

Creative Music in a Plain Brown Box

David Thompson

**“Those who
compose
because they
want to please
others, and
have audiences
in mind, are not
real artists.
They are
merely more or
less skilful
entertainers
who would
renounce
composing if
they did not
find listeners.”**

Arnold Schoenberg, 1946.

As the music industry seems enthralled by the shrinking circular logic of its own marketing NewSpeak few small organisations remain pleasingly unmoved by the makeover imperatives of packaging. As one company's name suggests, the Unknown Public shows scant regard for audience demographics and makes little concession to the music media's appetite for modish imagery and sound bites. If the company's motto "Creative Music in a Plain Brown Box" qualifies as a sound bite of sorts, it's also a perfectly reasonable summary of what the Unknown Public does.

Conceived as an irregular audio journal of contemporary music, and with a loyal and growing audience of subscribers in 51 countries, the Unknown Public (UP) catalogue spans an enormous range of sounds and sensibilities, presenting as standard: a breadth of frontier innovation few conventionally structured record companies could hope to match. The UP aesthetic accommodates an encyclopaedic sweep of compositional possibilities, whether conventionally scored, electronically rendered or configured by some other means. As so many labels, festivals and publications adopt elaborate territorial postures that define audiences by exclusion, UP's open-ended blueprint seems subversive, simply by default.

In the space of six years, UP founders John Walters and Laurence Aston have given an artistic home to more than 250 composers and performers, presenting exclusive or neglected work from figures both known and unfamiliar. A hasty scan of the UP archives reveals contributions by Gavin Bryars, Sheila Chandra, Steve Reich, Trevor Wishart and Frank Zappa. Each subtitled issue offers a loose and often abstract theme, around which the featured recordings gravitate. With no underlined sleeve-note connections to follow the listener is free to fathom whatever associations their own listening may inspire.

The ninth collection, subtitled "All Seeing Ear" circles around notions of synaesthesia and music's potential for rich visual suggestion and metaphor—a personal cinema experience for the ears and imagina-

tion. The featured pieces include the automotive agitation of Rob Elli's "Black Bullet Fiesta", Andrea Rocca's playful cartoon cut-ups and the gorgeously hesitant cellos of Richard Robbin's "He Meets His Mother". Also making appearances are the Polish Radio and TV Symphony Orchestra and a brief, febrile extract from Michael Brooks' "Albino Alligator" soundtrack.

The imminent tenth UP anthology takes solo performance and solitude as points of departure. Linked by the title "Naked. Music Stripped Down", thirteen pieces of audio erotica reach from improvised jazz and classical forms to live electronica and clouds of atomised ambience. Amidst the popular assumption of music as an incidental soundtrack to collective leisure activity, neither warranting nor rewarding significant attention, the pieces curated here invited a more serious and intimate consideration. From Helen Chadwick's slow sparing rendition of Osip Mandelstam's poem "Words" to the data glove-directed electronics of Walter Fabeck's "Les Astronautes" and Julian Argue's gorgeously discreet saxophones, the sense of detailed intent and introspective absorption is difficult to resist.

Rather than adopt the conventional strategy of reinforcing boundaries and generic familiarity the diversity of the UP collections quietly encourages the audience to investigate each piece with little of the prejudicial baggage that is fostered elsewhere. Irrespective of size and musical orientation, many record labels now employ marketing to prescribe an audience response that is more or less uniform, typically patronising and entirely premature. In effect, the listener is told how he or she should feel about the music before it can be taken home and scrutinised. In marked contrast, the UP's plain brown boxes invite their listeners to browse the music and to find out for themselves.