

J. B. Floyd

about Conlon Nancarrow

When did you go down to Mexico?

I think it was the spring of '73.

You went with your group?

We went with the STEREOPTICON. We went on a State Department tour and played mostly in the area of Mexico City, because of the equipment. It just wasn't feasible to go into the other areas of Mexico.

Ya, so actually how did you get in contact with CONLON NANCARROW ?

The cultural attache at the embassy, JOHN ALBRIGHT, was a good friend of NANCARROW, and he arranged for us to meet him, to visit him at his home for an evening. And I guess that that's the only way that anyone ever hears his music other than a recording, because he never gives concerts. He was telling us during the evening that he was finally persuaded at one time to give a concert in Mexico City. And he had his two instruments moved down to a hall, to the BELLAS ARTES, the big hall there. And he had a program, and very few people attended. It seemed like it was such a disappointment that he just.... he'd rather not. He'd rather make his music and enjoy it there himself, just....

living as a composer. Actually, there are too few people, who know him.

That's right. I think it was ah GORDON MUMMA and ah JOHN CAGE who were the people who discovered him in Mexico, and were so fascinated by his music that they arranged to make this recording. So, I think this is a result of his life, in the experience he's had dealing with people in relation to his music. He's become very guarded about his music. He really looks you over and decides whether or not you're really interested enough to go to his studio and listen to his tapes. He's very protective and doesn't want to spend the evening boring people that might not be interested in what he's doing.

And you told me that even his wife is not allowed to go into the studio?

That's right, yeah. In fact, DON ALBRIGHT'S wife, DON ALBRIGHT, the cultural attache who has been there several times, many times probably, taking various guests to the house, his wife wasn't allowed to go into the house to listen, because CONLON felt that she really didn't appreciate his music that much, that it might be that she was just being nice. And he didn't want to give her that opportunity.

Why is he living in Mexico City actually? He's American.

Yeah, I'm not sure. I don't really know the background that well.

HORAZAK: He was in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the socialist Republicans. And ah he says now that he's free to travel to any country in the world, except the United States.

What?

I think they know where he is, but they, I mean the United States, they just won't let him in. As a matter of fact, he was telling of troubles getting paper. I guess there's a paper that he needs that's from the United States. I don't know if it has to do with his status with the

United States or what, but they won't ship. They tried to smuggle it in. They tried to get people to mail him paper. He said he got just a few rolls a year.

It's very ironic that he isn't allowed in this country, but one of his closest friends is a member of the embassy, the U.S. embassy.

So, ah could you describe his environment? He has a player piano there?

He has two, two uprights that are specially prepared. He has treated the hammers. One he has made very metallic. I think he just pressed the hammers, ironed them very hard. The other has leather covered hammers, and it's a much different timbred instrument. But he's had those, and they're in fantastic adjustment, because the rolls are feigndishly technical. You know, they're like sixteen pianos playing all at once. And they really respond. The action for an upright piano is amazing.

Does he punch the rolls himself?

He has a machine. It's very archaic.

HORAZAK: It punches one hole at a time!

Yeah, one hole.

He has to move a pointer along some lines. He has to move a pointer towards which of the eighty-eight keys he wants to play. And then he pulls a lever, and it punches a hole, one hole.

A lot of work for one piece there.

Well, one of the most fascinating things about his work is it's so infinitely variable in the rhythms, in the durations.

There's not any limits to ten fingers.

Or to multiples of rhythms. I mean he can do endless variations. So no-one could possibly play his music. It might have sixteen different meters that are fluctuating, varying in a way that no-one would ever be able to perform. And when you hear that, it's just amazing.

Or the SOUND when you just go up and down hitting every single note.

It's like sixteen ART TATUMS going wild. He has one piece that's an "X", that starts at two different tempos. It comes together to arrive in the center at one tempo, and then part, each going its own way to the end. I think his music's unique and he's unique. He's a terrific host. He lives in a very fashionable section, San Angel section of Mexico. He has a beautiful home, Spanish type home, very gracious. And then he has this separate studio. It must have two-foot thick walls, they're really thick, a huge door, and that's strictly his. You walk through a garden, and there is his studio.

Did you ask him about how he's actually composing these things? He's calling his pieces "studies" for player piano. Did you actually see him composing?

Yeah, I saw some pieces that were being composed. I think he draws it out, he draws on the paper first. Since he goes through at a constant rate, his tempo is just measured by a ruler.

As for as I know he's studying polyrhythms, and then superimposed layers of fast piano playing, and if you can't distinguish the single tone any more, thus getting new qualities of sounds out of that. What else is he studying?

Well, he's very much influenced by jazz. It seems like that's his background, part of his background. And these gestures of jazz are really evident in his music.

It's really a kind of a ragtime.

Where is he performed?

We played last spring in Los Angeles in the Monday Evening Series, which is a Twentieth Century Music series. And we played half the program. The first part of the program was a HARRY PARTCH film. And the next part was three new tapes of NANCARROW. So that he does have performances. All musicians know about him. And he doesn't go to performances. And it's not the same to listen to a tape as it is to sit there and hear his instruments. That would be fantastic, you know, if you could go to concerts of his and watch the instrument. Just to see

that activity is amazing.

Ya, the piano playing by itself.

It's a great idea.

Do you think it would be possible that he would give out tapes if I would write a real polite letter?

I don't know if he has tapes. Maybe he does. You know, he has a strange attitude about his music. He only has one copy of each of the scores, of his rolls. And he's very casual about them. We said, you know, "But don't you have these preserved?! They're just out here on the shelves." "Oh, it doesn't matter." You know, he just dismissed it as not being very important or significant. But it's really amazing. He should have copies. There must be ways to make copies of those rolls.

