



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)

Over the course of a more than 40-year compositional career, Gordon Mumma (b. 1935) has carved out an important niche in the evolution of electronic music, with work ranging from taped components in electroacoustic ensembles to live, real-time, plugged-in performances. Beginning while still a student at the University of Michigan, he was a key participant in the radical Once Group (and is heavily represented in the indispensable anthology “Music from the Once Festival 1961–66,” New World), and soon thereafter cofounded the influential Sonic Arts Union (1966–73) with likeminded genre-smashers Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, and David Behrman. Among his best-known electronic compositions are *Megaton for William Burroughs*, *Music from the Venezia Space Theater*, and *The Dresden Interleaf 13 February 1945*—often densely textured, large-scale constructions that tend to move in tectonic shifts, incorporating roaring, grainy drones and swooping volleys or agitated eruptions of sound sometimes reminiscent of a dentist’s drill or jackhammer.

But there has always been another, less extreme and, until now, less documented facet of Mumma’s compositional aesthetic. Concurrently with his unpredictable, unorthodox conceptions for electronics, he has relied on the acoustic piano to voice the intimate, introspective, traditionally crafted side of his musical personality. These two CDs contain 75 miniature essays grouped under generic or elusively evocative titles, many dedicated to important figures in his life or registering a meaningful circumstance or artistic allusion, most merely a minute or two in length. Their concision reveals a distillation of compositional methodology drawn primarily, though not exclusively, from Second Viennese School sources, counterbalanced with an emotional impetus that suggests a great deal of drama and sentiment expressed in small, modestly yet acutely designed details.

Like haiku, or a painting by Mondrian, these pieces employ subtle means to imply distinctive characteristics—isolating and examining a few specific intervals, juxtaposing dynamics, weighing chords and abruptly contrasting them with accented single notes, sculpting stark melodic contours, offering echoes and resonant hues through pedal effects, or adapting familiar gestures to unexpected ends. Though the mood evoked is frequently somber, the textures sparse and rhythms taut, there are surprising exceptions, when individual pieces seem to be paying unintentional homage to composers like Satie (“Poplars” from *Jardin*), Feldman and Scriabin (“For David Revell” and “For Jon Barlow” from *Songs without Words*), Berg (“For Lou Harrison” from *Sushiverticals*), and Kurtag (the succinctness of the *Eleven Note Pieces & Decimal Passacaglia*). Other influences are more overt, such as that of Webern on the *Suite for Piano*, John Cage on the *Large Size Mograph* (where some of the musical parameters are derived from seismographic charts), Virgil Thomson on the musical portraiture most explicit in the various “Sushiverticals” and “Sushihorizontals,” and even Haydn (whose Minuet from the Symphony No. 47 is manipulated in the second *Threesome*).

To these brief, intense, sharply etched pieces, pianist Daan Vandewalle brings a keen awareness of architecture and an incisive touch that enables him to express episodes of delicacy, buoyancy, lyrical flow, hard-edged abstraction, dancelike movement, and spirituality. Once again, New World has illuminated an obscure, rewarding corner of our musical world. Well done. **Art Lange**

