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RHYS CHATHAM “ECHO SOLO (1989) for Forte Piano”

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By 1989, downtown legend Rhys Chatham had been fusing art music and punk rock for almost fourteen years and wanted to try his hand at something else. Accordingly, he set out to combine forms using a diverse vocabulary drawn exclusively from the classic avant-garde; the result is *Echo Solo*. In it, Chatham appropriates a number of musical styles—serial technique, chance operations, and just intonation—then through a process of amalgamation and superimposition, he transcends their original musical meaning while at the same time imploding it. Only the tiniest pair of critical scissors could isolate the individual elements from the final product; it’s a fascinating, paradoxical composition, one which the composer happily describes as “a rite of decimation.”

As Chatham himself writes: “When one tunes a piano in just intonation, it is essentially in one key, the key of 1. La Monte Young tuned his piano in E-flat, owing to the fact that he was originally an alto saxophone player. I used a similar technique, but used C natural as my starting point, for the sake of simplicity. When we tune a piano in this way, however, we are usually very careful to select a strategy of striking a particular set of piano keys in order to stay in the right musical key. In *Echo Solo*, no such strategy existed. The aleatory and serial techniques used to arrive at the pitch choices completely ignored the tuning of the piano. And it is in this sense that *Echo Solo* would seem to be a contradiction in terms with respect to the manner in which the piano was tuned. And indeed it is, but it has the happy effect of endowing the piece with a unique sound: it clearly doesn’t sound like Young, perhaps a bit more like a strange amalgamation of Cage and Boulez, but out of whack somehow. Something new...”

“Like a demigod, (Rhys Chatham) set everything in motion and then disappeared, leaving us to figure out how to live in the universe he created.”
—THE NEW YORK TIMES

“For years Rhys Chatham’s music has been more heard about than heard. While his work languished out of print, disciples such as Sonic Youth have gone to the bank with his sound. Chatham’s sonic vocabulary is an inspired marriage of minimalist structures, rock cadences and glittering overtones obtained from massed electric guitars played in unusual tunings at crushing volume. (His) knack for garbling indelible melodies in gorgeous sonorities makes them as attractive as ever today.”
—THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

“Blue Oyster Cult and Kiss might’ve made noises about guitar armies, but it took composer Rhys Chatham to actually deploy one. And there’s no other way to say this: It rocks.”
—MAGNET

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