

21ST CENTURY MUSIC

FEBRUARY 2011



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21ST-CENTURY MUSIC is published monthly by 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. ISSN 1534-3219.

Subscription rates in the U.S. are \$96.00 per year; subscribers elsewhere should add \$48.00 for postage. Single copies of the current volume and back issues are \$12.00. Large back orders must be ordered by volume and be pre-paid. Please allow one month for receipt of first issue. Domestic claims for non-receipt of issues should be made within 90 days of the month of publication, overseas claims within 180 days. Thereafter, the regular back issue rate will be charged for replacement. Overseas delivery is not guaranteed. Send orders to 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. email: mus21stc@gmail.com.

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Prospective contributors should consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), in addition to back issues of this journal. Copy should be sent to 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. e-mail: mus21stc@gmail.com. Materials for review may be sent to the same address.

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Mikel Rouse

PHILLIP GEORGE

Mikel Rouse (b. Michael Rouse, 1/26/57, Saint Louis, MI) writes in a post-minimal style that is idiomatically indebted to popular music, utilizing complex rhythmic techniques derived from world music, the avant-garde, and minimalism.

The son of a Missouri state trooper, Rouse grew up in Poplar Bluff, in the state's bootheel region. Early in life, he decided to change the spelling of his first name to "Mikel," more accurately representing the pronunciation.

He graduated from the Kansas City Art Institute and the Conservatory of Music at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Rouse's band Tirez Tirez relocated to New York City in 1979 and continued performing until 1987.

About this time, he directed the film Roundtable (1979), and, over the years has served likewise for The Glass Bead Game (1982), A Walk in the Woods (1985), Funding (2001), The End Of Cinematics (2002), and Music For Minorities (2004).

Upon moving to New York, Rouse absorbed African rhythmic techniques from A. M. Jones's Studies in African Music, took up other instruction in world music, and studied Schillinger System with Jerome Walman, one of the few "Certified" instructors in America; all of these influences came to inform his music.

In addition to Tirez Tirez he formed a new ensemble, Mikel Rouse Broken Consort, to work out his new rhythmic language in the context of rock-based instrumentation, making him one of the first composers to notate intricate music in such a context. Recordings with the latter ensemble include Jade Tiger (1984), A Walk In The Woods (1985), A Lincoln Portrait (1988), and Soul Menu (1993).

Other albums of the 80's included Etudes (1980), Colorado Suite (1984), Quorum (1984), Set The Timer (1985), Social Responsibility (1987), and Against All Flags (1988). Rouse's association with Ben Neill and Kyle Gann in the early 1990's led to the recognition of a new rhythmic complexity in minimalist-based music that came to be referred to as totalism.

Frustrated by the lack of institutional support for Downtown music, Rouse made an ambitious bid for composer self-sufficiency, premiering/directing a one-man opera Failing Kansas, based on the same story as Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, in 1995. One of the basic rhythms of the work is a five-beat isorhythm against which either harmony or drum patterns often reinforce a four- or eight- cycle.

Conceived as the first of a trilogy of operas, Failing led to an emerging art form which to composer has characterized as "counterpoetry," involving the use of multiple unpitched voices in counterpoint. Often individual lines performed by separate characters or groups are set to phrases of differing lengths (such as 9 and 10 beats) and characteristically played over a background of 4/4. Other works to employ this technique include Autorequiem (1994) for strings, percussion and voices; and the CD Living Inside Design (1994), a collection of extended spoken songs

In 1996 Rouse premiered and directed the technologically innovative Dennis Cleveland at The Kitchen, starring himself and based on a talk show format, with some of the singers/actors spread out among the audience. With a dense libretto drawn from John Ralston Saul's Voltaire's Bastards, the work was hailed by The Village Voice as "the most exciting and innovative new opera since [Philip Glass's] Einstein on the Beach."

Additional performances included The Eclectic Orange Festival in Costa Mesa, CA (1999); the Perth International Arts Festival, Western Australia (2000); the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois (2001, where the production was redesigned with assistance from the University of Illinois), and Lincoln Center (2002). The Australian Broadcasting Company filmed a documentary of the piece, which aired in 2001. 1999 found Rouse completing Return, a collection of songs built around samples from his 1985 Book One for string quartet. Also that year, the composer completed the music for the multimedia Cameraworld, collaborating with video artist Cliff Baldwin.

The following season, Rouse completed the score and film, tellingly entitled Funding, a full-length feature DVD/film/chamber orchestra piece, as well as conceiving and producing the first commercial CDROM release of prepared piano samples from John Cage's Sonatas and Interludes.

In 2001 the John Cage Trust commissioned Rouse to realize the score for Cage's radio-play-turned-theatrical-production James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet. Rouse completed the score at Louisiana Tech University during the beginning of a three-year Meet the Composer Residency in Ruston, LA. He also played the part of James Joyce in the international 2001-2002 tour of the work, premiering at the Edinburgh International Festival and including runs at the Dublin Fringe Festival, the Hebbel Theatre (Berlin), the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign), Cal Performances (Berkeley), the Perth International Arts Festival, and the Eclectic Orange Festival in Costa Mesa.

