CD Reviews

Erdem Helvacioglu
Altered Realities
(New Albion NA131, August 2006)
by Nathan Wolek

In *Altered Realities*, Erdem Helvacioglu has found a balance between guitar and real-time processing that results in a cohesive disc with moments of true beauty. The titles of the tracks are visually suggestive and offer vaguely poetic extensions of the disc's title. Names such as "Sliding on a Glacier" and "Shadow of my Dovetail" betray nothing of the musical mood, the programmatic intent or the creative inspiration. They are almost interchangeable on a disc that has no lyrics or program notes, but maybe this betrays Helvacioglu's aesthetic intent to create a compact disc that plays like an extended composition, as each track flows effortlessly into the next. Because the disc works so well as a unified whole that unfolds its macroform over the course of 53 minutes, it makes little sense to isolate the tracks from each other and talk about them as individual compositions. So instead my review will focus on the connective elements that Helvacioglu uses throughout the disc: his method and materials.

Helvacioglu's method of music making on this disc begins with his performance on acoustic guitar. The steely timbre of the strings grounds the sonic explorations as he augments the guitar with real-time processing. Helvacioglu's platform of choice for affecting his guitar sound is AudioMulch, the interactive computer music environment developed by Ross Bencina. The sound is captured and extended by a variety of processing techniques over the course of the disc. In addition, he uses sampling to achieve time-shifted playback within each track and what sounds like the occasional synthesized timbre to accompany the guitar, although these could just as easily be some form of extreme processing.

To control the computer's activity while his hands are busy with the guitar, Helvacioglu uses a MIDI pedal board with his feet. This equipment setup allows him to perform each track in real time and simply record to DAT, something he is clear to point out in the liner notes. Limiting himself in this way and not succumbing to the allure of endless studio editing and tweaking gives the tracks a more organic feel. The grounding in human performance makes this a disc that even novice listeners of electronic music will enjoy, and because the method employed to realize each track is the same, it is a big reason for the unified sound of the disc.

Helvacioglu's materials include a combination of simple motives with tasteful doses of processing, and his careful interactions between human and computer achieve compelling musical results. The melodic material for the guitar is never more than a short fragment lasting up to four measures. The minimal character of these riffs by themselves would likely come off as calm and sterile, not unlike a twenty-first century Satie. They struck me as poignant at times, but lacked the inherent musical tension to sustain focused listening over the duration of the disc.

It is the addition of processing that injects a subtle dose of drama into Helvacioglu's music. Without it, *Altered Realities* would be just another ambient disc (and I say this as someone who enjoys ambient music!). The processing never remains static for very long as it carries out its duet with the melodic material, where the timing of changes often follow the same formal divisions that govern the guitar playing. These arcs and progressions provide a form of tension and release that intensifies the underlying melodic figures.

The processing rarely seems to overpower Helvacioglu's guitar, providing artificial spaces, spectral alterations and granular shuffling. However, there are times when the intensity of the computer's voice surges and the clarity with which it usually augments the guitar is lost. The duration of these moments never feels too long and the guitar is always returned gently to a position in the foreground. Because Helvacioglu dynamically changes his processing parameters in longer, sweeping motions, he provides a perfect foil to the short, simple guitar motives. Had either one been pushed closer to the other in character, the balance would have likely been upset and jeopardized the success found in their contrasting natures.

The structures of individual tracks exhibit a striking simplicity and allow the changes to unfold gently over time. Most tracks have no more than five alternating motivic ideas in the guitar, with the one exception being a track called "Pearl Border on a Dune" that had ten by my count. Even this variety could be condensed if one accounts for harmonic and rhythm relationships that exist between the motives, as Helvacioglu often alters these parameters to provide something new. Each idea is established and repeated before moving on to the next one, but Helvacioglu seems to have carefully measured the amount of time he can extract from each idea without boring the listener. The guitar's repetition is also tempered with the longer arcs presented by the computer processing, as it morphs mostly within and sometimes between the formal boundaries created by the changing guitar motives. It is easy to read each track as a dialogue between these two

elements, in which the guitar is pushing the discussion forward with new topics and each conversation ends in a calm, cordial resolution.

