

80817-2 [2 CDs]

CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN (b. 1945)
LOUDSPEAKERS

Disc 1 [TT: 70:03]

Pianola (Pas de mains) (1997–2000) 39:51

1. Corale Cattedrale 3:57
2. Pet Hop Solo 2:28
3. Valzer Provarolloio 5:27
4. Tochastic Music 2:18
5. Passaggio di Coltivadori 1:07
6. Antheil Swoon 2:14
7. Chaos of the Moderns (Presto) 4:24
8. To a Nanka Rose 2:16
9. A Rimsky Business 4:43
10. Kiki Keys 10:39
11. *Im Frühling* (1989–90) 30:06

Disc 2 [TT: 61:30]

1. *Son of Metropolis*
San Francisco (1997) 26:38

Loudspeakers

(for Morton Feldman) (1988–90) 34:32

2. Meyerbeer 4:35
3. The Piece 5:26
4. Voice Leading 6:51
5. Took Some Time 7:34
6. Such a Surface 3:33
7. Pretty Pretty Macabre 3:08
8. Loudspeakers 3:24

Im Frühling © 1990, *Son of Metropolis San Francisco* © 1997, *Pianola* © 2000
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CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN | **LOUDSPEAKERS**



CHARLES AMIRKHANIAN (b. 1945) can be regarded as a central figure in American music, and on several fronts. As a composer, he's been pervasively innovative in two genres: text-sound pieces, in which he can draw engaging rhythmic processes from wacky word assemblages such as "rainbow chug bandit" and "church car rubber baby buggy bumper"; and natural-sound electronic pieces which go far beyond the usual confines of *musique concrète* to create long, poetic sound narratives poised between collage and sonic landscape. Much of his early influence on American music came from his activities as music director for KPFA Radio in Berkeley, California, from 1969 to 1992, in which capacity he brought a world of experimental music to California audiences. Since then he's been equally dynamic as a director and administrator of such programs as the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, the Composer-to-Composer Festival in Telluride, Colorado, and the Other Minds Festival. In these roles I would venture that Amirkhanian has done more to advance the music of other contemporary composers, especially of the experimental breed, than anyone else living.

Even this doesn't adequately describe Amirkhanian's tendril-like reach into the more exotic fringes of musical life, because he is a leading and tireless exponent of quirky figures from the past like George Antheil, Percy Grainger, Johanna Beyer, and Ivan Wyschnegradsky. He made the reclusive composer Conlon Nancarrow famous in the late 1970s by recording his fantastically rhythmically complex works for player piano for the 1750 Arch label, and he remains deeply involved in music for player piano. The further out a musical topic is from the mainstream of concert life, the more likely Amirkhanian is to be one of the experts on it.

Amirkhanian's text-sound pieces often begin with a quasi-minimalist basis in repetition, but their processes are playful and even humorous rather than strict. His electronic landscapes (including all the ones here) occasionally include

repetitive elements, but are more poetic, intuitive in their form and often impressionistic in their effect. Several of his earlier commercial recordings have showcased the text-sound pieces; the present two-disc set is a welcome compendium of his sound landscapes. We might characterize the whole as three tone poems preceded by a set of ten etudes.

The set of ten pieces, *Pianola (Pas de mains)* (1997–2000)—the subtitle is French for "no hands")—stems from Amirkhanian's long fascination with the player piano, or pianola—the self-playing piano. Technically speaking, the pianola usually refers to an instrument that can be placed athwart a piano keyboard to play the keys, the speed and dynamics controlled by a human hand, and Amirkhanian has collaborated on many projects with British pianola virtuoso Rex Lawson. A player piano is more strictly a piano run from a punched paper roll on a rotating machine inside the instrument. (A Disklavier is Yamaha's version of a computerized player piano, sans piano roll, and its name is sometimes mixed up with that of the completely different Synclavier to be discussed below.) The rich history of player piano rolls provided Amirkhanian with abundant temptation to pay homage to composers who have influenced him, a tendency that has been common in his music dating back to his *Symphony I* of 1965. And enough such references reappear from movement to movement to bind the piece into a coherent whole.