In 2002 he released two CDs, Cameraworld and a remastered Failing Kansas, and one DVD, Funding. Test Tones was completed that year and Music for Minorities the next.

The third opera in his trilogy, The End Of Cinematics premiered in Fall 2005, through collaboration with the Emerging Technologies department of the National Center for Supercomputing Technologies and the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois at Urbana.

A new piece commissioned by The Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the John Cage Trust and Betty Freeman premiered at The Joyce Theater, New York, in October 2006. The piece was scored for multiple iPods set to "shuffle" so that each audience member had a different realization of the score. The music for the piece, International Cloud Atlas, was released exclusively on iTunes and was available for download prior to the premiere. In addition to this work, Rouse also released House Of Fans and Love At Twenty.

Works

Etudes (1981), ten songs

Balboa (1981), video opera

Quartet (1981), three violins, double bass

Shield 81 (1982), chamber orchestra suite

Autumn in New York (1982), orchestra

Untitled (1982), electronics

Jade Tiger (1982), five pieces for chamber ensemble (Mikel Rouse Broken Consort)

Glass Bead Game (1983), opera on Herman Hesse novel

Story of the Year (1983), nine songs

Colorado Suite (1984), three pieces for violin and electronics

A Walk in the Woods (1984), seven-piece chamber orchestra suite

Red 20 (1984), orchestra

Quorum (1984), electronic drum sequencer, premiered as Vespers by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

American Nova (1985), orchestra

Set the Timer / Uptight (1986), extended songs

Book One (1986), nine string quartets

Social Responsibility (1987), ten songs

Lincoln Portrait (1987), suite of six pieces for chamber ensemble (Mikel Rouse Broken Consort)

Against All Flags (1988), ten songs

Two Paradoxes Resolved (1989), six-piece piano suite

Hope Chest (1991), chamber quartet

Copperhead (1992), electric quartet

Left in My Life (1993), for voices and electronics

Soul Menu (1993), five pieces for chamber ensemble (Mikel Rouse Broken Consort)

Kiss Him Goodbye (1993), voices and electronics

Living Inside Design (1994), nine songs

Autorequiem (1994), voices and orchestra

Failing Kansas (1995), opera on Truman Capote's In Cold Blood

Dennis Cleveland (1996), opera as television talk show

The End of Cinematics (1997), opera

Return (1999), a collection of songs constructed around samples from Book One (1986), a book of string quartets recorded in 1989

Funding (2001), choral piece and feature film

Cameraworld (2000), digital media project incorporating surround sound, feature length film and video "for home entertainment systems of the future"

Test Tones (2002), song cycle and feature film combined with live interviews from New York to Louisiana

Music for Minorities (2003), 14 songs for voice and guitar with live interactive video.

Love at Twenty (2004), music for the Joe Goode Performance Group

House of Fans (2005), album of songs

International Cloud Atlas (2006), music for iPods for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company

Gravity Radio (2009), song cycle with live AP news reports and film

Recess (2010), song cycle utilizing orchestrated field recordings (2010)

Corner Loading (Volume 1) (2010), 13 songs for voice and guitar exploring blues techniques through simple metric combinations



Chronicle

December 1

The Radio Dept. and Braids Bowery Ballroom, New York, NY. "The Radio Dept. is from Sweden, and it shares -- with bands like Junip, Kings of Convenience and Peter Bjorn and John -- the Scandinavian fondness for restrained, neatly made pop. Most of its set came from a compilation due for release in the United States in January, the precisely titled *Passive Aggressive: Singles 2002-2010*, released by Labrador. Performing as a three-man band with programmed rhythm tracks, the Radio Dept. harked back to the guitar-and-keyboard grids of New Order and the urbane whispers of Pet Shop Boys. Early in its career the Radio Dept. placed overlays of noise on its songs, but the band soon realized that it could be just as circumspect without the distortion. Onstage the songs proceeded at steady, moderate midtempo, with arrangements that were full-bodied but never overstuffed. Every so often the band allowed itself a dance beat or a major-chord crescendo approaching the lower elevations of U2. Within the decorous, melodic structures, [Johan] Duncanson was revealing longings, wounds and accusations. He derided Sweden's government in *The New Improved Hypocrisy* and confessed to private failings in song after song: 'It breaks my heart to say that when I was in pain / I wanted you to feel the same,' he sang. The music was both a sturdy shelter and an invitation, for the sympathetic, to peer inside. Braids, the Canadian band that opened the concert, doesn't follow pop guidelines. It builds its long, changeable songs on busy Minimalistic patterns: loops and drones, overlapping guitar and keyboard lines, contrapuntal vocals that can turn into ethereal chorales. And every so often, out of the hypnotic polyphony, came a lead vocal from Raphaëlle Standell-Preston (on guitar) or Katie Lee (on keyboard) that zeroed in on something more down-to-earth: 'What do you say to a man who's got no taste? / Who's really got no potential?' The songs -- from Braids' debut album, *Native Speaker*, due in January -- evolved gradually but never predictably, and held a good part of the audience rapt" [Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, 12/2/10].

