

including iTunes and, in the U.S., Chessky's HDtracks. Our main objection to downloads is the disruption of the dramaturgical flow of an album's track order. We're not in the singles business and still believe in albums with a beginning, middle, and end. Albums that tell a story, like novels, or films.

M.A.: What major releases can *Fanfare* readers look forward to over the next year or so?

M.E.: The jazz releases include Jan Garbarek's first-ever live album, and Keith Jarrett live in London and Paris. The Tunisian oud player Anouar Brahem introduces a fine new quartet. And Stefano Bollani puts a new twist on the jazz piano trio tradition with a new album, "Stone in the Water." On New Series, there is Kim Kashkashian's powerful album with music of Betty Olivero and Tigran Mansurian, Andr s Schiff's new recording of Bach's partitas, and an astonishing account of Paganini's caprices by Thomas Zehetmair.

Charles Amirkhanian Speaks His Mind about Other Minds

BY JAMES REEL

Once or twice a year, you'll find in these pages (or popping up on our Web site) a review of some provocative delight issued by Other Minds. Releases devoted to George Antheil, John Cage, Conlon Nancarrow, Ezra Pound, and Ned Rorem are in the *Fanfare* Archive at this writing, and right about now you should be able to find a review of a new Marc Blitzstein set, and perhaps another item or two. All together, 13 releases are currently available. But that's just a small part of what Other Minds has been doing since 1993. The endeavor began that year with an international music festival in San Francisco, showcasing works by Nancarrow, Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, Julia Wolfe, Foday Musa Suso, and seven other artists. One of the others was Charles Amirkhanian, whom musician and art gallery owner Jim Newman had recruited the previous year to help launch the effort, presented by an outfit they initially called the California College of Performing Arts. That name didn't stick long; in 1992, *The New Yorker* had run an obituary on John Cage that said, "His epitaph might read that he composed music in other peoples' minds." Other Minds seemed like the perfect name for a festival devoted to mavericks like Cage, and it has become the umbrella name for the entire organization, for which Amirkhanian serves as executive and artistic director.

So what is it, exactly? Here's a statement you'll find printed in the programs for its Bay Area events: "Other Minds is a leading organization for new and experimental music in all its forms, devoted to championing the most original, eccentric and underrepresented creative voices in contemporary music. From festivals, special concerts, film screenings and the commissioning of new works, to producing and releasing CDs, preserving thousands of interviews and concerts, and distributing them free on the Internet, Other Minds has become one of the world's major conservators of new music's ecology." At the top of its home page (www.otherminds.org), you'll see it described as "a global New Music community where composers, students, and listeners discover and learn about innovative music by composers from all over the world." If you're not able to attend one of the pretty much annual festivals (there have been 14 so far) or occasional special events in San Francisco and Berkeley, just visit the Web site to look at photos of festival composers and performers; explore an audio and video archive of spoken word and music excerpts; read short hyperlinked special features on the likes of Henry Brant, Vivian Fine, Pandit Pran Nath, and other such figures; subscribe to newsletters and an online forum; and tune in to Other Minds Web Radio, radiOM.org, with music by and interviews with such contemporary figures as Laurie Anderson and Anthony Braxton. It also includes material from the new-music archives of Berkeley radio station KPFA, featuring interviews, music, and documentaries on contemporary and classical music recorded between 1957 and 1992—6,000 analog reel-to-reel tapes, 200 digital format tapes, 325 LPs and 50 books constitute the collection, all of which has been owned by Other Minds since late 2000. Not coincidentally, Amirkhanian was KPFA's music director from 1969 to 1992.

