

Charlemagne
Palestine

Have some juice. We'll start with juice.
This tape starts with juice. (laughing)
It's the most healthy way for a tape to start.

Okay.

The healthy sound of juice (orange juice
pouring). Good! Okay. (box rattling) Sugar.

Where did you play in Germany?

Just this time I did concerts in Cologne at a
gallery. Then I did a concert at the Paris
Biennale, that was put up together very quickly.

Are that Balinese cigarettes?

Javanese cigarettes. You want one?

You know I have the same ones here. Do you buy
them here in New York? That's amazing.

Oh sure, I buy them by the case. They're very
similar. Did you get those in Bali? There are
only two people in the world who import them.
One is in California, and the other is here. And
I go to the one here. They're expensive. I mean,
they're eighty cents a pack, where in Bali
they're twelve cents a pack, or less, eight
cents a pack.

You were in Bali?

Oh yeah, a long time ago. I did a recording
venture with a guy named BOB BROWN, who's the
person who put together the Nonesuch Series of
Balinese records. And I was with him and the
World Music Society in 1971. We were in Java and
Bali the summer of '71.

Are you actually from California?

No, I'm actually from New York originally.

Ah, but then you went to California, to Cal
Arts.

To teach, to teach right. And then I taught
there for two years, and then I came back. And
it was while I was teaching there that I went to
Bali. (stirring juice) Which musicians have
you....

I spoke to TENNEY, because you see, I couldn't
go there. It was a phone conversation, and you
know, it's not as easy if you don't know the
people. So my questions are more formal. So we
really couldn't get so entangled.

But it's all about music then.

Ya. But could you describe TENNEY as a
person?

JIM has a great fantasy of wanting to be like
one of the old hermetic illusive American
composers in the tradition of kind of ah RUGGLES
or HARRY PARTCH or someone who's never quite
attainable, who lives out in the country
somewhere. He likes to you know play with plants
and stuff like that, and be always kind of like
an intangible. And I think that's when he's most
happy.

And his work to me usually takes elements that
have already been.... I mean to me he's a great
eclectic, a great academic eclectic, in that he
takes elements that are in the air. And then he
puts them down in a way that's very clear and
very direct as almost etudes. So that he works

with the past. He's taking many of the
directions that American music or European music
or new music has gone. And then he took the
essence of them and built a work that was
essentially like an etude of those elements.

Those were the pieces of his that I've heard,
with exceptions. Some of them I'd say are a pure
TENNEY. But that's a more vague personality. I
think he's like ah a great academician in a
sense, but you know not in a social sense, in
the REAL sense. I mean someone who can really
clearly understand and describe a phenomenon,
who can then you know show it and deal with it
in the best sense of the tradition. I mean, not
what we think of the old stuffy.

So he's, now important on the West Coast and
keeping people together.

Oh, I think so. You know, I think he's
definitely important. I think, yeah, I think
that definitely. And I think the problem is that
he's always wanted to be....

I mean he used to be a conductor of Tone Roads,
the series here of contemporary music, of
contemporary performances back in the sixties.
He did a lot of the first performances here of
certain IVES and lots of American composers
whose works weren't well played at that time.

He did a lot of digging around.

He's almost like a MENDELSSOHN, you know what I
mean? Like MENDELSSOHN was never really a heavy
composer in relation to the others. Yet now his
works are very good. At the same time he was
like always out there digging up like what had
been lost, and having ear sort of to the
heartbeat of the past, you know? And I think
that JIM is kind of like that in a way.

Ya. Another person you know is PETER GARLAND.
And I wanted to get in contact with him too.
But JIM said that he's in Guatemala to do some
digging, kind of looking for pre-Columbian
culture.

As a matter of fact, I feel that SOUNDINGS,
which was the magazine he came out with,
SOUNDINGS was an extension in a way of JIM's
approach. And then his STUDENT brought it out
into physicality. Do you know what I mean? And
the original impetus for SOUNDINGS was really
JIM's philosophy. I mean JIM was really into
those people like PARTCH and RUGGLES and VARESE
and whatever. (Telephone ringing and ringing
and ringing and ringing)

And then it was PETER GARLAND, who was at that
time still kind of rambling, he didn't know what
he wanted to do. He saw what those elements
were, and he put it into a magazine. So it
helped him to see clear.

So you were teaching there?

Everyone else was teaching theory and things
like that. And what I was teaching was a sort of
an approach to listening and an approach to
time. And so my classes didn't have anything to
do with the other stuff. Like I did a class
called "timbral perception". And that class
basically was about dealing with a rich
sonority, which I played every week, every
class, in a completely black room for the whole
year. And then every so often I would play music
from other parts of the world. And I never said
anything. And all the musics I played all had to

do with certain timelessness. And since you could hardly see, you weren't aware of physicality. You were only aware of sound as an essence in space.