December 5

Bach and Forth, with pianist Stephen Prutsman. Alice Tully Hall, New York, NY. "In his teens and 20's in California he played keyboards in rock bands and piano in jazz clubs. But he had thorough conservatory training and won prizes in major international competitions. He has explored world music, arranging and composing some 40 genre-blending works for the Kronos Quartet. His song cycle *Piano Lessons* was given its American premiere this season by Dawn Upshaw and Emanuel Ax at Carnegie Hall. . . . Prutsman brought the strands of his interests together in a fascinating recital program Using Bach as a point of reference, he . . . alternated [J. S. Bach compositions] with music ranging from an elegiac ancient Uzbek folk song to the wildly inventive 1974 song *Sound Chaser* by the progressive art-rock group Yes, which has become a Prutsman specialty. In the first half the Bach pieces were juxtaposed with Rameau, Beethoven, Wagner . . . , Debussy, and Schoenberg. But in the second half Mr. Prutsman drew even bolder connections, . . . with music by Charlie Parker (*Ornithology*), the gospel singer and pastor Walter Hawkins, a traditional Rwandan ode and more, all played in his own artful arrangements. . . . [T]he musical connections Mr. Prutsman made were so intriguing, and his playing so earnest and sensitive, that you never doubted the integrity of this musical adventure. . . . That Mr. Prutsman brought a similar approach to everything he played made the musical connections easier to hear. He played throughout with rhythmic freedom, warm colorings and jazzy spontaneity. I prefer Bach (and Schoenberg, for that matter) with more articulate rhythm and clarity. Still, Mr. Prutsman's performances were honest and elegant. . . . The highlight for me was Mr. Prutsman's slightly crazed and brilliant arrangement of the episodic, relentless Yes song. He did not speak to the audience about the program. . . . Instead he let the music do the talking. The audience listened with notably rapt attention, then gave Mr. Prutsman a standing ovation. There was no encore. To add anything would have thrown off the balance of Bach and Forth" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 12/6/10].

December 7

For a composer generally described as contemporary classical, Minimalist or avant-garde, Mikel Rouse has recently been getting almost folksy. His 2009 album, *Gravity Radio*, and two he has just released, *Recess* and *Corner Loading, Vol. 1* (all on Exit Music), are collections of verse-and-chorus songs featuring his voice and guitar picking: songs about the state of America, love, aging and uncertainty. Within the songs and connecting them are the patterns and metrical structures Mr. Rouse has always enjoyed. Around them, onstage, were video projections and current news readings when *Gravity Radio* was presented on Tuesday night at the Harvey Theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it continues through Saturday. Mr. Rouse was accompanied by a string quartet, two female singers and the sounds of shortwave radio static; he played a National steel resonator guitar or an acoustic guitar, singing in a rusty voice. 'When you think the worst is over/You know the worst has just begun,' one song counseled. Between every few songs, a woman read some of the day's Associated Press reports -- tax legislation, Iran's nuclear program, Wikileaks, Oprah Winfrey in Australia -- ostensibly to change the context for the songs. The video images were footage by Mr. Rouse that was often blurred or shown at disorienting angles; it presented landscapes, streetscapes and people, brightening or darkening with the volume of the music. The trappings gave a Laurie Anderson overlay to *Gravity Radio*, suitable for the performance-space circuit where Mr. Rouse has been touring with it. But they barely affected the songs, which didn't need any theatrical help. Melding the sinewy stoicism of folk tradition with Mr. Rouse's structural tweaks, they pondered disappointments and diminishing expectations, personal and political, reaching pensive conclusions in succinct choruses: 'The world got away with me,' concluded the last tune. With the steel guitar's tinny bite, the music hinted at blues and old-time country, while the acoustic guitar moved it into folk-pop. But the string quartet and backup vocals added convolutions: harmonies leaning toward polytonality, staggered vocals that gently concealed the beat.

Meanwhile, Mr. Rouse was toying with the rhythms, using odd meters that made the music skip and spring ahead so that it was never quite as cozy as the arrangements might seem. If Mr. Rouse had built his career in a different era, he might be playing these songs to indie-rock fans alongside bands like Dirty Projectors or an earlier Sufjan Stevens. But maybe it's for the best -- the classical rubric makes for quieter audiences [Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, 12/8/10].

