records, Box 604, Greenville, Maine 04441, USA

American Composers Alliance at 50 is a recording sponsored by Opus One to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the American Composers Alliance. The acoustic works featured on the recording are Mathew Rosenblum's *Le Jon Ra*, for two cellos; Anne Lebaron's *The Sea and the Honeycomb*, for chamber ensemble; and George Tsonkis's *Galway Kinnel Songs*, for mezzo-soprano, string quartet, and piano. The two electroacoustic works reviewed here are primarily instrumental works that use tape to augment and support live performers.

Brian Bevelander's *Castle Music* achieves near perfection in the subtle integration of tape and instruments. Never is there a time when the electronic sounds call undue attention to themselves, nor is this piece imaginable without any of its well-balanced components in place. The two percussionists and two pianists are the primary focus of the piece, performing with a collage of processed acoustic and computer-generated sounds. The tastefully sparse use of live tape-delay involves a procedure where extreme high and low frequencies are panned to opposite channels on successive generations of delay. The clear formal design of the piece alternates rhythmically dynamic, virtuosic ensemble playing with static introspective sections—a kind of "night music" with bowed cymbals, tape collage, and delay, creating an exotic atmosphere. The static music acts as a ritornello, separating the compelling dramatic outbursts.

These outbursts vary from syncopated motoric rhythms to wild treble flourishes over an atonal walking bass. The piece comes to a close in a glorious shower of bells and wind chimes. In *Roundabout*, for contrabass and tape, composer Robert Carl also successfully creates a compelling, unified sound world. Working with contrabass virtuoso Robert Black, he created two types of sounds using a Synclavier: long, sustained tones derived from the low E of the instrument and percussive sounds made by knocking on the body of the instrument. The long, filtered tones act as drones throughout most of the work, blending smoothly with the live bass and creating a rich yet simple background for the plaintive bass solo, which occupies the first half of the work. Knocking sounds add rhythmic punctuation to the more animated second half, although they seem less integral to the music. Using ornaments, harmonics, tremolo, and other coloristic effects, the piece grows over several minutes, the bass becoming more and more agitated. While Robert Black's flawless and dramatic performance leads convincingly to the climax, the tape part merely gets louder and faster. Here is one missed opportunity for a genuine musical interaction between tape and instrument. The premature ending abruptly cuts off a bass solo with a brief, irrelevant fanfare, which the composer describes as "ending on a shout of affirmation." Certainly such a promising piece deserves a better ending.

Novelty wears thin. It is the strength of musical ideas that makes these eight-year-old pieces still vital, surpassing the average five-year shelf life allotted to most electroacoustic works.

Reviewed by Todd Winkler
Stanford, California USA

Savouret, Lindwall, Oppenheim: Computer Music Currents 1

Available from Wergo WER 2021-50 WERGO Schallplatten GmbH, Mainz, West Germany, distributed in North America by Harmonia Mundi, 3364 S. Robertson Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90034 USA

Wergo's *Computer Music Currents* series, a collection of 13 CDs, is an ambitious attempt to present a snapshot of the state of computer music. The series was funded by the System Development Foundation, in a joint venture with Wergo and Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics as part of a benchmark grant documenting computer music through these recordings and the book *Current Directions in Computer Music*, published by the MIT Press in 1989.

Alain Savouret's *Don Quixotte Corporation: A Loud Speaking Melodrama* was produced at the INA-GRM studios in Paris during 1980–1981. Savouret remarks in his notes: "Listening to this melodrama presupposes a readiness to accept the following statement: mass television broadcasting is manufacturing a mild, ordinary collective madness for avid consumers." He compares this madness to the affliction of Don Quixote, who began to distort reality to conform to a dreamworld with which he had become obsessed. The composition reminds one of visual experiences, and not only through its repeated references to television. The material, much of it concrete, is often assembled in a manner similar to montage. In the first section, *Prologue*, different sounds are juxtaposed one against another, their boundaries delineated by the scrape of a guiro. The second section, *Dulcinea*, presents variations on seven sound objects: the four syllables of the exclamation "Ah, Dulciné" interspersed

