

James Tenney

Phone conversation:

Hello?

Is this JIM TENNEY?

Yes.

This is WALTER ZIMMERMANN.

Hi!

Do you think I can ask you some questions about your music?

Sure

The thing is, I'm just taping, ya, and we should talk a little bit louder than usual. Do you understand me?

Yes.

Okay. Until 1967 you were concerned with computer music. Then you switched to instrumental music. How do you integrate your experiences with computer music into the new pieces?

Let me first correct a date there. I was working with computer music from 1961 to 1969. Then I went BACK to writing instrumental music, since I had written instrumental music before 1961. And I found that the kinds of compositional procedures that I had learned and developed using the computer could be applied in instrumental music, too..... formal ideas, and ways of achieving certain kinds of textures, and so forth.

Like in CRYSTAL CANON. What I know is, they are like very sophisticated constructions of canonic drumming. I see that as a kind of fertilization from the computer experiences.

Fertilization?

Ya, from the computer experiences.

Certainly, they have influenced my instrumental writing.

Did you apply experiences with expanded time and harmonic scales, on new techniques of instrumentation? Do you understand the question?

Well, since I've been working with instrumental music again, I don't know that I've done anything very experimental with instrumentation, as such. I've been using mostly standard instruments, in pretty standard ways. But my concern these last two or three years with the harmonic series as a basis for pitch organization probably derives from my work in acoustics, as well as a very long-standing involvement with timbre as a formative parameter in music. Aside from that, I think it is mostly the formal aspects of these instrumental pieces that have been influenced by the computer work.

And some pieces are written in simplest possible structures and notation. I talked to one of your former students, MICHAEL BYRON, and he called it POST CARD MUSIC.

Yes, I went through a period of about a year (1971) when I found that a number of my musical ideas were easily notated on one page or in one

very small space. It occurred to me that these might nicely make postcards, or "Score Cards", and I called the series POSTAL PIECES. I am not doing that kind of thing anymore, although there are certain things about some of those pieces that I am still interested in.... a piece like KOAN for Violin, for example. Do you know that one?

Is it printed in one of the issues of SOUNDINGS?

No. This has only appeared in the post card form.

Then I don't know it.

In KOAN and some of the other POSTAL PIECES the form of the piece is so simple and linear that it will become utterly predictable to a listener after a very short time. My feeling is that, as soon as that happens, the listener then becomes free to concentrate on more detailed aspects of the sound, because he knows that he is not going to be surprised by any formal or "dramatic" turns here or there.

I see.

All there is to listen to the microacoustical details.

And the listener confronts himself much more with the music.

Right. I realized, in writing these pieces, that this was one way to avoid drama. Haha..... which I'm still trying to find ways to avoid.

Pieces I know from scores, like QUINTEXT, where each piece is written as a gesture for another composer: FELDMAN, XENAKIS, RUGGLES, VARESE, PALESTINE. Aren't they dedications in the best sense, because they grasp the specific personal perfume?

Personal what?

Perfume. They are dedications in its genuine structure, like you just try to feel in the work of FELDMAN.

Well, the only problem with that is that in most cases it worked the other way around. That is, the dedication didn't come before the composition of the piece, rather afterwards or during the course of writing. But I wanted them all to be dedicatory. Frequently these relations were very.... how can I say.... trivial ones. Like the CHOIR OF ANGLES FOR CARL RUGGLES. You know, the music is totally unlike RUGGLES' music, but the initial chord has the same interval structure as the initial chord of his piece called ANGELS. That was deliberate, and that's something that occurred DURING the composition of the piece.

The last piece of QUINTEXT is dedicated to CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE.

Yes. He was a graduate student at Cal Arts when I was teaching there. He was doing very interesting things with the voice and in piano improvisations, and this was a kind of personal gesture to him. Even though his work was very different from my own, we were both concerned with timbre and the harmonic series.

I see. another piece concerned with harmonic expansion is SPECTRAL CANON for CONLON

NANCARROW, written for a player piano which is tuned to the harmonic series. I have just seen the score, but the piece must sound fantastic. Was it performed?

