



Kyle Gann's "American Composer Jim Fox" article is reproduced from the pages of *Chamber Music* magazine, December 2006.

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## AmericanComposer

by Kyle Gann

There is music that works on recording, there is music that works in the concert hall and, of course, plenty of music that does both. We listen to recordings differently than to live performances. It needed no ghost come from the grave to tell us this—yet it is remarkable how little impact that fact, obvious to any pop music fan, has had on the consciousness of classical composers. The history of classical music written specifically for records—Morton Subotnick's *Silver Apples of the Moon*, Charles Wuorinen's *Time's Encomium*—is mostly electronic, and still a relatively tiny repertoire. A few composers, notably Paul Lansky, Robert Ashley, and Mikel Rouse,

contrabassoon play a tense duet as the rest of the orchestra sits idly by is wonderful theater, but on a recording you can't notice who's *not* playing, and it gets rather equalized. Modern music's violent gestures charge the concert hall audience with a physical electricity, but on recording they can elicit involuntary grabs to turn down the volume knob. Recordings, generally speaking, favor music of smooth, even, flat surfaces. Listening to music on car stereos and iPods subtly conditions people's ears to need or expect some consistency in the surface of a composition. The current, somewhat diagonal generation gap between those who want lots of drama in their new music and those who prefer the kind of even, dynamic-free steady state offered by pop music or minimalism is doubtless partly a clash of viewpoints between those who, in the concert hall, imagine the recording, and those who, listening to the recording, imagine the live performance.

All this begins to explain how a composer of music as phenomenally beautiful as Jim Fox's could be overlooked. Fox is not even known as a composer, but as the

choly, like a soundtrack for a lonely day with a light rain. That's an exaggeration; he's also included some noisy experimentalists such as Peter Garland and James Tenney. Generally, however, he tends toward West Coasters, like John Luther Adams, Harold Budd, Daniel Lentz, plus a few more obscure, like Chas Smith, Michael Jon Fink, Rick Cox.

None of the music fits the Cold Blue ambience more snugly than Fox's own. It is slow and moody, containing few events, though it is not without a certain pulsing energy. It is also written for some pretty odd combinations of instruments—which means it's easier for him to make recordings than to get performance gigs. His *Descansos, past* (2004), penned in memory of a bass player friend who committed suicide, is for solo double bass and nine cellos. *The City the Wind Swept Away* (1982) is for string quartet, piano and a droning chorus of two trombones and two bass trombones. "Who else would write a piece for a weird ensemble like that?" I asked rhetorically; and my son, who's done work as a sound engineer, replied, "Someone who knows how to produce a recording."

It's true. These pieces work gorgeously on CD, and are beautifully recorded. Look at the scores, and you're surprised to realize how little is going on. No one else's music contains so many whole notes. *The City the Wind Swept Away* pauses for a long piano solo with a melody on only three notes (A, G, F) over a slow B-flat major arpeggio. Onstage, it might seem awkward to watch those other eight players sit by while the piano goes on for so long, but on recording, that doesn't matter. It's mood music, but that doesn't mean there's anything New Agey or merely pleasant about it. The mood is elegantly nuanced, the pulses slow but irregular and unpredictable. Dissonances enter and are sustained until you give up waiting for resolution. An ostinato on only E and B

continues as various low drones on F and G creep by. Were Fox a grim East European patriarch who had suffered under Communism, like Arvo Pärt or Alfred Schnittke, musical pundits would listen and exclaim, "How soulful!" But Americans are never quite allowed to get away with such depth of expression achieved through simple, clear means.

Especially if they live in Los Angeles. Born in Indianapolis in 1953, Fox relo-



for the soloists emerging from growly tremolos by a string quartet. *Descansos, past* ("descansos," from the Spanish for "rest" or "repose," are the little roadside memorials used in the Southwest to mark where someone has died) employs undulating whole-note cello chords as background for a pizzicato double bass whose function modulates among bass line, arpeggiated chords, and variable-speed tremolos. Given the music's simplicity of means, it's remarkable how little it sounds like anyone else.

Would such dark yet calm music succeed in the concert hall? I haven't been given the opportunity to find out, but judging from Internet chatter about Cold Blue, Fox is garnering an impressive underground reputation for his own recordings as well as those of others, and he's got a knack for getting his CDs out into the international scene. Henry Cowell said there were two kinds of American music: "that which people play and don't talk about, and that which they talk about but don't play." We may be moving into an era of American music that gets recorded but not programmed in live concerts. Seems to suit Jim Fox.

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# Jim Fox

are adept at producing records as records, but most still think of recordings as mere documentation.

What are the differences? Well, for one thing, dynamic contrasts that are dynamite in the concert hall tend to get lost on a recording. That wonderful moment in Mahler's Ninth when the piccolo and

director and sole employee of a small but influential California CD label called Cold Blue (<http://www.coldbluemusic.com>). Several new-music record labels boast their own curatorial aesthetic these days, but Cold Blue is out front in that regard. Its music defines a certain LA-area desert style: mellow, delicate, sustained, melan-

cated to the desert atmosphere of the L.A. suburb of Venice and fell in love with it. Cold Blue started up in 1983 and died in '85, when the switch to CDs seemed too expensive. Fox revived the label in 2000. His music on the early vinyl records, like *Appearance of Red* (1983) for cello, piano, and electric guitar, was marginally minimalist, though more slow and luscious than repetitive. His music for the recent CDs is more textural, achieving intensity through timbre rather than change. *Between the Wheels* (1990), written for bass clarinetist Marty Walker, has long notes