

**Digital Moonscapes:** Wendy Carlos. CBS Masterworks M39340. Digitally generated sound, recorded in analog multi-track, mixed on the Sony PCM-1610 digital system. About \$9.

**Dreamsong, Orbital View, Love in the Asylum:** Michael McNabb. 1750 Arch S-1800. Digitally generated sound, transferred to disc master with the Sony PCM-1610 digital system. About \$8.

Wendy Carlos has been pissing me off continuously for 16 years. It started with *Switched-On Bach*, at one time CBS's biggest-selling "classical" record ever, which managed to set back the development of electronic music a decade. With its pseudomusical sound effects it trivialized the medium, and it reduced the complex machines that produced the sounds to the status of glorified electric organs.

She's still doing it. In the liner notes to *Digital Moonscapes*, she states that one of the goals of synthetic music is "to build new sounds with orchestral qualities that have not been heard before but are equally satisfying to the ear." The comment — lucid and perceptive — is typical of her pronouncements on electronic music, but, as usual, she ignores her own advice completely. She uses her GDS synthesizer to imitate almost slavishly a symphony orchestra, and then falls in love with her own creations. Granted, her oboe, bassoon, tuba, and trumpet sounds are excellent, but as Cambridge composer Curtis Roads aptly put it, "If I want a saxophone, I'll hire a saxophone!"

The record consists of two sets of short pieces inspired in large part by pictures taken by the NASA *Voyager* missions. It starts off promisingly enough, with nice, long, spacy sounds, but it deteriorates rapidly into a rehash of Holst's *The Planets* — but without the drama and the intensity of the earlier work.

In light of recent news from her New York publicity company that the music will be performed by a real orchestra next April in Berkeley, California, this record seems even more superfluous. Maybe Carlos should have hired the band in the first place (it would have made the musicians' union a lot happier) and saved herself a lot of trouble.

Michael McNabb's approach to electronic music couldn't be more different. McNabb, who works

out of the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA — known as "karma"), at Stanford University, is one of the few great original composers to embrace the electronic medium in recent years. He does not try to imitate anything — which is how all of the great composers of the 20th century have worked. He uses new techniques and technologies to develop totally new means of expression. And he succeeds.

These three pieces were composed between 1978 and 1981 and can be considered "state of the art." *Dreamsong* and *Orbital View*, the earlier pieces, are studies of the transmogrification of the human voice that, according to the notes, exemplify McNabb's goal: "the hallucinogenic shifting between familiar sounds and imaginary musical images." McNabb is not afraid occasionally to use simple tonalities and rhythms as reference points and to attract and hold the listener's attention, but he does so in a highly original way. And even though he acknowledges a debt to Holst for *Orbital View*, the music is not at all derivative of anything I can think of.

But these two pieces, *Dreamsong* and *Orbital View*, satisfying as they are, are merely warm-ups for *Love in the Asylum*, one of the most devastatingly beautiful pieces of elec-

tronic music I have ever heard. I first encountered this piece more than a year ago at an experimental planetarium show in Vancouver, Canada, and the memory of it still haunts me. It uses real and synthesized nonverbal vocal sounds, string- and bell-like tones, and even a calliope to achieve a gorgeous, sometimes funny, sometimes inspirational, sometimes terrifying sonic environment. Although McNabb drags in a huge collection of disparate compositional elements, from circus music and electronic fanfares to pop tunes and disembodied laughter, the piece works; if Charles Ives had had access to a computer, he might have written something vaguely similar to this. McNabb says that he originally wrote the work for symphony orchestra, but I can't imagine a piece of music better suited to the computer.

The pressing is superb. My only complaint is that this record is too short: the total time of the three pieces is a scant 27 minutes.

