

**Robert Gambill  
and Nina Stemme**  
Glyndebourne's  
Tristan and Isolde

Mozart Piano Concertos  
from Leif Ove Andsnes

Jonas Kaufmann's  
début opera recital

The Florestan Trio and Tokyo String Quartet  
in Dvořák and Beethoven

Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Simon Trpčeski  
play Bach and Debussy

Bach's solo cantatas  
Masaaki Suzuki reaches Volume 37

Liszt, Prokofiev, Shostakovich  
Lise de la Salle's first concerto disc



Reproduced here is *International Record Review's* February 2008 "Too Many Records" column, a regular feature of each issue's back page. Jim Fox was invited to pen this issue's column.

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# Too many records

When I browse in record shops, I start with the Miscellaneous bins – the As, Bs, Cs ... Ms (where I might encounter David Mahler, rather than Gustav) ... Ss (where I might nab Skempton rather than Scriabin) – before heading toward sections devoted to individual composers who are well-enough represented on disc as to warrant their own bins.

Record shopping and seeking The New have always been much the same activity for me. Sometime in my early teens, I sprouted eclectic ears that demanded, 'Astonish us! Surprise us! Revolt us! Tickle us!' I've tried to keep them entertained. The idea that music might be more than life's background noise crept into my consciousness around the age of 13, as did a new-found interest in writing music. Soon, I became deeply interested in the work of living composers.

Seeking one's own voice can involve the urge to engage in a 'dialogue' with one's contemporaries. For a kid in Indianapolis, Indiana ('Crossroads of America' according to the mayor's office, but appropriately dubbed 'Naptown' by touring jazz performers of the 1940s and 1950s), hearing those contemporaries was a process of finding recordings. Very little music by the living found its way to Indy's stages in the late 1960s; and few contemporary scores and recordings found their way to the local libraries. I had to haunt record shops to find The New (which more than once was a misshipped LP that a shop was unable to return).

This is when my infatuation with Miscellaneous bins began. To a wide-eyed teen, they were wells of the invitingly obscure – music of the little-known and unknown – from such labels as Mainstream, with LPs by Sonic Arts Union (David Behrman, Gordon Mumma *et al*) and Musica Electronica Viva (Rzewski, Alvin Curran *et al*); Advance, run by Barney Childs, with recordings by Robert Ashley, Richard Maxfield, Harold Budd and others; Opus One (some of its sleeves glowed under ultraviolet light!); CRI, representing many of academia's composers; Time Records; Turnabout ...

Columbia's recordings by Terry Riley (*In C*), Berio (*Visage*), Max Neuhaus and Wendy (still Walter at that time) Carlos gave new music unusually great exposure. The Odyssey series had music by Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, Alvin Lucier, Boulez, Feldman ... DG's avant-garde series had Stockhausen, Ligeti, Cage, Kagel. Nonesuch had Cage's *HPSCHD* (which came with a score for the listener to use to change volume and tone controls on the stereo while the platter spun), Morton Subotnick's *Silver Apples of the Moon* and the mind-bending *Ketjak* (*The Ramayana Monkey Chant*).

Standing alone in the late 1960s-early 1970s was *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde*, a richly



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produced, California-based magazine of scores and writings that came with 10-inch recordings – including Lucier's incredible *I Am Sitting in a Room* – in sleeves that were bound into the magazine. Finding issues of *Source* was a true delight. (*Source's* obvious predecessor was Cowell's *New Music* magazine and New Music Recordings, and its successor was Peter Garland's *Soundings* anthologies.)

I was also intensely interested in the new jazz of the 1960s and revelled in music on such labels as ESP (which stood for 'Esperanto!'), with its recordings of Albert Ayler (including his one-sided LP *Bells*), and Marion Brown; Impulse!, with its horde of major figures (Coltrane, Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, Gil Evans ...); Delmark, with music by Anthony Braxton and many other noted Chicagoans; Saturn, Sun Ra's label, featuring individually hand-drawn covers and labels; Shandar, featuring both new classical and new jazz; BYG Actuel ...

In the later 1970s and early 1980s came a fresh crop of new-music labels: Lovely Music, Philip Glass's Chatham Square label, Brian Eno's *Obscure*, John Zorn's *Tzadik*, Cramps, Thomas Buckner's 1750 Arch Records, New Albion ... and Cold Blue Music, the label I started in 1983.

Why I started Cold Blue is not particularly clear any more. I suppose it seemed like the right thing to do. However, I had little money at the time, so I soon found myself on a diet of Top Ramen (a brand of Japanese-made noodles and broth that sold for pennies a package). My Cold Blue goal was simple: release music that I enjoyed which wasn't otherwise getting to a broad listenership. By happenstance, this turned out to be primarily music from the West Coast, where I'd lived since the mid-1970s, music by composers who were perhaps loosely united by a common interest in music's basic sensuality. Grandchildren of Cowell and Rudhyar and/or children of Lou Harrison? Perhaps some are.

Cold Blue wasn't planned as the home for a 'school' of composers, but critics dubbed it as such. And who am I to refuse a handy moniker? ('[Cold Blue] is an invaluable resource for what might be called part of the new "California School" ... a label with a particular viewpoint and consummate good taste', wrote Joan La Barbara in *High Fidelity/Musical America*. 'The [Cold Blue] label defines a certain "Southern California sound", uncluttered, evocative and unusual, with a wistful emotional edge', wrote an *L.A. Weekly* critic.)

My founding of Cold Blue was about blundering forward with good ideas and intentions. I had taught university-level electronic music, so I had a working knowledge of the electronics of sound reproduction. Business sense seemed like something I could pick up along the way. (Yet it apparently eludes me to this day.) I knew almost nothing about making records. However, I certainly recalled once visiting a large RCA pressing plant on a Cub Scout outing. Stampedin' stampers! It was the loudest thing I'd heard at that tender age. It must've been the place in Hades to which noisy neighbours were condemned. The stench of melting vinyl heightened its hellish nature.

Cold Blue's first releases were a series of 10-inch EPs – each a 'taste' (20 minutes or so) of a composer's work at a price below that of an LP. Later, I switched to the traditional LP format. In 1985, both of my primary distributors went bankrupt. Without distribution, Cold Blue closed its doors too, just as CDs were emerging.

Why did I restart Cold Blue in December 2000? (I hadn't gained wealth to squander in the interim.) A new music label (not mentioned above) arranged to release some of my music, but its contract was absurdly unfriendly to the composer. It actually had a de-escalator clause (the more you sold, the lower your royalty percentage became)! It wasn't the money that mattered. I expected royalties amounting to only pennies – if that. It was the principle of the thing. So, in a fit of high-road-mindedness, I asked some composers if they'd be interested in having their music issued on a new Cold Blue, a reincarnation-plus, based around new releases and friendly contracts. Everyone was delighted by the idea. So off I blundered again.

This magazine kindly mentioned Cold Blue's reappearance on its cover and welcomed its first releases with 'When Cold Blue Records collapsed ... the label had already established a reputation for its discerning support of what was sometimes called the New California School. Now, 15 years later, it is back, as these three splendid discs resoundingly indicate.'

Today, Cold Blue and I continue to blunder ever onward into the Miscellaneous.

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