Amirkhanian's *Pianola*, then, is a whimsical set of essays based on the sound and techniques of the player piano. Early in the instrument's history a number of famous composers —Stravinsky, Hindemith, Antheil, Ernst Toch, and others—were persuaded to write for it, and several of their pieces end up quoted and transformed in *Pianola*. Though all source materials were produced by piano roll or its modern equivalent, MIDI, the tracks were combined, and some sounds generated, on a Kurzweil keyboard sampler. Thus the first movement "Corale Cattedrale" is a prelude to the group, using the Kurzweil's FM synthesis

timbres in a kind of additive process; an actual piano appears toward the end. “Pet Hop Solo” takes familiar quotations from the player piano roll version of Stravinsky’s ballet *Petrushka* through a high-speed canon (the lines played at different speeds simultaneously; many of Nancarrow’s player piano pieces were canons in different tempos at once). “Valzer Provarollo” is based on a test roll that was used to help tune player pianos, *provarollo* coming from the Italian word *prova*, or *trial*. Amirkhanian’s voice and that of Rex Lawson are also heard, along with ambient sounds from the Bellagio Study Center in Italy where the work was developed.

The title of “Tochastic Music” is one of Amirkhanian’s frequent puns, conflating Ernst Toch (1887–1964), whose music it uses, and stochastic music, a technique made famous by Greek composer Iannis Xenakis based on chance distribution of notes. (Though he’s little remembered today, Toch’s best-known work, “Geographical Fugue” for speaking chorus, was the piece that inspired Amirkhanian to begin working in the text-sound medium.) At the beginning, similar note sequences at high speed pass fluidly back and forth between left and right speakers, and the chaos gives way to bass lines from Nancarrow’s Study No. 6. “Passaggio di Coltivadori” is a short transformation leading from gestures from Nancarrow’s music to the popular tune “How You Gonna Keep ’em Down on the Farm / After They’ve Seen Paris.” “Antheil Swoon” again uses Kurzweil sounds based on player piano rolls by Antheil along with others.

“Chaos of the Moderns” is a tribute that brings several of Amirkhanian’s interests together. Passages of Toch and Nancarrow are heard along with the piano version of Percy Grainger’s “Handel on the Strand,” the cacophony giving way at the midpoint to a cloudy Kurzweil transformation of Edward MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose,” a piece that was a favorite for beginning piano students a half-century ago. MacDowell is interrupted in the middle by a repeating cadence from Nancarrow’s Study No. 6 again. The following “To a Nanka Rose” brings back “To

a Wild Rose” with a pun on Nancarrow’s name. Again MacDowell is the background, and again the Study No. 6 interrupts.

“A Rimsky Business” has a lot of fun with a piano roll of Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee” (the bee being especially busy). This famously frenetic classic is fractured, played against itself in canon, turned backwards, and even flipped upside-down, Amirkhanian noting that it is one of the rare classic works that can be recognized even played in retrograde and inversion. And “Kiki Keys” is the set’s grand finale, a massive, Ivesian collage of works, some of them modified in speed and register. Quotations include the patriotic song “America,” *Petrushka*, and “Handel on the Strand” again, Toch and Nancarrow again, Antheil’s *Ballet Mecanique*, Rachmaninoff’s Suite for Two Pianos, one of Arthur Honegger’s player-piano pieces, some 19th-century salon music, plus some Kurzweil effects. Much minimalist repetition and gradual transformation are evident, making this a rare example of a kind of steady-state chaos.

The remaining three works might be characterized as extended love poems, so affectionately do they portray their respective subjects: spring, San Francisco, and the composer Morton Feldman. These pieces were composed using the Synclavier, an electronic sampling keyboard first developed at Dartmouth in the late 1970s, for which Amirkhanian has written many of the most ambitious works. The instrument was based in FM synthesis and could create its own tones, but it also featured an unprecedentedly sophisticated system for playing back recorded samples, and was marketed as a “tapeless studio.” The Synclavier II added a keyboard, making live performance on the instrument an attractive possibility. The use of the keyboard Synclavier freed up Amirkhanian to develop his music improvisationally to an extent rare in electronic soundscapes based on environmental samples, and allowed him to discover and capitalize on “happy accidents.” Still, while he used the keyboard to get the sample combinations he

wanted—digitally altering them with the assistance of composer/guitarist/film scorer Henry Kaiser, one of the leading free improvisers—all these pieces were completed in a recording studio.

