

Richard Teitelbaum

I really would like to know something about your THRESHOLD MUSIC.

Well, I think that it's in a way the most personal music that I've ever done, the most intuitive and instinctive, the closest to me. Actually it's a kind of activity that I've been doing subconsciously for years, like humming almost inaudibly with the drone of my car motor, or a fan in an elevator or whatever. Sometimes I think I could do nothing but that. But then again perhaps it's so hermetic and personal that it's too introverted. So I keep doing other musics like playing with MEV and other musicians.

There are like six little pieces of special music?

Well, the notation of the piece is in the form of verbal instructions which I generally write out differently for each performance. Since the sound of the immediate performance environment is actually the score, I generally try to write it out after hearing the space, inspired so to speak by it, and also with reference to the specifics of the particular performers and available instruments. I also try and write it down very quickly and as immediately before the performance as I can, which reflects my interest in making the time of composition and performance as congruent as possible. Each time I've done the piece I've just put a number on it.

How do you understand this aspect of threshold? Is this -um - do you use electronic music or are you recording environmental sounds?

I do it in many different ways. It started with the experience of one particularly beautiful environment which was, uh.... Two years ago we lived out in the country, about fifty miles north of Toronto. And it was the most northerly place I've ever lived, and the most remote. It was like a large, flat valley, two and a half miles long and a mile and a half across, like that, with hills several hundred feet high all around. And the sound of Highway 400, the four-lane highway that is the main road north. The sound of the highway was very beautiful, because it was maybe two or three miles away, and "filtered" by the hills as it came across from the west. And you could hear the trucks for many miles. (A "score" representing this aural environment is published in MICHAEL BYRON'S anthology PIECES, published by ARC.) So I taped that. And I use that tape a lot in performance, played very softly, filtered and mixed, and I control the level very carefully.

So you confront the musicians with that tape, and they find sounds fitted to the level of the tape?

I also try to use the tape to match the level that's already there in the space. So I don't really confront them so much with the tape as with the environment they are in, into which I've added the tape as well. I don't tell 'em, "Now I play this tape." In fact sometimes they don't need to know if I actually play the tape. (And sometimes I don't!) It's really the immediate present that's the focus. The acoustic environment they are in. The score in a sense is the environment.

To integrate themselves into the sound, to find thresholds of softness?

Yes. To match the level of sound of the

environment as precisely as they can, as closely as they can. So they blend so well that the listener (who in this case is primarily, perhaps, themselves), ah, cannot distinguish between what he is doing and what is being done.

Did they have to play in a silent room?

You mean in an anechoic room? I never tried that. The softer the room of course the harder it is to perform. That's one reason I've sometimes used the tape. If the rooms are very soft and the musicians are not very soft, I can bridge the gap.

I mean rooms where the sounds just come from the presence of the people, like in one of those studios of York University.

I have been in that situation. I don't like it as much. I've grown to like outside sounds better. In New York I performed the piece as a solo on the Moog at 224 Centre Street, which is on the main truck route in Manhattan, and I enjoyed that very much. Those New York sounds are so astonishingly strong and rich. It's hard in a closed space, though I've done it myself that way.

I imagine that the people leave very sensitized. Is that true? Because the conception of these pieces leads always towards silence. It's a kind of a very introverted concept.

Well, it's definitely a meditation. I regard it as a spiritual discipline. It does lean towards a certain kind of consciousness. Because what I'm hoping or assuming or theorizing is that....ah, there's something about that threshold activity which will effect consciousness in certain positive ways. There's something about the narrowing down of perception, to zero, to the focusing on a point.... Do you know what I'm saying? It's like certain meditative practices. So it's not intended to be done in a chaotic, noisy environment like a boiler factory or something - though maybe one could....

That reminds me of a story that JOHN CAGE told about how DAVID TUDOR used to practice the piano (I think it was perhaps the MUSIC OF CHANGES, which is of course a very difficult piece.) in his studio in the woods by turning on the radio, television and as many distractions as possible, for the discipline. So I guess you could get to that. I'm not up to that stage yet.

Speaking of CAGE, I would like to point out that the THRESHOLD MUSIC is dedicated to him, and is very much indebted to his work. For me, JOHN CAGE has contributed a great opening up to the "outside", in which we have become aware of ourselves, and the sounds we make as merely equals in a multiplicity of sound events that constitute the environment.

It was the great contribution of LA MONTE YOUNG, some ten years later, to penetrate deeply and with a heightened intensity of perception to the "inside", the inner structure of sound itself. He did this, partly, by narrowing down the scope of perception to a highly restricted field -- just "two sounds", or even one, within which the multiplicity of events inside it, what you might call the "atomic structure" became apparent.

