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Friday, May 16, 2008

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NEW MUSIC CAN BE EASY ON THE EAR

By BERNARD HOLLAND
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The most innovative new music now showing up on records is often the least forbidding. We listen to pieces which - though inviting, even soothing in their basic materials - reverse traditional ideas of what music ought to be saying. This comes as somewhat of a shock for those of us long used to associating originality with challenging burdens on the listener.

Elodie Lauten, for example, is a French pianist living in New York whose music straddles the concert hall and the worlds of pop and jazz. Her "Concerto for Piano and Orchestral Memory" on the Cat Collectors' label stands in diametric opposition to the dour, renunciatory style of Ralph Shapey or Ben Johnston, whose music also appears on some new record releases.

Miss Lauten's harmonic combinations are familiar - even well-worn - but it is the way they are used which makes them interesting. Her concerto's eight movements seem to occupy a series of circular orbits around which the music drifts. In Mr. Shapey's music, we feel order being forcibly extracted from surrounding chaos. Miss Lauten, on the other hand, acknowledges and accepts her chaotic world and seeks to burrow out a place within it.

There are repeated piano figures, sometimes lazy, sometimes quite active, with constant small changes in accent and interval within the patterns. Miss Lauten's "orchestra" consists of three strings, trombone and processed tapes. It often drones in the background but at times joins with sounds from everyday life - birds, beeping video games, sirens.

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