Tom Johnson

The Voice of New Music

New York City 1972 - 1982

A collection of articles
originally published in The Village Voice

[New digitql edition based in the 1989 edition by Het Apollohuis]

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A collection of articles originally published in the Village Voice

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for all of those whose ideas and energies became the voice of new music,

and for all that I learned from them

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Preface

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The ten years, from 1972-1982, during which Tom Johnson closely followed the developments in the new music in New York and reported his experiences in the Village Voice, constitute the most innovative and experimental period of recent musical history. A considerable number of his articles and reviews has been brought together in this collection. Together they provide a lively impression of the genesis and the exciting adventure of the new music, of the diversity of utterances that were part of it from the very start, and of the circumstances and opinions which prompted it. Johnson recorded the emergence of a generation of composers and musicians which has set out to probe once more all conventions of the Western musical tradition and to remove the barriers between different cultures and various artistic disciplines. That process is still in full swing. Therefore it is of interest today to read how that process was triggered.

Tom Johnson has been the first champion of this new movement in music. His awareness of the importance of new developments incited him to writing essays that convey his observations quite lucidly, systematically and accurately. His talent for rendering musical experiences directly and intelligibly into language has contributed substantially to the recognition of new music. As artist and composer he participated in the new movement and so he described the development from the angle of the artist. Thus the reader becomes a sharer in the artistic process.

Our book has one serious flaw. One important and prolific composer of the evolution of New York minimalism is completely missing: Tom Johnson himself. A number of his pieces have probably been performed as much as any composition mentioned in this book, and some of them go back to the early seventies.

Tom now lives in Paris and continues writing songs, operas and other compositions. He expresses his perceptions and experiences in his own work as clearly, systematically and meticulously as in his reviews. His music corresponds oddly with the ideas of Boethius, a music theorist from the early middle ages (470-525) who opined that ‘music is number made audible,’ and that ‘it is not just music that is beautiful because of its dependence on number, but everything.’ Tom Johnson’s fascination with counting as a compositional means is brought out in many different ways in his music.

The selection of the articles included in this volume and the final editing have been carried out in close consultation with the writer. I thank Tom Johnson for the attention and time he has invested in this publication and for our amicable collaboration. Next, I would like to thank all of the collaborators, and especially Marja Stienstra who of processed the text with great dedication, Peter de Rooden and Lucas van Beeck for the careful proofreading, and Ton Homburg for the design. Finally, I am grateful towards Arnold Dreyblatt, who suggested the idea of this publication to me. I am convinced that this book will find its way to many readers.

Paul Panhuysen (Eindhoven, July 2 1989)

Introduction

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I was very pleased when Paul Panhuysen suggested that we put together a collection of my Village Voice reviews. I had known Paul for several years, had performed at Het Apollohuis, was familiar with their wonderful book on new instruments, Echo: The Images of Sound, and I was sure that they would do a good job with The Voice of New Music. I especially liked the idea of doing such a collection with a Dutch publisher, so that it would circulate more in Europe, where the Village Voice is generally unavailable, and where few people have ever read my criticism. It also seemed to be a good time. By now, these articles are mostly 10 or 15 years old. That is long enough to give us a little historical perspective on the evolution of a musical idiom which has since become universally acclaimed, but not so long that the issues, and the people, are dead.

Perhaps the most important thing for me about this book, however, is that it will give readers a more complete view of the origins of American minimal music than has been available so far. I find it frustrating, especially in Europe, that so many otherwise well informed people still identify this school or movement as the work of the two or three composers they know best, and think that the music always follows the basic procedures they have heard most often.

The idea of minimalism is much larger than most people realize. It includes, by definition, any music that works with limited or minimal materials: pieces that use only a few notes, pieces that use only a few words of text, or pieces written for very limited instruments, such as antique cymbals, bicycle wheels, or whisky glasses. It includes pieces that sustain one basic electronic rumble for a long time. It includes pieces made exclusively from recordings of rivers and streams. It includes pieces that move in endless circles. It includes pieces that set up an unmoving wall of saxophone sound. It includes pieces that take a very long time to move gradually from one kind of music to another kind. It includes pieces that permit all possible pitches, as long as they fall between C and D. It includes pieces that slow the tempo down to two or three notes per minute.

There are a lot of ideas in this little list, and they came from a lot of different individuals. But essentially they didn't come from individuals at all, but from a very large and rather nebulous group. Important artistic movements are not produced by individuals. They are produced when a number of talented people happen to be evolving in the same place at the same time. If the situation is right, their ideas cross fertilize, hybrids are formed, these produce other hybrids, the procreation of ideas accelerates, and gradually real breakthroughs become possible. One cannot really appreciate the phenomenon of Elizabethan poetry, for example, or cubist painting, or Bauhaus design, without considering the general context of the discoveries, and the music we are talking about here presents a similar situation.

Of course, some pieces are more minimal than others, and some of the music described in the book does not restrict its material much at all. Lukas Foss's 'Map' or Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians or a Musica Elettronica Viva improvisation session are all examples. It would also be quite wrong to think of John Cage or Morton Feldman as real minimalists - particularly Cage, one of whose greatest desires was to make music that would include every sound conceivable, without any restrictions at all. Yet all of these people were active around the SoHo music scene, and the ideas of Cage and Feldman are closely allied to those of the following generation in many non-minimal ways, and it

would be unthinkable to do a book about the evolution of minimal music without including such people. Besides, the book is not exclusively about minimalism. Our real subject is new music around New York City in 1972 to 1982, like we already told you on the cover.

It is clear in these articles that my own greatest interest, especially in the early '70s, was in the most extreme forms of minimalist experiments. I wrote with particular respect for the endless drones of La Monte Young, even when I had gone to sleep listening to them, and I was very impressed by some extreme minimalist exercises, which in retrospect, were rather naive. I am referring to occasions when someone would play the same gong for an hour, or repeat a few verbal phrases for a long time, or ask us to accept a completely static oscillator as a composition.

The extreme statements didn't continue very long, however, and in my last article of 1974, I am already lamenting the decline of avant-gardism and showing how many individual composers were abandoning their most extreme ideas, and my writing seems to imply that anyone who changed was a traitor to aesthetic purism.

But of course, the change was inevitable. Extreme minimalism just could not continue year after year. The audience lacked the patience to listen to no changes, however novel the presentations might be, and eventually even the composers got bored. No one does such things anymore, and today everyone agrees, once again, that the search for total stasis, for the beauty of absolute zero, was a search for a mirage. But what an exciting mirage, and how essential it was for us!

The minimalist search, the desire to restrict musical materials, was essential to almost all the composers in this book. Mostly born in the '30s and '40s, these composers were all basically reacting to the fast-changing, super-complex structures of their post-Webern teachers. And if they were sometimes overreacting, they in any case ended up in a rich new field of slow-changing, super-simple structures - minimalism.

Of course, the difficult part in preparing any anthology is selecting what to put in and what to leave out. In the years 1972 to 1979 I wrote over 40 articles a year in the Voice, and in 1980, '81 and '82 there were 20 to 30 a year. The whole pile would have come to perhaps 2000 pages, and would have been so scattered in its content as to be completely unreadable. To begin with, Paul and I simply eliminated all the articles dealing with old music, European music, folk music, non-Western music, and everything else not pertaining directly to the subject. Then, of course, there was a crisis of conscience and a weakness of will power, and we put some of these things back in, despite all of our rules. And then it seemed obvious that the bird and the pinball machine were at least as important as the people, so we made these and other exceptions. Gradually we eliminated other articles that seemed repetitive or stupid or badly written, and tried to make sure that nothing essential was left out, and generally tried to see to it that we were presenting a more or less balanced view.

As to editing within the articles, there were very few changes. Sometimes there were general introductory paragraphs, which I thought were very perceptive when I wrote them, but which seem so obvious now that we eliminated them. Sometimes we selected one half of a column and not the other, and naturally, we also tried to correct any errors we found. Titles were often changed when they seemed too newspaper-like, and when it seemed adviseable, I also inserted notes of explanation, all written in 1989. But nothing was rewritten, and the majority of the articles appear here exactly as they did in the Voice.

The details of my career at the Voice, acknowledgements of the people I worked with there, my decision in the late '70s to write more about non-Western music and less about minimalism, my gradual disillusion with New York, my shift to a life in Europe, and the gradual termination of my career as a music critic, are all summarized in the 1983 'Farewell Article' at the end of the book, so all that remains here is to express my appreciation to Paul and Helene Panhuysen and their super typesetter Marja Stienstra. It is rare for critics to see their articles collected in a book, and I am particularly pleased that this book is a rather large one. But as I said, the subject is also very large - in a minimal sort of way.

Tom Johnson
Paris, June 1989

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to the digital version

With this digital file, I am officially donating all these articles to the public domain. I have the right to do this, because the *Village Voice,* ever since its beginnings in the 1950s, has been truly a writer's newspaper, giving 100% of the control and royalties of its articles to the people who wrote them. The *Voice* was, and perhaps still is, the only large commercial newspaper anywhere where this is the case, and of course, this is one of the things that has made this weekly newspaper a truly important "voice" in our world.

Actually, I rarely made any money when someone reprinted these articles. When people ran something without asking my permission, I sometimes got angry and sent them a bill, and once in a while I accepted reprint fees just because I knew everyone else was being paid., but journalism was never my real profession. Even when I was young, and depended on writing music criticism to pay the rent, I was primarily a composer, and I spent the majority of my time writing, publishing, and presenting my own compositions. Then, in the early '80s, when my own compositions were being played with enough regularity that I could make a living just from that, I stopped journalism altogether.

In order to make this gift to the public domain, I am indebted to the generosity of several others, who are also giving up their rights. Already in 1989 Paul Panhuysen had the insight to realize that this anthology could be an important first source for the history of new music. He helped me select the best material, obtained grants to issue it in book form as a break-even Appolohuis edition, and he has continued to support our efforts to make the book available in digital form. Matt Rogolsky spent a great amount of time rescuing the book from outdated Atari diskettes and putting it into a current format, just because he found the project worthwhile. Javier Ruiz made many additional improvements in the book's appearance, without ever asking to be paid. And finally, Phill Niblock perhaps deserves the most credit, for it was he who brought us all together and fathered the project from a distance all along.

We are not asking you to pay money to buy this digital version of the book, but we hope that you will continue the spirit of generosity. If you quote or republish something you find here, please mention where the text came from, and if you pass the file, or parts of it, along to others, make it clear that the material is strictly freeware and public domain.

Tom Johnson, Paris, February 2002

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December 9, 1971

Steve Reich's 'Drumming'

It's not very often that a long complex piece of new music receives a standing ovation. What was it about Steve Reich's 'Drumming' that brought the audience to its feet at the Museum of Modern Art on December 3? The simple fact that 13 musicians had performed intricate rhythms with amazing precision for an hour and half no doubt had a lot to do with it. Or perhaps it was because the simple white-note scales were refreshing to ears grown weary of dissonance. Or perhaps it was the joyous blend of marimbas, glockenspiels, drums, and voices that turned everyone on. Or was it the pleasure of seeing African and European elements so thoroughly fused - almost as if we really did live in one world. Or perhaps it was because the music had spoken directly to the senses, with the sound itself never sacrificed for the more intellectual rhythmic side of the piece.

For me, the most gratifying thing about 'Drumming' is that it achieves a human quality which I sometimes find lacking in Reich's work. Although there was a lot of amplification going on, the volume was never uncomfortable, and the effect was not as dependent on electronics as much as Reich's music is. Like most of his work, the music moves ahead very gradually, one subtle little shift at a time, but the shifts are less predictable and more interesting than in his tape pieces, where machines are often in control.

Because Reich always limits his materials so severely, unity is never a problem, and there is enough difference between the four sections of the piece so that it is never quite boring either. The first section introduces the rhythmic ideas with a set of small tuned drums and male voices. The second combines marimbas and three female singers in a sound which, for me at least, was thoroughly intoxicating. The third section, which seems shorter, combines glockenspiels, whistling, and piccolos in a rather shrill sound, and the final section brings everything together in an unpretentious climax.

Having said all that, I have the feeling I should come down to earth and find something to pick at. After all, there must surely be flaws in 'Drumming.' But I'm still feeling very good about the piece as a whole, and I can't get into the mood to look for them. If they were very serious, they would surely have occurred to me long before this.

Note:

'Drumming' marks the real beginning of Steve Reich's composing career, and this article marks the real beginning at my tenure at the Village Voice, and this was probably the first occasion that any of the minimalist composers were taken seriously by any of the New York press. Many things were beginning, and it is appropriate that these paragraphs should now be the beginning of a book as well.

February 3, 1972

The First Meredith Monk Review

An electric organ stood in the corner of WBAI's studio on January 23. Next to it was the only source of light in the room, an electric hurricane lamp which emitted a harsh glow over the crowd. Presently, Meredith Monk entered and took her place at the organ, suggestive shadows thrown on her face by the curious lamp. As she began to play, both the organ and the music seemed surprisingly conventional, considering her reputation for doing extremely unconventional things. It would have sounded almost like some old Protestant hymns, except that it occasionally developed rhythmic spasms and often fell into repeated patterns.

Then she began singing and the mood changed drastically: loud nasal sounds, disarming sounds, squealing sounds, wordless whines, and just plain caterwauling - an impression of a woman gone mad perhaps. It didn't seem very disciplined or musical, but I wasn't too surprised since she is basically a choreographer and probably doesn't have much musical training. But then I started to notice that she was repeating some of those screaming phrases, and hitting exactly the same pitches every time. Before long my suspicions that she might be faking musically had to be completely abandoned, as it became clear that she was very much in control of her personal vocal language. And it is quite a versatile language too.

She uses at least three or four completely distinct types of vocal sound, several newly discovered consonants, new kinds of glottal stops, purposely-out-of-tune effects which I have never heard before, and a variety of other techniques even harder to describe. She also projects everything very well, and managed to fill the Free Music Store space quite adequately without amplification. And aside from being vocally astounding, it all seemed to mean something - something strange and plaintive, which was not at all hard to relate to after becoming acclimated to the new language.

After performing four or five short numbers in this style, the overhead lights went on and she danced a solo in silence. It was a very intricate dance with hundreds of little movements. It had a cool pedestrian quality, but incorporated many narrative and even pantomimic gestures. At times one could almost interpret them. But, as in her music, she never let you get quite that close.

It was a short program, but more than enough to convince me that I should look into 'Key,' her new album on the Increase label. Much of the album consists of the same music presented at the Free Music Store, but there are many additional sounds: footsteps, crickets, drums accompaniments, soft background voices, and three dialogues or 'Visions' which revolve around images such as 'heavy rich perfumed roses,' 'a very thick plush velvet purple sofa,' and a 'thick pink-lipped monkey.' With all these additional elements, the record becomes quite a bit more complex and theatrical than her live solo performance. But for me it is still the singing which has the strongest impact. One reason why her vocal style particularly impresses me, is because I feel it puts many musicians to shame. For some time, composers and singers, both in jazz and classical camps, have been attempting to extend the expressive range of the voice. But very few have broken as much new ground in such a personal way as Meredith Monk has. And she's supposed to be a choreographer! Well, choreographers have certainly been influenced by John Cage. Maybe now it's time for musicians to take a few lessons from a choreographer.

February 17, 1972

Improvising in the Kitchen

A plunk from the piano; then soft whooshes of wind through the trumpet; then a sustained note on the string bass. The trombone enters on an agitated note, and the pianist responds with a few sharp sounds. (The description refers to the beginning of a concert of improvisation presented at the Kitchen on February 6 by Frederic Rzewski, piano; Jeffrey Levine, bass; Garrett List, trombone; and Gordon Mumma, trumpet.)

Now the bass is more full and the trombone plays a soft gurgling 7solo. Then they both stop. The pianist hits a biting chord and everyone plays sharp sounds for a moment. Then the interest shifts to grating sounds on the bass, and the trumpet responds with a high whining accompaniment. (No one could compose music quite like this. Only in improvisations do musicians respond to each other in such a personal way.)

A trombone solo emerges, very fast, and the bass player is plucking a very energetic line. It sounds vaguely like jazz. The trumpet player even begins clicking out rhythms on his valves. Then it is over, almost as abruptly as it began, and the music reverts to soft nondescript sounds. (It is strange how energy can come and go so quickly. I have improvised a lot myself, sometimes with these same players, but have never been able to figure out how it happens.)

After a while fast things begin, and the players are scattering notes all over the place. The piano begins a loud fast repeated note which spurs everyone on, and things are very exciting for a while. Then everything calms down drastically, and all that remains is a very soft trill on the piano. It feels like intermission. A few people in the audience change seats and the musicians relax for a while, leaving the trill all by itself. (Maybe the players had planned to take sort of a break, but probably not. Things like that just happen in improvising sessions.)

Some time later the piano introduces some very loud repeated-note patterns and the brass respond with their first loud notes of the evening. The pianist fades into accompaniment, enjoying the fine brass sounds. But they are unable or unwilling to continue without his support, and revert back to soft things. (The pianist seemed to me to be calling most of the shots, but maybe not. It is so difficult to tell who really initiates something.)

The concert has been going almost an hour now, and the music is very quiet and relaxed again. The trombone suddenly introduces a rhythmic pattern, which he repeats over and over. But no one follows him and it starts to sound a little silly so he stops. (It is interesting to consider how differently the rest of the concert might have turned out if even one of the other players had followed the trombonist at that moment.)

Now the bass begins to predominate with scratchy squealing sounds. The pianist pulls out a tin whistle and the others follow him. For a while there is a very unified feeling with all those whistles, and the sound makes a very effective accompaniment for the bass solo, which is still going. The trombonist begins passing out whistles to the audience. (The musicians had obviously planned all this, but it didn't seem phony. Some members of the audience became quite involved in playing the whistles.)

By now everyone has grown tired of blowing whistles, and there is a loud blast from the trombone. The piano responds with a loud chord. Another blast on the trombone elicits another response from the piano. Soon all the musicians are playing short blasts, separated by silence or near silence. This pattern is quite effective, and with variations, remains interesting for some time. Then there is a soft glissando on the bass, a few quick notes on the piano, and everyone senses that the concert is over. (Perhaps I should say whether I liked or disliked the concert, but I can't boil it down to that. Improvisations like this are like the weather, as far as I am concerned, because no one actually controls what happens. It just happens.)

March 30, 1972

The Minimal Slow-Motion Approach: Alvin Lucier and Others

A pre-recorded voice is heard: 'At the time of the next statement, this cassette will be closer to microphone one than Alvin's cassette, and further from microphone two than Mary's cassette.' Then a different voice: 'At the time of the next statement, this cassette will be further from microphone one than Stuart's cassette, and further from microphone one than Mary's cassette.' There are four voices in all, and they continue to describe their positions in this manner, the recording quality

varying accordingly with each statement. It is very difficult to visualize the movements of the voices, and I didn't bother to try for the first five or 10 minutes. But there was nothing else to do, and gradually I became involved and began trying to visualize the movement being described. It was a totally unemotional experience, and yet a fascinating one.

