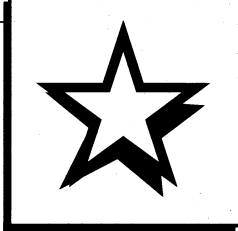


"...a number of 'firsts' in an exceptionally enjoyable program..."

Classical  
**KEEPING  
SCORE**



This issue's column was written by Steve Smith.

AS AT THE BIRTH of every new recording medium, DVD Audio is being greeted with enthusiasm by early adopters, trepidation by veteran record-buyers (at the prospect of overhauling their collections again), and skepticism by those unsure of claims that the sound of the new medium might truly be superior to that of its celebrated predecessor, the CD. Adding to the debate is the competitive tussle between DVD Audio and Super Audio Compact Disc (SACD), which has left many sitting on the sidelines wondering what the next standard will be in an industry that lately supports only one platform at a time.

One feature of DVD Audio is now drawing particular attention: its utilization of 5.1 surround-sound technology, which uses up to four additional channels in its reproduction of the soundstage. In addition to two standard, stereo front channels, the format employs two separate rear (or "surround") channels, as well as a center channel and a low-frequency subwoofer channel. The result may be as close to a concert-hall setting as one might ever expect from the comfort of the sofa. (Reportedly, the stereo-only SACD will also support surround sound eventually.)

In *Keeping Score* last fall and again just last week in *The New York Times*, conductor **Daniel Barenboim**—whose recent Teldec **Beethoven** symphony cycle was just issued on DVD Audio in Warner Music Group's major rollout of the format—reportedly declared the new technology as important an advance as the arrival of the CD, and before that, the LP.

When **Tom Steenland**, head of the Boulder, Colo.-based Starkland label, learned in 1997 that the standard for DVD Audio was to include surround sound, it sparked the realization of a "big notion" he had been mulling over for a while. Starkland has presented adventurous music with an emphasis on electroacoustic composition since '92. For a grand project to mark the millennium, Steenland commissioned 13 composers—including **Meredith Monk**, **Pauline Oliveros**, **Ingram Marshall**, **Paul Dresher**, and **Phil Kline**—to create new works specifically conceived for playback in surround sound. The works have been released in the DVD Audio title "*Immersion*," available since last December via the Starkland Web site and due at retail in mid-February.

Steenland chose composers who were comfortable with new technologies, whose music he felt might benefit from the spatial qualities of surround sound. Some were chosen because they positioned voices in unusual configurations in live performances, others because they had previously recorded in uniquely reverberant spaces, and still others because they had worked in surround sound's archaic predecessor, quadraphonic sound.

The production of "*Immersion*" required inventiveness at every step. "I was faced with a tricky issue when I approached composers about this in early '98," Steenland says, "because the format didn't really even exist at the time. They had never composed for it, and

they certainly didn't have the equipment to do it. But I explained it carefully to the composers, and all of them were enthusiastic from day one."

Steenland "suggested that I just do one of my normal pieces," says Kline, whose "normal pieces" are scored for multiple cassette players (or "boom-boxes"). But Kline says that Steenland's commission encouraged him to pursue new ideas, including "world-izing," a notion borrowed from rock iconoclast **Neil Young**.

"I thought about something I'd been pondering for a number of years," Kline says, "which involved recording things and then playing them back on tape recorders outdoors and then rerecording [the playback] and taking the sound back indoors." Kline stuck microphones out of his front window to record the germinal material for "*The Housatonic At Henry Street*," which he recast into an ethereal creep and rumble that justifies the title's **Ivesian** pun.

Each composer sent his or her piece to Steenland on the 20-bit Adat format—which had appeared just in the nick of time—and he delivered the results to renowned mastering engineer **Bob Ludwig** at Gateway Mastering in Maine. "Since we had 13 different composers using 13 different, cobbled-together home setups to do surround sound," Steenland says, "I

thought we would get 13 tapes that sounded extremely different and that in mastering we might have to do major things to get them to sound consistent throughout. But in reality, they all sounded terrific, and we made only a few little changes."

"*Immersion*" also includes a stereo mix of each track created for DVD users without surround-sound systems, but Steenland stresses that these do not give an accurate indication of the way the music ought to be heard.

DVD production requires a further step—authoring, during which all of the elements of the disc (the varying mixes, visual images, menus) are made to work together. "It's a major stage," Steenland says, "and it was particularly major in this case, because this was one of the first DVD Audio discs being authored, and the software was not very well-developed. DVD requires something like 37,000 lines of code, and if one of those lines is off, something doesn't work right."

Gateway's **Brian Lee** was responsible for the arduous authoring process. Steenland says, "He would call the software manufacturer and ask how something was done, and they would say, 'We don't know. If you figure it out, let us know how to do it,' which in some cases he did."

Auditioned on a state-of-the-art playback system at Strassberg Associates, a professional high-end audio-equipment dealership in Manhattan, N.Y., the music on "*Immersion*" bears out Steenland's enthusiasm. **Pamela Z's** charmingly literal-minded "*Live/Work*" affords a tour of her home studio, her voice first moving clockwise around the listener, then approaching from all angles at once. **Bruce Odland's** "*Tank*" accurately evokes the abandoned steel water tank in which trumpeter **Ron Miles** was recorded. Monk's "*Eclipse Variations*," written for a quartet of singers situated in a circle around the audience, is ideally suited for the surround-sound format.

Having achieved a number of "firsts" in an exceptionally enjoyable program for new-music lovers with "*Immersion*," Steenland prefers to wait and see where the market leads before committing to another such project. Yet Kline says, "It has awakened in me the possibility of doing things this way. It definitely gave me some extra capabilities and weapons, and I suppose there may come a day when the home-theater thing is just taken for granted." But both agree that, like most everything, consumer demand will dictate the future for such unique endeavors.

Based in New York, Steve Smith has written for *Jazz-iz*, *New Music Box*, and *Schwann Inside*, in addition to having worked for several record companies.



STEENLAND, LEFT, AND KLINE

