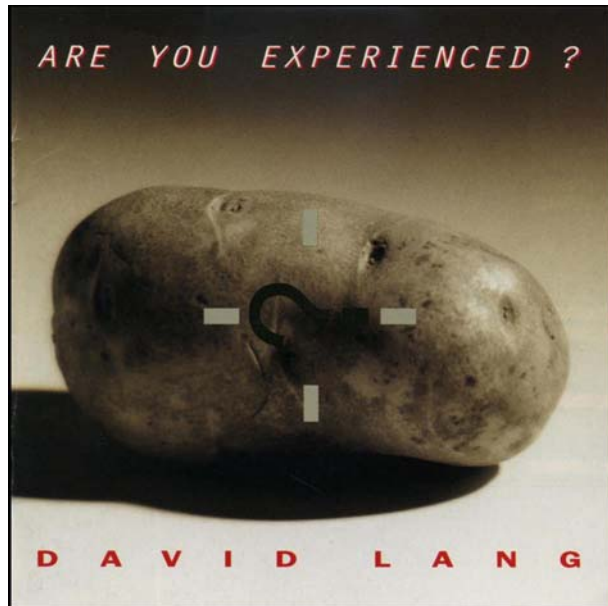


NWCR625

# David Lang

## Are You Experienced?



- Are You Experienced?* (1987) ..... (21:01)
1. On being hit on the head ..... (2:55)
  2. Dance ..... (5:35)
  3. On being hit on the head (reprise) ..... (0:59)
  4. On hearing the voice of God ..... (2:19)
  5. Drop ..... (6:18)
  6. On hearing the siren's song ..... (2:55)
- Jay Rozen, electric tuba; David Lang, narrator; Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne; Lorraine Vaillancourt, conductor
- Orpheus Over and Under* (1989) ..... (18:19)
7. I. Aria ..... (9:49)
  8. II. Chorale ..... (8:30)
- Double Edge: Edmund Niemann, piano; Nurit Tilles, piano
9. *Spud* (1986) ..... (10:19)
- Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne; Lorraine Vaillancourt, conductor
10. *Illumination Rounds* (1982) ..... (10:01)
- Rolf Schulte, violin; Ursula Oppens, piano

Total Playing Time: 60:00

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## Notes

“Are You Experienced?” is the title of a famous Jimi Hendrix song that became one of the anthems of the 1960s counterculture; and it became the title, as well, of the late guitarist’s first album, a strikingly original work of its time and, now, a pop classic. It is the title of a piece, written two decades later by **David Lang**; and it has become the title of this, the first recording devoted to the works of a striking young American composer who came to prominence in the 1980s. But, more importantly, it is a question.

David Lang has a penchant for provocative titles. He called an orchestra piece commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra, *Eating Living Monkeys*. *International Business Machine* was written for the Boston Symphony Orchestra; *Bonehead*, for the American Composers Orchestra; *Aliens Kidnapped Me and Stole My Blood*, for Stanford University. And there is this collection’s chamber orchestra score, *Spud*.

An element of whimsy inspired these titles, along with the predictable irreverence of youth towards the often smug reverence in which classical institutions are held by society. But all are works, as are the remaining scores included here *Orpheus Over and Under* and *Illumination Rounds* that question modern experience in a way that is new for new music. Each work serves as a musical analog to our immediate world and feelings, and a music results that is at once formally rigorous and stylistically hip. There is no name yet for this kind of music that has both the discipline of modernism and the relevance of postmodernism.

Born in 1957 in Los Angeles, Lang experienced musical education spread over Stanford University, the University of

Iowa, and Yale, where he obtained a doctorate degree. His composition teachers included some central figures in musical modernism, Jacob Druckman and Hans Werner Henze among them. He has received the recognition of the musical establishment: fellowships to Tanglewood, Aspen, the MacDowell Colony, and the American Academy in Rome; grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the ASCAP Foundation; awards from BMI and Columbia University. Nonetheless restless with the establishment’s neglect of new work, he is a co-founder of Bang on a Can, the imaginative annual New York new music festival.

Lang’s restlessness and his taste for the ridiculous can also be heard in *Are You Experienced?*— which was commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts for David Stock and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble in 1987 and revised two years later. The piece starts off almost as a joke, the evoking of Jimi Hendrix’s psychedelically fluid electric guitar with its absurd antithesis, the electric tuba. And Lang’s dramatic score for narrator, solo tuba and ensemble—which is a reaction to, rather than an arrangement or appropriation of, the original song—explores the darker antithesis to Hendrix’s hedonistic “experience” with sex and drugs. Hendrix’s song is the experience of loosing your mind to pleasure; Lang’s is about simply loosing your mind.

Comprised of six sections (“On being hit on the head,” “Dance,” “On being hit on the head”(reprise), “On hearing the voice of God,” “Drop,” “On hearing the siren’s song”), the narrator’s text, a fantasy on images from Hendrix’s song, goes from what first seems a *Three-Stooges* dancing bewilderment

following a knock on the bean, to disturbing mystical delusions, to scary returns to childhood (here “Drop” is the command school children in the 1950s practiced in case of nuclear attack), to utter confusion.