And so I really felt like when I went out to California that there was all this stuff and all this knowledge. I mean Jim was a fantastic teacher. What kind of chord of the seventh permutation of the ninth harmonic of the you know. I mean all those guys know how to do that a million times better than me. But all their classes still felt like, ah German Meister classes. "Und now, zhen shere's zhe zhree four chord, and zhen zhere's zhe four seven of zhe zhr-e of zhe six !" You know, you know what I mean. That's my picture anyway of the German Meister Klasse. But I used to see the guy with the stick standing there, "AND NOW YOU WILL APPLY ONCE AGAIN THE C- MINOR TRIAD IN ALL ITS PERMUTATIONS !" And you know what I mean. But it came from Europe.

Yes, it's still living around here too, in some of these universities.

Oh yeah, no. But it CAME from Europe. Like in Julliard it's terrible. I went to Julliard. But it was exactly coming from Europe. It's a European concept. Well, I would have had.... I mean in my class I didn't even SPEAK. Like you just came in. It was a little bit like a bordelle, you know what I mean. And you heard these sounds, you know. And it was like, so well since you'd have to go out and say, "Well, what was that all about?" And all you had done was sensually deal. I mean it was all about sensuality. And so what you dealt with for eight months was being bombarded with in a sense aural.... There's an odd conjure when they talk about oral intercourse. I mean you make.... Well it was instead of o-r-a-l, it was a-u-r-a-l intercourse. So that was ONE class.

And that was a unique class.

And then the other one I gave was called "Music of the Sublime", which was similar in that it was again in a completely black room. And all you could use was your voice. And I was in a corner of this big huge place which was very resonant, like a temple. And I was sitting in a corner making this kind of a "AHHHGH", a sort of searching inside for my demons in a way. And what the students did, the first day I went to class I just said that everytime you come in here from now on, I will be in this corner. And you're to search out with your body and your voice any way you want to try to articulate deep inside what seems most at the root of your sentiments and externalize them. And I'll be there all the time in that corner. I was sort of like the access. And then everyone else for eight months, I never spoke with them, I never spoke with them after class. I told them I would never speak with them for eight months. And then AFTERWARDS we would speak. And so for eight months we did the course. And every time we were in this resonant room, and they lived out these rituals of communication and stuff. So no one knew each other. Everything was dark. And so you began to know people only through their sound. So it became almost like an animal has a certain cry that you begin to know. So certain people had a certain timbre of their voice or certain kinds of sounds they tend to go back to. And you tend to tell, "Oh, that's THAT person." You didn't know who that was, because we hadn't met than formally yet. I didn't know

until many times later. I began to try in my mind a year later. I began to figure out, although I never asked, ah what I had gotten from the shading of their personality, what kind of person that was. Do you know what I mean?

I see.

So that's what my classes were all about. They were all about these sort of illusive properties. And so where the whole school was dealing with consciousness, I was dealing with unconsciousness.

So how did your practice of playing piano connect with your unconicousness?

In California I had found a big Boesendoerfer. And it was in a resonant room. The first rituals that I began to undo would be to take two sets of notes. With this piano you can hear all the overtones. So I started just playing like three notes of something:

(Plays F - G - B-flat sequence faster and faster.)

And I'd let my hands just sort of almost like sleepwalk, just sort of get into like a relaxation playing in a dark room. (The playing continues.) And I would do this for hours, and then I would get into the overtones. (Charlemagne keeps on playing for another minute.)

And the pieces that came out of that time were all much more impressionistic in a way, because even the energy of California I mean was very timeless. So the energy between New York and California, there's a difference. I used to do pieces there like five or six hours, and now the pieces I do here, like I had a piano piece there which went five and a half hours. And now my piano pieces are never more than an hour. And it's all about certain energy. There was that sort of groping, searching out, kind of mild searching out.

What kind of technique is involved to make these overtone relationship clear?

Well, on the piano I have a strumming technique, which I've been doing for the last year and a half. It becomes more and more dense. Actually, my music is becoming more dissonant. It was very dissonant around 1968 and 1969. In 1970 it became into pure sonorities, like fifths and fourths and sevenths, but minor sevenths, not major sevenths. It was all about rounded pure sonorities. Then, and now again it's getting into more dissonance. So that I do this strumming technique like:

(Strumming, starting with F - F# - G# - A. And the overtones become very, very clear.)

That's basic sets of properties. NOW the pieces are becoming a lot more about things like that. That's the basic strumming technique, which then goes down into the lower reaches of the piano and digs up the same harmonics which you heard at first. I mean I deal with it on one level fantastically precisely, almost like a chemist. And then in performance I let the elements wheel themselves by the acoustics of the place or something like that. So behind it is an incredible string of formal precision, of how the elements relate to each other. And then I sort of allow those to be reinflated like a balloon at the certain performance. And NOW

they're becoming more like this kind of:
(strumming, again.)

And then I press down and do all kinds of things. And then there's another kind of strumming technique that I have that then gets faster and faster

(Strumming, the double speed gradually taking over the normal speed.)