If one considers the entire disc as a macroformal structure, there is a clear progression from beginning to end that shows careful planning on the part of Helvacioglu. The first three tracks set up a light, playful mood, as the guitar sounds like it is testing the possibilities of its computer companion. Track three, entitled "Frozen Resophonic," is by far the sweetest sounding track on the album, with melodic content that could easily be mistaken for a children's song. "Dreaming on a Blind Saddle" is the track that follows and it is a definite turning point in the mood of the disc. The bleak character, immediately apparent in the opening guitar motif, provides a good setup for the track that is the climax of the disc: track five. Entitled "Shadow of my Dovetail," it combines touches of melancholy with a rhythmic drive that is reminiscent of classic blues, although without the usual progressions. From here the last two tracks give the listener more of the dreamy qualities found in track four, as the processing asserts its transformations evermore on the guitar. The final track ends its unmetered meanderings with a time-stretched and pitch-shifted arpreggio that slowly decays away, gently returning the listener to the real world.

Overall, Erdem Helvacioglu's *Altered Realities* is a compelling sonic ride that functions as a cohesive whole. The unified sound is an obvious result of his decisions to use consistent methods and materials throughout the disc. It is the ebb and flow between computer processing and acoustic guitar that shapes the music in convincing ways. Neither feels out of place as the computer works effortlessly to extend the possibilities of the guitarist. I felt it was a successful album that captures what it might sound like to hear Helvacioglu perform a live set at the local venue, and should be of interest to those who enjoy an intimate evening of electronic music.

RedASLA: Red de Arte Sonoro Latinoamericano, Vol. 1
(Self-released, April 2006)
by Jonathan Seiden

In 2006, RedASLA (the Network for Latin-American Sonic Arts) released *RedASLA Vol. 1*, a compilation of Latin-American electro-acoustic pieces. The album consists of ten pieces over twelve tracks by various contemporary Latin-American electro-acoustic composers. While many of the pieces challenge traditional notions of coherence and congruity within music, the album as a whole delivers a reasonably listenable and very interesting aural portrait of electro-acoustic music today. It is interesting to note that while some of the pieces on the album contain atonal sections, odd combinations of timbre, and seemingly random bits of noise, the album also contains many sections that would not sound completely out of place on a modern popular record.

In discussing this album, I will overview the tracks and then focus on the three I felt represented some of overarching themes of the compilation best. The album begins with Rodrigo Sigal's *Mudra*, a contemplative piece that blends electronic and organic elements together with beautiful dynamic contrast. The jazzy reedy timbre in this piece lends itself as an effective focal point. *What You See is What You See* by Daniel Quaranta follows with an interesting exploration of synthetic soundscapes. Raúl Minsburg's *Entre Sueños* can be best understood by translating its title, *Between Dreams*; this eerily compelling piece was extraordinarily introspective and produced vivid musical pictures. Daniel Schachter's three-part piece, *Espejos Viruales I-III*, would make an effective film score. Its subtleties, punctuated by periods of sonic brilliance, could easily provide the backing to a range of film genres. Óscar Chaves's *Estudio Sobre Mi Gatita*, or *Study on My Kitten*, is one of the most fun pieces to listen to on the album. Beginning with various human imitations of the composer's cat, the sounds are quickly edited into oblivion to create a varied aural experience. *Sentimiento Plástico* by Edson Zampronha is a composition in which nothing truly sounds natural. True to its title, *Plastic Feeling*, this piece effectively illustrates the nature of unnatural feelings through synthetic sound. Jorge Martínez Ulloa's *Leitmotiv No. 6* combines the seemingly incompatible timbres of a nearly unprocessed brass instrument with various shimmering electronic instruments. The effect of this combination causes each element to be highlighted in its position and offers an intriguing sonic contrast.

Otto Castro's *Mala Fé* presents an intriguing examination of a main theme of the album: the barriers, or lack thereof, between electronic music and sounds found in nature. The initial soundscape of the piece, presumably entirely electronically synthesized, sounds as if it could have come from a recording of jungle insects. The electronic nature of this piece heightens towards the middle as increasingly "electronic" sounding noises take over the piece and the electronic-mimicry of nature fades into the background of the noise tapestry. Usage of stereo panning techniques as well as variable frequency synthesized tones and modulations dominate the majority of the middle of this piece. Organic components once again return to the mixture with what sounds like heavily edited and modified bursts of a human voice. After this disappears from the piece and "electronic" sounds reappear as the substance, organic noises only return towards the end with a faint piano heard

in the background. The piece finishes with a recitation of one of Castro's poems, only slightly altered, which provides an interesting conclusion to a piece that mostly consisted of completely foreign sounding electronically produced noise.