If you are considering buying this album, you should know that the label, 1750 Arch, of Berkeley, California, which has been valiantly struggling to produce unusual new — and old — jazz and classical music for the past 10 years, is in the process of folding. If you can't find it at a dealer's, send \$9.50 (which includes tax

and shipping) to CCRMA, Music Department, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305. If you have a CD player you might want to wait until February, when Mobile Fidelity will put the album out on CD. It will be the first truly digital music album: the computer's output goes directly into the digital inputs of a Sony PCM-1610, which in turn feeds the CD master, so the first point at which any analog conversion takes place will be in your living room.

— P.D.L.

**Synchronicity:** The Police. dbx PS-1086. Re-release of A & M SP-3735, 1983. dbx encoded. About \$18.

**The Joan Baez Ballad Book:** Joan Baez. dbx PS-1039. Re-release of Vanguard VSD 41/42, 1972. dbx encoded. Two discs. About \$18.

In September dbx announced that it was discontinuing its line of encoded discs and cassettes. Although that's a shame, the move was perfectly understandable from the company's viewpoint. The Newton firm's records have been shining examples of how close vinyl records can come to true digital recordings in terms of sonic quality. Today, of course, anyone can get a CD player for just a little more than the cost of a good cassette deck, but when dbx put out its first records, there was simply no



# HORIZONTAL, VERTICAL, & DIGITAL

**PAUL ELLINGSON, "SOLO JAZZ PIANO."** Regular readers of *Keyboard's* letters column will probably have at least a dim recollection of the forthright personal views about jazz and its place in the history of music expressed by Paul Ellingson. When we last heard from Mr. Ellingson, he was promising that his yet-to-be-released solo album would elucidate his point ineluctably. As indeed it does. It's a two-record set, recorded with a fullness and warmth of piano tone that would do Bill Evans proud. The liner notes, which begin on the front cover, fill the inner portion of the sleeve, and break off almost reluctantly on the back cover, offer the most complete explication to date of Ellingson's interpretation of music history. If one can summarize this briefly without doing injustice to it, he looks at all the music of the European classical tradition as an outgrowth of the four-part Bach chorale, whose polyphonic independence of voice-leading made it, in Ellingson's view, an essentially *horizontal* musical expression. He goes on to apply the term "horizontal" without qualification to all subsequent European (and American classical) music. In contrast, he maintains, jazz is essentially *vertical* music, because of its emphasis on chord voicings. He goes on to explicitly deny the importance of voice-leading from one chord to another, preferring to look at each new chord as an independent chunk that can be followed by any other independent chunk, depending on the whim of the composer or improviser. The distinction between horizontal and vertical is Ellingson's *idee fixe*, and in taking it to its logical conclusion he has to do violence to music history and music analysis at a couple of points. To mention only one, he insists that there is no such thing as a vertical chord in a four-part Bach chorale, that the entire chorale consists of only one chord.

Ellingson's perspective is worth explaining because it animates and defines his approach to piano playing. The pieces on *Solo Jazz Piano*, both original compositions and well-known jazz titles like "Night In Tunisia" and "Re: Person I Knew," are presented almost entirely in the form of vertical chord forms, sometimes broken or arpeggiated and usually held with the sustain pedal until the time arrives for the next vertical block to make its appearance. Melodic fragments are sometimes draped over the tops of the chords, but for the most part they are

clearly delineated *within* the harmonic structure set forth by the chord rather than reaching out to suggest any broader harmonic horizons. In his essay Ellingson completely ignores the fundamental importance of rhythm in jazz; rhythm, one suspects, wouldn't fit neatly into the rigid boundaries of his scheme because it is horizontal. And as we should expect, there is little rhythmic vitality in his keyboard work. The constant fluctuations of pulse are, to be sure, derived more from free-time jazz ballad treatments than from classical rubato. Curiously, as he moves from one chord to another his voice leading is quite accomplished.

*Solo Jazz Piano* is too far outside the mainstream to be looked at as anything more than a personal statement by a loner. But it is a very competent statement, and music history is full of beguiling examples of loners and their eccentric visions. In his static rhythms, harmonic twists, and simple grandeur, Ellingson's piano music sounds very much like that of Eric Satie. This is a compliment, but I don't imagine Ellingson will feel flattered. After all, Satie was a European. Ivy Jazz Records (2820 East 4135 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84117), IJ1-E1-2.