Musically, Lang’s score follows this progression through a dissolution of order. The jarring hit on the head (groups of repeated notes alternating on and off the beat) leads to a raucous, rocking dance of fast, repeated sixteenth-notes in rapid short crescendos culminating in a riotous electric tuba solo encased in trademark Hendrix feedback. Following the reprise of the first section, where it becomes apparent the hit on the head was serious—not funny—the music becomes more rhythmically fragmented, long notes dominate. The tuba wails and breaths heavily, while drums beat in the fourth section; the fifth ends in a nuclear bang that leaves the scattered music of the ending in its wake.

Written in 1989 for the dual piano team, *Double Edge, Orpheus Over and Under* is the flip side of *Are You Experienced?*—a subdued meditation in two sections, *Aria* and *Chorale*, on the experience of loss. Lang says that his inspiration for the piece came from a desire to find in music the equilibrium between hope and loss that is conveyed in the Orpheus myth. “Orpheus first loses Eurydice above ground,” the composer wrote in a program note, “regains her below ground, and loses her finally when crossing the horizon, where over and under meet.”

Throughout the score, both pianos play in constant tremolos that shimmer like mirages on the distant horizon, the first piano keeping to a high soprano range, the second eventually expanding down into the base during the aria, and into the stratospheres at the end of the chorale. Each section—the first melodic, the second harmonic—begins with a narrow restricted range of notes that is slowly and subtly intensified in feeling through expansion of register, pitch and dynamic, welling up at the end of the Chorale into a climax that, like that in *Are You Experienced?* leaves shards flying, but is, in this case, cathartic.

*Spud*, a 1986 commission from the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, is, you guessed it, potato-shaped. Liking to think up ways to organize music that avoids conventional organic forms, growing from small motivic seed into grand structure, Lang here models the score on the potato, which the composer writes, “begins its life at its most coherent, losing its shape and substance with the growth of its sprouts. The

sprouts will, of course, become other potato plants, but, seen from the point of view of the potato, they are agents of death and decay. A piece based on the life of a potato, such as my composition *Spud*, might begin with the coherence of all musical voices and move towards their independence, much in the way that a series of variations might bear successively less resemblance to their theme.”

The musical dissolution is fairly straightforward, beginning with a plump melodic line in the winds punctuated by sharp, syncopated string chords. But as the various shoots in the musical potato start to protrude this tidy opening, surprising conflicts between the different instrumental groups occur. Lang says that much of his orchestral music is based around something he once noticed in Federico Fellini’s short film, *Orchestra Rehearsal*, namely that left to their own devices orchestra members would rather argue than play together in harmony.

*Illumination Rounds*, for violin and piano from 1982, is the earliest piece on this collection and also the most directly inspired by outside experience. Writing for Juilliard students, who, Lang says, were particularly excited by the physical nature and technology of playing their instruments, the composer modeled the roles between violin and piano on a type of bullet that was used in the Vietnam War. After being fired, an illumination round leaves a phosphorescent residue in the air, allowing gunners to aim by following a vapor trail. Likewise, in this score of violent gestures and fierce counterpoint, the violin and piano trade off being either image or echo, while the result experienced has something of both the exhilaration and terror of combat.

—Mark Swed

Le Nouvel Ensemble Moderne personnel:

*Are You Experienced?*

Guy Pelletier, flute & piccolo; Normand Forget, oboe; André Moisan, clarinet & bass clarinet; Michel Bettez, bassoon; Francis Ouellet, horn; Lise Bouchard, trumpet; Alain Trudel, trombone; Tim Brady, electric guitar; Julien Grégoire, percussion; Jacques Drouin, piano & synthesizer; Brian Bacon, viola; Christine Giguère, cello; René Gosselin, bass.

*Spud*

Guy Pelletier, flute; Normand Forget, oboe; Gilles Plante, clarinet & bass clarinet; Francis Ouellet, horn; Julien Grégoire, timpani; Claude Hamel, violin; Brian Bacon, viola; Christine Giguère, cello; René Gosselin, bass.

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## Production Notes

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

*Are You Experienced?*; *Spud*: Produced by Lauren Major.

Recorded in Salle Claude Champagne, University of Montreal on August 13 & 14, 1991.

*Orpheus Over and Under*; *Illumination Rounds*: Produced by Judith Sherman.

Recorded in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letter Auditorium, NYC on November 9, 1990.

Mastered by Ellen Fitton at Sony Classical Productions, Inc., NYC.

All compositions Novello & Co., Ltd. (ASCAP).

Thanks to the Faculty of Music, University of Montreal (Quebec, Canada) for the use of their rehearsal and recording halls, piano, percussion instruments and recording equipment for the recording of *Spud* and *Are You Experienced?*

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