I have not yet heard it either, because it has taken a long time to get the piano roll punched. I went to visit NANCARROW a couple of months ago, and I brought the roll with me because he has a special machine for punching. We started to punch it while I was there, but I couldn't stay long enough to finish it, so he kept it, and finished punching it for me. It is in the mail on the way here now, so I hope to be able to hear it soon. So far, though, NANCARROW is the only one who has actually heard the piece.

I heard he is living in Mexico?

That's right.

He is American, and just doing Player Piano pieces.

Yes, they are absolutely fantastic!

So far I haven't heard any pieces by him.

He is one of the really great composers living today.

How old is he?

He was born in 1912, so he's 63 years old.

You know, we should know much more about these composers on the West Coast, because Europe doesn't know too much about them.

Do you know the magazine NUMUS WEST?

Yes.

That is one source where you can get such information.

Then, I know the articles you wrote in the issue of SOUNDINGS about IVES, RUGGLES and VARESE. Do you see a new valuation of these composers?

I have always been interested in those composers, but do you mean in the sense of a larger public?

No, I mean if they are inspiring new music.

They were very important to ME. In fact, RUGGLES and VARESE were teachers of mine. I actually knew them. I was closer with RUGGLES than VARESE, but I considered them both as teachers.

Could you just describe the experience you had with RUGGLES, because I heard he was very strict in his composing and teaching.

I met him when I was a student at Bennington College in Vermont, and he lived in the little town of Arlington, which was just fifteen miles away. I got to know him, and we became really close over a period of several years. We used to have long talks about things that I played for him on the piano. Later I played for him tapes of my own electronic music, and we would talk about those. I don't think of him as "strict" at all, although in his own music he worked with a fantastically refined technique.... and a fantastically refined EAR. Always searching for the "perfect" sound in a given place in a piece.

And he worked very long on pieces, like ten years on one.

Right. But RUGGLES developed a kind of dissonant polyphony unlike any other music, and this was done without any sort of system, which might have facilitated his compositional process, but simply "by ear", one might say.

Do you think it is actually more his technique of composing which is inspiring, or do you think it is his music too?

Both. His music is very beautiful!

Ya? Like PHILIP CORNER Said that his style has become watered down by the movie music composers.

It seems to me that movie music is coming more from SCHOENBERG than from RUGGLES. What PHIL is talking about, I guess, is what RUGGLES and SCHOENBERG had in common.... sonorities based on 7ths and 9ths, and a certain kind of post-romantic or neo-romantic gesture in the melodic lines, and so forth. But you know, even movie music composers can't destroy REAL MUSIC.

The other one you studied with is EGRARD VARESE. You dedicated to him the CRYSTAL CANON.

I dedicated several pieces in my life to VARESE. The first one was a piece of computer music called PHASES, in 1963, and then later one of the pieces in QUINTEXT, "Parabolas and Hyperbolas...."

I think that VARESE is still inspiring because of his opening up of instrumental music to new sonorities taken from the environment. And I just want to know how do you realize this aspect in your present projects.

This awareness of environmental sounds will always be important to me, even when I'm not actually incorporating such sounds in a particular piece. The lessons to be learned from the music of VARESE are unforgettable, but of course many of the same "lessons" are implicit in the music of CHARLES IVES and JOHN CAGE, too. Let's not forget that!

Are you going back to computer music?

I've actually used a small computer for certain things in several recent pieces, and I expect to do more work with the computer very soon, but right now I am working with instruments and still finding an exciting area of things that can be done with traditional instruments. Some of these are related to my experiences with computer music, some are not.

Could you describe the piece you are working on now?

Yes, right now I am working on a piece for strings and percussion in which I am attempting to simulate speech. This obviously involved the same kind of acoustical thinking which one might use in electronic or computer music, but it fascinates me to do this with traditional instruments. The piece will be called THREE INDIGENOUS SONGS for Chamber Orchestra, and will involve "settings" of a WHITMAN poem, an Amerindian text, and an early Afro-American Blues song. That is what I am working on right now. I don't have any specific plans after that.