Amirkhanian admits that, although the organization has a small staff and board, he and Other

Minds are “fairly synonymous. In terms of the record label, these are all things that I initiated or accepted as projects that were directed our way. It’s kind of a one-man operation in that sense. I’m the person making decisions about what we release. I’m an inveterate record collector, and so I’ve always been involved in knowing what’s in the catalog and what’s been recorded and what hasn’t, at least in terms of the range of music I’m interested in. There are several groups of things I’m interested in. For example, the New Music Edition composers, the people Henry Cowell published in his quarterly (starting in 1927) and who became the maverick non-academic composers in the United States: Cage, Cowell himself, Lou Harrison, Antheil, Brant, people like that. I also have an interest in using language as a musical parameter, speech as opposed to singing. The Amy X Neuburg album, and our reissue of the ‘10+2’ album of text sound pieces that originally came out 30 years ago on 1750 Arch Records, both those releases fall into that category.”

Speaking of 1750 Arch, for which Amirkhanian was once a producer, that is the source of *Other Minds*’ four-CD reissue of most of Conlon Nancarrow’s studies for player piano, recorded on Nancarrow’s own pair of 1927 Ampico player pianos, one with metal-covered felt hammers and the other with leather strips on the hammers. Essentially, it’s a period-instrument recording, made under the composer’s supervision, now put out with remastered sound and a 52-page booklet with essays by Amirkhanian and James Tenney and two dozen illustrations. *Other Minds* has supplemented this with “Conlon Nancarrow: Lost Works, Last Works,” previously unrecorded pieces and player-piano versions of works originally written for some other medium, plus more than 30 minutes of excerpts from an interview Amirkhanian conducted with the composer in 1977.

I recently asked Amirkhanian if there is some sort of aesthetic filter that determines which composers will be of interest for *Other Minds* projects. “I hope it’s broader than one narrow aesthetic,” he replied. “I’m interested in people who push boundaries, so we often have at the festival somebody who plays an unusual instrument, like John Schneider, who played a ‘well-tempered’ guitar with different patterns of fretting that allow him to play different just intonations. We’ve also had, for example, Takashi Harada, an ondes-martenot-player from Japan. So: unusual instrumentation, different intonations, and we support the work of people who don’t get to be in the Bay Area regularly. We went to Poland and heard several interesting composers who should be brought here, and invited them to come not because they used any special intonation but because the inventiveness of their work surpassed a lot of composers I hear being played regularly in the United States. We brought Per Nørgård over from Denmark, a guy who certainly isn’t obscure, but he doesn’t get any performances from major American orchestras even though he writes brilliant orchestral music. He turned out to be the life of the festival in 2006. He’d come to KPFA in 1970 to do an interview, and was a very interesting character; he was interested in philosophy, and he’d developed a serial system for composing called the infinity series, a way to generate melodies fractally and endlessly using a mathematical formula, but the music didn’t sound formulaic. So since his music was a little unusual and hadn’t been heard much in the United States, he was selected to come. I’m also interested in supporting female composers, because they don’t get as much attention as they should. In this last festival alone we had one from Poland, one from Los Angeles, and one from Toronto, three out of nine composers. Some years we’ve had four or five. It seems pivotal to their careers to get this kind of attention just once, and suddenly other people will pay attention to them. We had one composer from Belize, Errollyn Wallen, who had studied at the Royal Conservatory in England but wasn’t taken very seriously in London until she participated in the *Other Minds* festival. As soon as she had her debut in the United States, she was getting commissions from all over England. We try to support the work of people of color when they’re interesting and not getting a chance.

“I’m also a percussionist and pianist, so I’m particularly interested in that repertory. I don’t know if that’s reflected in my programming, but that’s the kind of performing I understand the best.”

His goal with the CD series is simple: “We’re trying to release items that nobody else would release and that have lasting value,” he says. “If you went into the market now and tried to find any music on CD composed by Ezra Pound, you’d have one choice only, our recording of his works from the 1920s and 1930s. We’re also trying to give the fullest documentation we can, within reason: a multipage booklet explaining what the music is, where it came from, and its inspiration. It’s sort of

the opposite of ECM, which never prints a word about what it's doing. This is one reason we don't have multilingual booklets; they're too big.