What I am trying to do with the THRESHOLD MUSIC is, in a sense, to combine these two perceptions, keeping CAGE'S openness and breadth

of receptivity to the natural environment, while adding to it the intensity of a "microscopic amplification" of the inner structure of its longer duration events. That's what I mean by "inside and outside both together now."

So you actually enjoy noise?

Well, whatever noise is. (laughter) I like sounds, and that's all. Especially soft ones..... I don't particularly enjoy very loud sounds any more, in the way that, for instance MAX NEUHAUS does. He's actually been attacking the New York Environmental Protection Agency because they're trying to put the sound level down. He thinks that's "fascist". He's making an interesting electronic circuit now. It's put in a large public space with many, many loudspeakers in the whole space producing sounds which respond to the sounds in the environment in interesting, elaborated ways. In a way it's similar to what I'm doing, but I'm still interested in doing it as a personal, human activity rather than making a machine to do it automatically.

What do you think about one. of STEVE REICH'S "optimistic predictions about the future of music that, "..... electronic music as such will gradually die and be absorbed by the ongoing music of people singing and playing instruments."

I think it's a beautiful thought, but I don't see any contradiction between electronic instruments and acoustic instruments. I think it's unnecessary to make this technological cutoff.

But he is somehow flight, because the synthesizer 'til now is not available like instruments which allow that the whole person be involved in acting out, etc.

But I don't see what's the difference between acting out on electronic instruments and acting out on any other instruments.

It's just the fact of inside-outside working. It's like you have a sound in mind, but to realize it you have to manipulate switches, knobs, and so on. But like playing a Marimbaphone you have just to hammer. And this connection of mind work with the hands is more interconnected and much more functioning musically. That doesn't mean to leave the synthesizer out, but to develop it to a highly adaptable INSTRUMENT.

That's one reason I've continued to play the same synthesizer for almost ten years. ME and IT are very close to each other. When I first got in 1966 or '67, I spent a lot of time wiring myself up to it," you know, connecting my brain and my heart to it, interacting with it physiologically. That doesn't completely solve the problem, because the instrument is still the same instrument, but I'm physically closer, more in touch with it. And I think the instrument makers are aware of the problems. Like MOOG. I saw him a few weeks ago, and he wants to become a craftsman, just to make beautiful INSTRUMENTS for people. He's teaching himself carpentry.... He said he wants to become as good a carpenter as he is in electronics. He just bought a house with a big barn now, and he's going to work in his barn and stay out of the factory.

I don't know if that's a very direct answer to

your question. What I mean is that it is possible to develop that kind of very "organic" attitude towards electronics as well as towards anything else. I agree that until now synthesizers have been quite crude. Remember that they're in an extremely primitive stage of development - only ten years old!

But you don't see any logical distinction?

Why not have inside and outside both together?

I think that playing instruments needs always a large amount of "Trägheit der Masse"..... um, inertia! The aspect of the connection of the human body to the instrument is much more separated in playing synthesizers. So it's much more mind work.

I agree. There was a period where I didn't play the synthesizer for a year and a half. I had it in the house and rarely went near it. Because I was very involved with playing acoustic instruments like these Javanese gongs (STRIKING OF ONE GONG AT TEITELBAUM'S HOUSE) and Studying the Japanese Shakuhachi and Ghanaian drums. I think I later translated those sorts of playing experiences into my approach to the synthesizer.

This kind of analog control over the instruments, you mostly have to digitalize in synthesizers.

Well, that's one reason I still like analog synthesizers (and keyboard controllers), although I can see that the digital developments being made now will surely be powerful tools for what you call the "inside" aspect. At the same time I hope that the problem of the physical interference between hand and electronics will continue to be improved in the immediate future too. For instance, in the THRESHOLD piece, a very precise physical control is required to translate the level of incoming sounds that the performer hears into gestures which produce sounds of precisely matched amplitude on his instrument.

I have, as I mentioned, done the piece with both acoustic instruments and synthesizer. Now one of the things I like about the Moog synthesizer is that it has very slow attack and decay times; they can take ten seconds each if you hold down a key continuously. But if you control very carefully the continuity of touch, almost like caressing the key, you can keep the amplitude kind of "floating" about the threshold of audibility by the frequency and duration with which you suppress the key. (Looked at in another way, duration becomes translated into amplitude.) So you can control loudness by the way you play it, with touch. It takes considerable physical control and can be very refined. Again, it's a focusing down.