Bryan Holmes' piece *Canción de Cuna* provides an interesting contrast to Castro's piece. The opening lines of organic saxophone, electronically distorted and made to sound nearly alien, provide the primary texture for the beginning of the piece. The saxophone melody is heavily altered and then reorganized in various traditionally classical compositional manners. After the decay of the final sax note, the reversed sound of a music box is first heard; this will prove throughout the piece to be the most important sonic component. The double entendre of the title, which translates to "Song of the Cradle," is somewhat explained in the liner notes. The notes tell that the piece was composed using both old and new components of electro-acoustic composition and performance; the simultaneous use of the music box as a main producer of sound provides a more real sense of the "cradle" within the piece. The dual usage of earlier electro-acoustic recording techniques with organic instruments, which the liner notes identify as everything from a double bass to a vacuum cleaner, create conflicting motifs within the piece. The haunting but oddly comforting reverse music box and saxophone themes are set against more electronic and distorted noises that no one would ever want near a cradle. The piece uses these dual motives to keep the listener on edge and create a sense of tension between the two worlds of electro and acoustic. As the title of the piece would indicate, the ultimate prevalence of comfort and organics are displayed in the final seconds of nearly unaltered music box sample.

Presumably named for the famous German mathematician known best for discovering a three-dimensional object that retained one side, Eleazar Garzón's *Moebius* shares qualities with the geometric construction it refers itself to. The piece was comprised of altered samples from John Ffitch's "The Transport Project," a project that challenged electro-acoustic musicians to create short pieces based on an unaltered source sample of various city transport noises. The recombination of this singular source material and extrapolation into various musical ideas can be seem as the creation of a multidimensional object from a one dimensional object. The first of these distinct motifs is reminiscent of Castro's piece as an insect-like, near organic soundscape provides the background to the introduction of the piece. The "transport" sample, once heard in its original, is easily identifiable throughout the piece, as Garzón uses nearly unaltered sections to carry the majority of the forefront musical material. The clacks, clangs, and hisses of the city street can be jarring. However, after listening to the original sample, I was amazed at how varied a sound and effect the composer was able to achieve.

RedASLA Vol. 1 gives interesting insight into the world of Latin-American electro-acoustic music today. Any listener can appreciate the meticulous care, attention to detail, and sonic intricacies that went into these compositions.

Sources:
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Tanja Orning and Natasha Barrett
DR. OX
(c74 records, c74-013, March 2008)
by Krystal Grant

Dr.OX is an album by cellist/composer Tanja Orning and composer Natasha Barrett. The third track, "Polycomb," reveals the source of the overall aesthetic of this record. Here, the cello serves as a noise generator, making contact with the strings via pizzicato, tapping, spiccato, creaking, and col legno. These techniques are layered on top of each other as the computer remains unobtrusive, emerging only with a flutter of accents and reverse pizzicato toward the end. Most of the computer sounds throughout the record seem generated from cello timbres, most of them falling into one of four categories: 1) ringing, ethereal mid-to-high register chords that sound like a flanging of cello harmonics; 2) droplet sounds that seem to be softened pizzicato; 3) roars that appear as a magnification of the creaking of high bow pressure; and 4) metallic scrapings that might be generated by filtering a tremolo or mimicking the granular quality of creaking. This collection of duos works well because of these types of timbral similarities.

The cello is the anchor of "Anchor Synthesis." It begins with forceful low-register double stops, sometimes suggesting a rhythm. The computer's sirens, dangling chains, and thunderous granular static are disconcertingly split between left and right channels. As the cello plays low col legno, the computer imitates it with a fluttering between sides. The cello's ensuing combination of pizzicato and col legno is gradually overcome by a cacophony of popping, sirens, static, col legno, and ringing chains. Its return is confounded by

being split between three channels. When the cello returns to the center, its creaks are accompanied first by low knocking, then by wind-like sounds, then by the previously heard col legno. This fades to low bowed and pizzicato cello utterances and the fluttering col legno. For the ending, the cello plays low double stops similar to the opening, as the computer adds popping to the col legno.