Im Frühling (“In Spring”) might be called a tone poem in reverse: Amirkhanian notes that 19th-century composers often used the orchestra to imitate nature in pieces about spring, but here he starts with sounds of nature and sometimes electronically transforms them to sound like instruments. (Amirkhanian’s mother was a piano teacher, and the title is an ironic homage to the many light-classical piano pieces her students played that were called “Im Frühling.”) Amirkhanian collected field recordings and samples from all around the world to create an imaginary landscape of birds chirping, thunder, animal roars, streams babbling, and insect noises.

The transformations begin around seven minutes in, when the bird songs begin to mutate into electronic timbres and twelve of them pile up in quick succession, nature blending into the artificial. At 13:47, synthesized tones begin their own music in counterpoint with the birds. The “thunderstorm” that ends the piece: Is it real, or transformed into sampled timpani? Is it an orchestral storm triggered by a real one to sound like an orchestral depiction of a storm? Other composers (Luc Ferrari, Annea Lockwood) have given us canvases of natural sound, but I know of no other example of a piece in which the natural bleeds into the surreal, colorized so lightly that the distinction between natural and synthesized becomes ambiguous. The piece is not exactly gentle, but it is serene, less illustrative of the outburst of nature in spring than of the meditative state one finds alone in the woods.

The most affectionate homage is Amirkhanian’s hymn to his adopted hometown, San Francisco. In 1985–86 he spent a year recording sounds from the environs of the Bay Area, and produced a 55-minute sound collage called *Metropolis San Francisco*. Then in 1997, finding its length inconvenient for some

presentation purposes, he produced a more condensed version called *Son of Metropolis San Francisco*. The word metropolis is intended ironically, however, as implying a “brutal wasteland of commerce and industry” that is foreign to Amirkhanian’s experience of San Francisco. Instead of trolley cars and buses on steep hills, we get the surrounding seaside and cultural artifacts of the ethnic groups that color the city’s atmosphere, along with some musical elements that bind the soundscape together.

And so we hear the chirping and warbling of birds in Nisene Marks State Parks in Aptos, the vocal drumming of mating elephant seals (1:20), the recurring crash of ocean waves, the bubbling of an overflow valve in a swimming pool. Beginning at 8:26 we overhear the conversation and laughing of a group from the Pacific islands of Tonga in their native language, and at 12:00 a looped segment of Chinese television begins, including a soap opera in which a man says (in Chinese), “Miss Zhou, How can you hit me?,” and a woman responds, “I just *want* to hit you!” The piece is no mere ambient soundscape, however, for we also hear toy piano and organ chords, and at 4:30 a kind of synthesized dance. The toy piano is triggered by the cries of seals, the chords underlie and unify ambient scenes, and the drumming of a long bongo-playing group provides its own musical continuity analogous to diegetic music in a film score, as the music contains a musical performance within it. Interestingly, the drones and diatonic melodies in the last third of the tone poem are meant to allude to San Francisco’s role in the history of minimalist music, via Terry Riley, La Monte Young, and the San Francisco Tape Center (where Riley’s *In C* was premiered), as well as Bay Area proto-minimalists such as Lou Harrison.

All this makes *Son of Metropolis San Francisco* a perceptually complex hybrid, a music that crosses lines between classifications even as you listen to it. It works beautifully as an ambient soundscape even if one pays no attention to the provenance of the sounds. Still, the sounds are curated to

create a sense of place, not just via the exoticism of nature but also taking social and mass culture phenomena into effect, implying the experience of a curator. The non-diegetic music, so to speak, unifies and provides commentary, additionally making a meta-comment about the location's cultural history within the composer's own music world. There are so many levels to listen on, and the listener is free to choose.