But in the context of an instrument like this it brings out, it reinforces like certain tones. And then by pulling back it leaves dimming relief. So, by the time I've set a whole piece up there are maybe six or seven levels of sonority going on just through the piano.

So people always think I'm using electronics. Second of all they think they hear voices and instruments. And what I'm doing is setting simultaneously five or six levels of sound perspectives. There's like the furthest part, which is just a "hum" in a sense.
(demonstrating with the use of exaggerated gestures)

And then there's another part that comes out, it's almost like if you could run fast enough, you could give the illusion by going faster than the eye could pick it up that there was a person here, there, there, there, you know. If you could bounce fast enough, the person would just keep seeing these images and those places. And it would give the illusion that there were six people when in reality there was one. And that's what I do in sonority now.

And so the process of your pieces one like blinding of colours.

Chemistry. I used to call it alchemy. I mean, in California I came up with the feeling that I was like an alchemist, and I was searching for the golden sound. And like every year it becomes another way of doing it, like with a piano. I have these electronic sonorities. I have pieces with my voice. I have pieces for different instruments.

But the final, the thing that holds them all together in a sense, besides that I often use the same sonorities over and over again from year to year, is that I'm searching for sort of this GOLDEN SONORITY. And since the alchemists were very subjective finally, and they used the same elements again and again to try to get this gold. And of course they almost never ever did get gold.

They used it as a technique of self-experience.

Self-exploration, and articulating. Finally, what the alchemist did do, what we see of all their elaborate diagrams, was to finally articulate in a way the course of human exploration, a process which then articulates the internal and almost spiritual like evolution of the species, which is like me as a species.

Ya. So your work is like an infinite work which you began fifteen years ago. Do you remember the original motivation you had for this music?

It was that I had been taught to think that sound and music was about scores and notes. And it was like homework, you know, like being good at mathematics and being good at all those things. And then there was a part of me that

even as a kid just liked to be in a place and make something that really felt right, you know. And that was in conflict for a long time. Somehow one to me was just fooling around. I just sit and relax and try to get a certain thing. And then there was doing a real work, which was analyzing this score and that score and doing all that stuff, being able to you know, "Ba bee, bo bap a boo boo boo, bo ba jum jala". You know, 1-7-3-4-2 permutation 1 1/2-7 1/2-4 1/2-7-6-3-7-9-6. You know.

And then there was this other part of me that just liked to hear. And once with one of my first girl friends.... and this is almost fifteen years ago.... Like we were living in a little, little space. And there was only room for an upright piano from my childhood there. And then there was a bed. And then there was a little drawing board, because she used to draw. And it was the first woman I had really you know had that spark about. And so she too. And so all that we seemed to do all day was make love, you know. It was such ah, you know, I had made love before, but never with such constancy, you know, constant desire.

And then afterwards, it'd be dark. I'd sort of like in that kind of feeling you feel after you've spent, you know, I'd go over to the piano. And I'd sort of sit at the bench with sort of like that relaxed feeling. And I'd put my hands on the piano, and I'd put the pedal down. And I'd try to just sort of articulate the feeling that was in the room. And so I tried to aurally just sort of fill the room with sound what seemed was the residue of what was left. And I didn't know what I was doing. I just did it because it felt good. And she you know would draw in the dark. She had a pad nearby. And she would just sort of by lying down like this. And she'd have her hand, and she'd just sort of let it you know. I mean I could say that the first time it actually became an environment was there.

(laughing)

So the original impetus was being able to articulate a certain kind of space like that, a sensual space, to articulate as exactly as possible the multiplicity of sensual space. Something like that.

Where does this articulation of sensual space lead you in your next pieces ?

Now in my fantasy I'm actually going to be doing bigger and bigger orchestra pieces and things like that. But what I want to do now is reevaluate, almost like RIMSKY KORSAKOFF in a sense reevaluated the orchestra. And STRAVINSKY. I want to reevaluate the colours of the orchestra from the same approach. I want to discover it in its internal properties.

And I want to build a piece which would then become even perhaps a book, which would be a timbral study for orchestra, which will in a way create sonorities, build up sonorities, which are almost like in magic, when the hand is quicker than the eye.

But did you think about technique to get the harmonical layout of the sounds?

I've already been working on it sort of slowly for the last three or four years.... I feel like I'm in no rush.

And I don't see the reason like I saw in the sixties like CAGE and STOCKHAUSEN and everything, like trying to so quickly expand the language, even if the sounds themselves weren't that good.

And do you think that besides finding new good sounds you'll find new good feelings with this piece?

I don't know yet how I'm gonna do it. But I know that what I'm gonna try to bring to music now is a looking inside. Because to me it's for so long now just been looking outside. And that's what I want to bring to every.... So every concert I do is always more than just a piece. It means that everybody who's in it is going through some kind of reevaluation in some sense. Do you understand what I mean?