"Zinc Finger" is a collage of high and low pizzicato that would be impossible to produce by a single cellist plucking the strings. A few sonic events color the continuous pizzicato: a loud boom, reverb that enters then fades out, and reversed pizzicato.

Throughout "Toothrin," the cello improvises with creaking sounds. Through simultaneous processing, the creaking becomes gurgles of slightly reverbed granular synthesis and analog popping based on the attacks. These computer sounds begin as an accompaniment to the cello but grow to encompass the entire sound field. The cello responds to this climax by adding pizzicato to the creaking, both of which are heard in reverse via the computer. The cello signals the coda with one distinct bowing; the computer answers with a mid-register ringing sound and analog popping reminiscent of the gurgling, though clearer and higher. The cello returns with long creaks; instead of

gurgling, the computer bellows by using a reverbed low pass filter of the creaking.

Likewise, "Axial Landmark" layers several cello sounds. An airy hissing pervades the background as the cello's high-register creaking is layered with low-register creaking and pizzicato. An airy siren sweeps beneath these from right to left, increasing in volume and clarity as it descends in register, becoming a low cello multiple stop. This is repeated a few times as the creaking and pizzicato continue. Brief high register statements are spattered above these sweeps, noticeably a pitch shifting of cello playing. Silence abruptly concludes the piece.

Three tracks occur which seem to suggest a landscape that contrasts the natural with the synthetic. "Myelin" seems to open with the cries of seagulls or whales in dialogue with metallic scraping underneath. The cello plays ascending glissandos on harmonics colored by an airy reverb; these sounds are echoed in diminution. The scraping gradually becomes more present. At the climax, the cello and its reverb are buried under a mass of a synthesized glissandos in granular synthesis, a multitude of mini cries, and the airy reverb loud, fast, reversed, and rapidly panned. This brief climax is followed by an even shorter cello and reverb solo. Immediately, the mass returns more chaotic than before, with the cello harmonics staggered on top of each other.

The mass fades, and a new sound emerges: granular synthesis and filtering of the airy reverb become the chirp of insects, vinyl record pops, and finally a motor driving away.

In "Meiotic Recombination," cello harmonics are interspersed with creaking that sounds like falling trees amidst sweeps of white noise. When the creaking stops, the white noise continues with water-imitating amplitude fluctuations, and the high cello harmonics begin a dialogue with a mid-register moan of recombined string sounds. The cello takes a solo over the white noise as a bell chimes five times, then six times, carrying the music out of the forest and into the metropolitan chatter of pedestrians talking and cars passing by. The cello softly comments on the people's laughter, and a descending moan concludes the piece.

In "Cellobiohydrolase," the cello produces a buzzing sound through bowing and pitch sliding. The computer processes this with a monstrous reverb and augmentation of the low frequencies. Whirring, water, and electronic chirping sounds are added. Their frequency decreases until the cello plays alone and unamplified, buzzing its double stops. The water sounds and the reverb and rising of lows (albeit quiet) return as the piece ends.

In "Beta Receptor," the relationship between natural and synthetic is less clear.

At the beginning, the cello bows an un-pitched tremolo at various speeds. Electronic chirping is produced in imitation of this motion. When pitches are added to the tremolo, it is a roar of low *sul ponticello*. The chirping becomes a miscellany of tweets and squawks as the tremolo and echoes of it continue. A wave of white noise washes over the flock. The cello fragments the tremolo to *sul ponticello* pitch bending as the chaos of chirping enters in the low register. A rattle of white noise signals the end.

Outside the realm of arrhythmic creaking and tapping, "GFP-fusion" has a sense of stasis with a high heterodyning tone and the cello improvising on a major ninth chord. The resultant sound is almost spectral.

The only other instance of ideas based on the pitches of the cello is "Motif of Myo1p." The cello plays two forceful beats of double stops, a herald strangely reminiscent of the opening of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*. Crackles of droplet sounds underlie the cello's free development of the motive. Next, the cello plays double stops that end in a tremolo that launches a flight of wispy electronic sounds. The ensuing cello dialogue seems to reference Vivaldi, alternating between the cello tremolo and the ethereal computer sounds.

