

THE NEW CLAVICHORD

Of all the world's famous musical instruments, the clavichord is the most mysterious—although the lucky few who have heard one will rave about it as long as anybody will listen. The reasons for its rarity lie in its tiny scintillant tone, which has been over-shadowed first by the comparatively crude and clangorous harpsichord and later by its own thunderous step-child, the piano. The reason the clavichord has not been effectively recorded for the appeasement of modern ears is related: the thud of finger on key is often as loud as the resulting musical tone, and few microphones can separate the music from the noise.

The clavichord was invented about 1400 AD, and later became a favorite instrument of such great European composers as Bach and Mozart. Its operation is about as simple as possible: when the piano-like key is depressed, its tail end rises inside the box and a metal wedge strikes a string, simultaneously "stopping" it, like the fingers of a guitarist's left hand. So long as the key is held down, the note is free to ring, and a good clavichordist can produce a vibrato by wobbling his finger on the key. The keyboard is somewhat shorter than that of a piano or harpsichord, which imposes another reason for the instrument's lack of popularity, for there is little music of any epoch, even when the instrument was most popular, that fits within its range.

The present recording represents a fresh approach both to recording technique and to musical philosophy. Red Camp's jazz preludes are the result of a lifetime of experience in and out of jazz combos, added to a long-time fascination with—and study of—free improvisation, especially the kind that leans steeply towards atonality. After several years of solitary searching, perhaps provoked by hearing himself on some recent records* Camp was still unready, he thought, to present himself in a new form. No one ever is. Perhaps it was the excitement of his encounter with the ridiculously old (new) instrument. Perhaps it was the fact that he had already recorded an LP's worth of heartfelt jazz, (see also "The Hot-Tempered Clavichord" #1041) and midnight had come and gone, or perhaps it was the strong sympathy of the few friends who had gathered around the Halpern's handsome living room to listen and enjoy. Whatever it was, it caught fire with the fierceness of a new idea.

"What about chords like clusters of grapes?" somebody suggested. Camp played a few contrasting clusters. Yes, the listeners agreed, that was the idea. Now what about improvising freely on the same chords? Camp stood up, bending his long body to keep his fingers on the keyboard, feeling a rhythm surge through him, swaying gently as it took hold. He sat and played a few notes. He looked startled at what he was doing for a moment, then settled down and let his fingers take him through four different numbers, all grown from the same vine, all bursting with that mysterious driving force known as the "jazz feeling" and yet—with the exception of the darkling blues—having little to do with the honky-tonk or spectacular brand of the music known as jazz. Whatever got into Red Camp, that early morning, it came out naturally in the form that so many moderns have struggled to achieve with such unnatural results—a blend of jazz and "classical" music.

After he finished, Camp was numb and confused. "What did I do?", he mumbled. "I didn't hear a thing". When he heard the playback, he was as astonished as anybody, for his intimate musings on the whispering instrument thundered out with the monstrous power of amplification.

The record owner, too, is faced with a choice when he plays this record: 1) he may set the volume to zero, then increase it until the instrument is just barely audible, thus reproducing the exact sound of the clavichord as it existed 200 years ago; or, 2) he may run the volume at half muzz or better, thus effectively celebrating the lost sighs of an antique instrument and the birth of a new one of limitless possibilities.

SIDE A:

*Prelude for Twelve Fingers
Twofer Atonement
The Bluesando
Wing and a Prayer
Waltz in Left Field
Purdle Diddle Dido Twee Twee*

SIDE B:

*Nagasaki
Slow Slow Blues
Alma Llanera
Cocktails for Two
Ghost of a Chance
Louisiana Piano*

*Horizontal & Upright #10889

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