Like when I was working in the brainwave laboratory at Queens College in New York in 1967, they were also doing another experiment with biofeedback, training people to control their muscle movements to the extent of being able to move so slightly that they only fired one neuron. That's physical too, but....

Ya it's less the acting out, but much more a kind of sensitizing your whole system.

It's certainly true these activities don't build big muscles I should play more badminton (laughter) Hey, we could have a doubles match. I played badminton with ANTHONY BRAXTON

recently, and he "wiped" me. I was so ashamed, I could hardly run.

So do you like to play better alone with your synthesizer or play with others like in MEV?

Well, I'm getting to like playing alone. Because I've rarely played alone. I guess in a way it has something to do with the sort of collective, ah, philosophy of music which I really believed in with all my heart, probably more than it was good for me...

So you think a kind of homogeneous group would function much better if one tries to sensitize things? But like in MEV, where everybody represents his own individuality, there's no way besides just showing it. If you want to integrate the playing together of one group, then you have on the one hand a very noisy percussion, and on the other side a synthesizer. And especially if you're playing it on the lower level of recognition. Don't you like to play then in more homogeneous groups?

It's, ah, more pleasant. It's easier. You're right. It's probably masochistic to continue to do this.... But you should have heard the WORLD BAND. We had a Japanese musician, a Korean, an American, an Indian, an Armenian, each playing from his traditional base and yet trying to communicate musically. You see, I'm very interested in trying to keep it all together right now. And it seems to me that one of the big problems in keeping it together is just exactly in those places where where people tend to part - disjunctions of cultures, geography, styles, concepts, etc. So if you try to bridge these gaps.... That's been a concern of a number of musicians, and a growing tendency. There a lot of people crossing boundaries. And the music is sometimes very awkward. But I think there's a certain importance to keeping communication going on the highest possible level between otherwise disparate groups. (Telephone ringing)

But it challenges the need, then everybody gives up the self somehow to adapt to the, you know, to the group's common denominator to make it more homogenous than it originally is.

I don't know what to do about giving up the self in that way. I think I gave myself up too much in the past.

But if there is a group of individuals like MEV, then it is necessary at least for the instruments that are by nature dominant to hold back somehow. In the original MEV there was a kind of unity radiating from it, because everybody had this kind of, um, very powerful and vigorous anarchism expressed in his activity. Now MEV is like four different poles, by ideology and nature of instrument. So you can't be anarchistic. You have to relate to each other very carefully to get these four poles to a certain center.

It's a big question. But I think that's what improvisation is: a process which enables one to try to uncover those common things in a free situation. Where no one person's will is dominant or, one person's set of ideas is being tested.

Ya, it's more a thing happening within a circle, where people outside just, watch it. They don't get like emotionally touched by it. They just follow with their minds how the people

communicate. But if you have a group which is playing very homogeneously, it radiates much more to the people and is made for people.

Do you think that STEVE REICH's music radiates more to the people than improvised music?

It radiates by itself. I don't value it. I don't say that the people like it more. But it radiates because of the homogeneity and its simple-mindedness. And it's made to move.

Hm..... hm.....

Do you see any kind of tendency of this kind in the current music of LIST, RZEWSKI, WOLFF, etc? This kind of song writing, narrative songs, etc. WOLFF somehow defined his new pieces as an odd combination of SATIE and IVES.

Who said that? CHRISTIAN?

Yes.

Great!

That makes me listen. And I know that like AUSTIN in Tampa finishes the unfinished pieces of IVES.

That is a project I had in mind actually.

Wow.

The UNIVERSE SYMPHONY. I inquired about the sketches --They are all at the Yale Music Library. So I wrote to my old teacher, ALLEN FORTE, and asked him, 'cause he's been through all the IVES sketches. I thought that we should do it by "committee". I thought it would be nice to do it collectively by a group of American composers, and I wrote to JIM TENNEY about the idea when he was in Tampa. He is very much an IVES lover. But I understood there wasn't very much to go on.

You mentioned JIM TENNEY, that he's very devoted to IVES and VARESE. etc.

He's never been to Europe. Someone should bring him! It's ridiculous. He's a composer who doesn't push his career very much.

To get back to your own music, I think it points to a basic value of electronic music to confront a person with himself, making the own self the subject of a process. And so to experience more about oneself. Like LUCIER does with his poetry, or ASHLEY with his conversations.

Yeah, for instance, in the MEV improvisations we used to do in the sixties, there was a period of discovery for us which involved the physical and psychological effects of playing through electronic instruments and circuitry which was very much like that: the whole experience of making a physical gesture HERE, which then comes back to you from a far distant loudspeaker actually being transformed in a space electronically in a live performance situation.