**MICHAEL McNABB, "COMPUTER MUSIC."** You think you're a heavyweight in digital synthesis because you own a Synclavier? Up at Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, they're composing pieces on a mainframe Foonly F-4 (which we're told is basically the same machine as a PDP-10), using hand-tailored algorithms to do luscious things you have to hear to believe. Mutating the wind by imperceptible degrees into a woman's voice. Treating the phase and amplitude of each overtone in a note individually. Things like that. And along the way, making some beautiful music. The first volume in a projected series of releases from CCRMA contains three outstanding examples — Michael McNabb's *Dreamsong*, *Love In The Asylum*, and "Orbital View." Fragments of tonal material are frequently mixed with pure sound, as in the opening of *Dreamsong*, where a rising melodic fifth serves as a fanfare over a burst of crowd noise. Later, microtonal harmonies blend into one another as the various "instruments" swoop left and right, forward and back in the stereo field. McNabb's pieces are definitely symphonic as opposed to minimalist;

that is, there are wide variations in the density and urgency of the texture, and dramatic gesture is frequently an important element. The final cadence of the piece is chillingly effective: After nine minutes of instrumental sound, we hear a pulse of rumbling noise that quickly resolves into Dylan Thomas' voice, reciting his line, "I may without fail suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars." *Love In The Asylum* begins with quiet laughter and birdsong and incorporates several musical references, including a Brahms waltz and a recording of an actual carousel, but the bulk of the piece consists of insistently pulsing and swirling pitched sounds that break off unexpectedly, giving way to peaceful but oddly disturbing interludes which then build to new climaxes. Both compositionally and sonically (which in computer music are more and more the same thing) McNabb shows a masterful control of this rapidly evolving vocabulary. Recommended without hesitation. 1750 Arch Records (1750 Arch St., Berkeley, CA 94709; also dist. by NMDS, 500 Broadway, New York, NY 10012), S-1800.

### Also:

**Malcolm Bilson & Robert Levin, Mozart: Music For Two Fortepianos**, Nonesuch, 78023. The fortepiano's differences in register give new meaning to Mozart's scores in invigorating performances of the *Sonata In D Major*, K. 448/375a, the *Fugue In C Minor*, K. 426, and a fragmentary *Larghetto and Allegro in E♭ major*, for which Levin has provided his own completion. The next development in the early music scene, we imagine, will be entire new pieces composed from scratch in the style of the period.

**Terry Riley, Songs For The Ten Voices Of The Two Prophets**, Kuckuck Schallplatten (dist. in the U.S. by Celestial Harmonies, Box 673, Wilton, CT 06897, and by NMDS), 067. This is our first chance to hear Riley singing in the raga style he has been studying for the past ten years. The tunes are his own, but the melodic inflections are distinctively Indian. In this live solo performance taped in Munich, he accompanies himself on synthesizers tuned to non-equal temperament, fleshing out the exotic textures with frequent sequencer loops.

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# Turntable of Treats

From Mozart to Prince, the season's best listening.

**Mozart: Requiem (K. 626, edited by C. R. F. Maunder),** Vocal ensemble and Academy of Ancient Music, Christopher Hogwood, conductor (L'Oiseau-Lyre CD\*). Controversy still rages over how much of Mozart's doom-haunted last work is the composer's own work and how much was filled in by his student F. X. Süssmayr. Maunder's edition dispenses with most of Süssmayr's known additions and substitutes material drawn from other authentic Mozart sources. His work is convincing, but what makes it memorable is the tremendous intensity of Hogwood's vision of the piece, and the astounding clarity