Rufus Wainwright. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Wearing a black floor-length gown with a matching fur collar and dark eye makeup, he was every inch the tragic diva as he gravely crossed the stage A prima donna and a sad clown rolled into one, this grand, androgynous mourner embodied the grieving central figure of Mr. Wainwright's sixth studio album, *All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu*, released last spring. A cycle of 12 songs that includes his adaptation of Shakespeare sonnets 43, 20, and 10 -- *All Days Are Nights* is an outpouring of raw self-pity: a kind of musical crying jag, if you will. The Lulu of the title, Mr. Wainwright has said in interviews, refers to the silent-film flapper Louise Brooks, the Alban Berg opera *Lulu*, and the *Dark Lady* of Shakespeare's sonnets. . . . [S]he is the embodiment of Mr. Wainwright's alter ego, a haughty, high-strung opera star who feels entitled to vent any and every emotion with a feverish intensity. Prima Donna is the title of his first opera, which had its debut in England last year, and which he announced would open at the New York City Opera in 2012. The first half of the evening was an uninterrupted performance of the song cycle illustrated with clips of a long-lashed eye (presumably Mr. Wainwright's) ringed in black makeup, slowly opening and closing, the area of shadow suggesting a thumbprint. Its music is an ultraromantic pop pastiche of French impressionist composers, from Debussy to Fauré, and consists largely of flowery, continuously modulating arpeggios attached to wandering melodies. Mr. Wainwright sought to sustain an orchestral texture as thick as the piano could produce. Except for the sonnets, the lyrics are a torrent of angst, much of it abstract, that coalesces to some degree around the death in January of Mr. Wainwright's mother, the great folk singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle.

Two songs address his close relationship with his sister, Martha Wainwright, to whom the album is dedicated, and who appeared after intermission to sing some harmony vocals. Mr. Wainwright's heavily chromatic music lacks the harmonic refinement and dynamic subtlety of his French role models, but his theatrical presentation strove to make up the difference. His singing, as ever, went in and out of focus. His most problematic vocal area is a middle register that can sound like a coarse, grainy whine when pushed too hard, and a vibrato that wavers uncertainly when he sings softly. If Mr. Wainwright is not careful, he swallows syllables, and the words become unintelligible. His lower register is unexpectedly resonant, and his falsetto sweetly poignant. Increasingly, Mr. Wainwright draws out notes for expressive effect. Generally speaking, his voice leads and the piano follows. Although Mr. Wainwright has one of the most ardent fan bases of any singer-songwriter, the audience response to *All Days Are Nights* was politely respectful. . . . Stephen Oremus, the musical director for [Wainwright's] 2006 re-creation of Judy Garland's 1961 Carnegie Hall performance, accompanied . . . on piano as [Wainwright] reprised some of those songs, most successfully *Do It Again* and *The Trolley Song*. But the evening's strongest numbers, in which Mr. Wainwright vigorously accompanied himself, were his own pop songs, the best of which reveal him as a melodic master. . . . Performing them with a robust confidence, Mr. Wainwright was at the top of his game" [Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, 12/7/10].

December 8

Lee Hoiby's *Summer and Smoke* (Lanford Wilson, after Tennessee Williams). Manhattan School of Music, New York, NY. "[When the work] had its premiere in 1971, it was criticized by some for its conservative music, awash in the harmonic language of Menotti (Mr. Hoiby's mentor), Barber and Mahler, and its unabashedly lyrical vocal writing. But the work, with an effective and delicately poetic libretto by the playwright Lanford Wilson, also won deserved praise for doing what an opera is supposed to do: telling the story with sure dramatic pacing and understated expressivity, in music admirable for its directness and melodic grace.

These qualities shone through on . . . [in] the first of three performances, with Mr. Hoiby, 84, in attendance. The conductor Steven Osgood drew supple, beautifully restrained playing from the able musicians. Set in 1911 in Glorious Hill, a small Mississippi town, the story unfolds during several momentous months in the lives of two young adults who grew up as neighbors: John Buchanan Jr., a dashing doctor, and Alma Winemiller, the sweet but inhibited daughter of a pious minister. The handsome production, directed by Dona D. Vaughn, using windows and sets that descend into place, imaginatively evoked the neighboring houses: the staid sitting room in the rectory where the Winemillers live and the doctor's office where young John Buchanan practices with his father. The opera has long been embraced as ideal for student singers, and this excellent cast fit comfortably into its roles. Anna Viemeister, a soprano, sang with warmth and intensity, capturing the uneasy mix of yearning and repression in Alma. Though part of Alma has always loved John, she is intimidated by his breezy confidence, physicality and ease with women. Nickoli Strommer, a baritone, brought a mellow voice and crisp diction to John, the pride of Glorious Hill. John has nursed similar feelings for Alma, whose name in Spanish means 'soul.' But he goes too far one night when he takes Alma to the local casino, drinks too much and tries to rustle her to an upstairs room. Nothing would have happened, he explains months later in the crucial scene of the opera, because 'I'm more afraid of your soul than you are of my body.' In a way, the two young people cross emotional paths. Just as Alma, despairing of her loneliness, finds the courage to open herself to John, he worries that he has been spiraling into reckless behavior with women and drink, and decides to marry the young, nubile Nellie (Audean Farmer, a perky soprano), fresh from a finishing school for ladies. In a devastating final scene, Alma, sitting by a fountain in the park where she and John used to play, goes off dancing at the casino with a lonely traveling salesman, a short but crucial role sung by Brian Wahlstrom. Alma's parents were winningly portrayed by the baritone Robert E. Mellon as the Rev. Winemiller, and the soprano Claire Coolen as his wife, a hostile, childish and unstable woman whom the townspeople describe as 'eccentric.'

