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Catherine Christer Hennix – Selected Early Keyboard Works

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By Bill Meyer



Catherine Christer Hennix is a mathematician, composer and musician whose absurdly low profile has not kept her from making crucial theoretical, technical and sonic contributions to minimal and transcendental music since the 1960s. *Selected Early Keyboard Works* presents three pieces of keyboard music that she recorded during rehearsals for a festival devoted to work by her and American minimalists Terry Riley, Terry Jennings and La Monte Young. It is Hennix's first record to be pressed to vinyl; for people who think beyond format, it's also an opportunity to make connections between the music of her youth and the mathematically founded drones that she makes to this day.

Born in Stockholm, Sweden, Hennix grew up identifying as male; collaborative recordings made before her transition in 1990 are credited to C.C. Hennix. Hennix was raised in a household that welcomed American jazz musicians as friends and guests, and picked up the drums as a teen. Hennix played that instrument up through the 1980s, recording with Henry Flynt and jamming with Arthur Russell, but also took to electronic music in the late 60s at the same time that the student was pursuing graduate studies in mathematics. Hennix found a musical and philosophical home upon visiting La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's New York loft in 1969.

The association with Young and Riley led to study with Indian singer and guru Pandit Pran Nath and launched a lifetime pursuit of using mathematical rigor to inform the making of electronic music in just intonation, a tuning system whose scales can be expressed as pure ratios that avoid the dissonances of the equal temperament (aka standard tuning). That led, among other things, to Hennix devising electronic pieces derived from tambura harmonics, which Henry Flynt used as accompaniment for his violin on pieces like *C Tune* and *Purified by Fire*. Another angle was *The Electric Harpsichord*, an improvisation performed on an electric piano that was retuned to just intonation and augmented by a sinewave-generating oscillator and a tape deck delay system similar to Terry Riley's time-lag accumulator. The three pieces on *Selected Early Keyboard Works* were recorded with the same equipment, but they show Hennix did not dream of drones alone.

"*Mode Nouvelle des Modalités*" takes up both sides of the first LP. While the tuning suffuses the piece with a continuous haze of overtones, the music pursues winding elaboration upon pensive melodies. Within the consistency imposed by instrument and tuning, Hennix finds opportunity to explore density by first piling up notes and then stretching out the spaces between them. The other LP presents two more experiments. As the title indicates, "*Equal Temperament Fender Mix*" deals with conventional tuning, but in doing so shows that there's more than one way for music to alter one's consciousness. Each of Hennix's quick, short phrases gets drawn into the delay system, where it is looped, accelerated, and layered with the phrases that preceded or followed it. The effect is dizzying, and the message clear; even mathematically flawed tools can yield transcendental results.

"*The Well-Tuned Marimba*" reverts to just intonation, but changes the keyboard's setting to a marimba voice and adds another musician, Hans Isgren, who adds sheng (a Chinese reed instrument) to the keyboard and electronics. This performance brings to mind an underwater vista with marimba clusters bursting and retreating like billowing jellyfish while the sheng evokes coral in the fading distance. It's gorgeous, but while Hennix has

used some of these sounds again, there's no evidence that she has made music that sounds like this again. A couple years after the 1976 festival Hennix moved to the USA to teach mathematics. While this initiated a close and productive association with Henry Flynt and some so-far undocumented adventures with diverse New Yorkers, Hennix seems to have left keyboard music behind. Blank Forms promises that this album is the first in a series of planned archival releases. One can only hope that these plans bear fruit.

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