

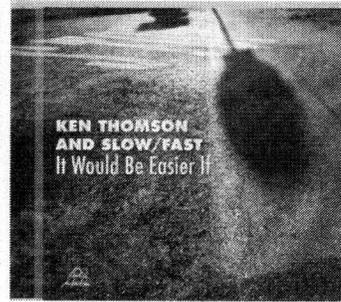
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## THE Arts

### Critics' Choice: New CDs



#### Ken Thomson and Slow/Fast

*"It Would Be Easier If"*  
(Intuition)

A striking thing happens about five minutes into the second track on "It Would Be Easier If," the studio debut of Ken Thomson with Slow/Fast. The track, which has a title just beyond the bounds of printability here — it's something you might say while shaking a fist at a Mister Softee truck — has already pinballed through a harrowing set of hyperactive fanfares tightly scored for Russ Johnson's trumpet and Mr. Thomson's alto saxophone. The thing that happens is an unaccompanied guitar solo by Nir Felder, who compresses the composition's wild chromatic sprawl into a single exhalation, his pealing phrases expressing proficiency as well as danger.

That pairing is by no means alien to Mr. Thomson, a multi-reedist and composer with a busy profile in new-music circles. He jointly leads both the Asphalt Orchestra, a resident marching band of the composer collective Bang on a Can, and Gutbucket, a jazz-rooted punk-rock band. Slow/Fast is his latest project, a spur to his long-form writing and an outlet for what he has taken to calling "21st Century third-stream music."

If you've been observing New York jazz culture over the last 20 years, you probably know enough to be wary of such a phrase. The marriage of detailed orchestration and bracing improvisation has become nearly commonplace. What used to get coded under the rubric "downtown" has now diffused into the water supply, so that Mr. Thomson's experiment sounds less like a discovery than yet another refinement.

None of which should cloud the effectiveness of the work. Mr. Thomson's compositions are intricately wrought and incident-steeped, even when — as on "Kleine Helmet", the album's impressionistic opener — they move in snowlike drifts. "Wander angst" begins with Mr. Thomson on bass clarinet shadowing Adam Armstrong's acoustic bass, in reverie; soon it's a frenetic chase sequence, with the drummer Fred Kennedy thrashing a pulse.

The gutsy precision of the playing, particularly by Mr. Johnson and Mr. Felder, calls for hearing this music in a performance setting, where its full impact can be felt. As it happens, Mr. Thomson has booked an album-release show for Friday at the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn Heights; [musicatfirstsite.com](http://musicatfirstsite.com).

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