María Leticia Hernández as the sensual young Rosa, whom young John almost marries, and Chris Lucier as Roger, Alma's decent childhood friend, were other standouts" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 12/9/10].

December 9

Steven Isserlis and Jeremy Denk. 92nd Street Y, New York, NY. "[B]ringing to light unfamiliar and worthy works by second-tier Romantics as well as contemporary composers seems to give Mr. Isserlis special delight. That his interests can draw sizable numbers of palpably engaged listeners is a credit to his estimable skills, enlightened advocacy and communicative powers. . . . Isserlis also had a noteworthy partner in Jeremy Denk, a pianist whose broad tastes and personable virtuosity make him a kindred spirit. . . . [Gabriel] Fauré's Cello Sonata No. 2 . . . closed [the first half of the program]. . . . Denk played three of Gyorgy Ligeti's études, offering precisely the mix of extravagant technique and potent imagination these dazzling works demand. . . . [in] the jazzily careening Fanfares, the achingly poignant Arc-en-Ciel and the obsessively rumbling Automne à Varsovie. . . . Isserlis . . . [played] four unaccompanied selections from Gyorgy Kurtág's Signs, Games, and Messages. Each was an economical miracle of portraiture, with the sparest of means yielding characterful results. Banking on his listeners' trust Mr. Isserlis earned their approval with his precise, heartfelt performances. He elegantly assumed vocal lines in his own arrangement of Ravel's Deux Mélodies Hébraïques -- the incantatory Kaddisch and the quizzical Énigme Éternelle -- with gracious support from Mr. Denk. . . . An arrestingly inventive four-part evocation of natural and urban vistas, [Lieux Retrouvés, written for him by the English composer Thomas Adès], is full to bursting with raucous, scintillating and zany effects. Mr. Denk joined Mr. Isserlis in a persuasive account, warmly received by the audience" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 12/12/10].

December 11

Rammstein. Madison Square Garden, New York, NY.

"Go for the fireballs, stay for the self-mythologizing and angst: That could be the pitch for Rammstein, the German rock band that played its first American show since 2001 . . . at a sold-out Madison Square Garden. During the concert flames shot up from the stage, down from the rafters and sideways from flamethrowers mounted in microphones and on a set of angel wings; fireworks added explosions and showers of sparks. At one point a man ran around the stage in a flaming suit, with an E.M.T. on hand to snuff him out. It was the kind of spectacle that has made Rammstein an arena and festival headliner across Europe. Its members are not modest. 'Lend your ears to a legend,' announced Rammstein, their first song, followed by a guttural shout that the crowd shared: 'Rammstein!' The music shows Rammstein's origins in the mid-1990s, when bands like KMFDM, from Germany, and Ministry and Nine Inch Nails from the United States had already bonded hard-rock guitars and dance-music synthesizers. The songs run about 60 percent rock, 40 percent electronic, slamming away and pausing occasionally for half-speed interludes of brooding pomp. Rammstein's lead singer, Till Lindemann, is a bass-baritone who makes his every utterance -- sung, barked, spoken -- portentous enough to match his stage presence; stocky and all muscle, he could be one of Wagner's Nibelungen. In Rammstein's early years its songs worked the easy shock effects that were common in industrial rock, singing about impulses of sex, violence and destruction. Rammstein's international breakthrough song from 1997 -- and a major singalong at Madison Square Garden -- was Du Hast (You Have, also a play on 'Du Hasst,' 'You Hate'), a bitter rejection of marriage vows. Rammstein stays grimly foreboding in songs from its most recent album, Liebe Ist für Alle Da (Love Is There for All) (Universal). There were dolls hanging overhead as the band performed Wiener Blut (Viennese Blood), which brings a woman into a castle basement for an ominous tryst: 'Welcome to the darkness,' Mr. Lindemann intoned, as the band started a churning, thrashing guitar attack. But Rammstein doesn't present itself as a band of simple, cartoonish bad guys. There's a troubled self-consciousness in songs like Waidmanns Heil (Happy Hunting), which opens with hunting-horn calls and confesses to a creepy bloodlust, and in Benzin (Gasoline), a stomper about fossil-fuel addiction.

Amid the visual and musical blasts, Rammstein doesn't exult in human depravity; it worries. During Engel (Angel), between streaks of flame from his wings, Mr. Lindemann was singing, 'We are afraid and alone' [Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, 12/12/10].

