

Wednesday, October 26, 2005
Landmarks (9)

Gordon Monahan: Piano Mechanics (1981-86). Uses the piano as is -- no preparations, no electronics, although it often sounds prepared or electronic -- to explore the complex potential of the instrument when used simply a "machine for the synthesis of sound". It is played mostly on the keyboard, but the technique is not traditional; one might even say that the techniques used are musically naive, being closer to the explorations made by patient children when left alone at the keyboard. The work is structured as a series of studies, concentrating on individual techniques or attributes; upon repeated hearings, I am ever surprised by how (literally) composed each individual etude is, and how elegantly the individual etudes are ordered into a whole. To be honest, Piano Mechanics was the first piece by one of my contemporaries which left me with a full case of composer's envy. The balance between clarity of purpose, minimal means, and novel but virtuoso execution is near-perfect, and the effect is maximal without appeal to any ordinary musical sensations.

Posted by Daniel Wolf

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