The disc's title piece, *Loudspeakers*, is a vocal portrait of Morton Feldman (1926–1987), who was probably the most influential composer of the late 20th century. He was also, to those who knew him, an unforgettably picturesque personality, with his curvilinear Queens accent, his long black hair greased back, and his Oscar Wilde-like ability to spin off paradoxes and epigrams by the yard as he held court among musicians. The accent and epigrams are both evident in the source recording Amirkhanian used for the piece, an interview Feldman gave to Steve Cellum on September 24, 1984. Individual phonemes are massed and repeated as accompaniment, over which Feldman's superbly imitable voice sings at times like an English horn solo, or elsewhere is stacked with different-speed versions of itself, which can sound disconcertingly like different people.

We hear Feldman object to the typical classical-music-world prejudice that the nineteenth century produced better music than the twentieth; his balancing Berlioz with Boulez makes musical sense, after which his statement that “Stockhausen is just as good as Meyerbeer” is guffaw-inducingly incongruous, but also manifests Feldman's trenchant ability to reframe the history of music in insightfully counterintuitive ways. We also hear him talking about his compositional process, especially the way he will keep using the same material over and over, configuring it a little differently each time—a technique Amirkhanian avails himself of in the piece's textures. *Voice-leading*, which Feldman refers to, is the way melodic lines connect between individual

chords, something that listeners don't necessarily consciously register but a central creative concern for composers.

Toward the end, the name Frank that is mentioned is Feldman's poet friend Frank O'Hara (1926–1966). The reference to loudspeakers looking like tombstones is a conceit Feldman used in his 1982 piece, *Three Voices*, in which singer Joan LaBarbara sings lines from an O'Hara poem in counterpoint with her own voice prerecorded coming from loudspeakers on either side—a performance setup that Feldman found suggestive of a graveyard. And as Feldman often titled pieces simply by the instruments they were written for (in pieces like Piano, Clarinet and String Quartet, and Flute and Orchestra), Amirkhanian completes his homage by calling the piece *Loudspeakers*, which is what the work is performed on.

What links all these pieces is a creative ambiguity of genre, a delight in shifting back and forth between elements whose sources can be recognized and those whose can't. The pacing, at least in the latter three works, is leisurely, and somewhere between ambient and symphonic: One can listen to them as atmosphere, yet a sense of overall dramatic shaping is not absent. Though we listen to them through loudspeakers, it seems problematic to pigeonhole Amirkhanian as an “electronic” composer. The music, restful and noisy at once, is too playful for that, and too natural—and elicits a listening mode that brings no other composer to mind.

—Kyle Gann

Kyle Gann is a composer and the author of seven books on American music, most recently The Arithmetic of Listening: Tuning Theory and History for the Impractical Musician. His recordings on the New World Records label include Custer and Sitting Bull and Nude Rolling Down an Escalator.

Born January 19, 1945, in Fresno, California, composer, percussionist, sound poet, and radio producer **Charles Amirkhanian** is a leading U.S. practitioner of electroacoustic music and text-sound composition. He is widely known for his

live and fixed media works utilizing speech (or sound poetry) elements in rhythmic patterns resembling percussion music. His *Dutiful Ducks*, *Church Car*, and *Seatbelt Seatbelt* are considered classics of the genre.

In later works, many composed with the Synclavier and Kurzweil digital synthesizers and including keyboard improvisation, Amir Khanian combines sampled recognizable sounds from the environment (that he refers to as “representational”) with traditional musical pitched tones (“abstract sounds”) to fashion dreamscapes that act as disjunct narratives and encourage a trance-like listening state.

Amir Khanian has been awarded commissions from the National Endowment for the Arts, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Meet the Composer, the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the 1984 Summer Olympics, the Arch Ensemble, and Ensemble Intercontemporain. His music has been choreographed by Bill T. Jones, Anna Halprin, Margaret Fisher, Nancy Karp + Dancers, and Richard Alston (Ballet Rambert). From 1975–1986 he performed theatrical realizations of his sound poetry with projections by visual artist Carol Law at venues such as the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, New Langton Arts (San Francisco), and the Australia Biennale (Sydney). He has appeared recently performing in Berlin, Beijing, Linz, Huddersfield, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.