December 15

Yukio Tanaka, biwa, and Kifu Mitsuhashi, shakuhachi, in Takemitsu's *November Steps* with the Saito Kinen Orchestra. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

December 16

JapanNYC: Winds and Strings of Change. Miller Theater, Columbia University, New York, NY." [A]n optimist would have taken heart that a receptive audience assembled for an event meant to honor the composer Toru Takemitsu, a pioneer in bridging Japanese and Western art-music cultures, and to promote Columbia's recently established Gagaku-Hogaku Classical Japanese Music Curriculum and Performance Program. . . . Yukio Tanaka on biwa . . . and Kifu Mitsuhashi on shakuhachi, I was informed by a New York-based Japanese pianist in the audience, are viewed as national treasures in Japan. Joined here by the Japanese koto player Yoko Nishi and the New York shakuhachi player James Nyoraku Schlefer, they gave masterly performances. Mr. Tanaka punctuated solemnly sung verses with the biwa's twang, rasp and bite in *Dan no Ura*, a 1964 song by Kinshi Tsuruta and Yoko Mizuki named for a cataclysmic 12th-century sea battle. . . . Minimalist-style arpeggios animated Tadao Sawai's *Gaku* (Bliss), played by Ms. Nishi. Chikurai Gosho (*Bamboo Soundings in Five Movements*), an evocative, fiercely difficult work by Makoto Moroi, required of Mr. Mitsuhashi broad leaps in register, biting attacks and articulation shifts in midphrase, even midnote.

Performing his own *Yukyu no Shirabe* (Meditation on Eternity), Mr. Tanaka sang a brief verse inspired by Tsunemasa, a 12th-century warrior and biwa player who perished at *Dan no Ura*, against a litany of desiccated rattles and sitarlike hums. Joined by Mr. Mitsuhashi, Mr. Tanaka ended the concert with Takemitsu's *November Steps, Number Ten*, a cadenza from the orchestral work repurposed as a showcase of roiling, abrasive brilliance" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 12/17/10].

December 17

Simon Rattle conducts Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, in a revival of Jonathan Miller's 1995 production. Metropolitan Opera, New York, NY. "At the end of this four-hour evening, some of the most ardent participants in the ovation for Mr. Rattle were the musicians in the orchestra pit, who stood and heartily applauded. In perhaps the most impressive performance I have heard Mr. Rattle give, he drew lush and plangent yet clear-textured and purposeful playing from the great Met orchestra. . . . Debussy's mysterious opera, first performed in Paris in 1902, is an elusive and unconventional music drama. Adapted from the Symbolist play by Maurice Maeterlinck about the troubled family of an aged king in an imaginary realm, *Pelléas et Mélisande* is a masterpiece of ambiguity. Some conductors bring out the Wagnerian harmonic textures and dark orchestral colorings of the work. When called for, there was Wagnerian richness and impressionist fluidity in Mr. Rattle's performance. Yet, in the manner of Pierre Boulez, an acclaimed exponent of this work, Mr. Rattle kept the textures lucid and focused, even when Debussy's chords were thick with notes. Debussy tucked some piercing dissonances inside these milky harmonies, and Mr. Rattle brought them out through the pinpoint accuracy he elicited from the inspired Met players. For all his intelligence, though, Mr. Rattle is an intensely dramatic musician. I have never heard a *Pelléas* in which the extremes of the score came through so vividly. You could sense the simmering below the deceptively subdued surface. In the first scene the melancholic middle-aged Prince Golaud, who is lost in a forest, chances upon *Mélisande*, a weeping young woman full of fears and secrets.

Mr. Rattle conducted the parallel orchestra chords that open the opera and the modal themes that slowly unfold with haunting serenity at a daringly slow tempo. In an impulsive act that is neither depicted nor explained, Mélisande marries the older Golaud. Yet, from the time they meet, Pelléas and Mélisande are drawn to each other, a sensual current that runs through this restless score. In Act IV, when they can no longer constrain their illicit attraction and confess their love, Mr. Rattle brought out all of the music's teeming intensity and fitful shifts. Mélisande is a good role for the lovely [Magdalena] Kozena. The tenderness of her singing could not disguise the inner emotional chaos of this strange young woman: a victim, yes, but also a compulsive liar who remains an enigma to the end. [Stephane] Degout brought a warm, youthful voice and stylistic insight to Pelléas, conveying the character's tragic path from the uptight younger half-brother of an imperious prince to a hopeless romantic with uncontrollable longing for his brother's wife. [Gerald] Finley, who triumphed at the Met in the title role of John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, was superb as Golaud. While not overpowering, his voice is dark, virile and generous. He is that rare operatic artist who even when singing lyrically, sounds like he is speaking with the directness of a great actor" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 12/19/10].

December 18

Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* performed by the Saito Kinen Orchestra, conducted by Seiji Ozawa. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Here he led the whole 85-minute *War Requiem*, including the segments incorporating Wilfred Owen's poetry and scored for chamber orchestra, typically handled by a second conductor. He worked seated much of the time, looking less vigorous than he had earlier in the week despite his obvious frailty, and an intermission was added to help conserve his energy. 'I personally do not care for political pieces,' Mr. Ozawa wrote in program notes, but he was introduced to the *War Requiem* by a Rostropovich performance in 1979, and he has obviously internalized the work. He conducted from memory, as usual, with complete command and a loving attention to detail and nuance.