"The Marc Blitzstein CD (with Sarah Cahill playing Blitzstein's three solo piano works and the Del Sol Quartet playing his two early works for string quartet) was a particular pleasure for me because it wasn't a reissue. We found the scores, and in one or two cases had to reengrave them so you could read them well, and had them recorded at the Skywalker studio under the best conditions we could, and we were pleased to find out this music was not only well written but exciting. That's not easy to do these days, because so many labels have recorded so much. To find someone of Blitzstein's stature, and music that had just been on the shelf and wasn't known from 1930 to 2008, that's just amazing. I had read in Oscar Levant's memoir about his reaction to Blitzstein's *Serenade* for string quartet and how it was 'one of the greatest presumptions toward an audience' he had ever encountered, 'a meal consisting entirely of stained glass, with different dressings,' and I thought, 'Wow! I've got to hear that!' I knew it was three largos, and it would be a schlep to make it work. When the quartet started rehearsing it, there was a lot of gloom in the room because it wasn't holding together, but once they started playing it more like Brahms than Schoenberg it took on a life of its own and the players' skepticism melted away. That's the one piece I'm most surprised by and pleased that we resurrected. There's no other recording of it at all. The *Piano Percussion Music* I always wanted to hear because I loved the idea of the exhibition of the pianist slamming the lid down in the finale."

Many of Other Minds' other releases resurrect long-unavailable recordings made by other firms. Besides the Nancarrow box, prominent examples are a Ned Rorem song collection that Columbia had released in 1964, and a greater rarity, George Antheil material released by SPA Recordings in the early 1950s: Antheil serving as pianist in his *Valentine Waltzes* and *Eight Fragments from Shelley* (the latter with the Roger Wagner Chorale), and F. Charles Adler and Herbert Haefner conducting what was billed as the Vienna Philharmonia Orchestra in the *McKonkey's Ferry Overture* and *Symphony No. 5*. That's just the first disc; the second has Antheil accompanying narrator Vincent Price in his settings of *Two Odes of John Keats*, and indulging in privately recorded, seemingly improvised rampages at the piano in which he accompanied himself in stories devised for his little son, Peter. There's also a substantial amount of interview material on the second disc. "That was a killer," says Amirkhanian. "The master tapes of the music had been lost when they were being shipped between the RCA and Columbia pressing plants that SPA used to produce very small quantities of these LPs. The owner of the company gave me permission to re-release the material if I recorded it off of the LPs, which were pressed badly in the first place, so there was a lot of work to fix that. We also used homemade discs cut by the composer himself.

"Not everything is that hard. In the case of the Rorem, we had brilliant studio recordings we licensed through Sony. Kui Dong, a composer and pianist, wanted to be on our label, so she took John Cage's prepared piano and improvised on it for an hour and came up with some amazing things. On Amy X Neuburg's CD, her work is related to Laurie Anderson's, but she's got a really operatic voice, and she's also a very skilled composer, and her stories are a little more hard-edged than Laurie's; her CD is fascinating and funny. The Ezra Pound material was licensed from the best performances of his material over the years, and then we added some studio recordings we made. Our first release was a pianola CD with the only recording to date of the version for player piano that Igor Stravinsky did of *Les noces*. It's shockingly alive, and gives another view into the music, because it's essentially a four-hand arrangement of the piece. Rex Lawson is the pianolist, and the CD includes his arrangements of Lutosławski and Rachmaninoff and Handel and some other pieces. He gives expression to them with the foot pedal; it takes a lot of endurance to do what he does. He can work up a good sweat playing a six-roll composition by Stravinsky."

Despite all the work that has gone into them, the CDs are not (yet) the dominant component of Other Minds. "They're kind of a calling card," Amirkhanian says, "because we use them as premiums for people to support the organization. But we do try to be creative and do things on them that we can't do in the concert hall. We may present a concert of Pound's music, but the concert performance will never be satisfactory for CD because the music is too picky to perform. By doing studio recordings, we can get it right."