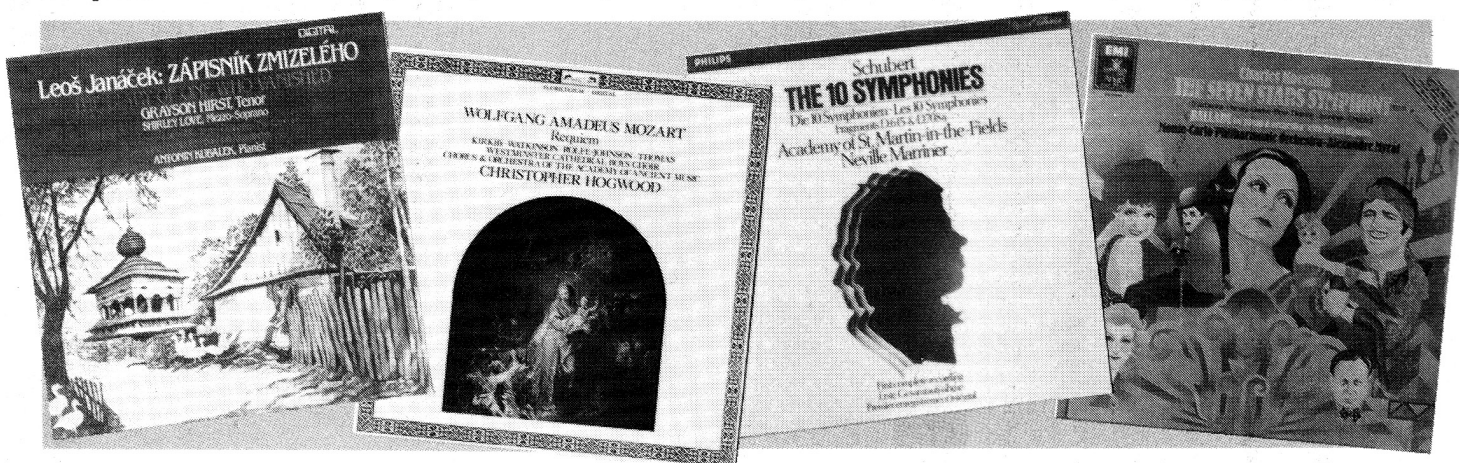
gang Sawallisch, conductor; **Verdi: Alzira,** Ileana Cotrubas, Francisco Araiza and an ensemble conducted by Lamberto Gardelli (both Orfeo). Early failures by recognized geniuses usually tower above the best works of lesser composers. Both these works—Wagner's warm-hearted paean to the joys of the bourgeoisie and Verdi's full-blooded shocker—are cases in point. In these excellent performances they take on a vitality that contradicts their dubious reputations.

**Mahler: Symphony No. 7, Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, Bernard Haitink, conductor (Philips CD).** Craggy, full of mysterious mutterings and madden-

ingratiating. The second, his first published score, is so energy-laden that it threatens to leap off the stage. Both receive brilliant performances by the Los Angeles-based Sequoia.

**Janacek: The Diary of One Who Vanished,** Grayson Hirst, tenor, with Shirley Love, mezzo-soprano, and Antonín Kubálek, piano (Arabesque CD). A 20th-century counterpart to Schubert's "Die Winterreise," Janacek's song cycle poignantly details the story of a young man snared in an impossible love. Long absent from the catalog, the cycle is well honored in this splendid new performance.

**McNabb: Computer Music (1750 Arch).** The computer doesn't compose, but it serves as an incomparable tool for manipulating a composer's ideas in a fascinating variety of ways. Michael McNabb, who works at Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, uses his electronic helpmeet in a wide variety of shapely pieces, some quite



with which his superb ensemble performs it.

**Schubert: Ten Symphonies,** Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Neville Martininer, conductor (Philips). Marriner's crisp, spirited leadership, with an orchestra small enough to allow Schubert's distinctive wind-and-brass scoring to shine through, brings new luster to even the best known of these symphonies. The real surprise, however, is the inclusion of two stunning symphonies (No. 7 from 1821 and No. 10 from the composer's last weeks), which Schubert left fully sketched but unscored. They have now been convincingly fleshed out by British musicologist Brian Newbould, along with some sketched beginnings of movements, too short to complete but tantalizing in the beauties they promise.