This is a description of Stuart Marshall's 'A Sagging and Reading Room,' presented on the March 19 program, which opened the Spencer Concerts series. And judging from this concert, it will be an extremely adventurous and thought provoking series. Some of the seven programs will be presented at Village Presbyterian Church, and others will be at Spencer Memorial Church, near Boro Hall in Brooklyn.

The second piece on the program was Mary Lucier's 'Journal of Private Lives.' It begins with a sort of prelude, consisting of black and white slides, depicting different forms of currency, along with newspaper clippings which are reversed and almost impossible to read. The body of the work consists of three simultaneous events. On a screen at the left, one sees a hand slowly writing a message: 'In the dream I am writing you a letter. I don't know what I am saying in the letter, but you must mail me a letter arranging to meet me on such and such a day... etc.' On a screen at the right is a series of color slides showing slightly different views through a window. All are rather hazy, and a good deal of concentration is required in order to pick out the differences between them. The third event takes place on a central screen. For a while there are slides of solid colors, only slightly different in shade. Then there are two simultaneous projections on the screen, and a couple begins slow-motion ballroom dancing, casting mysterious double shadows on the screen. The whole piece is in dead silence.

The program ended with Alvin Lucier's 'The Queen of the South.' Here, four singers sit around a square metal plate, about three feet across, with sand sprinkled on it. As they sing into their microphones, the metal plate vibrates, causing the sand to shift into many different patterns. It had a very religious feeling that night, with everyone staring at the sand as it moved into one intricate design after another. Most of the singing was not very pleasant to listen to, but it doesn't matter, because the movements of the sand had some of the same magic for us that the Navajo sand paintings must have for the Navajos.

The most striking thing about the concert as a whole was its coolness. Very little actually happens in any of the pieces, and they all work on a static dynamic plane. And yet I was never bored. The minimal, slow-motion approach gives one time to become involved in images in a very personal way. And if you can flow with it, and stop wanting something dramatic to happen, it can be extremely rich. The slam-bang-fast-pace-keep-the-show-moving approach we have all grown up with is not the only way to put on a concert, by any means.

Note: This may be the first time that the new music was described critically as 'minimal.' In any case, the article clearly defines what the word means for me.

April 6, 1972

Philip Glass's New Parts

One of the most important new trends in music is the area I like to refer to as 'hypnotic music.' It has a hypnotic quality because it is highly repetitious, and employs a consistent texture, rather than building or developing in traditional ways. Usually pieces in this genre are rather long, and they can seem tedious until one learns how to tune into the many subtle variations which go on underneath the sameness of the surface. Then very new and exciting musical experiences begin to happen.

Philip Glass's work for the past couple of years has been at the very center of this new trend, and his 'Music with Changing Parts' is one of the finest pieces of this type which I have heard. It is an hour-long piece, in which electric organs ripple along in little repeated patterns, while sustained notes in viola, voice, and wind instruments fade in and out. The music uses a simple white-note scale, and most of the rhythms are also relatively simple, but the patterns shift constantly in subtle, unique ways, and enough of them are going at any one time to keep the ear more than occupied.

Glass's latest piece, 'Music in 12 Parts,' is a continuation of this style, the main difference being that it uses a different structural format. It is divided into sections, or 'parts,' which are about half an hour long, and quite different from each other in character. Parts IV, V, and VI of the new work were presented at Village Presbyterian Church on March 26, as part of the Spencer Concerts series. Two organs were used through the evening, and the four wind players worked with various combinations of flutes, saxophones, and trumpet.

One hardly notices that Part IV is actually a labyrinth of rhythmic complexity, so smooth is its flow. Usually at least three simultaneous patterns are distinguishable, each independent of the others. Without stopping, the performers made a rather abrupt transition into Part V, which is built on a simple waltz rhythm and maintains interest through melodic shifts, particularly in the saxophones and trumpet. After intermission, they played the last half of part VI, which features quick patterns in two flutes, and many metric shifts.

In some ways, 'Music in 12 Parts,' or at least these three sections of the work, is less succesful than the earlier 'Music with Changing Parts.' The transitions from part to part are somewhat jolting, and seem to go against the hypnotic character of the music, although that may have been just a performance problem. And sometimes the variation procedures do not seem as intricate or subtle in the new piece, especially during Part V.

But that is just quibbling, because both pieces are really wonderful in so many ways. The loud textures are extremely rich and sensual, and the organs and other instruments are so well blended that it is sometimes difficult to tell which instrument is playing what. The music has a sensitivity to subtle differences between modes, which can only be compared to the Indian raga system. And such finesse informs the details that the music is always interesting, although it never moves outside a small confined area. Finally, it conveys a mood which is overwhelmingly joyous. Although the music does not resemble anything by Bach, it sometimes lifts me up the way a Brandenburg Concerto does.

April 13, 1972

Frederic Rzewski, Petr Kotik, and Melodies

Those who have been criticizing contemporary music for lacking true melodic lines, may be consoled to learn that some composers now are very much concerned with melody. I don't mean that they are writing romantic melodies, or popular melodies, or any other familiar kind of melodies, but they are certainly writing melodies. I heard two very good new pieces of this sort last week. One was Frederic Rzewski's 'Coming Together' at the Free Music Store on April 7, and the other was Petr Kotik's 'There Is

Singularly Nothing,' presented at the Space for Innovative Development as part of a concert by the SEM Ensemble from Buffalo.

Rzewski's piece features a speaker who delivers a very rhythmic reading of a text by Sam Melville, one of the prisoners murdered at Attica last fall. The text is divided into 15 or 20 phrases, which are repeated in continuously varied juxtapositions throughought the piece. Behind the speaker is a fast, white-note melodic line, which begins in the piano and electric bass, and later occurs in the clarinet, viola, horn and trombone. Essentially, the whole piece is simply this melody, played in unison by the five instruments. But many color changes are created as instruments drop out and return, and there are some slower lines that weave around the basic melody. The general effect is rather muddy and unpleasant much of the time, but quite appropriate to the irony of the text. 'I feel secure,' was one of the phrases written by the murdered man. The jazz-like syncopations and the louder volume toward the end of the piece also add to the mood, and drive the message home.

Kotik's piece was performed by flute, bass clarinet, glockenspiel, and baritone voice. The melody in this piece is also fast, but it is a chromatic line. It moves in a curious way, hovering around a very narrow range for quite a while, and then gradually moving up or down a few notes. Like Rzewski's melody, it keeps a steady beat, although the rhythm is far from square.

The flute is the primary instrument here, as it is the only one playing throughout the piece. The bass clarinet and glockenspiel make entrances sporadically, playing the same kind of melodic lines. It is a strange blend, since the glockenspiel is played with a harsh sound which contrasts with the flute almost as much as the bass clarinet does. Like Rzewski's piece, the texture changes frequently as instruments drop out and return. But what sustains the piece is the singer. He enters five or six times, singing brief songs set to texts from Gertrude Stein's lecture,

'What are Masterpieces?' His melodies are quite different from those of the instruments, and he stands out in bold relief whenever he enters. Both pieces are quite carefully thought out and the melodies which hold them together are disciplined as well as inventive. I suppose the only reason the pieces didn't particularly move me is that I have developed a prejudice against flexible instrumentation. It is a very practical way to write music, but the problem is, one can usually tell that the parts are not tailor-made for the instruments playing them. The wind players have trouble breathing with the music; the piano never sounds very pianistic; and the over-all color of the music seems arbitrary. Of course, Bach was certainly an advocate of flexible instrumentation, and 19th-century composers frequently rearranged pieces for completely different combinations of instruments. But contemporary composers like Varese and Stravinsky have shown us how beautiful it is when the sounds of the instruments become part of the piece rather than an elaboration of it. And I find that approach more sensitive and gratifying in new music.

June 8, 1972

Phill Niblock: Out-of-Tune Clusters

Phill Niblock's concert of tape music at the Kitchen on May 29 was not held at the Kitchen. Instead, everyone was transported to the composer's spacious loft on Centre Street, where wine was served and the atmosphere was very casual. Niblock is primarily a film-maker, and most of his tapes are conceived more as sound

tracks than as concert pieces. Since there are no live performers, and since the tapes are not really intended to entertain an audience all by themselves, it could have been tiresome to listen to the music in a formal concert situation. But in an atmosphere like this it was quite enjoyable.

The evening began with an untitled piece which consists of periodic grumbling sounds. It is in stereo, and the rhythms of the two tracks are always a little out of phase with one another, creating interesting shifting meters. It goes on for a long time and doesn't hold the interest constantly, but it is not really supposed to. Like most of what was played that evening, it is not so much a piece of music as it is a kind of sound environment. You can drift into it and out of it at will. It never forces itself on you.

The next tape was very slow counterpoint played by instruments which sound like a cross between trumpets, saxophones, bagpipes, and foghorns. It has an extraordinary quality, and I was amazed to learn later that the sounds had been made exclusively with a tenor sax. By doctoring up the tape in relatively minor ways, the instrument had been transformed quite drastically.

The main piece on the program was the 45-minute tape used in 'Ten 100-Inch Radii,' a multi-media piece which includes a film, along with dance solos by Ann Danoff and Barbara Lloyd. Though I am curious to know what the whole piece would be like, I am rather glad that the film and dancers were not there that night, as I got into the music much more that way. And it stands by itself rather well. The tape was made with flute, violin, tenor sax, and voice, but here, too, one would be hard pressed to identify the instruments. They play mostly sustained sounds, hovering around an out-of-tune cluster for a long time. Gradually it seems to become denser, and expands to the upper register - the only piece of the evening which builds up in a dramatic way. The piece sometimes seems mournful, but I'm not sure why, because it is certainly very different from any dirge or lament I can think of.

The last piece on the program was 'Voice Four.' Here the sounds are easily recognized as voices, and they are beautifully blended to create an expanse of low-pitched vocal sound which seems to hover around the room just a few feet above the floor. And at a point near the ceiling, a good 30 feet from any loudspeaker, there is a little pocket of overtones. I moved around the room to make sure I wasn't just hearing things, but that little pocket of high sounds was always there in the same spot, as clear and vivid as if it had been coming directly out of a loudspeaker. It was a remarkable hallucination and a tribute to the profound mystery of acoustics - and perhaps also to the wine we had been drinking.

Niblock's tape music reflects his background as a film-maker in several interesting ways. He tends to think of music as accompaniment and is more concerned with its suggestiveness than with its structure. His music has an undefined drifting quality much of the time, which leaves it vague and open to interpretation. As in radio plays, things are not spelled out in detail and much is left to the listener's imagination. The tapes are seldom as captivating as most music created by composers, but they are often more evocative.

Because their art relies so much on technology, and because the technical standards are so high in their field, film-makers tend to place a higher value on technical perfection than composers do. This is certainly the case with Niblock, whose tapes are immaculately clean, very precisely recorded, and mixed with unusual care. He is also more concerned with the method of playback than many composers are. The loudspeakers were set up at very particular angles in very particular places, and the sound was quite uniform around the room.

Another big difference in Niblock's approach is in the area of pitch. When musicians collage sounds on tape, they usually get hung up on exact intonation. But Niblock obviously isn't concerned with this, and the resulting out-of-tune feeling is one of the things that gives his music unique and evocative qualities.

It is more and more common for artists to work in areas other than their specialty. Not only do film-makers create music, but musicians do theatre pieces, theatre groups choreograph dances, dancers make films, and so forth. And almost every time an artist ventures out of his field of training, there are fresh insights of one sort or another. The term 'multi-media' is not so fashionable any more, but there are probably more genuine attempts to integrate the arts today than there were then. I like to think that maybe someday there will no longer be such things as sculptors and composers and film-makers and playwrights and poets. There will only be artists.

Note:One of my Weaker Conclusions

July 13, 1972

John Cage at (Almost) 60

It was very gratifying to see a full house at the New School auditorium for the all-Cage concert, June 30. Cage is unquestionably the most influential composer this country has ever produced. Composers have imitated him, critics have made fun of him, intellectuals have bandied his theories around, thousands have read his books. And now that his 60th birthday is approaching, people even seem to be interested in listening to his music. Not only that. A good 75 per cent of the audience stayed until the very end. If he lives to be 80, he may even see the day when a whole audience in his home town, New York, will appreciate his music and approach it with as much respect as other kinds of music. But probably not. By that time, Cage will no doubt have found new ways of offending our senses, of bringing our values into question, and making us think.

The concert began with a very inventive performance by Gordon Mumma of selections from the 'Song Books' (1970). Mumma always manages to find a way of making his performances interesting visually as well as musically. Here he did it by realizing each 'song' with a different medium. One was done by breathing into a microphone. Another was tapped out on an amplified typewriter. Another utilized an amplified musical saw, played with a bow. In another, he appeared to be making marks on a piece of paper with an amplified pencil. I suppose that sounds gimmicky, but it really isn't, because the rhythms and colors always end up making some sort of musical sense which goes far beyond the sound effects themselves.

Then there was a film made by Nam June Paik which shows Cage giving one of his lectures, collecting mushrooms in the woods, and, in general, being his delightful iconoclastic self. The bulk of the film is devoted to a Cage composition made especially for the film. This sequence begins on a city sidewalk where Cage is squatting in front of a map of Manhattan with pencil and paper and various charts. He explains in some detail that he is employing random procedures to select different sites in Manhattan and different durations of time. The results of these computations will be the score for a four-movement composition based on environmental sounds. After a few minutes, Cage, with the help of random numbers from some computer print-out pages, has completed his work and the score is ready.

Cut to a Harlem street where Cage is standing on a sidewalk listening to the sounds of people and traffic which make up the first movement of the piece. A number of passers-by end up in the film, and Nam June Paik interviews a couple of them, but Cage is mostly concerned with listening to the sounds and keeping an eye on his stop watch to make sure the movement lasts for the amount of time specified in the score. The film proceeds in similar fashion to Times Square and two other locations, as the remaining movements are presented.

Many people seemed to think the whole thing was a joke, as there was intermittent laughter throughout this sequence. And it is a kind of joke if one wants to think of it as 'composing' and 'music' in the usual senses. But Cage is not trying to be funny. I think he calls it 'music' and 'composing' just because he likes the kind of sounds and sequences which arise naturally in the environment and wants people to listen to them as if they were music. Anyway, when the four movements were over and Cage spelled out his belief that anyone can create music for himself by simply opening his ears, the point was clear and there was no more laughter. Everyone seemed to agree with Cage and to appreciate his ingenious demonstration of the beauty of the environmental sounds.

The concert ended with simultaneous readings of pages from 'Atlas Eclipticalis' (1961-62) and 'Winter Music' (1957) in a format worked out by conductor Gordon Mumma and performed by pianist Philip Corner, trombonist James Fulkerson, and percussionists Max Neuhaus and Gregory Reeve. The music is largely soft and attractive, and is performed with great care. Like much of Morton Feldman's music, it creates a pleasant drifting effect as it floats by in one unpredictable fragment after another, often with long pauses between fragments. It is much more severe and demanding than the other things on the program, and it was difficult to settle down to appreciating it after all the visual stimulation of the other things. But it was not just a matter of an unwise program order. Cage's pure musical statements are always difficult to listen to, regardless of context, as they are never casual and entertaining the way his lectures and anecdotes and other things often are.

Which leads me back to my opening paragraph and to the fact that people have been much more interested in Cage's ideas than in his music. But the music really expresses the same ideas much more clearly and beautifully than any of his other work. Hopefully, we are now ready to deal with these purely musical statements and not be satisfied with what we can pick up through the books and lectures of Cage and the articles of other people.

August 17, 1972

Rhys Chatham: One-Note Music

Rhys Chatham's score for Robert Streicher's solo dance, 'Narcissus Descending,' is a prerecorded electronic piece, but the composer manipulates his equipment throughout the performance. Most of the time the music consists simply of a single sustained note. Or at least it sounds like a single note at first. But as it drones on, you gradually get further and further into the sound, and begin to distinguish the different overtones. Then you get down to another level where you can perceive that the composer is subtly varying the volume of different overtones. Then your ears become sensitive to the different tonal qualities of each overtone, and you begin to hear beats (the pulsating effect which results when sound waves are not exactly in phase with each other). Gradually it draws you into a strange microscopic world where it is possible to hear acoustical details which are much too small to be perceived in normal musical contexts.

The style is related to other current approaches to electronic music, but is not really much like anything I have heard. The closest equivalent, I suppose, would be La Monte Young, who also uses tones that drone on endlessly. But while Young generally employs vocal tones or violin tones, and usually amplifies everything to a very high level, Chatham's resources are purely electronic, and his volume never gets very loud.

The music has an intimate quality which seems appropriate to the solo dancer, and a dreamy feeling which fits the mythological subject. 'Narcissus Descending' begins with the dancer asleep at the back of the stage. Some very deliberate slow-motion walking and pantomimic sequences lead him to the moment when he falls in love with his reflection. The music shifts smoothly to some Bach orchestral music for a short middle section in which the dancing becomes more active. Then Chatham's droning note returns and the dancer eases back to the more deliberate style of the beginning.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about this kind of one-note music is not the little changes which the composer causes in the sound, but the additional ones which somehow seem to happen in one's ear. Sometimes I found it hard to focus on some aspect of the sound which I knew, simply by the logic of what was going on, was acoustically present. Sometimes it was hard to tell if one thing was getting softer or if another thing was getting louder. Sometimes one of the overtones would change its color and it would sound like everything else was changing too. And often I could tell that something was changing, but would not be able to hear exactly what it was. Of course, it could be that as my ears become more accustomed to hearing music like this they will stop playing these weird tricks on me. But I have the feeling that illusions of this nature will always be created when pure electronic tones are sustained in a context of this nature.

We know quite a bit about optical illusions, but I have never heard the term 'aural illusions.' For some reason no one seems very interested in these phenomena, but they certainly exist, at least in electronic pieces like this one. Maybe someday there will be a musical equivalent of Josef Albers, who will work out a theory to explain how they happen. In the meantime, we can just listen and be pleasantly mystified.

September 7, 1972

La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Philip Glass

I've heard people refer to the 'New York Hypnotic School' several times now, and have been trying to figure out if it is a good term or not. Composers are all really individuals, of course, and lumping them into groups and schools often seems untrue and academic. But in this case I am beginning to think it is valid. At least it helps to define one of the more important areas of new music.

I think the term should refer primarily to La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass. Some people might want to add Frederic Rzewski, Philip Corner, or David Behrman to the list, although it seems to me that their work does not fit into the category quite so neatly. Gavin Bryars's music, on the other hand, is very much in the style. But it's a little difficult to consider him part of a New York school since he lives in England. There are a number of other composers writing hypnotic music whose names I will omit because they have not yet attracted significant public attention. And there are no doubt many others that I don't know about.

So, like any school, it is a hazy category, but it seems fair enough to define it, for the moment at least, in terms of Young, Reich, Riley, and Glass. My knowledge of the music by these four composers has many gaps, but I have heard enough from each of them to see common threads running through their work.

