

# 'Lovely Music' fills a need for musicians

By Charles Shere  
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New music, performance music, whatever you want to call it—the whole range is pretty well summed up on Lovely Music/Vital Records. (Berkeley's Rather Ripped Records, by the way, puts at least one of them on its "space" rack, calling Robert Ashley's "Automatic Writing" a "landscape.")

"Lovely was Mimi Johnson's idea," explains composer Robert Ashley—currently back at Mills College, where he teaches every spring. "She felt it was an area not being served commercially. There's no way these composers could get their work out. Yes, there are some small art gallery pressings, but labels like 1750 Arch are few and far between."

(1750 is the Berkeley-based concert hall and recording company which has put out a series of impressive recordings ranging from Monteverdi to Debussy, from jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin to avant garde text-sound pieces "curated" by KPFA's Charles Amirkhanian.)

Lovely Music/Vital Records is a commercial company, operated as a sort of collective. Not a vanity press, but a concern which defers the real profits on the records until the first 1000 copies are sold.

That's conditioned by the economic facts of record life: according to 1750's Phil Sawyer, the first thousand copies cost about \$1100—whereas the cost drops to about 60 cents a record for reorders. (Covers add about 35 to 50 cents, not counting color, special art.)

"Mimi has six distributors now," Ashley continues. "On the East coast, the Midwest, the West coast—college towns, and wherever the interest is. There are lots more independent labels now, and distribution is catching up."

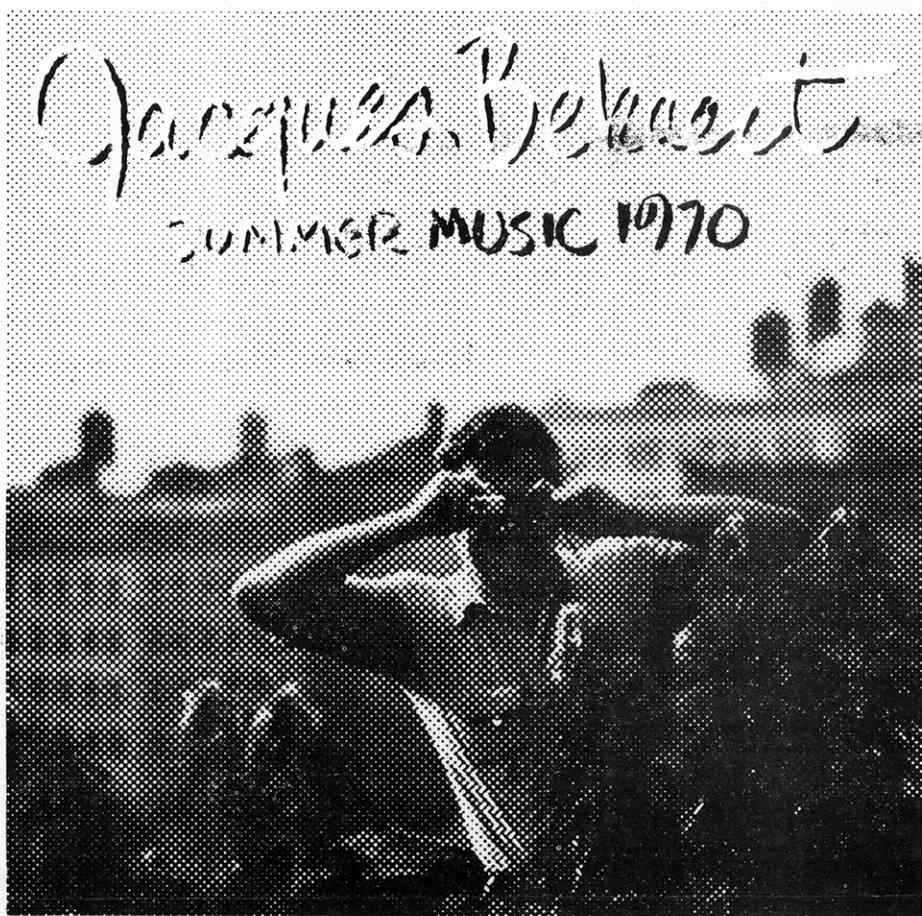
Sawyer agrees with that, but is cautious. "Distribution is improving, but there are distributor wars. Some big companies are getting worried about independents. Smaller distributors who handle independent labels are finding themselves without major lines, and some are raiding competing small distributors. It's a little like the major oil companies moving in on the independent operators, though not that bad yet. But there are a lot of unpaid bills."

Lovely puts out the music that makes it hard for Larry Kelp and me to decide who gets what. The categories are down, making definition hard—as contemporary music specialist Joan La Barbara complains in this month's "Musical America."

That's what happens when you deal with post-John Cage, post-Beatles music. This music goes back to a number of sources—not sources, really, but older brothers: You might recall George Harrison's "Wonderwall," a lot of Yoko Ono's music, definitely Christian Wolff and Cage.

