

# Sonic Riches Abound In New Music

By JOHN ROCKWELL

**W**ith rare exceptions, serious contemporary music is not a money-maker. Record companies, being companies, are presumably in the business of making money. Thus it's a wonder any new-music records are made at all. But they are—lots of them.

Decades ago, the American record business was dominated by giants, and they each paid some attention to contemporary art-music. Today, nearly all of those companies have fallen victim to a bottom-line, profit-maximization mentality that seems to preclude semiphilanthropic endeavors like "serious" records.

The result is that now, as with the music itself, the record business has become fragmented and specialized. That means less music speaking to the nation or the world as a whole, but a dazzling variety of available sounds. The typical contemporary disk is issued by a tiny company with distribution attended to by a much less comprehensive network than the big



The New York Times/Chet Higgins Jr.

Jack Mitchell

Pat Kelley

**Nicolas Roussakis—purely aural pleasure**

**Toru Takemitsu—rare recordings available through Polygram**

**Pauline Oliveros—making music from brain waves**

companies still command.

The "giants" of contemporary music today are the specialty labels of yesteryear. Composers Recordings Inc., otherwise known as CRI, issues a steady stream of new disks, honorably selected, recorded and packaged.

Most of CRI's releases seem concentrated on the kind of earnestly complex, rational music that has defined the Northeast especially for the past few decades. But there are exceptions: CRI 485, for instance, offers an example of the kind of stubbornly tonal, older-fashioned Americana that predominated in this country before

the advent of 12-tone Serialism. The composer in question is Ned Rorem, and this disk offers two lovely song cycles sung exquisitely by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Katherine Ciesinski.

Robert Black's piano recital on CRI 481 is more typical of the company's policies, if no less interesting. Mr. Black plays works by Roger Sessions, Miriam Gideon and Ben Weber, all Serialists but of a boldly Expressionist, emotionally involving sort. Similar in effect is the music of Meyer Kupferman (CRI 476), whose idiom recalls Ralph Shapey in its highly dramatic boldness.

Two recent CRI releases offer music by the three men who run the Group for Contemporary Music. The selections of Charles Wuorinen and Harvey Sollberger on CRI 463 are full of vitality, but still sound characteristic of the hard-edged music that ensemble concentrates on. But Nicolas Roussakis's choral "Voyage" on the same record, and even more his "Ephemeris," which takes up all of CRI 471, suggest a different sensibility, concerned with what the composer Milton Babbitt once dismissed as "purely aural pleasure."

If CRI concentrates on the North-

eastern rationalists, Lovely Music focuses on the experimentalists of the East and West coasts. A particularly beautiful example is music for accordion and voice by Pauline Oliveros (VR 1901). Miss Oliveros's work is sometimes more interesting for meditative and conceptual reasons than as music. Here, she evokes American and East Indian influences with genuine musical individuality.

Not on Lovely Music but similar in its "downtown" experimental spirit is Kirk Nurock's "Natural Sound" group, which makes a quasi-choral

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music out of everyday human — and even nonhuman — sounds (Labor Records LAB-13). At its best, Mr. Nurrock's music recalls Meredith Monk's vocal techniques and ritualistic allure; at its worst, it sounds gimmicky.

Miss Oliveros also appears as a "performer" on Alvin Lucier's "Music for Solo Performer" (Lovely Music VR 1014). This was perhaps the first piece to try to make music out of amplified brain waves. The purity of the experiment is sullied (if also enlivened) by overlapping several sessions of the same person's brain waves (Mr. Lucier's on side 1, Miss Oliveros's on side 2) and by using them to trigger various exotic percussion.

The same predominance of ideas over music applies to Roger Reynolds's two-disk "Voicespace" (VR 1801-2), which is full of lively ideas knit together without much apparent artistic coherence.

Some of Mr. Reynolds's ideas involve electronics, and Lovely Music remains one of the principal American labels devoted to composers working in the varied fields of electronic and computer music. Blue Gene Tyranny enhances his characteristically Romantic piano improvisations with unusual "sample-burst electronics" and "computer afterimages and preconditions" on VR 1063. And on VR 1701, Ron Kuivila and Nicolas Collins make surprisingly effective collages out of seeming unpromis-

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ing elements: the rumbles and gibbering and squeaks familiar from so much earlier electronic and computer music.