With a similar construction, "Homolog 1" opens with the cello playing double- and triple-stop harmonics. The opening six

harmonic dyads and triads are separated by a few seconds of silence. The computer enters with synthesized chimes immersed in reverb. This timbral exploration continues as the cello moves to the low register and the computer causes overlaps between the cello and previously played multiple stops. A low drone enters as the cello plays multiple stops in the middle register; one of these is looped as the cello continues to improvise and the chimes fade out. The computer adds sweeps of white noise. After the white noise stops, the drone ceases, and the cello plays a final triple stop.

The most convincing composition is also the longest. "Axial Budding" opens with a long descending slide that lands in a monstrous creaking. Shorter slides soar around. The next section begins with a low scraping sound, adds amplified *sul ponticello*, short squeaky motions, and a flurry of brief backwards fragments until one is surrounded by a field of sound. This is followed by the contrast of cello harmonics bleeding into one another over a background of white noise. The noise rises in volume as the cello dissipates into another long slide. Unlike the first, this slide ends in a soft rumble of creaking and heterodyning. The miscellany of sounds returns, but this time a patterned sizzle rises from the texture. When it fades out, a violent tremolo begins in the cello with ethereal slides flying around. The piece ends with low noise.

Tanja Orning's inventive use of the cello is commendable throughout the album. Although the building of textural climaxes is formulaic in some of the tracks, the interaction of processed and computer-generated sounds with the cello is always exciting. *Dr. OX* is a recording that vividly emulates a live electroacoustic performance.

Bob Gluck
Electric Brew
(EMF Media, EM169, 2007)
by Nathan Wolek

Bob Gluck's new compact disc *Electric Brew* features an eclectic mix of influences. The backbone of the disc is formed by four original compositions that were inspired by and use motifs from famous jazz compositions by Miles Davis and his collaborators, namely Joe Zawinul and Dave Holland. In addition, Gluck offers up two additional interludes that he describes as "collages," formed by editing together several live performances of his original compositions. Gluck mixes these jazz references with his eShofar, a twenty-first century take on an instrument typically used in Jewish religious ceremonies and Stravinsky's infamous *Rite of Spring*. Unfortunately, these varied influences often yield muddled results.

Prior to hearing this disc, I had never heard any of Gluck's music, although I knew of him by reputation. He has been director of the University of Albany's Electronic Music Studios since 2001 and currently serves as an Associate Director of the Electronic Music Foundation. He has studied jazz piano and holds degrees from a rabbinical college. These aspects of his background help contextualize the influences cited on this disc. They helped me understand the concept of the disc, but I still felt like I was missing something after my first listen.

After reading about the musical works referenced in the liner notes, I knew I needed to get better acquainted with these recordings. It had been a long time since I had heard *Bitches Brew*, the album to which Gluck's disc title is an homage. I thought it was important to grab this jazz-rock masterpiece from the library and dive into the sound world that inspired Gluck's compositions. It addition to the titular track, Gluck also cites Zawinul's *Pharaoh's Dance* as source material that he has reworked in respective compositions. I also listened to Davis's *Is There Still Time?*, a similarly referenced work by Gluck, but could not get my hands on *Q&A*, a piece by Dave Holland, who also played bass on *Bitches Brew*. After listening to all these and a cursory refresher on *Rite of Spring*, I felt more prepared to dive back into Gluck's disc.

After all this extra listening, a logical question followed: Is it fair to compare Bob Gluck's work with that of Miles Davis and friends? My answer was yes. Gluck has invited it based upon his admission to this influence and source material in the liner notes of the disc. In my opinion, you cannot write music that is inspired by another artist, draw motifs from his work and then absolve yourself from comparisons. The materials in Gluck's music are not obstructed and will be clearly evident to anyone familiar with the original recordings. I have no ideological qualms with him using these materials; sampling musical materials is par for the course in our post-modern world, and I will concede that Gluck has done something unique and original with them. However, Gluck's compositions do not rise to the level of those works by his muses.