**Brahms: Horn Trio in E flat, Op. 40; Clarinet Trio in A minor, Op. 114,** Andreas Schiff, pianist, with members of the New Vienna Octet (London). Chamber musicianship of the highest order—loving, probing and immensely communicative—makes something spontaneous and wonderfully fresh of these note-heavy pieces.

**Wagner: Die Feen,** Linda Esther Gray, John Alexander and an ensemble, Wolf-

ing digressions, this is the most difficult to approach of all Mahler's symphonies. Yet Haitink has pierced the score's tight defenses with remarkable success; his command of Mahler's line of thought reveals a work of strength and considerable beauty.

**Koechlin: The Seven Stars Symphony,** Monte-Carlo Philharmonic, Alexandre Myrat, conductor (Angel); **Music for Piano,** Boaz Sharon, pianist (Nonesuch). Honored as a pedagogue but at most tolerated as a composer of sweet nothings, Charles Koechlin (1867-1950) found surcease and inspiration late in life in a passion for movie stars. "Seven Stars" is what its name implies: a suite of tributes to filmdom's firmament of circa 1933, including an extended exegesis of the many moods of Charlie Chaplin. Among the piano pieces, most of them crushingly correct postromantic doodling, there is a "Dance for Ginger Rogers," a love letter no less, bashful yet ardent.

**Weill: Two String Quartets,** Sequoia Quartet (Nonesuch). Years before his emergence as the master of theater music (in Berlin and later in New York), Kurt Weill won fame as a serious composer. The first of his two quartets is an apprentice work from Weill's teens, garrulous and

witty, all aglow with light and color.

**Schumann: Works for Piano,** Charles Rosen (Nonesuch). Rosen's command of musical form is strenuously engaged by Schumann's exuberant romanticism, but the result is a set of performances that make such works as the "Kreisleriana" and "Carnaval" suites seem newly scrubbed. The three-disc album also includes the rarely heard original version of the "Fantasy."

**Kern: Silver Linings, 14 Theater Songs,** Joan Morris, mezzo-soprano and William Bolcom, piano (Arabesque CD). With Broadway shows ensconced in opera houses and operatic celebrities involved in recordings of Broadway shows, the distinction between pop and "serious" music becomes increasingly blurred. Morris and Bolcom, whose previous albums include songs of Gershwin, Berlin and vaudeville, clearly don't believe in any such distinction. Their marvelous give-and-take in some of Jerome Kern's wittiest and most haunting ballads elevates these songs to a level of high art, without undermining the vitality of American musical theater in its finest hours.

ALAN RICH

\*CD indicates compact-disc version also available.

## Classical Records

# The best classical records of the year — so far

By Paul Hertelendy  
Mercury News Music Writer

**B**EFORE the onslaught of Christmas-season recordings, it's time for a fall review of the best classical discs of

the past year. They appear below in three categories: best single LPs, best multiple-disc albums and best new orchestral music by living composers.

Any such list omitting the Bruckner Seventh Symphony made

by conductor Herbert Blomstedt in East Germany probably risks public rebukes by the faithful of the San Francisco Symphony. But if you sit and listen to Riccardo Chailly's lively handling of the same symphony with his RSO Berlin ensemble on a far more widely circulated label, the basis of choice will crystalize.

Lists are alphabetical except for the new orchestral music, which is in order of preference. The composers therein are three Americans, an Estonian (Arvo Part) and a Soviet (Alfred Schnittke).

All the discs are digital and also available on cassette, unless otherwise noted. Some are available on compact discs (CDs), too.

The San Jose Symphony's music of Henry Brant recorded at the Center of Performing Arts in 1983, under George Cleve, cannot be on the list for one very compelling reason: It has yet to be released.

