

**The Adding Machine**  
CD, Cantaloupe; 2002

Cantaloupe Music, (Bang On A Can) CD 21006  
<http://www.cantaloupemusic.com/>

Reviews:

“Every Labor Day I find myself upstate at an annual county fair, and each year the best display is the old machine display. There’s a ton of weird Rube Goldbergian contraptions that wheeze, chug, spew smoke and spit oil as they do things like husk corn or wash laundry. Each machine has its own personality and its own sound. Listening to Arnold Dreyblatt’s new CD reminds me of those machines. Every track moves along like old-fashioned clockwork, ticking and sweating away. Dreyblatt, a second-generation minimalist composer, has been exploring the sound of strings for nearly two and a half decades. His early work literally examined the resonant possibilities of one string by having a musician pluck away over and over, creating a multi-harmonic drone that was surprisingly rich. The plucking was always rhythmic, so that no matter how dry the exercise could get, there was something to tap your foot to.

Over the years, Dreyblatt has sought to extend the intimate insight he gained from these early works and bring them to several instruments in ensemble settings. He began to call these groups the Orchestra of Excited Strings, which gives a good description of what Dreyblatt’s music is all about. The strings never sit still; they’re always vibrating off one another in wildly intense ways, creating a musical equivalent to op-art. In fact, invoking another visual metaphor, Dreyblatt’s complex textures give the sonic feeling of an optical illusion. With so much going on, you start to hear entire worlds between the notes being played. Dreyblatt’s success is contingent upon good musicianship. It’s a different kind of expertise, though, not so much based on blinding skill or the ability to play kick-ass riffs, but rather involves a musician who’s willing to buy into the intensity of sound that repetitive playing can offer in conjunction with other instruments. So although he’s got some technically amazing musicians on this disc—including several Bang on a Can members—often their job is to just keep plucking the same string over and over again in increasingly complex rhythmic patterns.

His latest orchestra plays a variety of string instruments including cimbaloms, zithers and modified electric guitars and basses. (Dreyblatt’s been taking apart and putting together musical instruments for years: his “excited strings bass” has longer strings, giving it a deeper and more resonant sound.) The disc also includes a bevy of very busy percussion, the musicians slamming their instruments with bows, accompanied by more conventional snare drums that sound like they’re right out of a high-school marching band, giving the music a beat that won’t quit. Like most minimalism, Dreyblatt’s music is likable stuff. It stays far from the academic concerns that have in the past given minimalism a bad rap. It ingratiates itself by being almost danceable, and embraces many qualities that make rock ‘n’ roll so great, especially amplification and simplicity. But unlike most rock these songs never really go anywhere: there’s no real song structure to speak of; instead each track is a static rhythmic field unto itself, making it great music for doing things to. I’ve been taking it to the gym lately, where it works as well as it does in my office while I’m banging away on a keyboard all day. In

a culture that insists on relentless pumping, Dreyblatt might have composed the perfect soundtrack to an urban life”.- Kenneth Goldsmith

“On his new release *The Adding Machine*, Arnold Dreyblatt, whose own career has stretched across several fields of the media arts spectrum, proves himself worthy of such metaphorical capacity. The five pieces successfully reinvent the mechanical aesthetic of a roaring human infrastructure, and it is this marriage, of the human and the concrete, that engenders in the material a post-industrial romance evident throughout Dreyblatts recorded output.

The new record brings synthesis and juxtaposition to the minimalist canon, as the *Orchestra of Excited Strings* creates a sprawling and diverse atmosphere, which nonetheless remains consistent with the forebears of the movement. A composer of stature, Dreyblatt has charted his own unique course in modern classical music. Often characterized as the most rock-oriented of American minimalists, his work with the *Orchestra of Excited Strings* does justice to the moniker, in as much as the paradox is even feasible.