What amazes me about Gluck's disc is that out of references to such highly energetic, rhythmically impassioned and unmistakably exciting music, he produces mostly bland offerings. The original pieces are all about rhythms and grooves that propel the listener forward with such undeniable force that you cannot sit still. I want to move when Miles plays a solo and groove with the bass ostinato. I can't help but be energized by the intensity of the bass clarinet on *Bitches Brew* or the electric pianos on *Pharaoh's Dance*. All this is lost in Gluck's attempt to take motifs and ideas

and pin them down under his microscope for reflection and study.

Admittedly, "energy" and "intensity" are vague musical traits that beg for more specificity. The biggest contributor is likely the percussion on *Bitches Brew*, which featured two drummers on sets plus additional players on congas and shaker. Together these formed a consistent, layered pulse. Gluck only gives us percussion on *Pharaoh's Spring*, and here it is a MIDI conga that is a poor facsimile of Don Alias. The keyboards on the originals feature a funky Fender Rhodes, so when Gluck transfers these motifs to a concert grand, they seem to lose some of their edge. Gluck's eShofar with its chaotic processing system is no match for Davis's trumpet and his carefully placed delay effects. There is also something to be said for the recording quality on the originals, where nearly everything was close miked, giving the sounds a stronger presence in the mix. When compared to Gluck's choice of concert-style recordings where the listener is kept at a distance, one could easily make the case for this being the biggest difference between the two discs.

I felt the strongest track on the compact disc was the last one, entitled *Is there still time?*. It's an odd realization that this was the only composition in which Gluck dispensed with all the electronics and treats the listener to some straight-up jazz

piano playing. This provided the track with some clarity and identity and it was all the better for it. After hearing it, I wondered if this track would have been a better choice to start off the disc so that the listener could proceed through the rest with a better sense of how Gluck's piano stylings were extended by his electronics.

One piece that is not part of this jazz-rock milieu is *In the Bushes* for computer-assisted piano. It uses samples of George W. Bush to form what Gluck calls "a political commentary on the war in Iraq"—very much a sign of the times. I am usually resistant to pieces that try to be overtly political, whether they are right or left in their ideology. Artists in centuries past had to veil their political commentary or risk being persecuted by their governments. Today there is no need to finesse, and the freedom to be forthright coupled with sampling from well-known media sources can lead to a situation where the artwork loses its relevance over time. The materials have meaning to us now because we have heard them in their original contexts. I have now heard several of these "Bush pieces" at various concerts and conferences. How will it all be perceived in 20 or 50 years when the speeches are a distant memory? I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that the impact will fade.

There are two additional compositions on the disc not composed by Gluck.

Akeda, composed by Ofer Ben-Amots, is a simple yet evocative setting of a liturgical lamentation for the departed. Here again, Gluck's piano playing is given the chance to shine without electronic intervention, and listeners should be appreciative. Together with *Is there still time?*, we get a clear sense of the range of abilities Gluck possesses as a pianist. Shlomo Dubnov's *127 Digits* is described as "a duet for computer-assisted piano." Although I have worked with Disklavier and understand how one could go about the process of ornamenting the work of a pianist, I found myself a little lost trying to follow the duet in this piece. Perhaps it is the fact that the audio recording flattens the two into a uniform sound field and any sense of the duet is blurred. This piece likely works much better in live performance, preferably up close so that you can see what the performer and computer are each adding to the music.

It should be clear to any listener that the jazz-rock elements dominate this disc, easily demanding more attention than these other compositions. Gluck obviously has a personal fondness for the material from this period in Miles Davis's career and has used these compositions to explore it for his own amusement. While the success of the results is debatable, a definite positive is that one has to listen first to *Bitches Brew* in order to have any chance of appreciating *Electric Brew*. And directing new ears to this masterpiece is perhaps the disc's most redeeming quality.

Robert Normandeau
Puzzles
(empreintes DIGITALes, IMED 0575, 2005)
by Julio d'Escriván

Perhaps every review should start with a confession. It seems fair that if you're about to discuss somebody's work, you should say something about yourself. Otherwise, it is far too comfortable. This is it: I have been playing acousmatic music on my iPod while I train for my endurance events, alongside The Kooks, Juan Luis Guerra, Keane, José González, Snow Patrol, Juanes, Porcupine Tree, Caetano Veloso and Orishas. Actually, the only other acousmatic composer besides these pop guys is Dhomont. As often happens, I started wondering why I was doing this and what this told me about myself.