Yeah, we talked about that, and ah he got very cynical. Somebody actually brought up what was going to happen to the rolls after he died. And he said, "why? Do you want one?"

In 1960 Merce Cunningham choreographed a work for five dancers, titled "Crises", with decor by Robert Rauschenberg. John Cage arranged six of Conlon Nancarrow's Studies for Player Piano, in the order 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 6, as the musical accompaniment for "Crises".

"Crises remained in the Cunningham Dance Company repertoire for five years, and was revived briefly in the early 1970s. It was performed widely in the United States and on a six month world tour in 1964. This prolonged exposure, though only to a small part of Nancarrow's music, spawned a considerable, though rather arcane, legion of admirers.

In 1968 the Cunningham Dance Company, with musicians John Cage, Gordon Mumma, and David Tudor, made a Latin American performance tour. During a meeting with Nancarrow in his Mexico City studio, Cage, Mumma and Tudor, who were pioneering in live electronic music, discussed the idea of electronically modifying a group of the Studies for Player Piano in some future live performance situation. Nancarrow was receptive to the idea, and the following year it was realized in a collaborative theatre performance, featuring the dancers Viola Farber and Peter Saul, along with Cage, Mumma, and Tudor. In this special performance, presented at the Billy Rose Theatre in New York City, the musical articulation and rhythmic structure of the Nancarrow Studies retained their original form. Electronic variations were made only to the pitch and timbre characteristics of the music.

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The Studies for Player Piano found their way to the Cunningham Dance Company by the efforts of John Edmunds who, in the late 1950s, was with the Americana section of the New York Public Library. Edmunds had requested tape recordings of the then completed Studies from Nancarrow, and brought them to the attention of John Cage.

The first of Nancarrow's Studies for Player Piano was composed in 1948. During the next twenty-seven years Nancarrow composed 41 Studies, two of which, Nos. 38 and 39, are still in progress as of 1974.

Several trends are prominent in the development of the Studies for Player Piano. In the early studies the composer's rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic vocabulary is essentially intuitive, established by the circumstances of each piece. The early studies also have a strong flavor of ragtime or boogie-woogie. Some of the Studies are quite specific: Study 10 is a piano blues, and Study 12 has decidedly Spanish origins. Some of the individual Studies are particularly spectacular in their use of sonority. Study 24 is orchestral in the character of a concerto-grosso, with alternating concertante and ripieno sections. Study 25 is a slightly demonic fantasy with massive blocks of sound.

It is clear, however, that the issue of rhythm is uppermost in Nancarrow's music. It was the composer's desire to make a music of elaborate and precise rhythmic

structure which led him to abandon composition for other instruments and turn his efforts to the player piano.

A second trend, prominent in Studies 15 through 19, 24, and 31 through 41, is that of strictly organized rhythmic canons with fixed proportions. Each voice of a canon has its own tempo, and these tempos have fixed but complex relationships. Study 15, for example, is composed with the tempo relationship of 3 to 4. Study 19 is composed with simultaneous voice tempos of 12 to 15 to 20. Study 33 is extremely complicated, one tempo being related to another by the proportion of 2 to the square root of 2. Two separate voices moving at this proportion approach coincidence but never exactly meet.

A third prominent trend is rhythmic acceleration and deceleration within each voice of a canon. This happens first in Study 8, in which Nancarrow strictly organizes a continually changing tempo by the means of additive acceleration. Study 21 is a tour-de-force of this technique. Subtitled "Canon X", the higher of the two voices begins at great speed and decelerates, while the lower voice begins very slowly and accelerates. The two voices meet in tempo for a brief moment at the center of the piece and continue onward to complete the "X" shape at the conclusion. Two of the Studies are subtitled with the exact percentage-of-change ratios. Study 22 is "Canon 1%, $1\frac{1}{2}\%$, $2\frac{1}{4}\%$ ", and Study 27 is 5%, 6%, 8%, 11%.

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The two most recent studies are for two player pianos operating simultaneously. Furthermore, the rhythmic relationships of these studies are very complex. Study No. 40 is in two parts, the basis of which is the relationship of "e" to pi. Study No. 41 is in three parts. 41a is a canon on the reciprocal of $\sqrt[3]{\pi}$ to $\frac{3}{\sqrt{13/16}}$, 41b is the reciprocal of $\sqrt{\pi}$ to $\sqrt[4]{3}$, and 41c is 41a and 41b played simultaneously.

Nancarrow achieves the precise rhythmic control of his Studies for Player Piano by punching the player piano rolls directly. All of the studies were composed with a punching machine which the composer had specially built in 1947. This machine was used for Studies 1 through 21. Nancarrow then made modifications in its design to facilitate the more elaborate requirements of the Studies which followed.

Within specific limits the loudness of a player piano can be controlled by holes punched on the roll which change the striking force of groups of hammers. For example, the treble notes can be loud while the bass notes are quiet. These inherent limitations have been overcome by Nancarrow's unusual doubling of notes and radical use of register to achieve the effect of subtle changes of loudness.

The composer owns two player pianos, both with Ampico mechanisms, which he has modified to achieve the particular timbres which he likes for his Studies. The hammers of one are made of metal, and of the other are a combination of

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metal and leather. The Studies are intended to be performed only on one or the other of these special pianos. A now out-of-print recording, Columbia MS 7222, which included a selection of 12 Studies up to No. 33, was made under the composer's supervision on these pianos in his own studio in Mexico City. The composers James Tenney, Gordon Mumma, and Roger Reynolds are now collaborating on a book-length study of Nancarrow's entire player-piano music.

Conlon Nancarrow was born in Texarkana, Arkansas, in 1912, and subsequently lived in Cincinnati and Boston. Following a visit to Spain in the late 1930s he became a resident of Mexico City, and is now a Mexican citizen.

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