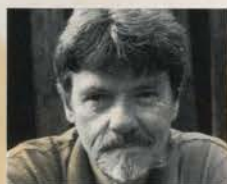


# MUSICWORKS

EXPLORATIONS IN SOUND

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## COMMUNITY RESONANCES

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the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the title has more recently been translated as *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, the *bardo* being the intermediate states between death and rebirth.

Eliane Radigue's *Trilogie de la Mort* is a series of three CD-length compositions, completed in 1994 and all linked by the theme of death. The music is electronic, made with a vintage ARP analogue synthesizer and a multi-track tape recorder.

*Kyeme*, the first piece in the trilogy, is inspired by the texts of the *Bardo Thödol*, which form both the literary and the theoretical basis of this trilogy. The Tibetans believe there are several intervals, or planes of existence, in the intermediate states between death and rebirth, and in what Radigue calls the "existential continuity of the being." *Kyeme* is divided into six parts, evoking the six intermediate states of the *bardo*. The music is a continuous harmonic drone, which changes very gradually with subtle and powerful shifts in harmonics and amplitude, evoking shifting planes of existence. Time stands still. The music completely surrounds us. It vibrates along the floor, while whistling upper harmonics fade in and out of existence, creating a shimmering radiance and evoking simultaneously both darkness and light. The music is not only heard, but very powerfully felt. The drone thickens and pulsates into bell-like harmonics, repeats at regular intervals, and then fades into the ether, while a low vibrating sound returns, circling, and then spinning into a vortex where the filtered white noise sound of wind and subliminal fragments of a requiem or maybe Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* are subtly and masterfully woven into the music. This fades slowly and gently into the ether. We're left with only a shadow of it. *Kyeme* is dedicated to Radigue's son, Yves, who died tragically in a car accident soon after she completed this work.

The second part of the trilogy, *Kailasha*, is inspired by a symbolic journey around Mount Kailash, considered in Tibetan cosmology to be the centre of the world. Mount Kailash is also a great natural mandala, and a place where pilgrims can enter the mythical kingdom of shambhala. According to Radigue's accompanying notes, this piece is also inspired by the paradoxes in the art of Albers and Escher, where one spatial element becomes an interface to another, becoming at once both logical and paradoxical. *Kailasha* has pulsating, circling sounds made with ascending and descending harmonic sweeps that create subtle effects on the psyche. There is a rhythmic pulsation that feels like a heartbeat, and subtle cross-fades from one harmonic plane to another. Sounds both pulsate and circle, then gradually fade in and out of existence.

The final part of the trilogy, *Koumé*, explores the transcendence of death. The sound is subtle, focussed and static. With repetition, it goes deeper and deeper into a transformation from darkness to light. The music becomes joyful, creating a link between the living and the dead. It seems to reveal unheard, unknown, or untouched layers of the psyche. There is redemption. Voices fade into eternity. The music ends as it begins—the ending is the beginning. Death becomes birth again, a great liberation through hearing in the *bardo*.

—Helen Hall

## AURAL EPIPHANIES PACKED IN PANACHE

Jocelyn Robert. *Canned Gods: A Typical Afternoon in the Backyard in Phoenix, Arizona*. Ohm Éditions, Ohm/Avtr 014.

In his book, *The Tuning Of The World*, R. Murray Schafer suggested that socio-cultural conditions and advancing technologies dictate the obsolescence of certain sonic events. To wit, we no longer hear or recognize the sound of horse-and-carriage on cobblestones nor the tinkling of milk bottles being carried to homes. Even church bells, the sonic locus of many communities in the past, are no longer commonly heard.

Fortunately, with the invention of magnetic tape, the tape recorder, and principally the computer, we can now sample and/or reconstruct sonic landscapes, warehousing them in audio libraries. These libraries, and in turn their cultural biases, are the source for Avatar director Jocelyn Robert's most recent project, *Canned Gods: A Typical Afternoon in the Backyard in Phoenix, Arizona*. Robert states that, "when one considers these collections globally, one gets the feeling that they are some sort of audio picture box or an audio picture book that presents a culture or a country. Thus, my idea has been to take one of these audio libraries and to use these sounds to trace a portrait of the culture from the material it chose itself."

So, what does a typical afternoon in Southwestern United States sound like? In the hands of Robert, canned music and banal sounds morph into delightful micro-symphonies whose aural strategies are analogous to the melting-pot of American myth. Through seamless digital editing and other studio wizardry, Robert simmers highly recognizable sound fragments, such as door bells, brass bands, seagulls, car horns, and crashing waves, to a boiling point.

Of the nine tracks on this CD, two cuts best exemplify Robert's *modus operandi*. *War #1* begins with a military bugle, from the melody line of which familiar phrases are dissected, echoed,

and multi-tracked, creating new rhythmic and melodic patterns. The presidential voice of FDR is heard, with the solemnity of his words, "nothing to fear but fear itself," glossed in bells, bagpipes, and the persistent beep of some wayward ship's sonar. A brass instrument enters the picture, and long lingering notes from an unrecognizable theme shimmer. Then, Richard Nixon intones his infamous lie "I am not a crook," as birds twitter and bleating sheep fade into the cacophony of American sound-space.

The ubiquitous laugh track (a staple of pop culture's entertainment industry) is the sole basis for the sonic event on the piece entitled *Art*. Escaping easy cynicism and the penchant for a quick one-liner, Robert increases the speed of the laughter so that the phasing in and out of the breath patterns oscillates between the humanistic and the mechanistic. In this manner, Robert transforms the past into the present, as the laugh track mutates to the point where it is indistinguishable from the sound of an urban beat box.

It should be noted that this CD is not the work of a crude collagist but that of a very sophisticated composer, whose use of found materials are tempered with a discerning awareness of pitch, texture, timbre, and duration. Hidden beneath the obvious cultural implications of Robert's project is a musical sensibility subtly altering context and mood through the reclamation and reconstruction of aural epiphanies. From canned music to "pop" cans and canned goods to *Canned Gods*, Robert paints his sound portrait of America with skill, wit, and panache.

—Mark Sutherland

## PERCUSSION MILESTONES

Essential Music. William Russell: *The Complete Works*. Mode 34, Mode Records. Web site: <www.mode.com>.

William Russell's artistic importance stands in inverse ratio to the size of his musical output. His eight pieces for percussion—most of them recorded here for the first time—are milestones in the history of the genre. Russell predated Cage in imaginatively combining African, Caribbean, Asian, and Western instruments, and in using the piano primarily as a percussive instrument. Consistently disparaging about the quality of his own music, Russell stopped composing in 1940, having decided that New Orleans jazz was infinitely superior to anything he could create. His importance in the history of percussion music has gone largely unrecognized, and his contribution has been eclipsed by the more prolific outputs of Cage, Cowell, Varèse and Lou Harrison. He died in 1992.