Some of their pieces employ traditional scales and some do not. Some of them chug along with a persistent beat and some float by without any rhythmic articulation. Most of them are loud and employ electronic resources. And some employ standard instruments without amplification or electronic manipulation of any kind. Yet they all have the same basic concern, which can be described as flat, static, minimal, and hypnotic.

The form of their pieces is always flat. They are not interested in building to climaxes, or in manipulating tension and relaxation, or in working with large contrasts of any kind. They keep their music flat, never allowing it to rise above or fall below a certain plane. In a way this flatness is related to the idea of 'all over' painting. In both cases, there is an attempt to make all areas of the form equal in importance.

The term 'static' is often used in reference to their music, since it never leaves this one level and never seems to be moving toward anything. Traditionally this word has been considered derogatory when applied to music, and in many quarters it still is. But in listening to the music of these composers, one soon discovers that static does not necessarily mean boring, the way we always thought it did. Many interesting things can happen all on one plane. A pitch changes slightly, a rhythm is altered, something fades in or out. They are not big changes, but they are changes, and there are more than enough of them to sustain one's interest, provided that he can tune in on this minimal level.

This brings us to the word 'minimal' and to the very small range of contrast within their pieces. The pitches, rhythms, and colors presented in the first few minutes usually define a specific kind of music, and the remainder of the piece will not depart very far from that. Yet within these limitations, hundreds or thousands of variations may occur.

'Hypnotic' is probably the best word for this music, because it comes closest to describing the effect that it has on the listener. The music never entertains or stimulates in an overt way. It simply lulls, hypnotizes, and draws him into its world. Of course, it won't put him into a true trance, medically speaking, but the effect is something like that. The music of the New York Hypnotic School is easier to hear than much contemporary music. It never concentrates on intellectual devices such as turning things upside down and backward. It has no in-joke references to 'Tristan and Isolde,' and no fancy tricks about deriving one theme from another. The music deals primarily with sound itself, and often the layman is as well equipped to hear what is going on as the trained musician is.

So it is relatively accessible, and I suppose it will eventually reach a wider audience than most contemporary music has. But since its aesthetic premises are a rather sharp departure from the tradition, it may take a long time for the audience to grow.

It is interesting to look around a concert hall and observe people who are having their first exposure to this music. Ten minutes into the piece, they may still be sitting there expecting something to happen. Sometimes the frustration and bewilderment are too much and they leave. But often they become drawn into the details and begin listening - and perhaps hearing.

October 19, 1972

Opening the Kitchen Season: Laurie Spiegel, Jim Burton, Judy Sherman, Garrett List

The group concert which opened the season at the Kitchen on October 9 was not one of the better concerts I have seen there. But like most concerts at the Kitchen, there were enough fresh ideas to make it a novel and interesting evening nonetheless.

Laurie Spiegel's electronic music was played while the audience was coming in, so I found it difficult to pay very close attention to it until her last piece. 'Sediment' is a quiet attractive piece, made up mostly of sustained tones which gradually fade in and out, overlapping each other in interesting ways. Many of the sounds are quite simple, but some of them have unusual colors and vibrato effects. It is a stereo tape, but instead of the two tracks being placed left and right, they came from front and rear. I like this procedure as it fills the room, creates greater separation between the two channels, and generally enhances the piece. But when the piece ended after perhaps five or 10 minutes, I had just begun to familiarize myself with the sounds enough to hear the piece on another level, and I was sorry that it stopped. Of course, a lot of other people might have been turned off if the music had gone on for half an hour. But I had the feeling that the piece itself would like to have had more time.

Jim Burton's 'Rhetoric I' uses two guitar chords, repeated continuously. The one on the front speaker has a slightly different tempo than the one on the rear speaker, so gradually they move in and out of phase with one another. Nothing changes for a long time until two voices suddenly emerge. The voice on the front speaker is worried that the audience will get bored listening to the music, while the voice on the rear speaker tries to reassure him that it is all right. While the music drones on, the self-conscious discussion leads through some amusing observations and sometimes forces the listener to examine his own feelings about repetition and time.

Judith Sherman's 'Moonlanding' is a tape collage which utilizes several tracks of her own singing along with some spoken poetry, fragments of distant rock music, and other sounds. The many elements are mixed together in a very professional way, and the singing is particularly effective. But I had trouble appreciating the poetry, which concerns a phallic space ship raping the virgin moon.

Michael Levenson's 'Coke on the Rocks' begins as a militant snare drum solo. Then he pours lighter fluid over a large, economy-size Coke bottle and sets it on fire. As the bottle burns, he returns to his snare drum and plays jazz riffs with brushes. His excellent drumming sustains the short piece well, and the simple stark image of the burning Coke bottle, in context with the drummimg, makes an arresting statement.

Levenson's other theatre piece, 'Professor Throwback Presents,' conveys much less through much more. Wearing a gorilla mask, he burns classical sheet music, does a bad magic act, induces a member of the audience to suck her thumb, draws meaningless symbols, etc., etc. It is more or less impossible to relate the many events, and the piece as a whole is pretty confused.

Garrett List's 'Resonance Music' (second version) was played by two double basses, French horn, and clarinet. The musicians play largely sustained tones and textures while the composer manipulates audio controls, amplifying different instruments at different times and creating feedback squeals. Though some sounds are interesting, they don't seem to fit together very well. But perhaps I missed the point.

Note: This article captures the mood of those first seasons at the Kitchen better than any other, and gives an idea of how open the atmosphere was here in the former kitchen of the Bowery Central Hotel.

October 26, 1972

Jim Burton's 'Six Solos'

Even allowing for some personal bias, since I know the composer pretty well, it seems quite safe to say that Jim Burton's 'Six Solos in the Form of a Pair,' which I heard at the Kitchen on October 17, is the most substantial piece Burton has done, that it is an extremely effective blend of musical ideas and theatrical ideas, and that it is one of the few chamber works around which holds up as a program by itself.

The 'Six Solos' are tied together by 'Mother's Piano Solo,' which runs throughout the hour-and-20-minute program. This began as pianist Don Gillespie attached six or eight vibrators to the piano so that they would vibrate lightly on the piano strings, making an odd, rippling piano noise. He then sat down at the keyboard and played a sequence of white-note chords. While the vibrators jingled on, he repeated this same basic sequence over and over, ingeniously exploring every possible variation of rhythm and phrasing, so that it never came out quite the same way. While 'Mother's Piano Solo' was in progress, the other five performers came out, one by one, for their solos.

Soprano Judy Sherman sang 'Free Offer Inside,' which utilizes match book phrases for its text and rather dramatic atonal lines for its music. It is nothing special musically, but it sustains itself well, thanks to its unlikely text. Clarinettist Jan Coward played 'Solo Melancholia.' This is also atonal, and utilizes many unconventional types of clarinet sound, although it is never very fast or virtuosic, the way contemporary clarinet solos usually are. I had trouble getting into his section and found my attention shifting across the room to 'Mother's Piano Solo.' But the flute solo, 'Festoons,' played by Rhys Chatham, had me hooked from start to finish. Here, a little phrase containing only two notes repeats itself into a phrase of three, four and five notes. It continues to grow and shift until the end, when it is 10 or 12 notes long and has evolved through several different tonalities.

For 'Potpourri,' Mike Levenson came on in a chef's outfit and unveiled a large rack of pots and pans. He set a kitchen timer, poured a little water and rice in the pans, and then proceeded to do some very impressive drumming on the pots and pans, which turned out to have very attractive sounds. When the bell on the timer went off, he served a few bowls of the uncooked rice to members of the audience and exited.

For the final solo, 'Simple Cymbal Piece,' the composer came on in a lion tamer's outfit, carrying a suitcase labeled 'Burton's Trained Cymbal Act.' He rolled a number of cymbals down a little ramp, slashing some of them with his whip. He tried to make one of his cymbals jump through a hoop, but it refused to do so, even when enticed with a carrot.

By the end of the program, most of the vibrators on the piano strings had run down, and the piano was softer. Gillespie was still playing variations of the same chord sequence at the keyboard, but the music had taken on a mournful quality and felt very different than it had at the beginning of the evening. He finally stopped playing and exited, accompanied only by a rather sad jingling created by the few vibrators that were still going.

November 30, 1972

Joel Chadabe and Garrett List

Joel Chadabe is the only composer I know of who is seriously involved with automatic electronic music. Instead of composing sounds to be produced by machines, he works out computer programs which allow the machines to compose spontaneously by themselves. Some of his earlier works seemed more experimental than musical. But in his latest work, which also involves a live performer, the machines have become quite alive and engaging.

In his performance of 'Echoes,' trombonist Jim Fulkerson sat under a blue light at the back of WBAI's Studio C, playing into a microphone. Intermittently he played soft eerie tones of one sort or another, occasionally inserting a brief melodic line or some sliding pattern. As he played these fragments, they were fed into a rather sophisticated homemade computer named 'Daisy,' which processed the trombonist's messages and relayed responses to the conglomeration of electronic equipment which was placed auspiciously on a large table at the front of the room. After brief delays, the equipment replied to the fragments played by the trombonist. Sometimes the replies were simply an electronic imitation of what he had just played. Sometimes they were similar but on a different pitch. Sometimes the machines made a big deal out of something the trombonist did, and mocked him quite elaborately on four different channels. Sometimes they paused a long time before deciding on a response. Sometimes they became obstinate and did not respond at all. In general, the electronic sounds were rather somber. They were not attempting to outdo the live musician. They stuck to the subject, and it was always clear that they were actually responding to the trombonist and not just going off on tangents of their own. But at the same time, the responses were never predictable and always remained a puzzle for the listener. And apparently Daisy was taking care of everything, as the composer made very few adjustments in the equipment during the performance.

Chadabe's 'Shadows and Lines' is similar to 'Echoes,' but slightly less stimulating because there is no performer. The machines react solely to themselves, moving within the many variations and sequences which are possible within the limitations set by the composer and his program. In 'Drift,' which is one of Chadabe's earlier attemps at automatic electronic music, the sounds are more violent in nature, and they do not seem to 'drift,' despite the title. The sequences are more forced, and the sounds do not fulfil themselves as easily and naturally as in the more recent works. The program was given on November 22 at WBAI's Free Music Store.

I heard Garett List's new work, 'A Self for Your Self,' at the Kitchen on November 21. Like much of his music, it is concerned with using a limited number of pitches. But here, instead of writing for amplified concert instruments, he has drawn on his jazz background and utilized vibes, electric bass, piano, brass, drums, and two female singers. He obviously feels more comfortable with this ensemble, and some of the ideas that never quite worked in other contexts work very well here.

The piece begins with only the two singers and only two notes. Gradually the instruments and the other pitches are added until, about 15 or 20 minutes into the piece, the music works up to a full seven-tone scale and a very high rich sound. A few extra dissonant notes are brought in for the climax of the piece, which is a veritable whirr of sensual music. I never could tell what the lyrics were all about, but it didn't seem to matter.

There is probably some influence of Steve Reich and Philip Glass here, because the repeated melodic patterns used in List's textures are similar to theirs. But it sounds very different, not only because of the jazz instrumentation and the climactic formal plan, but also because it allows musicians greater freedom and is not so concerned with details.

December 14, 1972

Victor Grauer: A Long Hum Drone Hum Hum

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This is not a particularly good imitation of Grauer's style, but it conveys the rhythms and the atmosphere of his 'Book of the Year 3000' better than a prosaic description would. It does not, however, convey the reality of sitting still and listening to Grauer's meditative poetry music for over three hours. It is not the kind of program that should be recommended to everyone. But for the patient listener who does not require a message or a dramatic line, the rewards can be great.

December 21, 1972

Charles Dodge: The Computer Sings

Some of the people at Bell Labs are trying to synthesize naturalistic human speech with the use of the computer. They feed the necessary information into the computer, which then computes the statistical properties of the actual sound waves, and puts the information on a piece of tape, all ready to play on a tape recorder. Fortunately, the many inflections which we give in different contexts are complex enough that it will be a long time before a crooked cop will be able to synthesize someone's confession statement, for example. But already the computer sounds more human than Hal did in 2001, provided it is limited to short phrases and provided it doesn't make too much difference exactly whose voice the results sound like. Now Charles Dodge has even managed to get the computer to sing a little.

In Dodge's three short 'Speech Songs,' a very natural sounding male voice delivers short phrases quite intelligibly. The voice also sings with more exact intonation than any human singer I have ever heard. As you might expect, it can also sing for a very long time without taking a breath. Unfortunately, this computer-created voice lacks the expressive range of the human singer, and tends to go off on electronic tangents, but it is rather lovable just the same, and Dodge has explored its limited possibilities inventively and amusingly.

Dodge's 'Earth's Magnetic Field' was also presented on this program of computer music at the Kitchen Friday night. It's expecting a lot to ask you to imagine a virtuoso sitar player whose instrument plays only white notes and has a quality something like a car horn. But that's the best way I can find of describing the piece. Dissonant electronic notes occasionally fade in in the upper register, while this bizarre sitar line drifts rhapsodically through variations of its white note melodies, occasionally inserting virtuoso arpeggios. It is not a particularly pleasant piece, but it has a compelling personality. One has the feeling that the piece is not simply a result of something the composer wanted to do, but that it worked itself out.

January 4, 1973

Music for the Planet Earth

The other day someone asked me what I thought was the single most important influence on contemporary music. After mulling over a few possible answers for a moment, I found one which seemed broad enough to answer the question. I said I thought it was the infiltration of non-Western ideas. I suppose this is not the answer most people would have given, but the more I think about it, the more I feel that my on-the-spot answer was as good as any other.

Of course, a few exchanges of ideas across cultural boundaries are inevitable at any period. But Western music absorbed very few non-Western ideas during the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. Then African musical ideas began to be absorbed in American popular music, leading to far-reaching consequences in all our music, even in symphonies, masses, and operas. Another exchange which may have been important was the visit which a Balinese gamelan orchestra paid to Paris around the end of the 19th century. We know that Debussy was quite entranced by this music. Some say he got the idea of the whole-tone scale from the Balinese. Some say he did not allow the gamelan music to affect his composing at all. My own opinion is that he already knew about the whole-tone scale, but that he learned a lot aesthetically from the Balinese. The music he wrote after that seems more relaxed than his earlier work. His later works drift more, are not so concerned with flashy effects, and tend to have less definite endings. It seems quite possible to me that much of the Impressionist aesthetic is an Asian import.

More recent borrowings are easier to document and many of them have had distinct and strong influence. Stockhausen, for example, was particularly impressed with his trip to Japan. I heard him speak quite enthusiastically about the dynamics of sumo wrestling and the tea ceremony. His 'Telemusik' collage is taken directly from recordings made in Japan, and some of his prose scores, which require an unusual degree of concentration from the performers, are clearly related to non-Western forms of meditation. Even 'Stimmung' strikes me as a kind of ritual which would never have occurred to him without some knowledge of non-Western practices.

Lou Harrison, to take another obvious example, has studied Chinese music extensively, and many of his own compositions reflect the Chinese rhythmic sense and sometimes even use Chinese instruments.

A new surge of African influence can be seen in many black groups. Often wearing dashikis, they tend to use more drums and fewer horns than they used to. It is now common, even for someone like Miles Davis, to do away with the traditional chorus structure and let things drift along by themselves, more as the Africans would. Steve Reich, a white composer, has been influenced by African music in another way. I suspect that almost all the rhythms in his 'Drumming' came as a result of studying drumming in Africa, and no doubt all his recent music reflects this influence to some degree.

The drastic stylistic change which Philip Glass made a few years ago came just after studying in India. Since he uses Western instruments and vocal styles, his current music does not sound much like classical Indian music. But if one listens for it, one can hear how Glass's knowledge of ragas and talas affects his work. A number of other Western musicians have gone to study in India in recent years. Most of them have become absorbed in the challenge of trying to become good classical Indian musicians, and lack either the ability or the desire to integrate what they learn with their own tradition. But as they return to the West, this knowledge gradually spreads - with what consequences, no one can predict.

Other composers have gone in other directions. Charlie Morrow, for example, has taken on the formidable task of trying to translate some of the chanting styles and ritualistic practices of American Indians into terms which will make sense to English speaking audiences. Christopher Tree has formed a collection of flutes and percussion instruments from all over the world, attempting to draw their sounds together in meaningful ways.

But these are all cases of direct borrowing. When one considers indirect influences, the picture becomes much broader. The unique singing style which Meredith Monk has been developing is not, so far as I know, based consciously on any particular vocal tradition, but it is a sharp departure from all the styles of American and European singing that I am familiar with. The experience of listening to non-Western singing must be the inspiration for someone like her to begin to explore the possibilities of her voice.

In one way or another, all the current experimentation with static non-developmental forms must be influenced by non-Western cultures. In the West, repetition has only been tolerated in small doses. The principles of changing keys and varying themes are at the very roots of our background. The fact that so many composers now are interested in staying in the same key and not varying themes can only be explained in terms of the less dynamic modes of expression found in other parts of the world. The 'climax' has been one of our most fundamental assumptions ever since Aristotle. Only Asians, Africans, American Indians, and current Western composers have been satisfied with unclimatic music.

John Cage, who has probably been more influential than any living composer, has never actually used musical ideas derived from other cultures, but he has probably been as influenced by non-Western thought as any of the composers already mentioned. He studied Zen with Suzuki and, through this, came to appreciate the beauty which lies in everything. Much as the Zen master finds beauty in a flawed teacup and the haiku poet finds beauty in a blade of grass, Cage began to find beauty in thumping on a piano string or making an electronic squawk. The fact that Japanese musicians never saw it this way seems to me to be irrelevant. It is a Japanese aesthetic nonetheless, and without it, it seems doubtful that Cage would ever have found a justification for absorbing odd noises into his musical vocabulary.

Cage's use of chance also derived from a non-Western source, in this case the Chinese yarrow sticks and the I Ching. Again, the fact that it had nothing to do with Chinese music does not negate the fact that it led Cage to a method of composing music, which upset our whole musical establishment and led to far reaching changes in our musical notation system and performance practices.

All artists are supposed to be concerned with making universal statements. But of course they never even succeed in making world-wide statements. About the best they can hope for is to communicate with the majority of people in one cultural milieu. During the past few years, Cage has grown particularly fond of quoting Buckminster Fuller, and many composers seem concerned with trying to see themselves in relation to other cultures as residents of the planet earth. They talk much less about American music than they did a generation ago, and have less respect for nationalistic attitudes. Of course, it is still inconceivable for anyone to write a piece of music which can be understood and appreciated fully on all parts of the planet. But perhaps, as the borrowing continues and the cross-cultural influences grow, we will gradually approach forms of music which, if not universal, will begin to be truly international. At least that strikes me as a pleasant thought for starting off the new year.

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January 18, 1973

Meredith Monk, Kirk Nurock, Jon Gibson, Alvin Curran

Meredith Monk's 'Our Lady of Late' at Town Hall on January 11 was the closest thing to a perfect concert that I have heard for some time. She has as much control over her singing as she does over her dancing, and her music shows as much originality and genuine inspiration as her choreography. Not that there is anything special about the notes themselves. In fact, a conventional score of her music would probably not look particularly impressive. But when her relatively simple melodies are sung the way she sings them and embellished with the many ingenious vocal techniques she uses, they are indeed impressive.

