

ELLEN FULLMAN
STAGGERED STASIS
ANOMALOUS CD

**ELLEN FULLMAN &
KONRAD SPRENGER**
ORT
CHOOSE CD

BY BIGA KOPF

Memphis-raised Long String Instrument (LSI) builder and composer Ellen Fullman's music is as much a feat of precision engineering as art. Inhabiting empty spaces strung with metal wires to resemble a giant harp or zither, her compositions involve one or more players getting inside the instrument and moving back and forth between tuned strings up to 30 metres in length. Rubbing them with rosined fingers or a V-shaped bow, the player draws out long notes that hang in the air and slowly thicken into dense toneclouds or layers of shimmering overtones.

The title of her 1987 piece *Staggered Stasis* — originally devised in an unfinished office tower in Austin for choreographer Deborah Hay — aptly describes her music's uncanny ability to agitate the atmosphere while seemingly staying rooted to the spot. Fullman puts it more poetically in her own sleevenote: "I imagine it must be like in the middle of an ocean, continually moving yet appearing the same."

Composed in three parts, the latter two performed with Santiago Villareal holding down the lower octave parts, *Staggered Stasis* makes great play of the paradoxical tension created by the lengths the players have to walk to keep its core drone slowly turning on the spot like a giant top, or better, like a whirlpool in the middle of the aforementioned ocean, moving listeners from the bottom to the top in wobbly overtone bubbles without them ever getting wet. Moving at this pace, Fullman and Villareal can determine, if not entirely control, the level of overtone activity — unlike, say, that generated by the rapidly circulating notes of an Evan Parker soprano sax piece. The two-part 1986 composition *Duration* completing this CD is Fullman's more exacting but no less exciting exploration of the elemental forces at play in an overtone series generated within a single key.

Produced in collaboration with Berlin musician and recording engineer Jörg Hiller aka Konrad Sprenger, *Ort* is Fullman's extraordinary leap into song. There's little that can be usefully added to Julian Cowley's full discussion of the album in his piece on Fullman in *The Wire* 245, except to confirm that she made the leap

without any of the messy pratfalls that often result from high art embracing popular or roots musics. In Sprenger's studio constructed settings for a broad range of instruments including a scaled down LSI, she talk-sings in a voice every bit as earthy and richly resonant as her stringwork, turning in heartrending versions of Woody Guthrie's migrant worker lament "I Ain't Got No Home" and AP Carter's murder ballad "John Hardy". In *Ort*'s context, they're of a piece with her own playful artsongs, such as "Glittering Glass", marbled with trace elements of Patti Smith and The Velvet Underground, and the emotionally adrift "In The Mist".