Folkways also concerns itself with electronic music; although naturally best known for its folk music, Folkways boasts a lively line of Classical new-music disks of all kinds. The label's most striking recent electronic-music release is an album of computer music highlighted at the 1981 International Computer Music Conference in Texas (FTS 37475). Included are pieces by Larry Austin, John Celona, Charles Dodge, Stanley Haynes and Bruce Pennycook, and while all are not equally persuasive, they suggest as a whole a lively future for the computer-music medium.

On Folkways FTS 37470, Jon Appleton has created two "melodramas," creepy Victorian tales accompanied in silent-movie fashion by himself at the synclavier, an electronic keyboard-synthesizer. The results are cute but inconclusive.

Similarly pictorial if more musically inventive are Jon Deak's "Musical Tales," again two stories musically accompanied, here mostly by the composer's own string bass. The disk appears on another label with an honorable record of service to contemporary music, Opus One (77).

European labels continue to produce disks of new music, of course, but their distribution here has become even more erratic than the American product. German Wergo, whose new

disk of John Cage's boring but historically important "Music of Changes" deserves mention (WER 60099), has a large catalogue of worthy but hard-to-find disks.

The Polygram combine (London, Deutsche Grammophon, Phillips) imports disks it doesn't think will sell well here as domestic releases on its "Polygram Special Imports" label. An example of PSI's riches includes several Japanese records of music by Toru Takemitsu otherwise unavailable here. One (Deutsche Grammophon MG 1047) includes such well-known American performers as Ida Kavafian and Peter Serkin.

Tim Souster is a rising young English composer still rarely heard here. London's estimable Nash Ensemble, which recently gave three concerts in New York, has a new 45-rpm, 12-inch audiophile disk of his music on British Nimbus (45020). An American company has also devoted a disk to Mr. Souster, with a long chamber score performed by the Capricorn Players followed by a shorter computer piece as a side-filler (Leonarda LPI 114).

A Berkeley, Calif., label devoted mostly to experimental music is 1750 Arch Records, whose S-1792 offers two most appealing scores by Daniel Kobialka, who writes lush, Romantic textures, and Charles Shere, whose delicate, atmospheric music is part of an ongoing operatic project inspired by Marcel Duchamp.

Similarly delicate, and wonderfully hypnotic in its concentration, is the music of Morton Feldman. His "Spring of Chosroes" for violin and piano is offered by Paul Zukofsky and Ursula Oppens on his own CP2 label, along with an appealing piece of Serialism by the pianist Artur Schnabel (CP2/8).

Back in Boston, Northeastern Records has recently released a disk of three organ compositions by Daniel Pinkham, whose style manages to combine originality with a respect for pre-Serial Americana and the organ tradition (NR 205).

One major American company that has maintained some commitment to marginally profitable new music is Warner Communications, with its Nonesuch subsidiary. Nonesuch has mostly specialized in Northeastern hard-liners, and its recent disk of Elliott Carter's early Piano Sonata and recent "Night Fantasies" continues that tradition (79047). The pianist is Paul Jacobs, whose excellence is only slightly overshadowed by the even more authoritative accounts of the same music by Charles Rosen on Dutch Etcetera (ETC 1008).

Finally, we come to the major American label that has the noblest history of service to contemporary music. That is CBS, formerly known as Columbia, whose attentions to serious new music have all but collapsed over the past 15 years, apart from reissues from its own distinguished catalogue.

CBS does record Philip Glass, but the artistic single-mindedness of the company's motives is undercut by the popularity, and hence potential commerciality, of Mr. Glass's style.

The latest Glass CBS release is "The Photographer" (37849), which sounds far better here than it did with harsh amplification recently in Carnegie Hall, and which will be presented in a fully staged version this fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Mr. Glass's compositions can sound imitative of his own past achievements, and this is not his most boldly original score. But it has its charms, and perhaps those charms will help CBS realize a profit on this release. ■