### BEST SINGLE ALBUM

Bruckner: Symphony No. 7. Riccardo Chailly conducts the RSO Berlin (London 414 290-1 LH); also on CD.

### NEW ORCHESTRAL MUSIC BY LIVING COMPOSERS

First Choice: Arvo Part: "Tabula Rasa, Fratres, Cantus," Gidon Kremer, violin (ECM 25011-1 F).

Second Choice: John Adams: "Harmonium," Edo de Waart leads the San Francisco Symphony, (ECM 25012-1); also on CD.

Third Choice: Joseph Schwantner: "Magabunda," William Schuman: American Hymn, Leonard Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony (None-such 79072).

Fourth Choice: Alfred Schnittke: Violin Concerto No. 2, Basler Symphonie with Gidon Kremer and Heinz Holliger (Philips 411 107-1).

Fifth Choice: Morton Gould: "Apple Waltzes," "Burchfield Gallery," Morton Gould leads the American Symphony (RCA ARC 1-5019). ■

Chausson: Songs, Jessye Norman, soprano (Erato NUM 75059).

Chopin: Songs, Op. 74. Teresa Zylis-Gara, soprano (Erato 71527).

Gregorian Chant, Vienna Hofburg Choralschola (Philips 411-140-4).

Janacek: "Diary of One Who Vanished," Grayson Hirst, Shirley Love, vocalists, with Columbia Pro Cantare Women's Ensemble (Arabesque 6513); also on CD.

Jongen: Symphonie Concertante; Franck: Fantaisie in A; Pastorale, Edo de Waart leads the San Francisco Symphony (Telarc DG-10096).

New Music with Guitar, Vol. 2, David Starobin, guitar (Bridge BDG 2004). Not digital, not available on cassette.

McNabb: "Dream Song" and other works, computer synthesizer at Stanford University (1750 Arch S1800); also on CD.

Rameau: Pygmalion (Ballet), Nicholas McGegan conducts English Bach Festival Orchestra and Singers (Erato STU 71507).

Schumann: Davidsbündler-



Leonard Slatkin

taenze, Robert Taub, piano (Harmonia Mundi 5133).

### BEST ALBUMS, MULTIPLE

Barber: "Antony and Cleopatra" (Opera, in English), Esther Hinds, Jeffrey Wells; Christian Badaea Conducts (New World 322-24, three discs).

Brahms: "German Requiem," Robert Shaw leads the Atlanta Symphony (Telarc DG 10092-2, two discs); also on CD.

Britten: "War Requiem," Simon Rattle leads Birmingham Symphony, with Elisabeth Soderstrom, Richard Allen, Robert Tear (Angel DS 3949, two discs); also on CD.

Giordano: "Andrea Chenier" (opera, in Italian), with Luciano Pavarotti, Montserrat Caballe, Leo Nucci (London 410-117-1, three discs); also on CD.

Mahler: Symphony No. 3, Georg Solti leads the Chicago Symphony and Chorus; with Helga Dernesch (London LDR 72014, two discs).

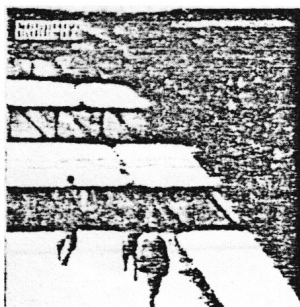
Purcell: "King Arthur," John Eliot Gardiner leads Monteverdi Choir, English Baroque Soloists (Erato NUM 751272, two discs).

Stravinsky: "The Rake's Progress" (opera, in English), Riccardo Chailly leads the London Sinfonietta and Chorus (London 411-644-1, three discs).

# Second Annual Polyphony Awards Banquet

by: Robert Carlberg

The year of Big Brother, women in space, and Doonesbury's return has seen Electronic Music mature tremendously. Not only are synthesizers being used frequently -- and well -- in popular music, but "Electronic Music" itself has grown more professional and accessible, blurring the distinction. No longer a novelty as it is absorbed into the mainstream of music, E.M. has gained respect and passes on its vitality to a new generation.



