

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Trends in New Music on Disks

Critics of the contemporary arts who talk about "eclecticism" and "flux" should always be regarded with suspicion. New music has often been referred to as "eclectic," yet in 50 or 100 years it will all be neatly categorized by music historians.

If our age appears to us as musically eclectic, however, there are good reasons for that. One is the apparent lack of dominant figures around whom movements can coalesce—the present-day equivalents of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók and the like. Another is the dizzying plethora of new ideas that bombard the composer; with options more open than ever before, it is increasingly difficult to feel securely part of an ongoing tradition.

These ideas, all of which crop up on an assortment of recent records, arrive from a variety of directions and come at a time when the serial principle has lost any of its pretensions to hegemony. There are technical possibilities opened up by electronics and computer technology. There are third-world cultures. There is a new respect for popular-music traditions and folk music. There is the increased historical consciousness brought about by musicological re-

search and recordings. There is a fascination with meditation and the Orient, hardly confined to music and abetted by the widespread use of such drugs as marijuana.

Much of the resulting music dates back to American composers in previous decades who could be called loners—in fact this country has such a number of interesting eccentrics (Ives, Ruggles, Partch, et al.) that they almost constitute a school by themselves. Dane Rudhyar is such a figure, a man who is now almost 83 years old and who has turned out strange and unclassifiable music for much of his lifetime. Born in France (he was in the audience for the first performance of "The Rite of Spring" in 1913) he came to this country in 1916 and settled in California in 1920. (The two parts of this country most congenial for the cultivation of fiercely independent composers have been California and New England.) Aside from music Rudhyar has long been concerned with the Orient, philosophy, religion and astrology, and has written much about those subjects. The latest disk of his music is a piano record on CRI, nicely played by

Marcia Mikulak, which offers works from the 1920's and from 1976. They sound remarkably alike—dreamy, fragmented rhapsodies, chromatic yet comforting.

John Cage might seem an odd figure to place in the "loner" category, since no one has been more assiduous about propagating both his music and his theories, or about gathering a school with disciples. Still, Cage's considerable influence has been more pervasive as theory and as a paternal presence; his music itself, with its sometimes deliberately ephemeral impact, is more confined to him. The new recording of Sonatas and Interludes and "A Book of Music," both from the 1940's and both for prepared pianos, suggests the extent and limits of his work: fascinating to

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consider; less fascinating to listen to for extended periods of time.

Lou Harrison had his alliances 40 years ago both to Cage and to Virgil Thomson, the Francophilic, sturdily independent American composer whose folk-rooted, consolingly simple operas and instrumental works disguised a considerable musical erudition. Mr. Harrison has retreated in recent decades to California, where he writes music mostly for conventional Western instrumental combinations in a mode that is often quasi-Oriental, and sometimes mixes in actual Oriental instruments. The "Elegiac" Symphony dates back to 1942 for its first sketches (it was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation) but only completed in 1975. It is a large-scale, gently contemplative work,

as befits its title, and most attractive. The other side offers a piece called "Cadences" by Robert Hughes, another San Francisco Bay Area composer, which is interesting in its elaborate juxtapositions of scraps of material and quotations from hither and yon, but not really directly akin to the kind of music being considered here.

It might seem odd to include Alan Hovhaness in this discussion, particularly a pops record by Andre Kostelanetz. But Mr. Hovhaness fits in, nonetheless, as a composer of mostly mournful, modal music with hypnotic undertones and a continued fascination for the coloristic possibilities of the modern orchestra. The fact that Mr. Kostelanetz has recognized in him a possible provider of fodder for his pop repertory is not surprising. One thing this new music represents is an implicit rejection of the extreme elitism that has characterized so much modern music, and if a composer actually chooses now to court an audience's favor, he can do so without a complete loss of his "serious" credentials.

