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**Various Artists,  
Immersion (DVD-A),  
Starkland, 2001**

| Performance 8 | Sound 8 |

The intention of producer Thomas Steenland in putting this disc together was to commission various electro-acoustic music producers and composers to create surround works for a "millennial" DVD-Audio disc. The pieces had to be produced in the first quarter of the year 2000 for release later the same year. As a result, the interesting group of artists, represented here by 10 very varied tracks, were not given an enormous length of time to create their pieces. However, without exception, everyone delivered excellent work. Although the largely abstract nature of the compositions may not be to everyone's taste, if you like this sort of thing, you are in for an audio treat, and if you have sympathetic friends, this is a great demo disc to show off your system.

Most, if not all, of the artists represented have worked in surround – generally quad – or at least in spatial environments before. In fact, Steenland specified only that the pieces should use front left and right and surround left and right. The use of the center front channel and the musically-useless LFE (Tomlinson Holman, in an essay in the booklet, amusingly refers to this as the "Low Frequency Enhancement" channel!) was left to the individual artist's choice. Half a dozen of the composers used these; the others did not. As a result, in many cases, we have essentially quadrasonic works, but this should not be a concern. Virtual center has worked for stereo for many decades and still works today (the CF was designed to stop dialogue from getting lost in early movie surround systems, after all) and, unless your system is sadly lacking in the bass management department, the presence or absence of an LFE signal should not affect either your sub-woofer's output or your enjoyment. When it comes to music, both these channels could happily be more gainfully employed in carrying height or side information (or both, as Chesky does).

There are copious liner notes in the 32-page booklet, thank goodness, including a useful (if ever so slightly

pretentious) overview by Kyle Gann, New Music critic for the Village Voice, who, like a lot of people, assumes that we only discovered the ability to present surround-sound recordings last week, even though we have been doing it for a good quarter of a century. There is also a rather basic (as needs be) essay by Tom Holman, and an interesting Producer's Note, both mentioned above. In addition, there are detailed articles and composer comments in the booklet on each piece.

"Immersion" is a combination audio/video disc, as in most cases these days (with the notable exception of *Surrounded By Entertainment* – see separate review). Perhaps unusually, the visual content – a series of slides that are visible during the playing – is quite helpful, especially during the first track, a brilliant choice of opener from San Francisco-based Pamela Z. Z takes us on an audio tour of her room, panning her voice (and other copies of it) around the room as she speaks. Listening in audio alone, I found myself aching to see what she was talking about. A series of shelves approximately four inches square, starting at eye level and continuing up to just below the ceiling, each one containing a cobalt-blue glass bottle... we need to see this! A powered speaker... well, that we can imagine... Luckily, the still images show at least part of what we hear about, and separately rather than simultaneously.

Each piece is vastly different. There is music composed from the noise of water and sounds from 96-foot strings. One piece, Phil Kline's "Housatonic at Henry Street," is an audio recreation of a virtual place, with street sounds, strange bell-like sounds and mysterious chords that seep in from the background. Another creation features mysterious counter-rhythms that seem impossible to count, while other pieces employ multiple voices.

The result is a very exciting collection of new music composed (or in one case remixed) for modern discrete surround. As virtual spaces are generated almost exclusively, there is seldom a need to be aware of the accuracy of localization, although in some cases – such as Pamela Z's voice panning slowly around the room – one becomes reminded of the tendency of level-only localization to result in sounds being sucked into the speakers. It's a 24-bit album, but sampled only at 48 kHz, allowing the same mixes to be used for both the DVD-A and DVD-V sections (the latter rendered in Dolby AC-3). There are stereo mixes as well as surround, but the point of these is obviously somewhat limited. In surround, this album will give your system and your ears a decent workout. And perhaps, it'll take your mind on a journey into the possibilities of the art of surround.

Reviewed by **Richard Elen**