His current affection for the piece stems in part from its role in his physical recovery, he said in an interview in September. Having led most of the same forces in the work at the Saito Kinen Festival in Matsumoto in 2009, he set about restudying it. 'I had so much time, and I couldn't do anything else, and music became more and more important,' he said. 'Maybe the piece was a little too heavy, but I felt so happy to study and have time.' The international representation was assured by the very nature of the Saito Kinen Orchestra, which mingles Japanese and Japanese-American performers (especially the string players) with Westerners. The Japanese choruses -- the SKF Matsumoto Choir and Children's Choir and the Ritsuyukai Choir -- performed superbly, with powerful fortissimos and breathtaking pianissimos, and they articulated the Latin texts admirably. The vocal soloists -- Christine Goerke, a penetrating soprano who sometimes shaded flat; Anthony Dean Griffey, a touchingly communicative tenor; and Matthias Goerne, initially remote but ultimately a hauntingly involved baritone -- were strong and well matched. And the orchestra shone again, with those remarkable strings upholding their lofty standard and the brasses -- after a few early hitches -- improving on their previous performances, in blazing climaxes. With an obvious mix of exhaustion and exhilaration Mr. Ozawa generously shared the clamorous ovation from an audience that seemed to have taken in the work's -- and the performance's -- many messages" [James R. Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 12/19/10].

December 22

Spiral Music: Koto and oud recital by Yumi Kurosawa and Brandon Terzic. Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY. "Kurosawa plays a 21-string koto, a modern version of the instrument developed in 1971 by Minoru Miki, rather than the traditional 13-string instrument. Except for *Greening*, a robust work by Mr. Miki, and *Midare*, a soft-spoken, pentatonic piece by the 17th-century composer Kengyo Yatsunami, the works Ms. Kurosawa played were her own. She is an inventive, seemingly cosmopolitan composer.

Several of her pieces, including *Green Point* and *One Girl's Story*, are built around melodies that vaguely evoke British and American folk songs, and a hint of Debussy wafted briefly through *Takeda*, a lullaby. In most of her pieces, Ms. Kurosawa presents her themes gracefully and then undertakes intricate, sometimes adventurous variations, drawing on a timbral palette that ranged from warm and rounded to bright and metallic. At times she seemed to push against the extremes of the instrument's character. You don't usually think of the koto as a particularly aggressive instrument, for example, but Ms. Kurosawa produced that quality in a passage that involved her scraping the finger plectrums on her right hand against the bass strings to create an abrasive din. Chromatic, harplike swirls, fluid chordal figures and alluring bent notes showed the koto's more familiar character. In the duets Mr. Terzic began with a thoughtful,

meditative oud theme, which Ms. Kurosawa picked up and varied expansively, leaving room for his responses and elaborations. Ms. Kurosawa also contributed a varied percussive underlay to these improvisations, sometimes creating a light-textured patter by tapping her plectrums against the side of the koto, sometimes providing a solid, steady beat by slapping her instrument's underside. And though the koto and the oud do not sound similar on their own, Mr. Terzic and Ms. Kurosawa matched each other's tone so closely that in the densest sections of their dialogues, you would not have known which instrument was playing a particular line if you were not watching" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 12/23/10].



Recordings

Jennifer Koh, Violin. *Rhapsodic Musings: 21st-Century Works for Solo Violin*. "Only four of the seven works on *Rhapsodic Musings* were actually composed in the 21st century, and that's if you include the title track, composed by Elliott Carter in 2000. The earliest of Mr. Carter's *Four Lauds*, the *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi*, dates to 1984, although the others, *Statement -- Remembering Aaron* (as in Copland) and *Fantasy -- Remembering Roger* (as in Sessions), were composed in 1999, a stone's throw from the new century. But a listener can forgive Jennifer Koh the eagerness of her subtitle, given the incandescent readings she offers. The pieces were chosen, she writes in a program note, as part of her 'search for a sense of meaning in the days, months and years following the events of Sept. 11, 2001.' Ms. Koh's selections are often as much about life as about death. Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Lachen Verlernt* (2002) -- inspired by the Prayer to Pierrot in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, in which the speaker begs Pierrot to restore his lost (or unlearned) ability to laugh -- begins wistfully and grows into an intensely emotional score. Its fast chordal bowing suggests not so much regained laughter as the vigor of the search for a hopelessly lost power. Mr. Carter's *Four Lauds*, like many of his recent multimovement scores, are disparate works assembled later into sets, though in this case each piece is a tribute to a colleague, and similarities of language and gesture help to bond them. Ms. Koh's account of the *Riconoscenza* is particularly striking for its rich tone and its evocative touches of portamento. Her free, expressive vibrato similarly enlivens *Pulsar* (2005), a fluid fantasy by Augusta Read Thomas. And Ms. Koh makes the eight aphoristic movements of John Zorn's *Goetia* (2002) into a magnificently varied, thoroughly unpedantic overview of contemporary violin techniques, in which playfulness and introspection mingle" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*].

Milo: Works by Bridge, Britten, Turnage. Orchid Classics.

