Phil Kline: 'Around the World in a Daze'

Phil Kline, electronics, vocalist, guitarist; Ethel; other performers. Starkland S-2015; two DVDs.

PHIL KLINE seems to be two composers. Some recent works — the cycle "Zippo Songs" and the Mass "John the Revelator" — use voices and instruments conventionally and expressively, at the service of original, often idiosyncratic ideas. But "Around the World in a Daze" proves that the better-known version of Mr. Kline, the electronic experimenter who deploys fleets of boomboxes to achieve his preferred textures, is hard at work.

This 10-movement suite evokes a world tour by combining field recordings — New York street noise, exotic parrot calls from an African watering hole — with electronic and acoustic instruments and voices, all heavily edited and manipulated (that is, composed). Other kinds of found sound (or "appropriation," as Mr. Kline correctly calls it) turn up as well. In "Luv U 2 Death," several 1940s recordings of the "Liebestod" from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," sped up but at the correct pitch, are overlaid; in "Prelude" a heavily processed recording of a Bach prelude nestles within ambient noise from a Zurich train station.

But the best pieces use field recordings sparingly. "Pennies From Heaven," an 18-minute tapestry of tactile, bell-like timbres and descending scales is offered as a commentary on trickle-down economics. "The Maryland Sample" is an appealingly harmonized vocal setting of a text by David Shapiro, combined with an outdoor recording of bug zappers. And if a hazy atmosphere cloaks "Svarga Yatra," it is the meditative string quartet score, played with an ethereal, plush tone by Ethel, that catches the ear.

Starkland released all of this on DVD mainly to take advantage of the format's surround-sound capability, but Mr. Kline accompanies each movement with his own photography. A second DVD includes a video piece, "Meditation," and an interview with Mr. Kline by John Schaefer. *ALLAN KOZINN*