There is a driving force to *The Adding Machine*, with nods to blues and rock traditions, and melodic progression is evident throughout, if heavily syncopated. Still, tempo changes and stubborn breakbeats are primarily responsible for the shifting pace within the pieces, which could only sufficiently be described as joltingly ambient. The tone is militant but never abrasive, the seemingly rigid instrumental elements of the ensemble quickly giving way to the slipstream of their own ephemera in the manner of a lulling kaleidoscopic vision.

There is a decidedly oriental feel throughout *The Adding Machine*, but an eastward orientation is likely the fated direction of any ensemble to employ a thumbnail zither. Most minimalist endeavors, and particularly those of the New York school, from which Dreyblatt himself emerged, have traversed a similar path. String instruments, with their unique capacity for sustained drone, laid the foundation for the work of La Monte Young and Tony Conrad; the accomplishment, however, was not merely the aural byproduct of the means of production. Minimalism derives substance from the same metaphysics as those underscoring eastern philosophy: continuity, cohesion, singularity of vision.

*The Adding Machine*, which opts for staccato plucking and percussion over extended drone, maintains this oriental mentality; the music builds and descends, but remains diachronically infinite, static in a mood suggestive of a peaceful, cyclical calm. The material comprising *The Adding Machine* was initially prepared for a series of live performances, and while I was not fortunate enough to witness the debut at Tonic in January of 2001, I did manage to hear a live broadcast of the ensembles concert at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. So far as the memory of this vicarious experience remains accessible, there is a subtle magic to these compositions in their original context, contingent on the control and spontaneity of the performers. *The Adding Machine provides* an experiential blueprint for minimalist theory and ambient music in general, capturing this intoxicating atmosphere for its audience.” - Tom Roberts

“Arnold Dreyblatts wonderfully fun *The Adding Machine* is pure American music in its eccentricity of instrumentation, tuning, and humor. Based on a 20-tone-per-octave scale, just-intonation system, and played by homemade and altered conventional instruments as well as by such homely standbys as the double bass, violin, cello, zither, and hurdy gurdy (which seems to be making a comeback in new music) the songs on *The Adding Machine* conjure up so many images that its hard to know which to begin with. But first, a bit more on the instrumentation. Dreyblatt tells us, I have been developing instruments specifically for my ensemble for almost 25 years, a number of which are represented in this recording. The cimbalom is a rebuilt and restrung pre-war Chinese childrens piano which is played here horizontally with hand-held hammers. One of the electric guitars has built-in magnetic driver-sustainers for each string and for both instruments new frets have been installed in the just intonation scale used for my music. The excited strings bass violin . . . has been adapted with unwound steel wire and is struck and beaten with a bass bow. As a result of this tuning, and in particular as a result of the hammering and striking, Dreyblatts song have a rickety and offish quality to them, almost toy-like in tone, rhythm, and percussiveness.

*International Dateline*, which starts out the album, is slow mechanical march of a sort I could imagine a ballet being written around, perhaps as a new version of Tchaikovskys Dance of the Toy Soldiers in the rough-hewn and skewed tradition of Charles Ives. That all the songs save House of Twang make me think of some form of dance no doubt owes to the album having been mixed by Jorg Hiller, apparently a Big Cheese in the Berlin dance club circuit. Lapse comes the closest to being dance music for nonprofessionals, but because of its erratic rhythms, I dont think itll be playing soon at a roller rink near you. Its much like rock music for wooden puppets. Like the adding machine on cover of this album, Dreyblatts music here conjures up the pace and rhythms of technologies past, before everything became digital and computerized. Meantime features rhythms that I can hear as fingers hitting the keys of an old typewriter or tapping out the dash-dot-dashes of telegraphs, the pulses building as instruments are layered on and chords change. These are chord- rather than melody-driven tunes, tunes episodic in nature, as if theyre following a storyline, serving as a soundtrack to stop-motion animation by, say, the Brothers Quay. If you like the music of Harry Partch; if accessible, playful inventiveness turns your crank; if good composition tickles your fancy, then Arnold Dreyblatt and his *Orchestra of Excited Strings*”. - Tom Bowden