Runners need cadence; it helps if you can follow a groove. It keeps you going beyond the eighth mile, which is when any training actually starts (for me, anyway). Normandeau's music is permeated throughout with pulse or the promise of pulse. *Puzzle* (2003), the first piece on this disc, is part of a long lineage stretching back to a piece called *Rumeurs* (1987) from the composer's early release *Lieux inouïs*, which also uses opening/closing doors and various sounds which are begging to be looped and pulsed, some which are clearly pre-reminiscent (I know the word doesn't exist, but is coined here as a "pataphysical"

concept). The doors in *Rumeurs* are used as structural pivots to parcel the work into sections or scenes, whereas in *Puzzle* the doors actually become the rhythmic material of the piece itself. I would suggest that the two pieces illuminate each other and should be heard in tandem, as they seem to explain each other in music. *Puzzle* fulfills the promises of rhythm in *Rumeurs*, and belongs to the continuum of pulsing pieces Normandeau has made in the intervening years (including of course *Le renard et la rose* (1995) and *Clair de Terre: Montage Metaphorique* (2001), which are also forerunners of this piece and perhaps easier to link on the surface level).

But *Puzzle* does something that is also very modern: when you start playing it, you find that it was already playing before you started it. This *Puzzle*—which gives the disc its name—is but an instance of *n* potential Puzzles, or so the author tells us in the liner notes. It is not that in some ways it could be construed as an algorithmic piece, or that because of the way the musical loops have been tailored you have some material in search of rules, but rather that a non-linear compositional approach has pervaded a style of music which is known for being very linear. In acousmatic music, normally, development is made into a virtue. Interpolation is revered, careful remixes of brassaged textures prompt much beard scratching, furrowed brows (if no beard) and hushed "aaaahs." The process of

making it has traditionally been rather linear. Tape was bounced onto tape. Old habits are reproduced to this day, profitably, on non-linear editing software. Yet here is a piece made of loops—re-arrangeable, freshly pulsing, infectious loops. It is more Ableton Live than ProTools, more Dance remix than cinema for the ear. A puzzle of patterns, yes, but perhaps also evidence of a shift in Normandeau's electroacoustic thinking.

Éden (2003) begins with beautiful Vietnamese singing, and before you know what's happening you are flying over the clouds in the dusk, no land below to be seen, just the textures of clouds and the strange twilight of the northern hemisphere, and the stewardess voicelessly asking you to switch off your iPod as we are about to land in Toronto (yes, this is actually what happened and rebelliously I only took one earphone off and proceeded to listen to, well, half the piece). Again, as the mature piece that it is, it reflects concerns that Normandeau has voiced earlier but perhaps never in this way. Perhaps the greatest musical affinity to this work can be found in his CD *Clair de Terre* (1999-2001). As the slowly changing and pulsing layers reveal perhaps the sound of the sea, the suspending in time of the female voice and the sudden explosive openings of vistas, new and old musical material washes over the listener and submerges them into Eden (the title is so damn appropriate!).

Chorus (2002) is conceptually based on the story, taken from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's "Nathan the Wise," of a dying father giving his three children a ring made out of his own ring, thereby avoiding having to give the original one to any of the three. A parable on the three religions "of the book" and the fact that—wait for it—they May ALL be right (!), the piece is a layered stream form that uses shofar, bells and voices, stretching them all out with liberal punctuations that do not detract from the textural unity that is achieved here. These punctuations work as statement "markers;" they define parts and sections, but as the piece progresses, they give way to blends of sounds that allow us to forget the earlier divisions. It's a fitting metaphor for the spiritual place we should all be striving to reach. *Chorus* also reminds me of a much earlier piece worth re-listening to, *Jeu* (1989). In that piece's opening section, Normandeau treats the voices similarly, and this fascination with vocal sounds, arguably a feature of all of Normandeau's music, is portrayed nearer its infancy (as is the use of rhythmic pulsing, actually).