Could you give me some more information about the music scene on the West Coast....tendencies, clusters of interest and so on?

Well, it's very extensive and variable. One would have to include ROBERT ASHLEY and CHARLES AMIRKANIAN in the San Francisco Bay region, LOU HARRISON, GORDON MUMMA and myself here in the Santa Cruz area, DAN LENTZ in Santa Barbara, HAROLD BUDD in Los Angeles, BARNEY CHILDS at Red-lands, DANE RUDHYAR in Escondido, PAULINE OLIVEROS, ROGER REYNOLDS, KEN GABURO, ROBERT ERICKSON, and of course, until his death a few years ago, HARRY PARTCH..... all in the San Diego area.

And then quite a number of our former students at Cal Arts have been doing some very interesting work..... though many of them are no longer in California..... like CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE, INGRAM MARSHALL, DAVID MAHLER, JOHN ADAMS, MICHAEL BYRON, PETER GARLAND and many more. The musical concerns range all the way from theater and live electronics (ASHLEY, MUMMA, LENTZ, REYNOLDS) to the use of new (or very old) instruments and/or tuning systems (PARTCH, HARRISON, myself), new vocal techniques and "text sound" (GABURO, MARSHALL, PALESTINE), "sonic meditation" (OLIVEROS), and "gradual process" (BYRON), to a kind of neo-primitivism arising out of a search for deeper roots in pre-Columbian cultures (GARLAND).

I see.

These are some of the more interesting things that are happening now.

Studying the AZTECS and HOPIS..... Who is very

concerned with this at the present time.?

I am thinking of PETER GARLAND, though he is no longer in California.

Where is he now?

Right now he is in Guatemala.

Oh, ha. Did you personally know HARRY PARTCH?

Yes. I worked with him for a while when I was at the University of Illinois in 1959-61.

Is there someone who is preserving his instruments?

Yes, a former student of his, who remained with him as an assistant. His name is DANLEE MITCHELL, and he is still in San Diego.

So there is hope that his music will be performed in the future?

Yes, it's already happening, in fact.

It's really a pity that only a few in Europe know about PARTCH, HARRISON, NANCARROW, etc..... Like RICHARD TEITELBAUM. I met him in Toronto, and he told me that you don't push your career and that you should definitely go to Europe and tell all these people about the music of these marvelous composers of the generation of PARTCH. Did you think about this?

I think I would like that, but I always seem to have too much music to write. If the opportunity arises, however, I'm sure I would enjoy doing it!

Walter - This is a page of manuscript for an early draft
of a piece I'm working on now - a "simulation"

for chamber orchestra of Walt Whitman's poem, Kosmos,

which will be one movement in a set of pieces called

Three Indigenous Songs for Strings and Percussion.

I thought it might be of use to you.

Jim Tenney

Kosmos (3)

2 2

1/4

Handwritten musical score for the piece "Kosmos (3)". The score is written on ten staves:

- Flas I (soli)**: Flute I, marked "soli".
- Flas II**: Flute II.
- Flas 2**: Flute 2.
- Flas**: Flute.
- Vcl**: Violin.
- Cb**: Contrabass.
- Trent**: Tenor saxophone.
- timp**: Timpani.

The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and articulation marks. The Tenor saxophone part includes lyrics: "Sex-u-al-i-ty of the earth, and the great clar-i-ty of the earth, and the". Below the lyrics are phonetic transcriptions: "E U ae I Y A Y 3", "ae A 3 E Y", "E 3 I Y A Y 3", and "ae Y".

Handwritten annotations include:

- "change perc notation delete timp" written near the timpani staff.
- "of ksh" and "change sh control instead of notation" written near the bottom of the page.
- A circled "3" in the Flute 2 staff.
- A circled "3" in the Flute II staff.
- A circled "3" in the Flute I staff.
- A circled "3" in the Flute staff.
- A circled "3" in the Violin staff.
- A circled "3" in the Contrabass staff.
- A circled "3" in the Tenor saxophone staff.
- A circled "3" in the Timpani staff.

At the bottom left, there is a logo for "12774 Vine St. Hollywood, Calif." and a page number "16".