Dressed in white, she looked very small and distant sitting alone in the middle of the Town Hall stage. In front of her was a little table with a goblet on it. Her only accompaniment was a soft drone created by rubbing her finger around the rim of the goblet. Throughout the hour-long performance, her eyes were focused down on the little table. This visual image changed only a few times during the concert when, in a ritual gesture, she lifted the goblet and drank a small amount of the liquid, thus raising the pitch slightly for the ensuing music. The concert was beautifully framed by off-stage solos played on some sort of bell by Colin Walcott at the beginning and end of the concert.

The singing is split up into perhaps 20 short pieces. There is not a great deal of contrast between the pieces, but each has a slightly different character. Most of them are sung with a relatively nasal sound, but some are more open. Most of them follow simple scales, but some veer off into unpitched guttural qualities or speech-like patterns. Most of them have a clear pulse, but some are more free rhythmically. Most of them follow a consistent line, but one remarkable one does not. In this piece she sings contrasting phrases, alternating between a rather gruff voice and a meek, high voice. This lion-and-mouse dialogue verges on humor, but the atmosphere is so strange and severe that one doesn't feel much like laughing.

Perhaps what makes 'Our Lady of Late' so extraordinary is not so much her approach to voice placement as her attitude toward language and phonetics. In her previous big vocal work, 'Key,' one can pick out an occasional word or phrase. But here, Monk completely avoids anything which might be taken as intelligible English. Most of the time she doesn't even use familiar vowels and consonants. Occasionally there is something that might pass for an 'n' or an 'o' or some other English phoneme, but most of the time her singing has nothing to do with English or, so far as I can tell, with any other language. She has found her own vowels and consonants and evolved her own very personal language.

The Natural Sound Workshop does not have technical control and discipline which marks Meredith Monk's style, but they too have developed an extensive vocabulary of unconventional vocal sounds. In their concert on January 10, they brought off a number of effective musical moments and some nice theatrical ones. They used the space of WBAI's Free Music Store particularly well, sometimes encircling the audience and often moving around so that their voices drifted through space.

Director Kirk Nurock's new piece 'Night' is a rich collection of choral effects, each of which lasts about 10 seconds. The rather monotonous pacing did not always seem appropriate to the mysterious quality of the musical material, but the sounds themselves were all quite ingenious and well performed. Theatrically the high points of the evening were Gershon Freidlin's parody of the concert soloist, complete with elaborate entrance and exit procedures, and an amusing bit where Bryant Hayes made his voice go haywire by breathing helium gas out of a balloon.

For me, the highlight of John Gibson's concert at the Kitchen on January 9 was a tape collage called 'Visitation.' In a way, it is more like an aural seascape than a piece of music, for it begins and ends with the sound of ocean waves. Out of the waves emerge a lot of jingling sounds, some long electronic tones that just wander around, bleating effects, and metallic sounds, which sometimes resemble wind chimes, adding much to the outdoor mood. I always used to have difficulty accepting Richard Strauss's wind machine and Edgar Varese's sirens, thinking that literal sounds had no place in music. But lately a number of composers have been using sound effects and, when they are recorded and mixed effectively, as in Gibson's piece, I find them quite musical, as well as suggestive.

One of Alvin Curran's pieces, heard at the Kitchen on the previous evening, also involved sound effects. Here a recording of bird calls was used as the background for an instrumental work called 'Under the Fig Tree.' The soft blend of flute, trombone, viola, and electronics, backed up by the birds, was quite lovely in a fluttery sort of way. I was very surprised when I later found out that the score to this piece consists of a mere page and a half of conventionally notated melody. I don't know how Curran and his fellow performers managed to make such a rich texture out of that little page and a half, but they did it very well. Curran's concert as a whole had an unusually relaxed atmosphere. The music seemed more concerned with setting moods than with anything else. The performers were not out to impress anybody. And when something didn't go quite right, it didn't seem to matter very much. It was a pleasant evening.

February 1, 1973

David Behrman: Slides and Whooshes

Most of the electronic music we hear is produced on the many brands of no-fuss-no-muss music synthesizers. They are available now for as little as $1000 or $1500, so composers everywhere have access to them and, in many cases, own their own units. With such wide availability, one might expect the synthesizers to be the lingua franca of new music, but instead, they seem to me to have become the bane of new music. It's getting hard to tell one synthesizer composer from another, because they all tend to make use of the same convenient automatic devices supplied by the manufacturers.

I'm not suggesting that the synthesizers are bad. They are excellent for teaching purposes, and they often work extremely well in combination with voices or instruments, particularly when the sythesizer itself is played live, rather than recorded on tape. What I am suggesting is that, as far as pure electronic music is concerned, much of the most interesting and original work is coming not from the fancy synthesizers but from homemade gadgets designed by specific composers for specific purposes.

David Behrman is one of the best examples of these do-it-yourself electronic music composers. A while back he did a piece called 'Runthrough,' which is actually just a complicated set of cheap circuitry. Several participants are allowed to improvise by activating photo cells with flashlights and manipulating a few switches. It must be great fun to play this musical game, and judging from the Mainstream recording of the piece, the raucous music which results is remarkably interesting just to listen to at the same time.

Now Behrman has designed a more sophisticated set of electronic equipment and written a score to go with it. The equipment is rather limited in many ways, but it is much better suited to his current concerns than any ready-made synthesizer would be.

Behrman and Katherine Morton played 'Homemade Synthesizer Music with Sliding Pitches' for about an hour at the Kitchen on January 23. It begins as a collage of sliding sounds, mostly in the upper register. The tones come in like little sirens, starting very softly, getting louder as they slide up a few notes, and then fading out on a lower pitch. A few soft, sustained pitches in the background serve to orient the ear, creating a minor-key feeling. Later, the sliding effects become less prominent, and stable pitches take over, fading in and out in various ways.

Unlike most electronic music, there is a great concern for harmony. The tones often overlap into fairly thick chords, and every note is precisely in tune. The basic sounds are all triangle or sawtooth waves, so the tone color is relatively consistent, and the music has a pleasant quality as it drifts from sound to sound, always maintaining a moderate volume level.

The concert was also interesting to watch, as the audience sat in close proximity to the performers. It was an intimate atmosphere, almost like watching them in their studio, and one could try to puzzle out which dial was controlling what.

February 22, 1973

Morton Feldman's 'Voices and Instruments II'

It's a little difficult to review Morton Feldman's music, since he was my composition teacher for two or three years. Actually, he was more of a guru, in my case. Every time I had a lesson with him, I would go home and carefully make notes of what he had said and then set about trying to solve any problems he might have posed, without any of the resistance I often gave to my teachers. Like anyone's guru, he was all knowing, infallible, and perfect, as far as I was concerned. And even today, whenever I run into people who have reservations about Feldman's music, it seems to me that they are being frightfully unobjective. Of course, my own admiration of his music is not particularly objective either, so I will try to avoid superlatives, and just describe the stylistic change currently taking place in his music.

'Voices and Instruments II,' which was premiered on February 14 at Carnegie Recital Hall, follows the basic Feldman approach to sound. The piece is very soft and consists of individual notes and chords, mostly sustained, without any melodies or rhythmic ideas, to speak of. The pitches and colors are carefully chosen, and there is great concern for the constantly fluctuating harmonies which result from them. In this case, the ensemble consists of flute, two cellos, bass, and three singers who hum, mostly in the upper register.

The new piece, however, is much longer than the typical Feldman piece, and it changes character noticeably, rather than maintaining one feeling from beginning to end. At one point, a single chord is sustained for quite a while before the notes start to change again. Sometimes one or two instruments will not play for a while. The harmonic feeling of the music also seems to be different in different parts of the piece, though these changes were too subtle for me to put my finger on in one hearing.

Now that Feldman is moving into longer forms, his sensitivity to time and his exquisite (oops) control over harmonies and tone colors are more apparent than ever. Those who have considered Feldman a quaint miniaturist will be forced to take a second look.

Some listeners were probably disappointed with the way the piece was performed by members of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts of Buffalo, but I liked their approach very much. The hardest thing in the world is to play very very softly, and nobody likes to do it in public, but the Buffalo musicians accepted the challenge. They played so softly that they were right on the brink of losing control most of the time, and occasionally a cello bow or a singer's voice did go out of control briefly. But by playing it this way, they gave the piece a wonderful fragile quality. At the same time, they drew the listener in by requiring him to strain his ears a little.

March 8, 1973

Phill Niblock on Fourth Street

One afternoon last week I happened to be walking along West 4th Street and noticed a strange low humming sound. Once I realized it was coming from Washington Square Methodist Church, it took only a moment to recognize it as Phill Niblock's music. Apparently they were rehearsing for the weekend performance of 'Ten 100-Inch Radii.' The music seemed extremely inappropriate to the usual workaday sounds of West 4th Street, so I decided to stop for a minute, just to see if other passers-by would notice it. But of course, it takes much more than an eerie sound to arouse the curiosity of a New York pedestrian, and nobody paid any attention.

After a while, I noticed a casual acquaintance coming along. He is an undergraduate music major, and I thought it would be interesting to confront him.

'What's that sound?' Surprised by my question, he stopped to listen. For a moment he was genuinely curious about the sound, but then he decided to shrug it off.

'It must be airplanes.' 'I don't think so. Listen. It changes a little now and then.' He listened a little longer and changed his mind.

'I guess it's some kind of machines.' Both of us were losing interest in this guessing game, so I told him the answer.

'No. It's music. They're rehearsing for a...' 'Music!' He was horrified, and before I even had a chance to tell him about the program, he had already decided he was busy on those nights. The conversation ended rather abruptly, and he continued on his way, putting the whole thing out of his mind, I'm sure. No confrontation, no problem.

Like many people who frequently attend concerts of new music, I find it difficult to see how anyone would ever question that it is music. But once in a while an incident like this reminds me how wide the gap is between some of the more radical new approaches to music and the expectations of the general public, or even of the average music major. Of course, no one seems particularly upset about this gap, but that is primarily because no one is confronted with it.

For the most part, the composers seem fairly content with the occasional exposure they might have at a gallery, a loft concert, a performance at the Kitchen, or a weekend at Washington Square Methodist Church. They would probably appreciate more exposure, but they are not masochistic enough to force themselves into situations where they know their work would be unappreciated. So it is fairly easy for the musical establishment and the general public to avoid contact with any of the more radical departures. Meanwhile, the critics continue to apply the term 'avant-garde' to composers like Boulez, Ligeti, or Babbitt, almost as if to reassure themselves and their readers, that nothing new has happened since then. No confrontation, no problem.

It seems to me that many important innovations are taking place in music right now, more than in any of the other arts, but I hesitate to advocate confrontation. On those rare occasions when something truly new is presented to a general audience, as when Steve Reich's 'Four Organs' was included in a Boston Symphony Orchestra program at Carnegie Hall a while back, it does not seem to accomplish very much. The audience jeers, and the critics lose a lot of sleep trying to figure out how to prove objectively that the music is inept, without revealing stylistic biases. The music itself may also suffer, since the performers in a situation like this may not be familiar with the idiom, and in many cases, the physical structure of the hall itself seems to contradict the attitudes expressed in the music.

So perhaps it is better if things move slowly. But meanwhile, there is no point in kidding ourselves. The gap is quite large, and the new sounds are not going to go away, even though they may remain hidden from general view for some time yet.

At least a dozen composers, right in New York, write music at least as new, as distinctive, and as carefully made as Niblock's is, and I don't mean to point him out above others. In fact, I am beginning to wonder about Niblock's versatility, since all of his music that I have heard uses the same basic procedure. He would be a more interesting composer if his work showed more flexibility, but that is not a serious reservation, since the one thing he does is strong enough to merit serious consideration, even if he never extends his vocabulary at all.

Niblock begins by recording sustained tones, sung by voices or played on traditional instruments. Then he clips off all the attacks, giving the sounds a strange dehumanized effect. Later, he splices all these tones together and mixes them, using as many as 14 tracks, and plays the mixture in loud stereo. The recorded quality of his tapes is impeccable, and the sound is extremely rich. At the same time, the music is icy cold, and its droning does remind one somewhat of airplanes or machines. The music is quite dissonant, but since it always remains on one dynamic level and avoids any kind of rhythmic gestures, it never seems aggressive or expressionistic. The irony is that, although it is made from conventional vocal and instrumental sounds, the end result seems colder, less

human, and more machine-like than some music which actually is produced on machines.

Niblock often presents his music separately, but in 'Ten 100 Inch Radii' he uses it to accompany three simultaneous color films. The films are devoted to nature, especially water, flowers and insects, with many close-ups and some time-lapse sequences, all shot with a stationary camera.

About 40 minutes into the program, the music and films stop for a silent interlude of modern dance. Barbara Lloyd's solo emphasizes fancy footwork, quirky gestures and a few vocal sounds. Nancy Topf's solo is a series of vigorous rhythmic phrases, followed by a long sequence of minimal gestures lying on the floor. The dancing provides a welcome relief before the music and films resume, and divides the evening into the most extreme A-B-A form I can imagine.

The contrasts are quite sharp between the cold machine-like music, the attractive nature photography, and the silent dancing. In terms of theme or message they don't belong together at all. But in structural terms, these blatantly contrasting elements offset each other quite effectively. And structure is really what it is all about. Despite my groping for descriptive images, Niblock's version of multi-media, like his music, is basically an abstract art.

March 15, 1973

The Queen of the South Returns: Alvin Lucier

Last spring I reviewed Alvin Lucier's 'The Queen of the South,' in which a metal plate about four feet by four feet was vibrated by amplified voices, gradually jiggling sand into beautiful designs. The piece has grown quite a bit since that time. The presentation at the Kitchen on March 5 lasted two hours instead of 30 minutes, and involved three vibrating plates instead of one. Sheets of wood, plastic, and metal were stimulated by purely electronic sounds, and several colors of sand, along with other ingredients such as coffee grounds, grain, and purple Tang, were used to create the visual patterns. Six television monitors projected the images, but most of the audience preferred to move around from one section of the room to another to view the patterns directly.

Two musicians operated sound equipment at each of the sheets. The sounds tended to be sustained, and the musicians adjusted them quite delicately as they searched for frequencies which would vibrate the sheets most effectively.

It may seem odd that a group of people would spend two hours watching minute particles vibrate and listening to the sounds that vibrate them, but there is an odd attraction to this symbolic activity, and most of the audience stayed until the very end. For me, the strongest association is with Navajo sand painting. But instead of a medicine man, the laws of physics are in charge of the mysterious rites. Lucier told me at the end of the evening that his own strongest association is with alchemy and that 'The Queen of the South' is an alchemical term.

He was attracted to the idea because of an appreciation for basic substances and for the mystery of how they interact with one another. Those with scientific backgrounds or with backgrounds in the visual arts would probably have made other associations.

The sounds were quite interesting in their own right, and it seemed like a rare opportunity to be able to watch these sounds as the many beautiful designs took form on the sheets. I felt I was getting a clue to the mysteries of the laws of the cosmos. What more can one ask of a work of art?

March 15, 1973

Charlemagne Palestine's Perception

Charlemagne Palestine is from New York and studied electronic music with Morton Subotnick here, but he has lived in California for the past few years, where he was teaching at the California Institute of the Arts. His March 9 concert, presented at a Greene Street loft by Acme Productions, can best be discussed in terms of the three basic media he uses, namely electronics, voice, and tubular bells.

His electronic music deals with sustained chords. The same pitches drone on for long periods of time with slight changes. Different notes seem to protrude at various times, and occasionally a pitch will seem to change octaves. It is often difficult to tell whether some change is actually occurring on the tape or whether it is taking place inside the ear as one's attention shifts from one thing to another. It is similar to Op Art in that it deals with perception, often creating illusions of motion, even when no motion is actually taking place. The effects are subtle, and at first one does not realize what is happening, but after a while these phenomena can become quite fascinating.

Palestine has a rather large, well-controlled voice. I was not too interested in his semi-Indian singing against electronic drones, but I liked his 'Overtone Study for Voice' very much. In this unaccompanied piece, he walks around in slow circles, singing the same pitch for perhaps 15 minutes, continually changing vowel sounds and voice placement. It is remarkable how many ways he can color one note, and he sometimes manages to produce very sensitive phrases within this severe limitation.

Palestine's music for his set of seven tubular bells is also concerned with perception and color changes. By playing the same bell at different points, he emphasizes different overtones and produces subtle variations of color. This piece, unlike the others, takes a dramatic form, gradually working up to a climactic point in which he plays many bells simultaneously with relatively hard mallets.

Since Palestine is so concerned with perception and acoustics, his music sometimes seems more like a demonstration than a thoroughly musical statement. I can't help thinking of the painter Joseph Albers in this regard, since many people feel his work is also more concerned with perception problems than with artistic expression. But we have not had an Albers in music yet, and there is certainly much to be gained by paring things down and trying to figure out how they work.

March 29, 1973

Minimal Material: Eliane Radigue

There is something very special about the music of Eliane Radigue, but after thinking about it for almost a week, I still can't put my finger on what it is. Is it the intimacy? The way one feels that the music is speaking only to him regardless of how many other listeners may be sitting in the room? Is it the sheer efficiency with which it accomplishes so much with so little? Is it the enormous care and devotion which must have been required to make something so sensitive out of electronic sounds which most composers would consider drab and unpromising? Is it that Radigue sustains her minimal material for 80 minutes without ever repeating herself or becoming boring, and yet without ever leaving the restricted area within which she works?

'Psi 847,' the piece presented at the Kitchen on March 19 and 20, was created on an Arp synthesizer. It is built out of a number of themes or motifs, but they are not motifs in the usual sense. One is simply a low fuzzy tone which goes on for a long time, hardly changing at all. One is a very high tone, so high that it is difficult to tell exactly what pitch it is, so it sounds different, depending on what else is going on. One changes color from time to time. One is a clear middle-range tone which fades in and out quite a bit, sometimes dominating the other motifs and sometimes hovering in the background. Later there are some more elaborate motifs. There is a tone that wobbles quite a bit. There is a five-note descending melody. There is a tone that pulses every five seconds or so, something like a muffled department store bell.

The texture is never very thick. Often only three or four motifs are working at once. But there is always much to listen to, since the motifs fade in and out in many combinations and interact in many ways. The focal point often shifts from one motif to another, sometimes giving the impression that the music is changing key. As a motif changes color, it may begin to blend with some other motif which previously sounded alien to it. As a new motif fades in, everything else may begin to sound quite different.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about 'Psi 847' is the way its motifs seem to come from different places. They were all produced by the same loudspeakers, and many of them seemed to come directly out of the loudspeakers. But some of the sounds seem to ooze out of the side wall, and others seem to emanate from specific points near the ceiling. I am told that this is actually true with any kind of music, and that the acoustical properties of a room will always affect different pitches in different ways.

But one only becomes sensitive to this phenomenon in pieces like this, where tones are sustained for a long time.

