

**bernhard günter: THE REWARDS OF CONCENTRATION**  
by Phil Freeman

German composer/sound sculptor Bernhard Günter has a small, but very devoted cult following among fans of so-called 'experimental' music (anyone with a better word for the vast and heterogeneous tone-scape which is governed by this heading in even the best record stores is encouraged to go public with it as soon as possible). He also has a growing reputation, almost a legend, among those who might be interested in his work but who have not yet heard it, for the extraordinary, Zen-like quietude of his releases. Over the course of nine major releases (including two collaborative CD's) and numerous remixes and compilation tracks, his music has become a source of astonishment, wonder and sometimes shock. It is, quite simply, so quiet, so subtle, that it creates a window of silence around itself that its impact might be fully felt. An achievement hardly to be underrated in today's almost oppressively forceful, and hardly subtle, sonic environments.

Günter acknowledges the forcefulness of the outside world, and regards his own whispered contributions to it with a sort of bemused benevolence which belies the power of the works themselves. Claiming that early technical limitations are at least partly behind the origins of his 'technique', he explains "as for the volume of my music, it has evolved partly with the way I hear my sounds, and partly with the technical equipment I use...my first two CDs were made with only an Ensoniq EPS 16+ sampler direct to 2-track DAT, and I found that the sampler sounded best at very low volume. While my current 4-track ProTools system on my Macintosh sounds good at any volume I choose, I still prefer lower volume settings, because I do not wish to force my music onto anybody, as it is often done with popular music, or muzak in public spaces that is forced on people without regard for their wanting or not wanting to hear it - I rather offer it as a gift that can easily be refused if anybody wishes to do so...if you don't like what you hear, it is pretty easy to ignore it..." His work exists, then, not only as an alternate sonic reality, but simultaneously as an apology for the infinitely louder, and more brutish, world outside.

His first two CDs, *un peu de neige salie* and *Details Agrandis* (both on *Table Of the Elements* in the US and *Selektion* in Europe) were cryptic and ultraminimalist works comparable to those of Japanese artists \*0, Ryoji Ikeda and others -tiny clicking and scraping sounds, repeated in gradually perceptible patterns, and played back at barely audible levels. *Un peu...* in particular, with its five untitled tracks, has been cited in many arenas as some sort of sonic landmark (one of the '100 recordings that changed the world' according to *The Wire*, and listed in that magazine as *Record of the Year 1993* by noted avant omnivore Jim O'Rourke). Indeed, *un peu...* has cast such a shadow, as notable debuts often do, that *Details Agrandis*, a disc of three extended pieces, is often forgotten, lost in the shuffle. Its air of quietude extends not to its sound alone (it is methodically similar to the first record, if substantially different in actual result) but to its market-presence as well. It permits itself to be ignored, making barely a peep on its own behalf. Nevertheless, to ignore it would be the listener's loss.

It was with the release of his third full-length CD, and the establishment of his own label, that Günter's work began to truly approach brilliance, and his public profile to reach its present higher-than-could-be-reasonably- predicted level. His label, *trente oiseaux* ('thirty birds' in French), is committed to the release of work not necessarily sonically similar to Günter's own, but definitely of a concurrent attitude or philosophy. Each disc (at this writing there are approximately fifteen, including three by Günter himself, is packaged beautifully, with cover art by Marc Behrens (who has also released recordings on the label) and minimal, though perceptive and pertinent, liner notes. Contributing artists (for one gets the impression of a collective of men working towards something greater than themselves, an aggregate philosophical and sonic achievement) have included Francisco López, Steve Roden, and others, and the CDs range from nearly inaudible hisses and rumblings to over-powering scrapes and splatters.

The three CDs Günter has released through *trente oiseaux* are of an astonishing power, a stark beauty which defies easy description even as it welcomes listeners not necessarily grounded in academic theory (an important point in the world of 'experimental' music, where quite often the ear's pleasure can be forgotten, if it was ever considered at all).

*Univers temporel espoir*, Günter's third full-length release, is composed of three extended pieces, one in two parts. Its opening tracks, "un lieu pareil à un point effacé, 1ere partie" and "2eme partie" are possibly his greatest achievement to date, a crystalline example of the singular virtues of his work. The pieces consist of simple elements: a steady, organic-sounding hiss, and under/around it (the creation of a three-dimensional soundworld is vital to the piece) a small scuffling or scraping sound, as of a rodent scuttling past behind the listener unseen. The first time the scraping sound comes, the listener can feel totally justified in jumping slightly in his chair.