**Album of The Year:** Group 87 - **A Career in Dada Processing** (reviewed Aug). A prime example of the new maturity in electronic music, brought on by the influx of established musicians and sophisticated hardware. Honorable mentions: Laurie Anderson - **Mister Heartbreak** (Aug) and Thomas Dolby - **The Flat Earth** (Apr): Adroit use of electronics in more conventional frameworks.

**Song of the Year:** "Mr. Moto's Penguin (Who'd Be An Eskimo's Wife?)" from Mark Isham's **Vapor Drawings** (Feb). One of the principals of Group 87, Isham proves his success was no fluke.

**Tape of the Year:** John Wiggins - **Anagenic** (Apr). An example of the type of music that best fits the cassette format, being perhaps too complicated and heroic for the informal LP.

**Best Album Title:** **The Flat Earth** by Thomas Dolby (Apr). Acknowledges and gently spoofs the inexplicable resurgence in reactionary thought these days.

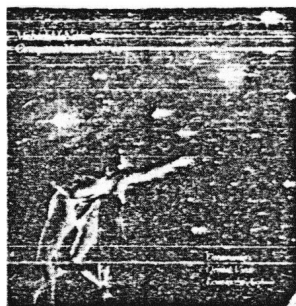


**Best Song Title:** "Ghosts Before Breakfast" from Michelle Musser's **A Cast of Shadows** cassette (Oct). No reason -- just like the sound of it.

**Best Popular Synthesizer Album:** Take your pick -- there were a million of them on the radio. A couple hundred thousand anyway.



**Best Jazz Synthesizer Album:** **Modern Times** by Steps Ahead (Aug). Shows how to be "modern" while still being timeless.

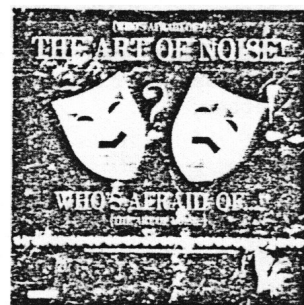


**Best Avant-Garde Electronic Album:** **Computer Music** by Michael McNabb (Aug). Comes with the kind of lengthy 'explanations' that usually spell trouble, but this one's a

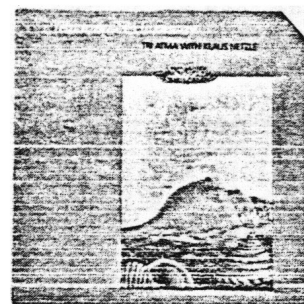
gem of shifting tonalities and surprising transformations.

**Most Improved:** Laurie Anderson for **Mister Heartbreak** (Aug). After a couple of albums which were not substantially advanced over her debut, Laurie came out with a winner.

**Most Likely to Succeed:** The Art of Noise -- **Who's Afraid of?** (Oct). If not them, then someone like them. It's too dumb to fail.



**Best Group Name:** Bluetoy -- **Re-inventing the Wheel Without a Third Eye** (cassette, Oct). When asked, Chris admitted it's his license plate.



**Best Mixing:** Iverson and Walters **First Collection** (Oct) for mixing bluegrass and EM. Tri Atma **Yearning & Harmony** (Oct) for mixing jazz guitar, Indian percussion and EM.

**Irony of the Year No. 1:** Spinal Tap, the parody of what's worst in Heavy Metal, played concerts and

(continued on page 16)

player, and author of the album notes. He describes the two jolly pieces about the football game and the steamboat as "realizations by Gunther Schuller," but leaves it at that; realizations from what? We get the *America* variations in a transcription of a transcription (William Rhoad's adaptation for winds from William Schuman's orchestral transcription of the original for organ), but the version is well performed, and Ives himself probably would have loved it. The pianist accompanying the four choruses remains anonymous, and we certainly could have used the songs' texts. On the whole, though, parts of the program make this disc worth your attention.