For me this piece represents the height of musical sensitivity, but perhaps I should temper that statement by admitting that it is a minority opinion. Most people would have been unimpressed by the modest sounds and uninterested in the tiny things that happen to them. I am told that supermarket products which have no red on their packages are usually passed by, and the music of Eliane Radigue will probably be overlooked for similar reasons.

Strength and brilliance are certainly to be valued, but I am often more moved by simplicity and subtlety. Perhaps I was influenced by Morton Feldman a few years ago when he wryly mentioned that, since this is the Jet Age, everyone thinks that we ought to have Jet Age music to go with it. Things have simmered down a little since the multi-media craze of the late '60s, but quite a bit of the music written today is still oriented toward speed, loudness, virtuosity, and maximum input, Eliane Radigue's music is the antithesis of all that.

April 12, 1973

Terry Riley Returns to Tonality

One of the most surprising musical developments is the way quite a few composers have recently rejected atonality and taken up more lyrical tonal idioms, almost as if Bartok and Schoenberg had never existed. If someone had predicted 10 years ago that this would happen, he would probably have had trouble convincing anyone. Our reaction to the 19th century was quite complete by that time. Atonality was the rule, attractive melodies were the exception, and that harsh dissonances had not found their way into popular music was regarded simply as a lamentable example of how popular music was always so far behind art music. Even conservative composers, say Leonard Bernstein or Virgil Thomson, put in a dissonant chord now and then in order to make their work acceptable to a symphony orchestra.

Perhaps now things are swinging back the other way. Terry Riley's music, at least, is not only tonal, but it can ripple along on one simple diatonic scale for 30 or 40 minutes at a time, with many lovely melodies and no harsh sounds anywhere. The irony, of course, is that Riley is generally regarded as a radical, though it might make better historical sense to consider him an arch conservative.

Riley has been living in San Francisco recently, where he has been devoting most of his time to the study of Indian Music, but he returned to New York for a concert at the Whitney Museum on April 5. He is rather well known now, due to the Columbia recordings of 'In C,' 'Rainbow in Curved Air,' and 'Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band,' and the Whitney was packed for the occasion. The concert, billed as 'Music from the Persian Surgery Dervishes,' was performed by Riley alone, playing a two-manual electric organ, with a delay mechanism to give the instrument a more sustained quality.

Like the music on his albums, the concert was an extremely attractive blend of Oriental modes and repetitive figurations, with a few hints at the composer's jazz background. The music hovered around one dynamic level for the entire evening, but the thematic material shifted frequently and the interest never lagged. Particularly engaging were the many intricate rhythms which played against each other constantly. Riley is extremely dexterous in this regard, sometimes maintaining a five/four rhythm in the left hand, while shifting curiously between several other meters in his right hand, without ever missing a beat. There were more subtle things too, as when a simple oom-pah figure would gradually turn into a pah-oom figure.

Since this music is largely improvised, it does not have the intellectual depth of the more calculated new pieces by Riley's former colleagues, Phil Glass and Steve Reich, but it has a warmth and personal lyricism which is quite enticing and accessible. In a way, Riley forms a bridge between the tighter forms of hypnotic music and the looser forms of jazz and raga improvisation.

May 3, 1973

A Christian Wolff Metaphor

Christian Wolff's music never bowls me over while I am listening to it, but often, after leaving a concert, I discover that it has made a strong impression on me. That is what happened Sunday afternoon when Wolff's 'Changing the System' was premiered by the Ensemble at the Alice Tully Hall.

The composer has not specified specific instrumentation for this piece, but on this occasion it was performed by two quartets. The piano, bassoon, horn, and bass played together at one side, while the trombone, vibraphone, harp, and violin played their own music at the other side. At first the music is simply a long sequence of chords, with each quartet following its own leader. Later it becomes more melodic, with the players passing notes from one instrument to another. For the final section one quartet switches to simple percussion instruments, playing together in a slow irregular pulse. The other four players take turns delivering a rather long text, speaking one syllable at a time. The text refers to the Peace Corps and the New Frontier, and states that the system itself must change in order for priorities to change.

None of Wolff's musical material here is particularly attractive or unusual, and his statement about systems is not exactly a new discovery, so I just clapped politely with everyone else. But later I began to think about how quartets had played against one another, each one intent on its own problems, and about how little communication there seemed to be between the two groups. Then the image became more provocative. The musicians in the Wolff piece have quite a bit of freedom within the improvisatory cueing games which Wolff has set up, but it is always the system, rather than the individual choices, which determines the result. Musical systems, like political systems, can tyrannize people, even when there appears to be a great amount of freedom involved.

This is only one possible interpretation of 'Changing the System,' but it is a good example of some of the extramusical considerations which a Wolff piece can stimulate. And in Wolff's recent pieces, which use verbal material, I think it is really the extramusical considerations which are most important. 'Changing the System' is not so much a piece of music as a metaphor.

May 3, 1973

'In C' in Concert: Terry Riley

My only acquaintance with Terry Riley's 'In C' has been through the Columbia recording, so I was looking forward to the live performance on April 25 at Washington Square Methodist Church. It turned out to be disappointing, mostly because of tuning difficulties between the piano and the pipe organ. The tempo also fluctuated quite a bit, and the 12-player performance in general was not very good, even though singer Meredith Monk, trombonist Garrett List and clarinettist Daniel Goode were all excellent.

But all was not lost. If nothing else, the concert did at least point out that there is a need for live performances of the piece, regardless of how many thousand copies of the record are in circulation. The structure of the piece, and the way its melodic fragments play against one another, are much clearer when one can watch the musicians, and it is nice not to have to listen to all the fancy mixing which gimmicked up and dehumanized the recorded version.

Moreover, since the orchestration of the piece is not specified by the composer, and since the many melodic fragments may be linked together in a variety of ways, the piece is an open invitation, and no one will ever be able to produce a definitive version. In a way, 'In C' is more like a raga than a piece, since its musical value depends almost completely on the sensitivity of the interpretation. Fifteen or 20 singers could turn it into a very different piece, and possibly a wonderful one. A string quartet version might be breathtaking. It is good to see creative performers explore the possibilities.

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May 10, 1973

Lukas Foss's 'Map'

It's a beautiful spring evening here in the Whitney Museum, and it's still a close contest. Jesse Levine is now launching into some tricky violin passages that Jan Williams is trying to imitate on a recorder. Petr Kotik, who is primarily a flutist, is following along as best he can on another violin but... No. Referee Virgil Thomson has decided that it wasn't good enough and has taken Kotik's violin away from him. There were a few jeers from Kotik fans on that decision. Things were looking good for him, especially a few rounds ago, when he managed to play his flute without breaking, even though Julius Eastman was sticking a toy whistle into his mouth and Williams was holding down some of his keys. But he is falling behind now. Score keeper Lukas Foss chalks up a penalty for Kotik on the large scoreboard, and now Williams will have a chance to challenge Levine, who appears to be going into his round with a cello... Yes, he's starting to play sustained tones on the cello now, and it looks like Williams is hanging something onto Levine's bow. Wait a minute. It's a little hard to see. It appears to be some kind of rings. Yes, they are little metal rings. Williams has looped them around the tip of the bow, and they are giving Levine a good deal of trouble. He is still playing, though, and it looks as if Williams has failed to stop him. Yes. There's the decision. Levine gets the point. I think one reason why Thomson gave the point to Levine is because his cello is blended so well with the prerecorded instrumental sounds which are being played in the background. Most of the time, no one appears to be paying much attention to the background music, but it seemed important in that round.

(Several rounds later) Eastman is still ahead, despite the additional penalty he received when he dropped a mallet, in an unusually clumsy moment. But Levine is moving up, thanks to that nice maneuver when he thwarted Williams's vibraphone playing by clanging a big chain across the vibes. Now Levine and Williams are confronting each other in one of the most intense challenges of the game. The audience is quite still now, listening to the tricky patterns they are tossing back and forth. It is quite remarkable how Levine, with his violin, seems to be able to imitate anything Williams plays on his vibraphone. Williams, in turn, has been doing some fine imitating himself. But now. Wait a minute. Williams has just ended one of his vibraphone phrases with a soft cymbal crash. How will Levine ever manage to imitate that on his violin? The audience is hushed. Levine takes his bow and plays. Will he make it?... No. Thomson's decision is immediate. Levine's cymbal imitation was not good enough, and that, unfortunately, gives Levine his third and final penalty, leaving only Williams and Eastman to battle it out in another round of imitation and... Williams wins the point easily. Thomson declares Williams the winner, and there is a nice round of applause. But wait. Scorekeeper Foss is intervening. Apparently there is some

technicality which I do not understand, as Foss has declared that they must have another play-off round. Eastman wins that hands down, and now he is declared the winner. Most of the audience seems to feel that the referee was right and that the prize, which is a small bell, should have gone to Williams. But there is not much point in arguing with Foss, not only because he is the scorekeeper, but also because he is the inventor of this curious and totally involving game called 'Map.'

May 24, 1973

Steve Reich Tries out Two Works

Private art galleries have seldom served as concert halls, but it is increasingly common for concerts to be presented in SoHo galleries. This usually means sitting on the floor, and sometimes one's view of the performers is not as good as it would be in a regular concert hall, but open gallery spaces generally have good acoustics, and their flexible lighting facilities can often be put to good use by musicians. Perhaps most important, playing music in an art gallery sets up a healthy relationship between the arts. The concert goers are exposed to a few wall hangings, people who drop in to see exhibits end up hearing some music, and everyone is better off. Steve Reich and Musicians played four times at the John Weber Gallery betwen May 12 and 17. The features of this program were two new Reich works, each of which is about 25 minutes long.

Reich's 'Work in Progress for Six Pianos' is perhaps the most subtle music he has written, and I like it very much, although my favorite Reich work is still the extraordinary 90-minute 'Drumming.' The work for six pianos is a continuous stream of intricate rippling patterns, interrupted only slightly at two points when the lower notes drop out for a moment and the music inconspicuously shifts into another mode. The minor mode prevails, and the music vaguely suggests Slavic or Israeli qualities to me, even though it has nothing to do with the actual harmonic progressions or melodic patterns one finds in these traditional idioms. The six performers played very well. Not only did they stay exactly together, which is no minor accomplishment in a piece this long and this fast, but they have all mastered a rather unusual pianist technique. The touch is dry and percussive, with almost no accents or nuances and no use of the sustaining pedal. The six spinet pianos were slightly amplified, and a subtle ringing quality seemed to emanate from the loudspeakers.

Reich's 'Work in Progress for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ' is a little different stylistically from most of his works. Instead of being a single blend of sound, this piece moves along on several levels. A loud electric organ and two soft female voices offer slow chord progressions, which repeat in little phrases. On another level, glockenspiels and marimbas ripple along in quick patterns, much like the six pianos in the other new piece, though the sound here is rather shrill. On another level, a 'metallophone,' which is really just a vibraphone with the motor turned off, inserts loud chords of its own. A third female singer adds short 'doop doop' notes, which run along on yet another plane. I found it difficult to tune in on more than one or two levels at once, but no matter whom I listened to, there were always interesting little variations in progress.

As in all Reich's music, a rigorous logic is behind everything, but the logic is relatively concealed in the new pieces. This was particularly apparent in comparison with the two earlier works presented on the same program. In 'Clapping Music' two musicians clap a simple rhythm over and over, with one of them occasionally moving another beat ahead of the other. It ends quite predictably after the cycle has been completed and all the permutations have been stated. 'Piano Phase' was performed in an arrangement for two marimbas. The process in this three-section work is not so obvious as in 'Clapping Music,' but here too one can hear the patterns shifting through their permutations.

A word should be said about the professional caliber of the well rehearsed ensemble. The musicians are all quite good in their own right, and they have played together for some time, so that they really understand the music and work together admirably. Robert Becker, Stephen Chambers, Tim Ferchen, Russ Hartenberger, Benjamin Herman, James Preiss, Joe Rasmussen, Glen Valez and Reich play the pianos and mallet instruments. Janice Jarrett, Joan LaBarbara and Jay Clayton are the vocalists.

June 7, 1973

The Sonic Arts Union: Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma

The Sonic Arts Union performed more or less continuously in WBAI's Studio C for three days, May 25 through 27. I have attended Free Music Store concerts there many times, but have seldom heard one on the radio, so I decided to listen to some of their performances on my FM tuner. This turned out to be a very poor vantage point. David Behrman's 'Home Made Synthesizer Music with Sliding Pitches' and Gordon Mumma's 'Cybersonic Cantilevers' sounded all right, but I was never able to really involve myself the way I do when I am on the scene, watching them manipulate their equipment. And Alvin Lucier's 'Vifarb Hyperb,' which apparently has something to do with moving loudspeakers around the room, did not make any sense at all on radio. This was frustrating, of course, but at the same time it was deeply encouraging, because it demonstrated that the concert hall is still alive and well and necessary. Even in purely electronic pieces, radios and phonographs are hopelessly inadequate as substitutes for a well-organized concert presentation.

However, a wonderful crazy tape piece called 'In Sara, Mencken, Christ and Beethoven There Were Men and Women' came across fairly well on the Saturday night broadcast. This is Robert Ashley's setting of a poem written in 1944 by John Barton Wolgamot, and it is quite unlike anything else, chiefly because of its unique text.

Wolgamot is a minor poet, if there ever was one, though he seems to be famous among many artists who were around the University of Michigan in the early '60s. The 128 verses of this poem are largely a long list of 'really grand men and women,' including all the names eulogized in our history books and a number of unfamiliar ones. Throughout the reading, a great variety of electronic sounds go on busily in the background.

Apparently Ashley spliced out all the breathing points, because the reader's voice goes on and on without ever coming up for air. The text is delivered in a rhythmic monotone, and I became restless after 20 or 30 minutes, but I also became more and more fascinated with the absurdity of listing all those names, just for the sake of listing them. Perhaps I would not have been so restless if I had just turned my attention to the consistently interesting electronic sounds accompanying the reader, but for some reason I seldom did. It is a hard piece to come to grips with, even on a basic perceptual level. But that's partly what makes it so wonderfully crazy.

Early the following afternoon I visited the studio to see how the Sonic Arts Union would be set up during normal visiting hours. I found a casual gallery atmosphere, with people dribbling in for varying lengths of time. Some 16-mm films were running, but I was more interested in the 'Cybersonic Cantilevers' which Gordon Mumma was pumping into the room. This is not really a piece, but rather a process, involving a special set of equipment which will run on any sort of sound you want to feed it. No matter what sort of input you use, the sounds go through the same circuitry, where they become distorted in particular ways, and come out as 'Cybersonic Cantilevers.' While I was there, Mumma was working mostly with a large pile of cassette tapes. Every once in a while he would grab randomly at the pile and find something fresh to plug into the system. He explained that some of the time he had been making 'Cybersonic Cantilevers' out of WBAI's broadcast signal, and that he sometimes set up microphones, so that interested passers-by could feed their own voices into the system.

Mumma also had a couple of little do-it-yourself units. An individual visitor could put on a pair of headphones and manipulate a few simple controls, directing several varieties of distortion into either ear. It is a neat gadget, guaranteed to keep you interested for quite a while.

It is difficult to say what these 'Cybersonic Cantilevers' sound like, since much depends on the nature of the input, but they are usually raucous and tend to flit nervously from one kind of squawky sound to another. It is fairly easy to tell if the machine is feeding on verbal, musical or electronic material, but the specific identity of the input is never very clear. One of the fascinations is trying to puzzle this out.

Mumma's goal is not to create lovely effects, or to convey human emotions, or to create good music in any traditional sense. It has to do with machines: communicating with them, playing games with them, trying to accept them, and simply letting them do their thing. His machines are telling us something. And when we tune in on their level, the music seems fascinating and important - even to people like me, who never soldered a single wire and have trouble remembering the difference between a watt and an amp.

June 7, 1973

Learning from 'Two Gongs': Rhys Chatham

I learned some interesting things about gongs on May 30 at a Centre Street loft concert: that gongs have many different pitches, most of which don't make much sense in terms of the overtone series; that different tones stand out, depending on how the gong is struck; that when a gong makes a crescendo, a wonderful whoosh of high sound streams into the room; that loud gongs vibrate the floor in a special way and put an odd charge in the air; that listening to gongs, played alone for over an hour, is an extraordinary experience.

All this has little to do with Rhys Chatham, who simply found a couple of gongs and a couple of people to keep them ringing, set up a little amplification, and generally organized the evening of 'Two Gongs.' But it has a lot to do with broadening our definition of music. An electronic circuit designed by Gordon Mumma can make music. And a piece of metal, carefully crafted into a fine gong, can make music.

Now that Eastern thought is making its way into our lives and one hears more and more talk about controlling the ego, I wouldn't be surprised if more musicians began to turn in this direction. Giving up controlling every sound. No longer insisting on human organization. Just setting something up and allowing nature to take its course.

Note: Unfortunately things didn't go that way.

June 28, 1973

The Max Neuhaus Beep: But What's it for?

Max Neuhaus has been circulating posters giving a rather cryptic description of a 'sound discoverable' which he has installed at the Jay Street-Boro Hall subway station. So one afternoon last week I went out to Brooklyn to look for it. I wandered around for a while, but I couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary until I finally took the escalator up to the street level and noticed some soft electronic beeping.

Numerous loudspeakers are mounted at the top of four columns in the little plaza in front of the Transit Authority office building. They emit two electronic tones, which beep along in steady rhythms. The speed changes slightly once in a while, and the tones wander from column to column. It is a pleasant sound, and I enjoyed just standing there listening to it for a while, but I began to wonder what other people thought of it, especially those who had to listen to it every day. There were quite a few people standing around, mostly Transit Authority employees on their coffee breaks, so I decided to approach one of them. 'Excuse me, sir. Are you aware of that beeping sound?' 'Oh that. It's always there.' 'Do you like it?' 'It doesn't make much difference to me one way or the other. I don't think it will add much to the noise pollution. What is it anyway?' 'A composer named Max Neuhaus put it up.' 'But what's it for?' 'I don't know for sure. I guess he just thought it would be more interesting to listen to than all the trucks and buses going by.' 'You're not telling me it's supposed to be music, are you?' 'No. Not exactly.' I suppose that was not a very courageous answer, but I didn't feel like getting into a discussion about definitions. 'By the way, do you ever notice it change very much?' 'No. It always seems about the same to me.' I thanked him and approached someone else. 'Excuse me, sir. Are you aware of that beeping sound?' 'I've noticed it from time to time, but I don't know what it is.' 'It's an electronic sound installation that runs automatically. A composer got a grant to put it up.' 'No kidding. I thought it was just to keep the pigeons away or something.' I laughed. 'It may do that too, but I don't think it was intended for that.' 'What's it for?' There was that question again. I decided to take a fresh approach. 'I guess it's just decoration. You know. Sometimes they put a fountain or a piece of sculpture in front of a building so that there will be something to look at. So this composer put sounds out here so that there would be something to listen to.' 'But what's it for?' 'That's about all I know about it.' It seemed time to change the subject. 'By the way, have you ever noticed the sound change, or does it always seem about the same to you?' Now he became more involved in the conversation. 'I remember one night when I had to work late, till about 7 or 8, and when I came out it seemed a little slower than usual. Is that possible?' 'It's quite possible. I don't know exactly how it's set up, but it's supposed to sound different depending on the temperature, the sunlight, the humidity, and even the

air pressure.' 'I wondered if it might be doing something like that.' 'Do you have any particular feelings about the sound. I mean, do you like it?' 'It doesn't bother me, but it doesn't do anything for me either. Not like music. Music makes me feel something, but this doesn't make me feel anything.' I tried another approach. 'Does it remind you of anything?' 'Well, it sometimes does. Once I happened to be listening to it, and it sounded to me like some little children playing. Like the way they play with their little shovels and things, not really paying attention to the sounds they make. You know what I mean?' I couldn't relate to this specific image, but I appreciated his comment a great deal. Here was a man with a very restricted definition of music, who probably wouldn't have been caught dead at an avant-garde concert. And yet Max Neuhaus, with his crazy weather-sensitive 24-hour-a-day synthetic music machine, had evoked a highly personal response from him. Nor was he the only one. Several people I spoke to said they were reminded of birds, and no doubt hundreds, or even thousands of people have had some form of aesthetic response while passing through the plaza.