There is a statement in the KABBALAH that I liked to quote very much at that time to describe the experience which says that in the state of ecstasy a man "suddenly sees the shape of his self before him talking to him and forgets his self; and it is disengaged from him, and he sees the shape of his self before him

talking to him and predicting the future." Of course, that was written hundreds of years before electronics.

The piece we used to do called SPACECRAFT, and my own biofeedback pieces of that time were attempts to formalize those kinds of experiences into a process. And the process was very involved with electronics. As a part of it, I used to connect myself physiologically into the system, using my heartbeats and brainwaves and breathing. So it became a physical, electronically-assisted Yoga you might say. This was particularly true of the brainwave and biofeedback pieces I began doing in 1967 - ORGAN MUSIC, IN TUNE, and others, even more so than in the collective MEV pieces. The whole biofeedback experience...At this time I hadn't any negative feelings about electronics, because for me, you know, it's like the extension of the nervous system, if it's treated that way.

So are you going to do that, in your next pieces?

Yes, I'm still interested in the application of biofeedback techniques in a musical context. Last year we did a new piece in which BARBARA MAYFIELD's brainwaves were picked up and transmitted by FM to control a synthesizer while she was practicing Tai Chi Chuan, the Chinese martial art that is itself a form of meditation. The alpha peaks were used to trigger and advance a sequencer with a pre-set pentatonic melody - actually a South Indian vocal pattern in raga Mohana. As the brain "played" this melody, following the rhythm of the alpha bursts, the South Indian drummer TRICHY SANKARAN accompanied it on his Mrdangam, searching out recurrent rhythmic patterns and cycles in the alpha.

We also did a videotape version in which the alpha controlled the video image through the Paik-Abe and Dan Sandin video synthesizers, which was shown recently on Channel 11 in Chicago. We will soon be putting out a record of one of my brainwave pieces (maybe this one; I haven't decided yet.) through ARC with one of DAVID ROSENBOOM's biofeedback pieces on the other side.

I'm still interested in composing some structures for improvising, particularly for a trio of FREDERIC RZEWSKI, ANTHONY BRAXTON and myself. I've always been interested in the trio formulation, and FREDERIC and ANTHONY are two of

the musicians I most enjoy playing improvised music with. We are planning a tour of Canada in the spring.

I will also continue to develop the THRESHOLD pieces, and I have a political piece that I'm hoping to work on also. It's been in the back of my mind for a year or so. It has to do with, ah.... the death of someone I knew, a friend.

Of course I'm still interested in working with musicians from other cultures, and studying their music.

So you said that you want to go to Korea?

More likely I'll go to Japan first.... I wrote a piece for SHAKUHACHI last year, and I want to study some more.

Just the instrument of breath!

I used to get quite hyperventilated practicing (laughs) I used to come for my lesson. I studied with a great Shakuhachi player at Wesleyan in 1970 and '71 named KODO ARAKI V, from an incredibly distinguished family of Shakuhachi players, many generations, a very important family, who married an American woman, which gave him a different perspective than his ancestors.

But I'd come for my lesson and sit down and he'd say, "Okay, just play one long note at a time." We'd sit on the floor opposite each other. And so I'd play this one note for as long as I had breath, and then each of the others the same way. Then he'd put this notation in front of me. And it looked like Japanese, except that it was actually music. And then he'd tell me to play this. And I'd be so spaced out from just playing those notes that I could hardly see anything (laughs) And he'd look. I'd say, "Eh?" And he'd say "DIZZY ??" (laughter)

Yeah, it's an amazing instrument....The thing is, I've been reading that Shakuhachi players were used as spies at one period. Because they had monks who used to play with baskets over their heads, and nobody could tell who they were. And it's rumoured that they often turned out to be spying for the government. This was about the Seventeenth or Eighteenth Century, I think. It's strange, isn't it? One of the highest, most spiritually disciplined instruments in the world, and yet....

The Sounding Environment in the Score

playing along ^{quiet rolls} on resonant metal instruments
roll softly, ^{without attack,} on resonant metal instruments,
choosing sounds and pitches which
interact with those you're focusing on
from the environment
match your loudness to that of
the sounds you hear as
precisely as you can.

By making very slight changes in loudness
should create interactions of acoustic
phenomena, beat frequencies and melodies
of partials between your sound and
those of the environment.

The greater the skillness, the higher the expression

Richard Turilla
Berlin Oct. 4, 1974