Loren Rush is a San Francisco composer who, like Mr. Harrison, has writ-

ten music that is sometimes conventionally chromatic and abstract and sometimes more meditative and openly experimental. The piano music on Dwight Peltzer's record devoted exclusively to Mr. Rush's work is of the second type, and mightily appealing. "Oh, Susanna" begins with a dreamily chromatic cloud of seemingly random notes, and out of that cloud, gradually and mysteriously, emerge first fragments and eventually the whole of the wedding march from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." It's a lovely idea, and one that doesn't lose its charm on repeated hearings. "A Little Traveling Music" blends piano figurations and computer-generated sounds in a most effective manner, and "soft music, HARD MUSIC" juxtaposes soft, distantly quiet sounds for three ampli-

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fied pianos with a second section of hammering, roaring noise.

"Lovely Music, Ltd." is the name of a new record company in lower Manhattan that specializes in music of the sort being considered here. In fact, the very notion of this name, no matter how tongue-in-cheek, would have been inconceivable for most forms of 20th-century avant-gardism. And by and large much of the music in the first six records released in this series is "lovely"—both in the sense that it is nice but also in the sense that it is deliberately, sweetly pretty.

David Behrman is another San Francisco composer, although he has spent a good deal of his time in the East and ran Columbia Record's lamented and venturesome series of avant-garde recordings in the late 1960's. Mr. Behrman is mostly concerned these days with the alteration and extension of minimal live music through an electronic system of his own design. The result is both beautiful and suggestive of a blend of tech-

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nology and improvisatory folk music. Music like this disproves in the simplest way possible any fears that technology entails a dehumanization of art.

If anyone is the father figure of the Lovely Music series, it is Robert Ashley, a composer who, along with Mr. Behrman and two others, founded the Sonic Arts Union a few years back. More recently Mr. Ashley has taught at Mills College in Oakland, Calif., and spent a good deal of time here. His "Private Parts" LP consists of two sections from a projected seven-section work; these two plus a third were given live recently at the Kitchen in lower Manhattan. The work consists of Mr. Ashley reciting a sing-song, calmly surreal text of considerable poetic beauty over a musical background of piano filigree, synthesizer and clavinet chords and tablas,

most of which is provided by another composer named (Blue) Gene Tyranny. The second of Mr. Tyranny's own records in this series, "Out of the Blue," makes similar use of speech over gently lulling music, and both records are very beautiful indeed.

The first side of Mr. Tyranny's disk and much of Peter Gordon's record in this series are devoted to a quirky kind of avant-garde semi-popular song. It's interesting to hear this kind of fusion attempted from the "artistic" side—Jim Burton has done the same elsewhere for country music, and arty attempts from the rock camp are common enough. But it can't be said that Mr. Tyranny's or Mr. Gordon's tunes are always convincing. At times, however, Mr. Gordon transcends those limitations, particularly in the instrumental parts, and attains a strange and original appeal.

Meredith Monk is a particularly striking example of another tendency in this kind of new music, which is for artists to experiment in a variety of mediums. This presupposes a certain level of technical simplicity, and risks a degree of awkwardness and amateurism, but it can have its palpable rewards, too. Miss Monk's disk, "Key," is actually a reissue of an out-of-print record she released in 1971. It's good to have it available again (actually its release has been delayed for a few weeks), but it would be nice to have Miss Monk's newer musical works on records.

The final Lovely Music record, by a long-time La Monte Young associate named Jon Hassell, is full of exotic, semi-Balinese or African instrumental pastiches, unobjectionable to hear but a little lacking in the kind of personality the other composers project.

Mr. Glass is a composer associated socially and generationally with many of these men, and he too achieves a meditative flow of sound full of conventionally consonant intervals. But he attains his ends through the tightly structured interaction of contrapuntal lines, built up on additive principles that owe much to the visual work of such artists as Sol Lewitt and to Mr. Glass's early notions of the nature of East Indian music.