'What is it for?' still seems to be the most common reaction, and the installation, which has been up since January, is only beginning to work on the heads of most of the people who pass under it every day. Gradually, however, they are bound to become more aware of what they are hearing, and eventually they will probably begin to discern the difference between the rainy day beeping and the sunny day beeping, or between the winter version and the summer version.

Those of us who do not frequent the area will never be able to appreciate that aspect of the installation. But when we happen to pass by, we too may perceive the soft electronic beeping, somewhere between the traffic and the subways. We may even stop long enough to notice how pleasant it sounds and how gracefully it moves from one column to another. And perhaps, just perhaps, we will keep our ears a little more open wherever we go. After all, if we don't, we may miss Max's next piece.

July 3, 1973

Shredding the Climax Carrot

When I was a composition student, the one thing which was always held up to us as an unassailable criterion for good music was whether or not it would 'hold the attention.' This seems obvious enough until one begins to consider what it involves.

In order to hold our attention for an entire evening, a work must jolt us once in a while with a well-timed surprise, hold a climax carrot in front of our noses so that we will have something to look forward to, lift us up and let us down in an appealing sequence, and titillate us with interesting details all along the way. Otherwise our minds might wander.

There is something manipulative about pieces which force themselves on us, conning us into following every move they make, and I think this process begs a few questions. What right does an artist have to tell his audience what to feel and when to feel it? Shouldn't it be possible to have an enjoyable evening in a theatre or concert hall without constantly being manipulated? When we go to something like 'Rigoletto' aren't we really just sitting there like so many Pavlovian dogs, salivating when the bell rings, laughing when we are supposed to, and weeping on cue?

I am not saying anything is wrong with Verdi, not to mention Beethoven, Shakespeare, Bartok, or any of the other masters whose works hold our attention so well. We give ourselves willingly to these things, just following them along, allowing them to manipulate us, feeling whatever we are supposed to feel, and loving every minute of it. But I am not sure this kind of art, which actually tyrannizes its audience, is what people really want and need today. And I am not sure that we should continue to insist that a performance must hold us in rapt attention from beginning to end in order to be beautiful.

Some of the performances I enjoyed most this past season are ones in which my mind wandered a great deal. They did not try to manipulate me or ring any Pavlovian bells, and they did not struggle to hold my attention. They simply said what they had to say, leaving me free to listen or not listen, and respond in my own way.

I think the first time I began to think along these lines was the night Victor Grauer read his 'Book of the Year 3000' at the Kitchen (see Dec. 14, 1972). This was a truly non-manipulative performance, and it is a good example of what I am talking about, because Grauer made his intentions quite clear at the outset.

His introductory remarks, as well as I can remember them, went something like this.

'I'm going to be reading for about three hours against this electronic sound. There won't be any intermission, but I don't want anyone to feel tied down. If you would like to hum along with the electronic tone, or echo back some of the words or phrases I read, that's fine too. And if you get sleepy, don't force yourself to stay awake. We can take in a lot of things even when we're asleep. The important thing is just to make yourself comfortable.' I listened attentively much of the time, sometimes humming along with the electronic background. But I also took a couple of intermissions, and I spent quite a bit of time just lying on the floor, allowing the mellifluous words of the repetitious text to wash over my wandering mind. The piece was not holding my attention much of the time, but I would not have walked out for anything. Whenever I was able to tune in on the specific images and rhythms, I liked what I heard. And when I came to the end of a concentration span, the atmosphere itself was quite enough to keep me content.

In a very broad sense, all art is manipulative, and Grauer was pulling a few strings himself. After all, he did prime us with those introductory remarks. The lighting he used, the electronic tone, and the text itself all had a calculated effect. But this is not manipulation in the specific sense I was talking about before. No climax carrot. No surprises. No titillation. No insistence on holding the attention. He left us pretty much alone, allowing us to decide for ourselves how we wanted to respond, and leaving plenty of room for each individual to respond differently.

I encountered this nonmanipulative attitude again when I heard Eliane Radigue's 'Psi 847,' a wonderfully sensitive, though extremely subtle hour-long electronic piece, a few months later (see March 29, 1973). I had a chance to meet Radigue after the concert, so I decided to sound her out. 'I like your music very much,' I explained, 'but I must admit that I wasn't able to concentrate on it all the time.' 'Of course not,' she was quick to reply. 'No one can concentrate on such tiny differences for such a long time. But it's not necessary. The piece can go along without you for a while. You come back to it when you're ready. And maybe the things you were thinking about while you weren't focused just on the music were also meaningful. That's all part of the experience. How you get into the music, leave it, come back again, and so on. And it's different for everyone.' It is different. In my case I listened attentively for the first 15 or 20 minutes before my mind finally took its first intermission. But I remember the critic John Rockwell saying that night that he hadn't paid much attention at first, thinking it must be kind of an introduction, but that he got into it later, after he realized it was going to continue on this same minimal plane. We were not being manipulated. We were simply exposed to something beautiful and allowed to deal with it in our own ways.

Grauer and Radigue are convenient examples, since they have expressed their attitudes verbally. But they are really only a small part of a large picture which has been evolving for some time. I think the seeds of this nonmanipulative attitude could be traced back at least as far as Gertrude Stein and Charles Ives. Certainly the bulk of John Cage's work has been relatively nonmanipulative, though this was never his main concern. In 1956, for example, Cage introduced an evening of collaborations with Merce Cunningham with this remark, 'The activity of movement, sound, and light, we believe, is expressive, but what it expresses is determined by each one of you - who is right, as Pirandello's title has it, if he thinks he is.' The works of dozens of current artists could be considered nonmanipulative. Many of the things I heard this past season reflected this attitude. Like the three-day event presented by the Sonic Arts Union at WBAI, where people were free to come and go all day (see June 7, 1973). Or Max Neuhaus's permanent sound installation in front of the Transit Authority building (see June 28, 1973). Or Alvin Lucier's 'The Queen of the South' (see March 15, 1973), or Rhys Chatham's 'Two Gongs' (see June 7, 1973), or David Behrman's concert (see February 1, 1973), or Phill Niblock's 'Ten 100-Inch Radii' (see March 8, 1973).

In some of these works a great deal of information is presented, and the audience pays close attention most of the time. But none of them require us to feel or think particular things at particular times. We are not treated as Pavlovian creatures, but as free agents who have our own ideas, our own fantasies, and our own curiosities. Pieces of this sort do not manipulate the audience, actively demanding anyone's attention. They are passive in nature, and the audience is allowed to approach them in different ways.

I am less familiar with current playwrights, choreographers, and film-makers, but I have the feeling that this new wave of nonmanipulative art is coming at us from all directions. It is a cool wave, reminiscent of the kind of coolness McLuhan was talking about when he discussed hot and cool communications media. And it threatens to drown our last sure-fire dictum for evaluating performance pieces: that they must hold the attention in order to be valid.

July 26, 1973

A La Monte Young Diary: Feb. 1968-June 1973

February 16, 1968: For several years I had been hearing crazy stories about La Monte Young. About how he turned a butterfly loose in a Berkeley auditorium and said it was a piece. About his composition in which the performer attempts to make a grand piano (sic) eat a bale of hay and drink water out of a bucket. About how he sometimes played one note for hours on end. About how few people had ever managed to sit through one of his concerts. Even my most liberal friends seemed to feel that he was completely beyond the pale. All this hearsay was more than enough to pique my curiosity, and I had been looking forward to his concert at the Barbizon Plaza, to see for myself about his Theatre of Eternal Music.

The music that night was the loudest I had ever heard. It consisted largely of electronic drones, which shifted slightly once in a while, while Young hummed along. I found the sounds harsh and offensive, and I probably wouldn't have stayed very long except that I happened to notice a change in the color of Marian Zazeela's large projection in the background. Like the sun going down, or a cloud passing by, I never could see it change, but every time I looked back, the intricate filigree designs had taken a slightly different form, and th color seemed different. I was also fascinated by Young's claim that the music they were playing, 'The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys,' was an endless piece which had already been going on for four years. That was a nice idea, but it did not relieve my assaulted eardrums.

Fall 1972: I had pretty much decided that Young's music was not the kind of thing I wanted to sit down and listen to very often, but I had grown increasingly interested in his ideas, and particularly in some of his post-Dada theatre pieces. Many of these things are contained in his 'Anthology,' but I couldn't find copies in any book stores, so I arranged to stop by his Centre Street loft one morning to pick one up.

As I entered the door, a strong scent of incense hit my face and I was asked to take off my shoes. Young and Zazeela's Indian singing teacher, Pandit Pran Nath, were there, as well as Don Cherry, the trumpet player who used to work with Ornette Coleman. I never was able to figure out if Cherry was also studying Indian singing, or if he was just a friend or what, because Young explained that we had to sit silently for a moment. It seemed that, in the adjacent room, Pandit Pran Nath was lighting more incense and doing some sort of morning ritual which required that we all sit silently for a few minutes.

Later, conversation was again permitted, and I asked Young a little about himself. He is a relatively small man, now 38 years old, with a gentle manner and an enormous beard. He talked about his jazz background, about his former colleague Terry Riley, about how they used to play their saxophones together a lot in California, and how they had both become involved in static music 10 or 15 years ago.

Later the conversation drifted into more practical matters, and he told me a few stories about his dealings with recording companies, concert managers, and so on. Some curious contradictions emerged here. On the one hand he is more oriented toward aesthetic and spiritual values than toward money or status, and he is unwilling to make the slightest concessions in his methods just for the sake of landing a commission or a record release. But on the other hand, he is about the only composer I know who has been successful in selling expensive private editions of tape recordings or records of his music. And judging from the armload of publicity materials which he gave me on my way out the door, he is a much better press agent for himself than most composers are.

On returning home I shifted through some of the things he had given me, and was surprised to see how much public attention his work had received. There were long complimentary articles by John Perreault, Jill Johnston, and Ron Rosenbaum from the Voice, many items from European publications and domestic art magazines, a clipping from the New York Times (under 'Art Notes'), and even a couple of columns from Newsweek. There was also a long impressive list of grants and fellowships.

January 27, 1973: I went to a small private concert Young was giving in his loft late in the afternoon. Young and Zazeela were both singing, assisted by a trumpet player and a trombone player, as well as electronic drone tones. The sound was moderate in volume and rather pleasant to listen to, without any of the raucousness which had bothered me a few years earlier at the Barbizon Plaza.

Despite the pleasant atmosphere, or perhaps because of it, I dozed off after a while. I don't know how long I was asleep, but when I woke up everything was very different, and I became particularly attracted to a projection on the rear wall. It was changing very slowly, reminding me of the Zazeela projection I had seen at the Barbizon Plaza, but this one was more intricate and seemed to be working automatically. I wondered why I hadn't noticed the projection before, and suddenly I figured it out. It was still daylight when the concert began, and the projection had gradually come into view as the sun went down. Nice idea.

A couple of hours into the concert, Young's singing was really beginning to take off, and I could tell that those years of studying Indian singing had given him a facility which he didn't have before. Not that he was singing in an Indian style. But he had that kind of flexibility and control. I became particularly interested in an odd pulsating effect which came from down in his throat somewhere, and which became more and more prominent as the concert droned on. By now he was using the microphone most of the time, but he used it largely just to add an edge to his voice. The music never became too loud.

Most of the time the performers just stuck to the root and fifth, exactly in tune with the electronic drone. But once a ninth came in, making a drastic change. Adding one note in this kind of music is like bringing in a whole chorus in a 19th-century symphony. Later there was another big change, when the trombone began playing a pedal tone, a whole step below the drone note. It was a strange modulation, and the music sounded very dolorous for a while.

I liked this music much better than the concert at the Barbizon Plaza, not only because it was softer and more pleasant, but also because there was an element of technical virtuosity. But I was rather surprised at the way the music built up, increasing in energy the way a raga improvisation does. It seemed to me that the Theatre of Eternal Music should want to keep on one plane. The study of Indian music must be having some effect on Young's aesthetics, as well as on his vocal technique.

April 18, 1973: A friend of mine was telling me about his experience at a concert given by Pandit Pran Nath, along with Young and Zazeela, and he raised an interesting point. He said he was offended by all the incense and didn't like to be forced to take off his shoes. He also resented the way all the camp followers, mostly dressed in Indian fashion, huddled around the performers, leaving him and the rest of the audience out in the cold. He felt that musicians should be content just to play music, without trying to foist their religion onto the audience at the same time.

The business about the shoes and the incense and the camp followers had never bothered me particularly, and I felt my friend's comment was a little unfair. I said I didn't think they were really trying to convert anyone to anything and that the trappings were necessary in order to create an Oriental atmosphere, and that this kind of mood really was appropriate to the music.

April 21, 1973: After thinking about it some more, I decided I was wrong. Young probably really does want to convert people. It's still basically the music that he wants to convert us to, but his musical ideas have become so mixed up with his religious feelings that he has trouble separating them.

June 25, 1973: In the process of going over old notes and trying to pull my 'La Monte Young Diary' together, I realized that the most important point was missing, namely, the extraordinary amount of influence which Young has had on other composers. There is a direct line of influence from Young, to Riley, to Steve Reich and Phil Glass, and from there to Mother Mallard's Portable Masterpiece Company and probably many other composers and groups. Tony Conrad, Rhys Chatham, and Jon Gibson are a few other people who have had direct contact with Young and Zazeela, and whose music seems to show their influence. It would probably not be exaggerating to suggest that the whole movement of static music, and the current widespread concern with non-Western styles, can be attributed in large part to Young.

Of course, the most original and influential artists are not always the best ones. And personally I find that many of the works Young has inspired in other composers are richer and more rewarding than his own more obsessive music. Yet there is a strength, a purity, and an authenticity in Young's work which one does not find in the others. He is a beautiful man, a sincere composer, and unquestionably one of the true originals of our time.

July 26, 1973

David Tudor's 'Rainforest'

Merce Cunningham's 'Rainforest' (1968) has been widely discussed, particularly because of the mylar pillows which Andy Warhol designed for it. The pillows are partially filled with helium so that they are suspended in mid-air and, according to all reports, they are fascinating to watch. The music for this dance, created by David Tudor, has received little attention. This music, however, is based on another unique principle which in many ways is even more fascinating than Andy Warhol's pillow idea.

Under the title 'Sliding Pitches in the Rainforest in the Field,' Tudor presented an expanded version of this music on one of the Chocorua '73 concerts, presented as part of New Music in New Hampshire. The sounds are entirely electronic, but instead of using loudspeakers, they are fed into various objects, which resonate in their own ways. These objects, most of which were suspended from the ceiling of the old barn where the concert took place, included a wine barrel, some bed springs, a small metal ring, a plastic lawn sprinkler, a tennis racket perched on a 10-gallon bottle, a styrofoam picnic basket, a long cable which stretched diagonically up to the ceiling, and a large metal rim, which looked as if it belonged on a covered wagon wheel.

Of course the objects were all wired to tape recorders and sound synthesizing equipment, but it was the objects themselves which took on the greatest significance. In a way they were the performers, because it was they, after all, that were actually producing the acoustical sounds we were hearing. Each object had its own distinct voice.

The wine barrel, for example, seemed happiest with low frequencies, and as one might expect, he added a deep echo to all his sounds. The little plastic lawn sprinkler turned out to be a squawky fellow, who resonated much louder than anyone his size ought to. The sounds of the large metal rim had a crazy way of spreading out all over the whole room, making it difficult to tell where they were coming from. But if you put your ear right next to the rim, or better, stuck your head inside its circle, it became quite clear that it really was the rim you were hearing.

The situation was informal, so that the audience could mill around and explore these objects. It was fascinating just to poke around and figure out what was doing what, and the sounds were appealing in their own right. There was a great variety of timbres, from the rumbles of the wine barrel, to the zinging effects of the large cable, to the whirr of the bed springs, to the extremely odd effects

which happened as the sounds of the tennis racket seemed to drop into the 10-gallon bottle beneath it.

The individual effects were largely repetitious, many having a rhythmic pulse, but the situation was constantly changing. Every few minutes some object would fade out and another would come into play, and the process kept me interested for a couple of hours.

It kept Tudor and his assistants interested for five and a half hours. They were not trying to press the point, as people were free to come and go at will. They just seemed to enjoy keeping the sounds going for those who wanted to stay, and for those who would come back later on. I suppose they were also having an enjoyable time feeding various sounds into various objects, testing how the objects responded to different things, trying to find resonant frequencies, and listening to subtle variations. For those who may be unfamiliar with Tudor, I should add that he was, for some time, the best avant-garde pianist around. He phased out his career as a pianist five to 10 years ago, but I would not be surprised if his current activities could turn out to be even more significant than his now legendary concerts of Stockhausen, Cage, et al in the ‘50s and early ‘60s.

August 30, 1973

Soundings from the West Coast

Little magazines come and go every year, and generally they are of little consequence. But a unique new music magazine called Soundings merits special attention. While quite a few of the scores and articles in Soundings are by older composers and East Coast composers, this little quarterly is largely a product of West Coast avant-gardists, many of whom are still in their 20s. And as a whole it offers a musical point of view quite different from any encountered around New York.

Soundings is primarily the brainchild of its editor, Peter Garland. It grew out of a class at Cal Arts, a publishing seminar taught by Dick Higgins in 1970, and its first issue appeared in January 1972. Now, a year and a half later, the little magazine still has only about 170 bona fide subscribers. But the six issues it has published form a rather remarkable body of new music and ideas about new music.

From a New York point of view, perhaps the most jolting thing about Soundings is its sense of recent music history. Most young composers today find their roots in Webern, Stockhausen, or Cage. But in Soundings these names are scarcely mentioned. Instead, the older-generation mentors are composers like Harry Partch, Lou Harrison, Silvestre Revueltas, and Dane Rudhyar.