There are not a lot of ways in which I could be induced to listen to much hurdy-gurdy playing, but if it is to be mutated into these elongated beautifully textured layers found in *StrinGDberg* (2001-2003), I am all for it. Normandeau calls this a "deep listening work," perhaps unwittingly

referencing Pauline Oliveros (he actually said "écoute en profondeur," which I believe has not been trademarked yet). The piece is seemingly static, but as with so much of Normandeau's music, full of life that reveals itself upon successive listening as you unpeel the layers. This piece is also punctuated with sudden starts that eventually make you aware of a pulsing motion. This is music to endure with. Or should I say music that helps you endure? Anyway, it is tactile, sensual and immersive, not conventionally "acousmatic." I feel I would like to listen to it many times (and I have), as there is still so much to be heard.

Another feature of Normandeau's work is that a number of his pieces, such as *Hamlet-Machine with Actors* (2003), have a previous existence as incidental music for the theatre. This is always a challenge for a composer. As opposed to what happens in film music, the composer has no exact measurement of pace in the theatre, as the action is realised live on stage. In practice, this means that the music must approximate without exactly shadowing; the composer has to allow for imprecision, and this always takes its toll on the musical pace. In film, on the other hand, you can compose to the quarter of a frame and know that the action will always be supported in the same way. This is why, I think, Normandeau is at pains to explain to us in the liner notes that he has "reworked every sound and recomposed every sequence to produce

an autonomous work." The piece as it stands evokes visual imagery and does not hide its close relationship with the stage. I wonder if I should have watched the play to derive maximum pleasure from listening to this. As it unfolds and I listen repeatedly, I find more connections and put together some kind of mental plot, but it comes back to reconstructing in my mind what the original must have been like. Should this piece be able to stand on its own in concert as, say, *Petrushka* can be played without the ballet? Perhaps. It is for each listener to decide. In any case, the sounds of the actors at work and the inclusion of the aural environment of the industrial neighbourhood where the rehearsal building was located seem to add a dimension of "acoustic ecology" to the work, but maybe that is a facile reference. I am sure this piece will have a very diverse impact depending on how close you are to the original play and how much you enjoy "theatrical" environments. I can't separate it from the original idea, and I wonder, if I had not read the liner notes, whether the effort in aural reconstruction would have been equal to the pleasure I have had listening to other works on this disc. I think *Clair de Terre* (1999-2001), which also has a theatrical background to some of its movements, is worth listening to in order to more clearly show the

dexterity with which Normandeau has surmounted these challenges in the past.

Book Reviews

Simoni, Mary, ed.
Analytical Methods of
Electroacoustic Music
Routledge, December 2005
(312 p., ISBN 0415972694)
Reviewed by Kristian Twombly

The field of electroacoustic music is still quite young, and precious little exists in the way of analyses and published theoretical approaches to this music. It is only in the last few years that collections of such analyses have begun to appear, and Mary Simoni's *Analytical Methods of Electroacoustic Music* is a valuable addition to this important field of study.

The collection of essays represents a variety of musical and analytical approaches and, after an introduction from the editor, is launched with a welcome discussion of some basic concepts in acoustical and electronic analysis, written by Norman Adams. This essay briefly describes various methods of representing audio signals visually, from time-domain representations to spectrograms, each with numerous examples from a variety of audio sources. While the spectrogram is the primary representative tool used in

the book, Adams' essay presents both the usefulness and drawbacks of each form of representation, including fundamental (and often overlooked) aspects, including logarithmic versus linear frequency graphing and window sizing.

The next essay, by Leigh Landy, is perhaps the most distinct in the collection. Most of the essays focus on timbral and compositional issues, but Landy presents what amounts to a sociological study on compositional intent in electroacoustic music. As the author states, "This investigation is based on the premise that certain forms of music deserve a larger audience than they currently have" (p. 29). The Intention/Reception Project therefore attempts to empirically measure audience response through questionnaires and post-listening discussion. For the purposes of the study, the study groups were divided primarily according to familiarity with electroacoustic music. Each group heard two different works—*Prochaine Station* by Christian Calon and Claude Schryer and *Valley Flow* by Denis Smalley—multiple times. Composer intent was determined primarily through answers given to a series of questions by each composer, and listener response was similarly garnered with the addition of a group discussion following each listening session.

This essay was challenging for a number of reasons. *Valley Flow* proved to be too long