Mr. Glass's work has appeared erratically on records. He hasn't been courted by the record companies that specialize in the East Coast academic establishment, nor has he been very eager to appear on those labels. He also hasn't won himself a major label as Steve Reich has done. Much of Mr. Glass's early music has come out on his own label, Chatham Square, and there is one disk on imported English Virgin, a progressive rock label, and another on American Virgin. But his recent major scores, of which many hours have been recorded, still await distribution. In the meantime

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there is a new record on the French Shandar label, which specializes in American experimental jazz and avant-gardism, of two early pieces for single or double electronic keyboard. And Paul Zukofsky, the extraordinarily curious independent American violinist, who plays a wide range of new music, has put out a disk that includes Mr. Glass's early, austere "Strung Out," 21 minutes of feverishly monotonous notes for solo violin. The record also includes two works by fascinating European composers—Giacinto Scelsi and Iannis Xenakis—which prove that many of the ideas and styles being discussed here have parallels on the other side of the Atlantic.

They also have parallels in the world of experimental jazz. We have already alluded to rock avant-gardism, which is typified in New York by the work of such bands as Talking Heads, the Patti Smith Group and Suicide. Paul Bley is a jazz pianist whose solo improvisations have long taken him into realms heretofore "reserved" for the supposedly classical composer. His new solo disk, "Axis," finds him working in a chromatic idiom that sounds sometimes almost serial. Of the new jazz pianists, Keith Jarrett makes improvisatory music that is closer in spirit to that of the majority of composers considered in this article. But Mr. Bley's record is both serious and compelling.

The example of Meredith Monk, as an artist who operates in more than one medium, is hardly an isolated one. "Airwaves," a "two-record anthology of artists' aural work and music," offers short pieces both by persons generally recognized as composers and, more frequently, sound pieces by people who have won their first fame outside of music (Miss Monk, Vito Acconci, Terry Fox, etc.). It's an absolutely wonderful set—"lovely," even—with a consistent freshness and technical polish to encourage those who might be put off by the possible amateurism inherent in such a project.

Finally, we have a curious disk called "Pythagoron," which doesn't purport to be music at all. This is, instead, an assortment of electronic sounds put together by a non-musician with the ex-

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DANE RUDHYAR: Transmutation and Two Tetragrams. Marcia Mikulak, piano; CRI 372.

JOHN CAGE: Sonatas and Interludes and A Book of Music. Joshua Pierce and Maro Ajemian, prepared pianos; Tomato TOM-2-1001 (two disks).

LOU HARRISON: Elegiac Symphony and **ROBERT HUGH S:** Cadences. Oakland Symphony Youth Orchestra, Denis M. de Coteau, cond.; 1750 Arch Records S-1772.

ALAN HOVHANESS: Miscellaneous short works. Orchestra, Andre Kostelanetz, cond.; Columbia M 34537.

LOREN RUSH: Three Piano Pieces. Dwight Peltzer, piano; Serenus SRS 12070.

DAVID BEHRMAN: On the Other Ocean and Figure in a Clearing; Lovely Music LML 1041.

ROBERT ASHLEY: Private Parts; Lovely Music LML 1001.

(BLUE) GENE TYRANNY: Out of the Blue; Lovely Music LML 1061.

PETER GORDON: Star Jaws; Lovely Music LML 1031.

MEREDITH MONK: Key; Lovely Music LML 1051.

JON HASSELL: Vernal Equinox; Lovely Music LML 1021.

PHILIP GLASS: Solo Music; Shandar 83 515.

PHILIP GLASS: Strung Out; **GIACINTO SCELISI:** Anahit; **IANNIS XENAKIS:** Mikka and Mikka 'S'. Paul Zukofsky, violin; CP2/6.

PAUL BLEY: Axis. Bley, piano. Improvising Artists Inc. IAI 37 38 53.

AIRWAVES: Music by Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Jacki Apple, Connie Beckley, Jim Burton, Diego Cortez, Terry Fox, Janna Haimsohn, Julia Heyward, Leandro Katz, Meredith Monk, Richard Nonas and Dennis Oppenheim. One Ten Records.

PYTHAGORON: Pythagoron Records, P.O. Box 2123, Grand Central Station, New York, N. Y. 10017.