"A web of musical connections among several generations of teachers, pupils and friends inspired this disc of works by three British composers, vividly interpreted by two other Britons, the cellist Guy Johnston and the pianist Kathryn Stott. Benjamin Britten was often inspired to write for a particular musician, like the tenor Peter Pears. The great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich was the beneficiary of Britten's *Sonata in C for cello and piano*, given a vigorous performance here. Ms. Stott and Mr. Johnston play with witty panache in the pizzicato-driven second movement and with soulful intensity in the somber third movement, which displays Mr. Johnston's rich tone to fine effect. Rostropovich described the fifth and final movement as 'irresponsible and tempestuous.' Mr. Johnston's burnished and varied sound, aptly complemented by Ms. Stott's sensitive playing, is also lovely in the gentle *Spring Song* and *Mélodie* by Frank Bridge, a friend and mentor of Britten's, who championed his works. Britten described Bridge's early style, illustrated by these two selections, as 'Brahms happily tempered with Fauré.' Bridge, who shared Britten's pacifism, was profoundly affected by World War I. His melodic idiom veered toward a grittier aesthetic during the war, revealed in the two-movement *Sonata in D minor for cello and piano*, composed from 1913 to 1917. A restless cello line soars over the agitated piano part in the opening movement. Mournful musings in the piano at the beginning of the second movement reflect Bridge's despair over the war. While writing this unjustly neglected sonata, Bridge suffered from insomnia and wandered around London in the early hours of the morning. A gripping performance by Mr. Johnston and Ms. Stott gives full depth to the work's introspective, angst-ridden and melancholy moods. The disc also includes *Sleep On*, three lullabies for cello and piano by Mark-Anthony Turnage, who has said that they were influenced by Britten's *Solo Cello Suites Nos. 1 and 2*. There is nothing soporific about these vividly textured lullabies, particularly the probing *Refrain*. Last on the disc is Mr. Turnage's *Milo*, a lullaby named after his son. Mr. Johnston, Milo's godfather, performed the gentle piece at the child's christening in 2009" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 10/29/10].

Rys Chatham. *A Crimson Grail*. Nonesuch. "[A] mammoth meditation for 200 electric guitars, 16 electric basses and percussion. . . . *A Crimson Grail* . . . lingers for long, hypnotic stretches on single, disarmingly simple ideas. . . . Chatham, who has been writing for electric-guitar ensembles since the late 1970s, composed *A Crimson Grail* for an all-night festival at the Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Paris in 2005 and reworked it in 2008, for Lincoln Center Out of Doors. The recording comes from a 2009 performance at Damrosch Park. . . . In this three-movement work's outer sections, Mr. Chatham expands his guitar army from a small ensemble to a roaring swarm, in which the sound of 200 picks on amplified steel strings creates a tactile, prickly surface. In the opening movement, overtones and shifting balances create an illusion of faint melodies. Mr. Chatham gives listeners more to work with in the finale -- power chords, rhythmic counterpoint and rising scale figures -- and his central slow movement is built of a wave of guitar chords that fade in and out in a hymnlike progression, suggesting a wheezy harmonium. Yet the work's greatest allure is in passages where melody, harmony and rhythm are virtually absent, when all you hear is the visceral roar of plucked strings" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 10/29/10].

So Percussion and Matmos. *Treasure State*. Cantaloupe. "[A] collaboration between the instrumentalist-composers of So Percussion and the electronica group Matmos. [*A Crimson Grail* and *Treasure State* both] draw in varying degrees on the notion that sound trumps content as the most crucial element of a composition. This is a time-honored idea in a particular corner of the avant-garde where conventional elements like melody, rhythm, harmonic movement and phrase structure are regarded as less fascinating than timbre, texture, duration, volume and intensity, particularly when these qualities change slowly, if at all. Mr. Chatham's work and the So-Matmos collaborations are by no means uneventful. . . . [The] *Treasure State* pieces . . . use timbre so seductively that everything else seems secondary. Together these pieces tell us a lot about how a listener's inner ear will create a narrative, supplying hints of melody and development even when the music appears intent on avoiding or at least minimizing them. . . .

So Percussion and Matmos are ideal collaborators in the sense that each group provides part of the sonic arsenal necessary to create the eight otherworldly vignettes on *Treasure State*. Minimalist melodic cells, often played on music-boxy combinations of glockenspiel and piano or vibraphone, run through these imaginative pieces, and sometimes -- in *Needles and Cross* -- dancelike figures emerge. But the attraction here, and the unifying undercurrent, is the combined group's constantly shifting, variegated texture. Its instrumentation includes typewriter, amplified cactus, fish toy, animal sounds, splashing water and paper being crinkled, along with guitars, trumpets, So's percussion instruments and Matmos's samplers and synthesizers. The works' thematic cells may catch the ear. But it is the arrangement and imaginative juxtaposition of familiar instrumental timbres with splashing, crinkling and other exotic noises that makes these pieces so irresistible and entrancing" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 10/29/10].

