THE SACKBUT BLUES

Reviewed by Larry Polansky, Department of Music, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755, U.S.A.

After nearly 10 years of work, Canadian composer, instrument designer and editor Gayle Young has produced her long-awaited biography and musical study of Canadian composer, instrument designer and inventor, Hugh LeCain. This book follows the extraordinary recording of LeCain’s music and demonstrations that Young produced a few years ago, and it should become an essential volume in the history of early electronic music.

Hugh LeCain, long-time resident of Toronto, was one of the earliest designers of electronic music instruments. Beginning in the early 1950s, LeCain designed and constructed a number of important prototypes and working studio instruments that explored important and visionary aspects of electronic music. LeCain was extremely interested in ‘control’ and ‘expressivity’, and in his designs for such instruments as the touch-sensitive organ (1956), the Sackbut, and even the multitrack tape recorder (1955), which could be played via a small keyboard, LeCain presages many of the current concerns for ‘input structures’ and ‘alternative controllers’ that are prevalent in computer music today. His studio instruments, like the oscillator bank and the serial sound structure generator (and the multitrack tape recorder) were important early models of complex electronic compositional environments. It is interesting to see in this book how some of LeCain’s most extraordinary ideas still have not been realized in commercial computer music devices.

Young has done meticulous research on LeCain and chronicles his entire career with sympathy and deep understanding of what LeCain was trying to do. Her writing is clear and relies heavily on interviews with those who knew and worked with LeCain. The first part of the book is a copiously illustrated biography of LeCain, and the second part, titled ‘Technical Description of Instruments Designed by LeCain’, will be indispensable for its comprehensive technical descriptions of LeCain’s work. There are complete descriptions of virtually all of the designer’s major experiments, with beautiful photographs, diagrams and histories of the instruments.

THE BEAUTY OF LIGHT

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Ben Bova has written 70 novels and nonfiction books about space and high technology. He has been honored as an editor and has received several awards for his science fiction. With this background it is not surprising that this book is a gracefully written collection of interesting tidbits about light for the general public. This is not a book for those with specialist knowledge about any aspect of light or vision, but it should catch and hold the interest of young people and the casual reader.

The feel and level of the book is indicated by the section titles: “To See”, “To Learn”, “To Use” and “To Seek”. The book closes with chapters on the stars and outer space, the enduring interests of the author.