

Northwest Notables

CDs by Oregon musicians made 2004 tolerable.

As 2004 drizzles to a damp close — a dreary end to a generally dispiriting year — Eugeneans can look for solace to a local music scene that has grown richer and more diverse than ever. Most of the action happened in clubs and concert halls, but a number of engaging CDs serve as attractive artifacts of the year, particularly for piano fans. Rather than succumbing to corporate sounds, why not treat yourself or friends or family to a gift of worthwhile music by our some of our own neighbors?

Any composer who issues a compendium of 48 keyboard works faces the intimidating legacy of predecessors from J.S. Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier* through subsequent *magnum operas* by such pantheonic figures as Shostakovich, Chopin, Debussy, Bartok, and more. I'm not ready to place Eugene's **Gary Noland** in those stratospheric heights, but his two-disk collection of postludes and interludes from Portland's North Pacific Music is a fully realized tour de force and a major artistic statement. Any fan of classical and contemporary piano music is likely to find some-

thing delightful or intriguing in this ambitious collection, but it should find special favor among aficionados of late 19th and early 20th century composers as varied as Strauss, Schoenberg and Satie. From brittle waltzes to restless pantonal excursions to cheeky pastiches, this well-crafted survey showcases Noland's deep appreciation for — and occasional ironic takeoffs from — the work of the masters, not to mention some thrilling piano playing by the composer himself.

Another NPM disk, by California composer/pianist **Varsha Saxena**, will appeal to fans of so-called New Age pianists such as George Winston. Sometimes drawing on her parents' East Indian heritage, Saxena knows how to conjure memorable melodies and atmospheres. Devotees of easy-on-the-ears solo pianism will also appreciate **Mark Vigil**'s striking new collection of fantasies, preludes and sonatas, splendidly performed by pianist **Sandy Holder**. The Eugene composer's third release reveals growing depth and sophistication as he sprinkles occasional welcome dissonances into his hitherto relentlessly tonal recipe —

and, like salt on watermelon, it makes the flavor all the richer. Like Noland's, this disk is recommended for fans of modern piano music.

The big news in Northwest music was, of course, the much-anticipated release of **Pink Martini's** *Hang on Little Tomato*. The three-year interregnum since the Portland nonet's delectable debut raised fears of the stereotypical sophomore slump; as Elvis Costello noted, you get 22 years to make your

first record, and six months to make the second. But far from being overripe, this *Tomato* confirms pianist/composer Thomas Lauderdale and singer/composer Chynna Forbes as far more than retro-lounge ironophiles. They really believe in the virtues of pre-rock, Latin-flavored pop and dance music, and that confidence in their distinctive voice permeates this irresistible new album. Though this surprisingly low-key studio recording can't quite capture the band's exuberant live spirit, it displays the strong musicianship familiar to local fans from the band's frequent appearances here.

Like Pink Martini, Eugene's **Scrambled Ape** draws on diverse retro influences — in their case, cartoons, New Orleans brass bands, jazz, gypsy, cabaret music, and more — and a good-humored, slightly off-centered take on those influences. Its loopy debut CD, *Comprehensive Atlas Of 21st Century A.M. Radio Classics*, mixes classics from 20th century masters such as Raymond Scott, Henry Mancini and Duke Ellington with traditionals such as "Basin Street Blues" and dizzy originals by bandleader and cornetist Michael Roderick.

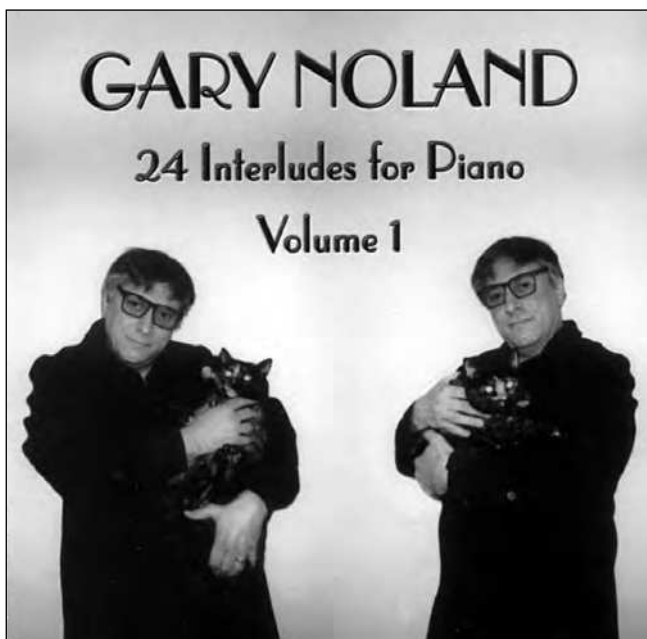
The greatest Northwest composer, Portland-born **Lou Harrison**, died in 2003 at age 85, but new collections of his prodigious output keep emerging. Fans of the UO's Oregon Percussion Ensemble, longtime champions of Harrison's work, will appreciate *Drums Along the Pacific* (New Albion), featuring percussionist William Winant leading a survey of some of Harrison's trailblazing works from the early 1940s through melodious and dramatic pieces like 1978's ravishingly melancholy *Threnody for Carlos Chavez* for gamelan.

Another percussion masterpiece, *Mass to St. Anthony* (which I'd love to hear at the Bach Festival), highlights a diverse disk of the grand old maverick's works on the Mode label, which also contains his whimsical 1949 score for Jean Cocteau's *Marriage at the Eiffel Tower* and other handsome chamber music. Two of Harrison's major works were commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra in the 1950s, and those performances of his four *Strict Songs*, celebrating his return to nature and the West



Coast in 1954, and his *Suite for Strings* have at last been reissued on CD. A new recording of the latter appears on a just-released CD by the London-based New Professionals Orchestra that also features Harrison's somber second suite for strings and 1997's ebulliently exotic *Concerto for Pipa with String Orchestra*, in which he seamlessly integrates Western strings and Chinese lute. Finally, two recent disks of guitar music contain some of Harrison's most warmly reflective music, including his final composition, "Scenes from Nek Chand." Guitarists David Tanenbaum (on New Albion's *Serenade*) and John Schneider (on *Just Guitars*) were friends of the composer, and both play this gorgeous music immaculately, with Schneider performing Harrison's works in the composer's specified tunings.

I like to focus on local artists in these annual roundups, but I can't let the year go by without pointing Eugene music fans to two of my favorite international record labels. World music fans, especially anyone who enjoyed last month's **Putumayo Latinas** concert, should check out that disk and other recent issues in its popular groove and lounge series, which do a good job of building a bridge to traditional global music via contemporary yet authentic electronic and rock hybrids. And the always fascinating ECM Records had a particularly strong year, with great disks by the **Hilliard Ensemble** (motets by Guillaume de Machaut) and **Trio Mediaeval** (new music for old instruments by leading composers such as Gavin Bryars) leading the pack. **ew**



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