It also provides me the cue to boast, unabashedly, of having spent an afternoon with Ives in his East 74th Street house in New York in 1948, and of publishing (in *Harper's*) the first full-length biographical article about him. At that time, many musicians had serious, quite genuine doubts as to his sanity. Forty-five years later, Boston—*Boston!*—holds an Ives festival, and Heiss's notes remark offhandedly that Stephen Drury "has long performed both Ives Piano Sonatas and much of his keyboard music." Times do indeed change.

What a pity they changed too slowly for Ives to have enjoyed at least a little more such recognition before 1954, when he died, affluent from his life insurance firm but shockingly neglected as this country's most impressive composer to date. I can imagine the expression on his face if he could have heard this sonic depiction of that football game, complete with kickoff, grunting linemen, signal-calling, and the wild run for the touchdown that wins the game—certainly for Yale, Ives's *alma mater*. I think he would have gotten quite a bang out of that. I think you will, too. PAUL MOOR

**McNABB: *Dreamsong*; *Love in the Asylum*; *Orbital View*.**

Michael McNabb, computer. [Michael McNabb, prod.] 1750 ARCH S 1800 (digital recording). (Distributed by Composers Recordings, Inc., 170 W. 74th St., New York, N.Y. 10023.)

Michael McNabb and his music have firm ties to Stanford University. He pursued his doctorate in composition there, and in 1976 began working as a computer programmer and composer at Stanford's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics. The three computer works on this disc present us

with a clear, consistent picture of his musical preferences.

*Dreamsong* (1978), according to McNabb, is a "careful blend of synthesized sounds and recorded natural sounds that have been digitally processed or resynthesized." Some of the so-called natural sounds—musical instruments, singing and speaking voices, planes taking off—are still recognizable. Others have been reprocessed to the point of unintelligibility. McNabb's greatest achievement is the seamless integration of purely synthesized sonorities with those natural sounds; one hardly knows, for instance, where real vocal lines end and artificially produced tones begin. Though the entire composition possesses the aimless, almost surreal quality of a dream, the musical result—despite the wide range of material employed—never seems fragmented, owing to McNabb's smooth, unbroken "sonic continuum."


The soprano lines of *Dreamsong* are layered as well as reprocessed, producing what amounts to an eerie cosmic chorus. The same technique is employed throughout *Orbital View* (1979, rev. 1981), a portion of the soundtrack from a NASA-sponsored film that shows footage taken by the Viking probes to Mars. One vocal line enters after another, all in pure nonvibrato manner, and the lush, echoing sonorities ultimately resolve in a clear, powerful minor triad.

The longest work on the disc is *Love*

in the *Asylum* (1981). Like *Dreamsong*, it explores the contrast between natural sounds (instrumental and vocal) and those created entirely in the studio. Unlike *Dreamsong*, all of these sounds—except for laughter and calliope music—were synthesized. Thus, even the "natural" ones are not what they seem.


Cast in three movements ("Mad as Birds," "Pirouette," "The Magician's Daughter"), *Love in the Asylum* was originally conceived for orchestra. Its computer version aims for a sonic unity similar to that of *Dreamsong*, comfortably blending an enormous variety of sounds—"chorus," music box, circus calliope, repetitive melodic figures à la Philip Glass, and climactic pedal points.

In general, McNabb's synthesized sonorities are attractive, avoiding the extremes (and ugliness) of white noise. This mellow strain in his musical production is reflected in his harmonic and melodic language. Unlike many computer composers, McNabb is a traditionalist: He prefers a vocabulary that is consonant, tonal, accessible. Some may find that his harmony strays too close to the platitudes of popular music, but while certain chord progressions do sound dangerously saccharine, I find McNabb's music more appealing than disconcerting. 1750 Arch's direct digital recording (and pressing) is a model of silence, but at 27 minutes total for the two sides, let the buyer beware. K. ROBERT SCHWARZ



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