Who decides what music to put out? "It's more or less Mimi's taste," Ashley says—adding that they are married, you know. "I didn't know Jon Hassel, or Meredith Monk very well. I recommended Blue Gene, of course, but his music would have been logical to include anyway. Peter Gordon just came along with the tapes."

"They're doing well. Mimi decided there was an advantage in publishing them in sets, so we put out six to begin with, then five last spring. The next is a boxed set of six 7-inch records—young composers never recorded before; it should be out in a month or so. They'll be called Lovely Little Records."



Cover of Jacques Bekaert's 'Summer Music 1970' from Lovely Music/Vital Records

"We've got a dozen or so composers we want to get to, and the next big set will be out as soon as we can get half a dozen ready at one time. We're thinking of Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, George Lewis, George Cacioppo."

The list represents both coasts well: In artists and in actual recording, Lovely is equally comfortable at Mills College or in New York where the offices are. It also represents most of the kind of music that's catching on right now—although a surprising amount of this music was actually recorded some time ago, some as much far back as 1970.

For the record, as you might say, here's a Lovely discography:

**Robert Ashley:** "Private Parts" (1001), "Automatic Writing" (1002). Poetically sustained verbal landscapes continuing Ashley's interest in narrative imagery and the music of spoken words. "Parts" are monologues narrated by the composer against clavinet drone, tabla punctuation, and atmospheric cocktail piano; "Writing" is more intimate, a sort of invisible video with Ashley's voice processed beyond verbal comprehension, joined by Mimi Johnson whispering reassuringly in French, the whole in a silent electronic atmosphere.

**David Behrman:** "On the Other Ocean" and "Figure in a Clearing" (1041). "Ocean" puts magnificently lyrical flute and bassoon playing (Maggi Payne, Arthur Stidfole) against Behrman's minicomputer electronic circuitry to make a haunting, tranquil, elegantly sustained 23 minutes of sound; "Figure" is similar but substitutes David Gibson's cello as the live instrument, interacting with computer-determined chord changes.

**Jacques Bekaert:** "Summer Music 1970" (1071): Cage-influenced conceptual pieces ("Listen to the clouds in the sky and dream the music, or play it, considering the form of the clouds") performed with great subtlety and nuance—and wit—by Mills College performers and friends.

**Peter Gordon:** "Star Jaws" (1031): rock-flavored songs and instrumentals on the edge between new music and entertainment, lots of sax, clavinet, drumming; vocals (by Jane Sharp and the composer) on Kathy Acker's lyrics (except Gordon's own Warholish "Life is Boring," a funny drag of a song).

**Jon Hassel:** "Vernal Equinox" (1021): Exotic landscapes, again, with natural sounds (tropical birds, night insects, village silences) combined with the composer's moodily beautiful sustained trumpet and percussion, including mbira, congas, tabla and the like, by Nana Vasconcelos, David Rosenboom and others.

**Tom Johnson:** "An Hour for Piano" (1081): Frederic Rzewski plays exactly that—an hour, all at a steady tempo (just over 120), small cells of two- and three-part material overlapping at different lengths, very tonally centered—not at all background music: the very real shaping in the piece demands total absorption, something like Phil Glass' very different version of trance music.

**Meredith Monk:** "Key" (1051). Monk's astonishingly Onosque voice—some might call it keening—combines with electric organ and mridangam, riding over repetitive regular rhythms, alternating on the 37-minute program with narrations of visions and occasionally with more traditional vocalizing ("Change" is particularly effective in its overdrawn vocalise).

**Gordon Mumma:** "The Dresden Interleaf..." "Music from the Venezia Space Theatre," "Megaton for William Burroughs" (1091). Vintage early '60s electronic pieces. "Dresden" and "Megaton" work with piled-up textures and complexes of drones and sustained chords toward an antiwar statement; "Venezia" is more spacious, admirably suggesting the visual environment it was planned originally to accompany: elegant, resonant, physical, well structured.

**"Blue" Gene Tyranny:** "Out Of the Blue" (1061). "Blue" Gene's specialty is keyboards, his *metier* that edge, again, between pop and new music. (Forget distinctions and definitions, just listen.) There's plenty of humor here, but the music has substance too, and grace. You'll play it.

"Just for the Record" (1062): Here "Blue" shows his serious stuff in Robert Ashley's "Sonata" for piano, composed in 1959, completed in 1978—a sort of free, gentle, spacious antidote to Pierre Boulez' piano writing. The other side features "Blue" on clavinet and Polymoog in Phil Harmonic's clean-ending, steadily conceived "Timing"—a friend of harmony indeed—in Paul de Marinis' fascinating game-piece of match-the-circuitry, "Great Masters of Melody," and in John Bischoff's complex, rock-influenced "Rendezvous," whose clearly defined phrases undergo a sort of timbral or spectral panning to drift into one another.