Partch and Harrison have often been overlooked or underestimated, largely, I think, because they don’t fit into any perceivable mainstream. But they are both fine composers, and it is easy to understand why young musicians on the West Coast might look up to them. Both are Californians. Both have been strongly influenced by Oriental ideas, which seem to have more appeal for each new generation. Both are stubborn individuals. And both have focused their attention on acoustics and actual sounds, scorning the more intellectual procedures of both serialism and probability theory.

The emphasis of Revueltas seems to have a political basis, since, as an early 20th-century Mexican, he represents the Third World. Revueltas made extensive use of Indian and folk material in his music and had strong nationalistic tendencies. He identified with the lower classes and often spoke out against the American and European oriented musical life in his country, which he viewed as a kind of musical imperialism. Other South American composers also receive attention in Soundings. One issue contains the score of one of Conlon Nancarrow’s remarkably complex player piano pieces. About half of one issue is devoted to the pretentious and rather unenlightening theories of Julian Carrilio.

It is hard to explain why Rudhyar and his music receive so much space in Soundings. Rudhyar is much better known to us for his books on astrology than for his early atonal music, and his expressionistic scores look rather chaotic and uninteresting to me. His articles, however, with their strong concern for the Orient and for acoustical matters, seem appropriate to the context of the magazine.

Another surprising thing about Soundings is that, unlike every other avant-garde periodical I can think of, electronics plays a small role. I can't recall a single reference to computers, and the vast majority of scores have nothing to do with electronic equipment other than, perhaps, calling for standard amplification. 'Too much attention has been focused on machines to the detriment of the social and physical ground of music,' states Garland in one of his editorial comments.

But almost every other recent musical idiom is well represented, and many of the scores are quite good. I was particularly impressed with James Tenney's 'Clang,' a 15-minute orchestra piece which uses many semi-improvised techniques, similar to those currently fashionable elsewhere, but without any of the flashiness, virtuoso overtones and dramatic intensity which one finds, for example, in Ginastera or Ligeti. Philip Corner's 'Ink Marks for Performance' is one of the most interesting graphic scores I have seen. It is fascinating to study the intricate patterns of Frederic Rzewski's 17-page melody, which accompanies a text by the Attica victim Sam Melville in 'Coming Together,' Part One. Ivan Tcherepnin's two-piano arrangement of 'Silent Night,' slowed down, and with the rhythm altered, is lovely in a very odd sort of way. The simple melodies of Lou Harrison's 'Peace Pieces' are enticing. And some of the conceptual art pieces are provocative, especially those of Pauline Oliveros.

One fascinating, if somewhat bewildering, aspect of Soundings is its many minimal scores. Of course, composers all over have recently become interested in working with limited materials and subtle variations. But some of the scores in Soundings go far beyond the kind of minimalism New York audiences have heard in Steve Reich, La Monte Young or even Charlemagne Palestine.

One of Harold Budd's 'Sun Pieces,' for example, simply asks us to begin a drone tone when the sun first begins to appear over the horizon, and to alter the sound imperceptibly until the sun has completely risen.

In Michael Byron's 'Song of the Lifting Up of the Head,' a pianist is requested to keep repeating seven little one-bar fragments for at least 15 minutes.

In Tom Nixon's 'Scarhead,' a simple chant-like melody for clarinet is blithely marked 'hold each note as long as possible,' which would probably drag the three simple phrases out for about 10 to 15 minutes or longer, depending on the size of the clarinettist's lungs.

There is admittedly some appeal in this kind of innocence and simplicity, but I can't help feeling that pieces like this are a little too innocent, a little too simple, even a little naive, in a highly educated sort of way. Sometimes when I think of the many religious cults which have sprung up in California, I get the impression that Californians are a little gullible, that they like to ride bandwagons, tend to carry things to extremes, and often loose sight of the forest. At other times, when I think of BankAmericards, super highways, topless dancers, and air pollution, I have the feeling that everything starts in California, and that the Californians are simply a few years ahead of the rest of us.

A friend of mine suggested another theory. According to him, this extreme form of California minimalism all has to do with acid. Tripping has always been big on the Coast, and people who trip a lot don't need much stimulation. They can be quite content just staring at the wallpaper or listening to one note. Which is not to say that these composers and their audiences are all acid heads, but only to suggest that the psychedelic '60s may have left an impression on the general artistic climate of the West Coast.

Whatever one's pet theory about California happens to be, and however one chooses to interpret California minimalism, the values presented in Soundings are, at the very least, provocative. And some of them could turn out to be prophetic.

Note: Soundings still exists. A letter from Peter Garland in August 1988 reported that the address was P.O.B. 8319, Santa Fe, N.M. 87504/8319 and that issue 16 was in progress.

November 15, 1973

Musica Elettronica Viva at the New York Cultural Center

I caught about an hour's worth of some very fine improvising at the New York Cultural Center on Sunday afternoon. Musica Elettronica Viva originated in Rome, though most of its members were Americans, and the group became well known for its many appearances in European avant-garde events, as well as for its contribution to the explosion sequence in the 'Zabrisky Point' sound track. This four-man performance by Musica Elettronica Viva (New York) was an energetic free-form improvisation with a tight ensemble feeling.

Trombonist Garrett List stuck mostly to atonal melodies and virtuoso riffs, and much of his playing could have passed for fairly far out jazz solos. But he was always extremely sensitive to the rest of the group and seldom took the spotlight for very long at a time.

Gregory Reeve, the percussionist, pulled the group together dynamically, contributing much energy whenever things started to build, but always getting out of the way quickly as soon as an idea played itself out.

Pianist Frederic Rzewski seemed to be calling many of the plays, though he was never at all domineering. He simply has an uncanny knack for running across fresh material which is so appropriate to the moment that the others tend to follow suit. One of his contributions was a soft, oddly harmonized version of 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,' which was as effective as it was unexpected.

Richard Teitelbaum is extremely facile with his Moog synthesizer, and his electronic sounds always seem to blend with the instruments. He generally stayed in the background, and could not be heard at all in many loud passages. Yet his modest role provided the element which most clearly distinguished the music from that of similar improvising groups.

December 13, 1973

John Cage at the Kitchen

The John Cage concerts last Friday and Saturday were an auspicious way for the music program at the Kitchen to open its new season and to inaugurate its Walter series. The large second-floor gallery space at 59 Wooster Street was packed both nights, and both performers and audience seemed genuinely enthusiastic.

For once I had the feeling that Cage's music was being presented not as a token gesture to left-wing music, not as a publicity stunt, and not as some solemn dutiful hommage to the notorious 61-year-old composer, but simply because some people wanted to perform his music and others wanted to listen to it.

The most engaging work for me was Cage's 'Speech' (1955), in which two speakers read recent news clippings against the accompaniment of five radios. Cage's use of radios as musical instruments is one of his most widely discussed techniques, and I had always thought of it as a kind of early form of conceptual art. Just an idea. A kind of Dada game, just turn on a bunch of radios, fade them up and down according to the score, and listen to whatever happens to be on the airwaves. Easy to imagine. Simple. Right?

Wrong! Now that I have actually listened to one of Cage's radio scores for 40 minutes and observed audience reactions, I have changed my mind radically. There is much more to his radios than I had ever imagined simply by reading about them. I would even go so far as to say that these radio pieces are among the strongest statements of our time, both sociologically and musically.

Cage's radio scores are really mirrors which reflect the environment whenever they are performed. They put a frame around the world we live in and force us, through the medium of radio, to look at it. I saw more than I really wanted to see.

The idea is also valid musically, especially now, since so many composers have been writing eclectic music, using quotations from many different styles. The mixture of musical styles which results in one of Cage's radio pieces is just as musical, and far more natural than those fancy deliberate mixtures worked out by composers such as Luciano Berio or George Rochberg.

'Twenty-six Minutes 1.1499 Seconds for a String Player' (also 1955) is one of the many Cage scores in which the sounds were determined largely by the random flaws in his manuscript paper. Jon Deak, who normally plays with the New York Philharmonic, worked out a wonderful interpretation of this score for his double bass. Along with all the standard virtuoso tricks, which he does with

great ease, Deak utilized several special effects which I had never heard before. Perhaps the most remarkable of those were the loud raspy sounds produced by bowing on a piece of styrofoam. A pre-taped performance of the piece was shown on monitors while Deak played a slightly different performance live. The recorded sounds and the live sounds blended unusually well, and the technicians kept the performance lively by switching the live Deak and the taped Deak back and forth on the monitors.

'Water Walk' is a short theatre piece which Cage premiered on Italian television in 1959. At lightening speed the performer must perform a great many actions, most of which involve making sound with water. In this newly videotaped interpretation, Jim Burton pours, sprays, splashes, and squirts his way through the piece quite amusingly, though he never hams it up. As in most of the best interpretations of Cage's theatre pieces, one felt that the performer was simply following a score, rather than acting a scene.

The earliest work in the two concerts was the unaccompanied 'Sonata for Clarinet,' which was excellently performed by Jan Coward. This is an atonal piece in three short movements, with some nice melodies, but with none of the intense originality which was to enter Cage's music later on. It is extremely well

made, though, considering that the composer was only 21 when he wrote it. For my money, the piece provides more than enough proof that Cage could easily have become an outstanding mainstream composer if he had wanted to take that route.

There were four of those extremely simple white-note pieces which Cage wrote in the late '40s as a reaction against atonality. I particularly appreciated Philip Corner's almost impressionistic rendering of the piano piece 'Dream.' 'Bird Cage' was one of the electronic pieces included. It was composed just last year, and utilized eight different tapes derived from bird sounds, street sounds, and Cage's voice. The music is relatively sparse, and quite pleasant in comparison with Cage's harsher electronic pieces such as 'Cartridge Music.' The audience was encouraged to mill around while Joel Chadabe sat at the mixer switching the music sporadically between the eight different loudspeakers.

Also on the program were a lively precise interpretation of 'Water music' (1952) by pianist Don Gillespie, a pop music interpretation of 'Imaginary Landscape No. 5' (1952) spliced together by Harvey Matuso, other pieces for piano and prepared piano played by Philip Corner, songs sung by Judy Sherman and Connie Beckley, the electronic 'Williams Mix' (1952), and the ensemble piece 'WBAI,' which incorporated, among other elements, a four-channel recording of Cage reading his fascinating lecture, 'Where Are We Going and What Are We Doing?'

Completing the roster of capable and dedicated performers were percussionists Roy Pennington an Andrew Lubart, trombonist Garrett List, violinist Linda Quan, flutist Rhys Chatham, and last but not least, Phill Niblock, who played the radio.

January 3, 1974

New Music: A Progress Report

There must be almost twice as many new music events in New York this season as there were only a couple of years ago, and on the whole they are better presented, more adventurous, and more diversified. So much so, that it seems safe to say that this city has become the most important center for new music in the world. A composer who recently came here from London, after looking over the November listings on the Center for New Music calendar, concluded that New York offers more new music in one month than London does during the entire season. Others from Rome and Berlin have been equally impressed.

In December alone, according to my computations, 15 concerts of experimental jazz and free-form improvisation were given, not counting the weekend events at Studio Rivbee. There were seven one-man concerts oriented toward electronics, seven all-contemporary concerts by different chamber groups, two all-Cage concerts, a marathon of new music, two programs at WBAI's Free Music Store, several events at SoHo galleries, two programs by the New Wilderness Preservation Band, several appearances by Steve Reich and Musicians, and a Philip Glass concert, not to mention three concerts in Great Neck, one Avant-Garde Festival, and a whole raft of concerts which mixed new music with old.

Granted the attendance was small at many of these events, but it represents a vast increase over the number of New Yorkers who were seeking fresh musical stimulation a few years ago. And we are not dealing with the evolution of one school, but a burgeoning of activity in many new directions at once: maximal approaches, minimal approaches, cross-cultural approaches, electronic devices, theatrical forms, highly controlled idioms, and open-ended idioms. And in general the performance standards and the level of creative responsibility at such concerts is quite high.

I think the main reason for the increased activity is simply that so many fine composers are working here at the moment, something like what happened in Paris in the '20s. They go to each other's concerts, talk shop a lot, learn from each other, develop friendly competition, and establish higher and higher standards. The energy is contagious, so everyone does a lot of work, outsiders move to the center to be in the swim of things, and everything snowballs.

There are other factors too. Places like the Kitchen, WBAI's Free Music Store, the Cubiculo, and a variety of lofts, churches, and galleries provide performance spaces at no cost to the artists, and with an unprecedented degree of artistic license. At such places no one will tell composers or groups that they have to be finished by 11 p.m. because of union regulations, or that they must submit scores

to a committee, or that they must guarantee an audience of so many people, or that they cannot write for such-and-such instruments, or even that they have to keep their clothes on.

We have had fine performers of contemporary music in New York for a long time, but I think there are more now, and they are more adventurous. Quite a few of them are sufficiently dedicated to new music that they will occasionally perform gratis when someone tries to organize a performance of a new work and no funds are available.

Among subsidiary advantages available to New York composers, the Center for New Music has been particularly useful in publicizing concerts for groups with spartan advertising budgets. Publicists and producers of new music also seem to be more capable than a few years ago. And of course, the New York State Council on the Arts, the largest of all the state arts councils, is an important force, since it sponsors many experimental ventures which would probably be impossible to susidize in any other state.

In a conversation following a concert in Phill Niblock's loft, someone commented that the atmosphere reminded him of the gatherings some 10 years ago in Yoko Ono's loft. Those seminal events were a prime source for Fluxus, happenings, conceptual art, the Something Else Press, and many of the intermedia innovations of the '60s. If things continue the way they are, a number of important composers and a whole era of valuable musical literature will soon emerge from New York's current boiling pot of off-beat musical activity.

With that optimistic prediction, I should perhaps admit that I have been writing this article in a cheerful holiday mood. I could, and often do, go into more specific and more depressing questions, but I thought it would be nice to start the new year by emphasizing the positive. Besides, there are bound to be plenty of gloomy articles in the Voice this week without my adding another one. Happy New Year.

January 24, 1974

The New Wilderness Preservation Band

On New Year's Eve I dropped in on an event billed as a 'Tibetan Jam' and heard something which still haunts me. Four musicians had made a tape loop out of a segment of Tibetan music, which was almost atonal and full of brass, and they were improvising along with it. I had the feeling that the live American musicians and the recorded Tibetan musicians were calling to each other, and in some way which defies all laws of time and space, they actually seemed to be making contact.

This was part of a new series of provocative cross-culturally oriented events taking place at Washington Square Methodist Church under the label 'New Wilderness.' It is an interesting concept, and the poets and musicians involved are exploring it in a stimulating way. Last Tuesday the featured artist was Avery Jimerson, a Seneca Indian, who came down from the Allegany Reservation upstate to sing a few of the 1000 or so songs he has composed during the past 30 years. Jimerson speaks English quite well, and he is not at all naive about the white man, but he is not accustomed to giving concerts for him either. So the evening had a curious kind of what-shall-I-do-next informality, sort of as if we were visiting him in his living room. He told a couple of stories and his wife led a few volunteers in a Moccasin Dance, but most of the time he sang, and with great assurance. He has a strong voice with a slightly pinched sound, and he never moves his lips more than a fraction of an inch as he makes his way through his intricate melodies, always accompanying himself on a drum. The songs are all short, some scarcely a minute long, but they are not at all repetitious and generally have lots of shifty rhythms and complex formal structures. Most of them have no words, making do simply with hi-yo-way and other non-verbal syllables common in American Indian music.

I found all of this contemporary Seneca music absorbing and intellectually challenging, but for me the emotional high point of the evening was Jimerson's version of 'Auld Lang Syne.' This melody is taken directly from the white man, yet it was so thoroughly integrated into Jimerson's own Seneca style that I probably would not have recognized it if the singer had not clued us in. It sounded pretty strange, but it was somehow deeper and more communicative than any 'Auld Lang Syne' arrangement I ever heard at a New Year's Eve party.

Bruce Ditmas, Charlie Morrow and Carole Weber, members of the New Wilderness Preservation Band, responded later with some fine music of their own which paid homage to the Seneca style without ever mimicking it or overextending themselves. Against a background of jingling bells, they reeled off

a number of variations of a simple melody with singing, whistling, flute and musical saw.

The New York poet Jerome Rothenberg, who has spent a good deal of time on the Allegany Reservation, talked a bit about Seneca customs and read several poems collected in his own Seneca notebooks.

Note: The importance of cross-cultural exchanges of this type can not be overemphasized, as they had great influence on all of the music and musicians that were developing. From a European point of view, we were very naive to think we could communicate with recorded Tibetan trumpets or learn from a Seneca singer, but many important discoveries have begun with naiveté.

January 24, 1974

Yoshi Wada's Pipe Horns

Yoshimasa Wada's concert at the Kitchen on January 13 featured four of his 'pipe horns,' which are simply enormous plumbing pipes with mouthpieces attached. They sound a little like tubas, although the sound is more direct, and the players can slide from one note to another without benefit of valves or slides. Playing against electronic drones, the four players made simple sliding melodies for about two hours, creating a meditative music strongly reminiscent of La Monte Young's work. With the exception of Garrett List, the performers lacked sufficient breath and embouchure control to make their melodic lines consistently gratifying, though the sonorities themselves were appealing.

The electronic drone tones, all tuned to the root and fifth, made delicate adjustments in volume throughout the evening. This was accomplished by Liz Phillips, utilizing a remarkable set of equipment which processed the pipe horn sounds and made the adjustments automatically according to her program.

January 31, 1974

Charlemagne Palestine: Electronics, Voice, and Piano

Charlemagne Palestine has given three stimulating one-man concerts here this season, the most recent being his 'Spectral Continuum for Piano,' presented at the Kitchen Sunday night as part of the Walter series. After hearing these programs and spending a couple of afternoons talking with him, my view of what he is doing is greatly expanded, and I can see much in his work that is unique and important.

To begin with, Palestine is not really a composer, but a composer-performer, as he always presents his own music, rather than entrusting it to other musicians. This practice allows him unusual flexibility. Instead of writing set pieces, he simply works out materials which he then selects and adapts to specific concert situations. He is vitally concerned with room acoustics, lighting possibilities, and the inclinations of various types of audiences, so the same materials are likely to be presented quite differently from situation to situation. An electronic tape which ran for 20 minutes at the Sonnabend Gallery concert, for example, went on for about an hour at the more intimate concert at Phill Niblock's loft, and it might go on for two weeks if Palestine decided to use it in one of his gallery installations. Similar variations occur in his vocal solos and his piano pieces.

Palestine's electronic music is the easiest to explain as it is basically a marriage of aesthetic principles borrowed from La Monte Young, and technological finesse learned from Morton Subotnick. All of his tapes deal with sustained tones which fluctuate ever so slightly. Sometimes they fade in and out over long spans of time. Sometimes they meddle with overtones. Sometimes they create aural illusions, enabling the listener to hear melodies that aren't actually there.

Palestine's tapes are perhaps the most extreme form of musical minimalism I have yet encountered. Sometimes it is difficult to hear whether the sounds are changing at all. But after a few minutes it is usually possible to tune in on that microscopic level where the music is, and begin to pick out all sorts of details.