with a cackling hen, an old automobile horn, and a snorting horse. The variations are spun out as increasingly intricate echoes, proceeding from simple repetition through a faster succession of the same sounds, this time followed by chorused transformations, to an elaborate counterpoint of the objects in any order, sometimes played against drones and tied together in surprising unisons, as in the "né" + horn honk gesture around 2 min into the section. The rapid-fire succession of objects in the style of montage is one reminder of film here; another is that the art of the work lies in the editing. Many of the sounds used are not particularly interesting on their own. Beyond the array of concrete sources, vocal transformations, particularly by digital filtering and reverberation, form the bulk of the timbral material. Savouret gives these well-worn elements life by his composition, in a quite literal sense. Their placement, mixture, pace, and articulation draw one's interest beyond the television voices and car honks. It is when such agility and counterpoint give way to more methodical elaborations, as in *Maritornes*, that the energy flags.

Points (1986), by the Swedish composer Christer Lindwall, is anything but. The source material consists of sustained, vocallike sounds made with *Chant* at EMS in Stockholm. It is presented in long cascades, trailing out in little swarms of voices, alternating between sides of the stereo field. Gestures are very long here and placed variously in a sonic depth of field. The middle of the piece, after about 4 min, and the end, after a climax at 12 min, are played out as if at a great distance. I am reminded of Ligeti in the *Atmospheres* period, when contrapuntal movement is layered to such a degree that it is heard as if under water. Lindwall's piece is

deeply layered as well, and then the whole moved forward and back in space by its global amplitude. Diverse treatments of the *Chant* material mark the evolution of the piece, leading to a vaguely flutelike processing at the end.

The period of transition from electronic music to computer music was an eclectic one; people simultaneously became interested in using computers for several different reasons. One catalyst was algorithmic composition; another was the facility with which the computer could improve some phases of traditional electronic music production. Though completed in 1987, well into the computer music era, Daniel V. Oppenheim's *Round the Corners of Purgatory* is representative of the latter impulse toward digital technology. The material is again largely concrete, consisting of pipes played in various ways and water sounds. The primary processing technique is traditional tape manipulation, with analog spatialization performed by Moog and DG equipment. The computer is used in the mixing and editing stage, as is often the case in concrete music, the stage where most of the compositional decisions are made. Oppenheim used a Synclavier II to mix and place sounds in time. There are intriguing contrasts to be noted between this piece and the Savouret, both concrete works in which editing is the primary vehicle of expression. Oppenheim's sounds are fuller than Savouret's, more arresting as a musical resource on their own. Perhaps because of this, the forms in which Savouret casts his material are more mercurial; Oppenheim allows greater spans of time for the sounds to speak, in directed, organic, spun-out phrases. Both pieces are split into six sections. Where Savouret explores different parts of the Quixote story in each section, Oppenheim's collection

is more deliberately symmetrical: the entire structure is bounded by a *Prologue* and (short) *Postlude,* with twin *Purgatory* sections in second and fourth place. Both *Purgatory* parts begin with the same sound and use much of the same material. Water sounds and a rhythmic, repetitive bass play prominent roles. The two are differentiated by the material they develop. Still, I found myself wishing that their larger architectures, built in each case from density of layering and rhythmically placed amplitude envelopes, had shown more variation. *Drifting Up,* the longest of the sections, shows to advantage much of what works about this piece: the spatialization and the sense of rhythm, particularly in the opening, when repetitive rings at different tempi are bounced about in separate speakers simultaneously.

The three works collected here show contrasting approaches to the casting of sonic material in extended forms. Of the three, Savouret has the least opulent sounds; it is interesting to speculate that a relative inattention to the individual events led him to invent more versatile shapes in which to present them.

Reviewed by Robert Rowe
Cambridge, Massachusetts USA

Vaughn, Williams, MacDonald, Wishart, Dearden, Alvarez: Overhear

Available from Overhear Music, Music Department, The University of Keele, Keele, Staffs., ST5 5BG, England

Overhear is the first recording by Overhear Music, a new compact disk label based at the University of Keele. This CD is expertly produced and contains excellent examples of