



**MUMMA** *Jardin. Songs without Words. Suite for Piano. Graftings. 4 Pack Ponies. Basket of Strays. 19 from the Sushibox: 5 Sushiverticals; 3 Perspectives; 11 Sushihorizontals. Sixpac Sonatas. Threesome. 11 Note Pieces & Decimal Passacaglia. Large Size Mograph* • Daan Vandewalle (pn) • NEW WORLD 80686 (2 CDs: 144:11)

As I've mentioned elsewhere, I suddenly have a lot of solo piano music on my plate (other composers include Michael Byron, Morton Feldman, and Michael Hersch). Gordon Mumma (b. 1935) would seem perhaps the most improbable of this bunch, as his reputation rests on his pioneering experiments with live, interactive electroacoustic music. As a horn-player plugged into early computer-controlled processing systems, he stands as a pathfinder in music technology. So it can come as a bit of surprise to find he has been writing solo acoustic piano music throughout his career, presented here in a comprehensive two-disc set.

The majority of these pieces date from the last couple of decades of the 20th century. Two works precede them, the 1960 *Suite* and the *Large Size Mograph* of 1962. The former is an essay in the disjunct pointillist style of its era, the latter a gentler and rambling translation of seismic data that sounds somewhat like early Morton Feldman.

But starting from *Eleven Note Pieces & Decimal Passacaglia* in 1978, a more consistent character begins to assert itself in Mumma's approach to the instrument. All of these are collections of short pieces, many of them character sketches dedicated to friends (something of a "who's who" of avant-garde musical circles). The tone tends to be personal, introspective, ruminative. The pieces, often (though not always) simple in their technical demands, suggest private thoughts that in another era would be written late at night by candlelight, to be filed away in a drawer. At times they are spiky; at other times there is a gentle lullaby-lyricism about them.

I hear a few antecedents hovering over the proceedings. Schoenberg of the op. 19 *Six Pieces* is an obvious ghost in the pervasive bagatelle format (and quite direct in the third of the "Sushihorizontals," dedicated to painter Ages Martin, with a bare, repeated major second). Another is Satie, when Mumma references an earlier tonal work of his (as in the 1997 *Jardin*, which starts from a 1958 piece). Even more so is *Basket of Strays* (1970–2001), where one feels tangos, waltzes, and even snatches of pop (in "Soft Saloon Song") hovering at the edges.

But the most recurrent model seems to be the Webern of the op. 27 *Variations*. One certainly wouldn't think this, considering Mumma's American experimentalist reputation, and yes, the music doesn't *sound* strictly serial. But the rigorous, rhythmically plain vocabulary, the pointillistic texture spread out over the piano's range, and a general avoidance of obvious motivic or tonal grounding all point to that source.

The sound became somewhat wearing for me, and I'd advise any potential listener to take on this collection a set at a time, listen closely, and appreciate the music's "simple subtleties" (paradox intended). The Webernesque side of Mumma is best represented by the 1985–97 *Sixpac Sonatas*, which have a greater textural density and rhythmic drive. They seem to build momentum and exude energy. Two other pieces that make a particular impression are the 1966–96 "3 Perspectives" from the omnibus *Sushibox*, which comprise a soft, heartrending lament on the death of the composer's wife, and the aforementioned *Eleven Note Pieces*, which have a genuine wit in their concision and slightly absurdist musical gestures.

I think at times someone needs to write at length about the "secret lives of musical experimentalists," as I keep discovering that so many who have fearsome reputations of writing music that pushes to the edge of what most define as "music" have a love of old-fashioned beauty embodied in lesser-known pieces (it's not for nothing that one of the major record labels of the movement is *Lovely Music*). Mumma has a fine ear, and a refined sensibility.

Daan Vandewalle has enormous sensitivity to this material, and technique to burn whenever it's called for. I can't help but feel this collection is a little *too* comprehensive for most, and that completists will be the ones most attracted to it. If you buy it, you'll probably end up selecting a subset of works to which you'll return (with pleasure). But since New World's mission is "The Recorded Anthology of American Music," such encyclopedism is justified. If listeners unfamiliar with Mumma would like a taste of his more noted adventures, check out New World 80632, which I reviewed in *Fanfare* 29:4. **Robert Carl**