The second piece on the disc, "the ant moves/the black and yellow carcass/a little closer," is modified / improved from a version originally appearing on the Ash UK compilation *A Hole In the Nothing*, and is also quite extraordinarily beautiful. The disc's final track, "vertige hasard", is the closest thing Günter has yet released to a typical 'ambient'

electronic work. A gloomy 12-minute rumble, it closes the disc with a morose finality, bringing the listener to the decisive, incontrovertible endpoint of a musical journey that, from the opening moments of "un lieu..." has offered, even at the disc's still extremely low volume levels, nothing quiet or tedious enough that stopping play would be less than jarring, creating a sense of incomplete experience. Günter himself recommends this CD as the ideal starting point for someone totally unfamiliar with his work.

Günter's next two releases are as much a leap forward from univers temporel espoir as univers... was from the first two releases. Slow gestures/cérémonie désir (for Heike) is a short, single-track release, Brown, blue, brown on blue (for Mark Rothko) also a single track but more than half again as long (38 minutes to for Heike's 24). The liner notes to Brown, blue... read in part "it picks up where slow gestures/cérémonie désir (for Heike) left off (actually, the two pieces can be listened to as one large work in two parts...)". Günter elaborated on this by writing (in e-mail) "the main thing that connects them is that for Mark Rothko starts with sound that is taken from for Heike and this very sound 'triggers' or signals the 'finale' of the piece. It also contains a few other sounds (at different pitches) that are part of for Heike. The basic materials of both works are from a similar family (i.e., bowed objects and instruments)... there is no particular intention connected to this - my work develops and I follow it...in both cases, I did not realize the relationship between the music and the person it was finally dedicated to, before the work was finished..."

The sound of these two releases, as might be assumed by their origins in 'bowed objects and instruments', is almost overtly romantic, creating in the listener's mind a desolate space which is equal parts Rothko (and possibly Barnett Newman as well), Samuel Beckett and Morton Feldman. For Heike, in particular, suggests Feldman's piece Coptic Light in its use of long, sweeping tones which are punctuated or interrupted by, in particular, a single quite jarring sound coming about 1/3 of the way through the piece and which takes nearly the rest of the piece's length to resolve itself back into the whole of the work. For Mark Rothko, by contrast, almost suggests the work of Estonian 'Holy Minimalist' composer Arvo Pärt in its evocations of dark landscapes of the mind and spirit. Unlike Pärt, however, whose recent work has become nearly static, more purgatory than salvation, for Mark Rothko resolves itself in a crescendo of immense beauty and power, the last three or four minutes of the piece washing over the listener in a way unprecedented in any of Günter's prior work and, for its pure emotive force, quite literally irresistible. The listener is carried to a place of rapture which captures perfectly the impression Günter himself gives, in the liner notes, of the impact the titular Rothko painting has had on him.

Despite the low volumes at which his music is offered, which might convey an impression of relaxation or a diffidence of purpose, Günter has fortunately never been lumped in with the slushy so-called 'ambient' music which is often little more than industrial-dance records with the beats pared away. "Personally," he writes, "I see no connection between what I do and what is generally called 'ambient music' - somebody might listen to my music in an 'ambient' way, but all I compose is intended for close and concentrated listening." All of his work, indeed, demands concentration; at the very least, it demands the use of headphones, which implies instantly a level of engagement with the work one step greater than merely pressing 'play' and wandering off to read a book or complete a crossword puzzle. The miracle of his music, though, is just how well the willing listener is rewarded for their patience and their focus.

Günter is presently working on a new piece, presumably for release later this year, which he describes as "mainly dealing with time, and slowness... the experience of slowing down and going deeper is essential for it, and I have devised a non-tempered scale as the basis of the various transpositions in which sounds appear..." Given the astonishing power of his works to date, and the impact they have had on those who have heard them, the strongest time-related element of this piece may well be the impatience of listeners awaiting its release. The sonic journey of Bernhard Gunter has only begun, it seems, and conclusion is a long way off.