All of the tracks on the CDs can be downloaded from sites like iTunes and Rhapsody, but Amirkhanian would prefer you to order the physical CDs from the Other Minds Web site. "With the downloads, you're not getting the documentation, the rich collection of essays and photos," he points out, "and you're getting MP3 audio, which isn't as good as CD. I think people who listen to what we do prefer to have the documentation. But we have also sold a cut of the Ezra Pound music through the Wal-Mart Web site, so go figure. I think Pound would have been astonished by that."

It would be interesting to see how many people who download track by track bother with the interview material; conventional wisdom in the CD business holds that talking is a turn-off. Yet that is one aspect of these projects that excites Amirkhanian the most. "The recording of Antheil speaking about his life is unique," he says. "I think it gives an insight into his character to hear his animation, his accent, his rich baritone voice. With Nancarrow, he refused interviews through most of his life. This was the first one, in 1977, that gave anyone a window into his soul. We've had a lot of compliments about it. And because CDs can have 74 minutes of sound and the Nancarrow music on that CD is only material that was not available otherwise, which is not enough for a whole disc, we wanted to fill out the disc and do a service to the public at the same time, so we included the interview. Now, 74 minutes of music straight through can be a little daunting, so in the case of the Nancarrow four-CD set we replicated the LPs, which were 44 minutes each. I could have crammed it all onto three CDs, but we replicated the original four LPs because 44 minutes is plenty of player-piano music at one time, especially Conlon's, which is very rich and dense. And, secondly, Conlon specified the order of pieces to be heard as a unit on each side of the LPs. I wanted to preserve his curatorial judgment, so we decided to make it four instead of three CDs, and each one would be kind of short. I think we did the right thing."

What does the near future hold for Other Minds, the label? Says Amirkhanian, "We want to record the complete *Harmonium* series by James Tenney; only one has been commercially released. We plan to record them in Los Angeles with musicians who knew him; Adam Fong was his teaching assistant, and he now works at Other Minds as our associate director. I'm working on two recordings of music for violin and piano, the first with mavericks of American and European music. The violinist is Kate Stenberg of the Del Sol Quartet, and the pianist is Eva-Maria Zimmermann. The two of them have played for the last three years at the New Music Séance, which is a chance for us to play non-living composers, because at our music festival everyone is alive. At the Séances, not everyone is. We've resurrected pieces by Henning Christiansen that sound like hoedown music stuck in a loop. It fits nicely with Henry Cowell and a few others. The idea is to make available on records pieces that people don't hear much anymore, and make interesting relationships between them. It'll be called 'Scenes from a Séance,' and we are releasing that in the summer (it should be available when you read this). The Tenney pieces will be shortly after that. We're also collaborating with a violinist who recorded a lot of modern music in the 1950s and 1960s for MGM, Anahid Ajemian. Her sister, Maro Ajemian, is a pianist who recorded with her. Cage wrote his *Sonatas and Interludes* for Maro. Anahid was on call for an MGM producer who'd go to Pedelson's and buy the remaindered scores, and record them and put out these very harsh sounding LPs. Unfortunately, Anahid has been forgotten. She made brilliant recordings of Riegger and Krenek and Hovhanness, but the master tapes have disappeared. I went to visit her, and she and her husband have 10 or 20 mint copies of every one of her recordings—he remembered they had them, but she'd forgotten—so I've been trying to decide which ones to reissue. It'll remind people of their contribution to maverick composers nobody would play; Cage, Hovhanness, Harrison, and Cowell all wrote for them. These women were very modest and very talented, and I'd like to do something for them."

"They're both Armenians, and when I was growing up in Fresno, my father brought home some 78s from an appliance store just because there was an Armenian rug on the cover. Maro Ajemian was playing Alan Hovhanness on it, and John Cage. My mother heard a few minutes of it and said, 'You better take it back! It's terrible!' I thought it was spooky; hearing prepared piano in 1951 when I was six, I was very influenced by that. I thought Cage must be a good guy, because he was hanging out with Armenians."