His music is available on Starkland, Other Minds Records, Wergo, Megadisc Classics, Fylkingen, New World Records/CRI, Centaur, Cantaloupe, and Perspectives of New Music. Charles Amir Khanian was Music Director of KPFA Radio in Berkeley (1969–1992), where he produced hundreds of programs on the subject of contemporary music, poetry, and experimental intermedia. In 1993, he co-founded Other Minds, a multi-faceted new music organization in San Francisco, of which he is Executive & Artistic Director. <https://www.otherminds.org>

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- Lexical Music*. Other Minds Records OM 1023.
- Mental Radio (Nine Text-Sound Compositions)*. New World/CRI NWCRL 523.
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- Politics As Usual*. Included on *Auxesis*. Centaur CRC 2194.
- Ripping the Lamp*. Kate Stenberg, violin, with tape. Other Minds Records OM 1019.
- Walking Tune*. Starkland ST-206.

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PRODUCTION CREDITS:

Pianola (Pas de mains)

Composed 1997–2000 using a Kurzweil KS 2500 X synthesizer in combination with a variety of outboard equipment at the studios of Arts Plural (El Cerrito, California) and BEAMS (Bellagio ElectroAcoustic Music Studio, Rockefeller Foundation Study Center, Italy). Piano sounds are from player piano rolls in the collections of Rex Lawson and Denis Hall, performed by Lawson on the Bösendorfer Imperial Grand at Dulwich College, London, and recorded in 1997 by John Whiting. Pianola assistance, Denis Hall. Editing of recorded samples with the assistance of Mark Grey. Commissioned by Executive Producer Klaus Schöning for WDR/Köln, Studio Akustische Kunst. First broadcast: March 31, 2001, WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk). Licensed by WDR mediagroup GmbH

Im Frühling

Composed 1989–90. Sounds altered digitally in the Synclavier studio of Henry Kaiser, Oakland, CA), and mixed in the 24-track studio of Sprocket Systems (LucasFilm Co.) in San Raphael, CA. Nature sounds recorded by Bill Fontana, Phil Perkins, Charles Amirkhanian, and others. World premiere in concert April 29, 1990, at the 2nd Acustica International Sound Art Festival of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk Hörspiel Studio at the Whitney Museum, New York City, in collaboration with Goethe House New York. Broadcast premiere June 19, 1990, WDR/Köln, Studio Akustische Kunst. Concert premiere, September 9, 1990, One Step Down Festival, Footwork Studio, San Francisco. Licensed by WDR mediagroup GmbH

Son of Metropolis San Francisco

Composed originally as *Metropolis San Francisco*, 1985–86; revised in this shortened version, March 6, 1997. All sounds recorded by the composer, assisted by Carol Law, sampled and manipulated in the Synclavier studio of Henry Kaiser, Oakland, CA, who assisted in the production. Multi-track mix engineer: Robert Shumaker, 1750 Arch Studios, Berkeley, CA. First broadcast of original 55-minute version: November 18, 1986, WDR/Köln. Concert premiere of this version: July 15, 1998, Garden of Memory III, Chapel of the Chimes, Oakland, CA. Commissioned by Klaus Schöning for WDR/Köln, Studio Akustische Kunst. Licensed by WDR mediagroup GmbH

Loudspeakers

Composed 1988-90. Voice recording of Morton Feldman by Steve Cellum from his interview with the composer on September 24, 1984, and by permission of Barbara Monk Feldman for the estate of the composer. Sounds manipulated in the Synclavier studio of Henry Kaiser, Oakland, CA, with his assistance. Broadcasts by WNYC-FM (New York City) and KPFA-FM (Berkeley), 1991. Concert premiere, 18th Annual Electronic Music Plus Festival, Mills College, Oakland, CA, April 3, 1991. Engineered and mixed by Robert Shumaker at Bay Studios, Berkeley, CA. Commissioned by Meet the Composer with funds from the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund.

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