This music has a meditative quality, simply because the surface is so placid, and I used to think the best way to approach it was just to drift into the sounds, almost with a blank mind. But I have changed my mind. If the ears are sharp, and the mind is quick, there can be a great deal to listen to on this microscopic level. I would even go so far as to say that one of Palestine's sustained electronic chords can be as interesting as a complex symphonic texture. After all, the ear and brain can deal with only so much information at one time anyway, and we can occupy ourselves with an abundance of subtle information just as easily as with a super-abundance of gross information.

The most unusual category of Palestine's work is his vocal solos, which use sound with movement. In his concert at Niblock's loft, Palestine knelt quietly on the floor for a while, just rocking and breathing, and then gradually picking up steam both physically and vocally. When the performance climaxed, about 20 minutes later, he was reiterating loud tones and throwing himself vigorously onto his hands. The hypnotic repetition of sound and movement became quite involving, partly because there were so many ways to interpret what he was doing, partly because it looked like he was hurting his knees, and partly just because the performer's concentration was so intense. He finally stopped and exited in one of the heaviest silences I have ever experienced.

In another vocal solo, Palestine simply walked and ran around the three rooms of the Sonnabend Gallery, while singing a steady pitch. This was largely an exploration of acoustics, enabling the audience to experience sound moving in a variety of directions at a variety of speeds. But the performer was so intent that it seemed like much more than just a study or an experiment.

These vocal solos are easier to remember than other Palestine pieces, but they are harder to explain. There is nothing to compare them with, and I don't know what they might mean dramatically. I'm not even sure if they are good pieces in purely musical terms. I am sure, however, that they represent a distinctive approach toward linking the human voice with the human body, and I suspect they could lead to some extraordinary form of full-blown music theatre, especially if Palestine ever figures out how to present such things with a group of people instead of as solos.

Palestine's piano music deals with overtones and subtle changes in sound, similar to his electronic works, in combination with the performing energy of his vocal solos. The piano pieces he played at the Sonnabend Gallery and the Kitchen all involved very fast left-right-left alternation, usually with simple combinations of only four or five keys. Hammering away steadily like this for 20 to 30 minutes at a time, as he sometimes does, must require a great deal of energy, but Palestine has plenty of that.

Within its severe limitations, the music changes a lot, and it is difficult to predict what will happen. Every once in a while a note is added or subtracted. The pedal is occasionally depressed or lifted, sometimes so gradually that it takes five or ten minutes to make the changes, and it is a crucial change in this context. Little accents and variations in emphasis add continual interest.

Most of the time Palestine sits eyes closed, his head turned to one side, listening intently to the overtones. And the strange activity of these overtones is essential to the music. Like all overtones, they are elusive, hard to pick out, and pure as gold when you can bring them into focus. But unlike most overtones, they seem to fluctuate in rational ways. They are, after all, being controlled by a man whose ear is perhaps even more remarkable than his performance personality and his aesthetics.

February 7, 1974

Frederic Rzewski's 'Struggle'

The New and Newer Music series opened its season at Alice Tully Hall on January 27 in a program which featured the premiere of Frederic Rzewski's 'Struggle.' The text is taken from a letter written by Frederic Douglass in 1849, and describes the constant struggle necessary to achieve social reforms. The message is still relevant today, and Rzewski's setting for baritone and a large ensemble certainly aims to underline this relevance, though the music itself is always the main thing.

In each of the first six parts the baritone sings a couple of sentences of the text at a rather slow pace, while the instruments provide a background of white-note music which drifts through a number of tonalities and modalities. Some sections are rhythmically oriented. Others are collages of lyrical lines. All juxtapose traditional instrumental colors in unusual ways.

In the seventh and final section the mood shifts abruptly, and the 'Struggle' is quite apparent. The baritone reiterates the entire text at a fast pace, while the ensemble joins in one of those vigorous, loud unison melodies such as one finds on Rzewski's recent album on the Opus One label.

Baritone Julius Eastman projected the text superbly in a straight operatic style. The Ensemble seemed to be coping quite well with their parts, which are paticularly demanding in the final section. And the piece itself has a strong impact, thanks to the final movement, which pulls everything together in a wonderful, almost ecstatic culmination. Without ever ranting and raving, the piece makes its political message quite convincing. And its pure instrumental and melodic invention are almost as remarkable as its rhythmic vitality.

Note: So far as I know, 'Struggle' has never been performed again, which is unfortunate, as this premier performance rests vividly in my memory.

February 14, 1974

Paul DeMarinis's Pygmy Gamelan

Paul DeMarinis exhibited a fascinating electronic instrument which he calls the Pygmy Gamelan at WBAI's Free Music Store on February 6. DeMarinis is a 25-year-old composer-technician from the Bay area, who studied at Mills College with Robert Ashley. He has been designing electronic circuits only for a couple of years, but his work is already quite sophisticated, and he has a good ear too.

The Pygmy Gamelan display consisted of four little units, all of which were beeping out little electronic melodies. The total blend was soft and attractive, and it did sound a bit like a distant gamelan orchestra.

Each unit contains its own little synthesizer, amplifier, and loudspeaker, with which it cranks out endless five-note melodies. The five pitches and the basic pulse remain constant, although the notes keep changing their orderings, and there are many sporadic silences. DeMarinis explained that these variations depended on radio signals and other waves that happened to be passing through the atmosphere at the moment.

Another remarkable thing about DeMarinis's invention is that the whole system is powered by a single 12-volt battery. It was designed this way so that units could be installed in automobiles, which strikes me as a fascinating idea, although I doubt that General Motors would share my enthusiasm.

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March 21, 1974

Carole Weber's Meditations

Carole Weber's 'Meditation Cycle' at Washington Square Methodist Church on March 12 was a sort of do-it-yourself affair. A soft five-note chord was sustained on the pipe organ all evening, while Weber and the other members of the New Wilderness Preservation Band occasionally played or sang along in a highly informal, sparse sort of way. The lights were dim most of the time, and the audience was left to deal with the situation however it liked, with the help of Weber's program notes, which were actually instructions. Attempting to evaluate 'Meditation Cycle' is a bit like attempting to evaluate someone's religion, so it seems preferable to simply quote a few of the instructions from the program and allow readers to reach their own conclusions. Besides, one of the most frustrating things about being a critic is having to deal totally with second-hand information, and Weber's notes give me an opportunity to present some first-hand information, something readers can experience for themselves:

'Focus your attention on your breath. You can put your hands on your back right above your hips and feel air filling up, emptying out.' 'Breathing in, breathing out. Bigger, smaller. A Cycle, continuous. Image: the earth breathes. It is breathing you in and out...' 'If your breath wants to focus to the point where it becomes sound, allow it to happen; you can make a decision to chant. Take time to find each area of vibration sensation. You can move the notes or sounds around until you feel vibration in that area. Feel O vibrating in the gut. Feel OO vibrating in the solar Plexus. Feel AH vibrating in the area of the heart. Feel EH vibrating in the throat. Feel EE vibrating in the area of the third eye. Feel MM of OM vibrating the top of the head...' You may have trouble getting into it in your bedroom, but your own experience is bound to be less of a distortion than a mere description of someone else's would be.

April 4, 1974

Annea Lockwood's Water Music

How can a mere music critic be expected to pass judgment on the sound of the waterfall at Stony Point, the River Orchy in Scotland, or Cymtillery Stream in South Wales? Is it even possible to discuss a trickling brook or a foaming rapids in terms of music? How can we be so naive as to think that a recording of a river has artistic value? Yet how can we be so presumptuous and narrow-minded as to say that it doesn't? Where exactly should we draw the line between art and nature? Is it possible to include some things under both categories?

I doubt that I could do a really convincing job on these questions even in 10,000 words, so I'm going to sidestep all the important issues and simply say that my visit to Annea Lockwood's exhibit at the Kitchen was as fascinating as it was problematic. The recordings in the River Archives are amazingly clean, with scarcely a bird song or a wind noise anywhere. Most of them were done on location by the artist. A few were contributed by friends. They proceeded in segments about five minutes long, each of which had its own distinctive personality. As one might expect, much of the trickling, foaming, and swirling is quite attractive, and it led me to discover several things about river sounds that I had never noticed. They all have crazy half-predictable rhythms. Some of them have bass lines. For some reason it is difficult to pay close attention to them for more than a few minutes at a time, despite a wealth of activity.

In conjunction with the week-long exhibit, Lockwood presented evening performances in which she chanted along with the tapes. On March 23 she was assisted by another singer, Marilyn Rosenberger. Their voices blended well, and they exhibited remarkable breath control, frequently sustaining phrases for more than 30 seconds. Beginning on a high tone, they sang for about 40 minutes, gradually descending in range and increasing in rhythmic activity. The text was drawn from an intriguing collection of about 20 ancient words from various languages. Most are mellifluous, like 'malaman,' and all of them mean 'sound.' The chanting was largely improvised, and its accidental sequence did not have the finesse of a finished composition, though it seemed like an appropriate human response to the rivers.

Lockwood's River Archives remains the important thing, not only because it is such a curious idea and because it contains such a variety of attractive water sounds, but even more because it forces us to re-examine so many fundamental questions. Ask me in a few years, and I may have figured out a few of the answers.

Note: Sorry. I still don't know.

April 11, 1974

Robert Ashley: A Radical Statement

Bob Ashley's 'Your Move I Think' on March 30 was the most radical statement I have encountered for some time. Even the normally liberal audience at the Kitchen began to dwindle in the first half hour, and I suspect that if the event had taken place anywhere else in New York it would have provoked mass protest. I don't think anything in the performance was completely unprecedented. Nor was the material overtly offensive. There were no tortured animals, no political diatribes, no vulgarity, no painfully bright lights, no loud volumes - not even any nudity or repetition. Yet, in his own indirect way, Ashley was presenting something that people did not like at all. They did not look bored as they walked out, as people do when something is inept or just bad. They seemed really irritated, and even angry. I doubt that most of them could have explained exactly why they felt the way they did, but I suspect that Ashley understood it all very well. Such controversy can only be generated by an artist who understands what we want and expect, understands why he wants to give us something completely different, and has mastered the art of involving people who don't want to be involved.

When I entered the Kitchen, a few minutes before the program was to begin, Ashley was already seated at a dining-room table with Kathey Beeler and Anne Wehrer. Four floor lamps surrounded the group, shedding a pleasant light and marking off the playing area. Prerecorded tapes played softly in the background, but the focus was on the three performers, who rambled on as if the audience wasn't even there, all the time sipping on mixed drinks.

Their conversation was intelligent, and much of it was quite interesting, though it sometimes bogged down, the way dining-room conversations generally do. They talked about art vs. entertainment, about California vs. New York, about Nick and George and other friends, about the art establishment, about grant distribution, about how dull they felt most performances were, and about the difficulty of gaining recognition for new approaches.

Aside from short snatches of diverse music and some dreamlike monologue on the tape, nothing really happened. The performers just kept talking and getting drunker, and the audience kept leaving, and the general irritation kept increasing.

The irritation must have had something to do with the sharp realism of the performance, which reflected many conversations we have all participated in, and was not always a flattering mirror. And it probably had something to do with the way the performers insisted on being themselves rather than playing roles, which must have given people the feeling that they were not seeing a show, and

not getting their money's worth. We like to talk about spontaneity and slices of life, but we seem to have trouble dealing with them in a raw form, which has so little artifice or formal structure. And of course we were left out, unable to express our own opinions, and unable to share in the alcohol. The performers didn't even bother to tell us who Nick and George were.

But perhaps the essential irritation had to do with power. At one point in the discussion the performers observed how artists tend to put themselves in positions of power, particularly when they perform, forcing people to listen, manipulating their perceptions, and titillating their emotions. Ashley's attitude toward the artist's power trip was strong. 'You don't have to do that anymore,' he stated several times.

One could argue that 'Your Move I Think' also represents a kind of power trip. Ashley was giving us a calculated experience, after all, and one that most people did not want. Still he wasn't trying to sell us a bill of goods, and he certainly wasn't trying to prove he was clever or profound. Basically he was just offering a provocative real-life situation and allowing us to make of it what we would. I guess most people still prefer pieces that let them know how they are supposed to respond.

This is not the first time Ashley has offended audiences. Born in 1930, he was one of the founders of the Once Festival at Ann Arbor Michigan in the '60s. People who were there still talk about Ashley's 'Wolfman Motorcity Revue,' which must have been one of the really major statements from the days of multi-media. He was one of the first to discover new forms of music in speech sounds, as he did in 'She was a Visitor.' He has evolved a number of unique theatre pieces, such as 'Four Ways,' in which four performers carry microphones and loudspeakers in attache cases. His String Quartet Describing the Motions of Large Real Bodies utilizes one of the more ingenious systems for hooking up live performers with electronic equipment, and also produces some of the most attractive sounds in the whole string quartet literature.

Ashley is currently based at Mills College in California, so his work is seldom heard in New York, except in connection with the Sonic Arts Union, a cooperative group which he formed with David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma. So it is still fairly easy for New Yorkers to avoid Ashley's iconoclastic work. But that may not always be the case. I have the feeling that sooner or later the music world is going to have to come to terms with Ashley. And the dust may not settle for quite a while.

May 9, 1974

Jon Hassell: Solid State

Jon Hassell presented an electronic work called 'Solid State' at the Kitchen last Wednesday. The title is appropriate not only because of the solid-state electronics used to make the piece, but also because the work alludes to sculpture. The rather loud sounds change quite slowly, and one has the sense that a massive, almost tangible piece of sound sculpture is hanging in the air.

After the piece had been going on for a while, I felt the need to explore the work from different perspectives. As I moved to different places in the room, the music changed a great deal. Balances shifted. New elements became audible. New associations became clear, just as they do when one walks around a Henry Moore.

The 50-minute composition was presented on tape, though it can be performed live on two Moog synthesizers. The rather dense sound consists largely of sustained tones, which are carefully tuned, usually following the natural harmonic series rather than the system of equal temperament. There is little rhythmic activity at first, but by the end of the piece everything is pulsating, and rhythm becomes the chief concern.

Since the sounds were produced by machines, all of this pulsating had a mechanical regularity, which at first seemed to detract from the sensual quality of the music. But later I began to appreciate the regularity, because I realized that this same kind of logic is involved in the tuning of the pitches themselves. It is as if all the vibrations in the piece were in proportion with all the others. Yet the sounds are dense enough and rich enough that the piece never quite sounds like a mathematical formula.

'Solid State' is only one segment of Hassell's 'Landmusic Series.' A little booklet describing the 'Landmusic Series' as a whole explains that 'Solid State' is ideally intended to be performed 'outdoors with very powerful speakers hidden from view.' Another part of the series, 'Elemental Warnings,' involved 20 miniature oscillators, which beeped their way into the atmosphere on helium-filled balloons one day in 1970.

Oldenburg style, the series also includes plans for monumental projects which have never been realized. One suggests live transmission of the sound of the Pacific Ocean so that it can be heard at a desert site near Las Vegas. Another suggests wiring trees so as to amplify the sounds of birds, squirrels, and wind. Another proposes burying loudspeakers in an open field and having them produce underground thunder.

Hassell's background is strictly musical, but it is clear that his sculptural and environmental approaches to sound have more to do with recent developments in

the art world than with the mainstream of music. Consequently many of his major outlets have been places like the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, the Albright-Knox Gallery, and the Brooklyn Museum.

The curious thing, of course, is that most art lovers will have little appreciation for his highly developed musical sensitivity, while most music lovers will have trouble understanding why a composer would want to work outside of the concert halls. There may be a problem about what category Hassell belongs in, but there can be little question as to the freshness of his approach or the musical competence of his work.

Note: But Hassell soon reverted to his basic career as a jazz composer/trumpet player, and Ashley also went back to music, often in combination with video. Like many of the composers in this book, they made their most radical statements in New York in the early '70s, which also says something about the openness of the SoHo atmosphere at this time.

May 23, 1974

Max Neuhaus's Water Whistle

'Water Whistle' is a unique form of environmental music which Max Neuhaus has been installing in various swimming pools for the past couple of years. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is that it requires neither live performers nor electronic equipment. Instead, the music is produced by jets of water which stream through little funnel-shaped contraptions suspended under the water. Though barely perceptible outside the pool, their pleasant, high-pitched whistling sounds are easy to hear whenever your ears are in the water.

The installation varies from swimming pool to swimming pool, but the set-up at the Hotel Paris last weekend was probably typical. Ten whistles of different pitches dangled from two ropes which stretched across the pool in a large 'X.' Near the center of the pool quite a few of the whistles could be heard at once, blending into a complex chord. At the peripheries of the pool the sound was simpler, with closer whistles masking out more distant ones.

Completely submerging oneself in water is a special experience to begin with. I can't think of anything that shuts out the world and draws one into oneself quite so effectively, and when the water is vibrating with the sound of Neuhaus's whistles, this feeling is amplified quite a bit.

After I got accustomed to the weird situation, I began exploring the water more consciously, comparing the sounds at different points, listening to them change, and trying to focus on them in different ways. I became particularly fascinated by the discovery that the sounds did not change when I moved my head, the way sounds in air do. For some reason sound disperses more in water, and I could never be sure from which direction a tone was coming.

The biggest limitation on music for wind instruments is that the performer has to stop for breath so often. The biggest limitation on Neuhaus's underwater music is that the listener has to stop for breath so often. It seemed like every time I started really getting into something it was time to come up for air. So it was never possible to relate to the music the way I might have in a concert hall.

But 'Water Whistle' is not intended to be a piece of music as such. The pitches waver quite a bit as the whistles bob up and down in the water, and the composer has not even attempted to present specific melodic or rhythmic material. The intention, I think, is simply to create a unique environment which allows people to experience sound and water in a special way. And that much does it quite vividly.

May 23, 1974

Musica Elettronica Viva

Musica Elettronica Viva continues to be the best improvising ensemble around town, as far as I know, though there are quite a few free jazz groups that I have not heard. The MEV musicians have little regard for harmony or formal restrictions, and go for a counterpoint of individual expressions, which are somehow unified simply by their energy. At the peaks such improvisations can become loud protests. But the anger I used to sense in these jam-session protests a few years ago is not so common now. A tone of optimism or confidence seems to have taken its place.

The performance by MEV at WBAI's Free Music Store Saturday night had many sparse sections, ans even gentle moments, but the last half hour was as intense as I have ever heard the group play. Throughout the evening the diverse contributions of the four players always seemed in balance with each other. All were leaders. All were followers. The current group consists of trombonist Garrett List, drummer Gregory Reeve, pianist Frederic Rzewski, and Richard Teitelbaum, who operates a Moog synthesizer.

Note: The group originated in Rome about 10 years earlier, where it usually included Alvin Curran, as well as Rzewski, Teitelbaum, and others.

May 30, 1974

Philip Corner's Metal Meditations and Daniel Goode's Circular Thoughts

It has taken me quite a while to appreciate the unassuming art of Philip Corner. One must acquire the taste, and this does not come easily, as Corner's music involves a kind of subtlety that one does not find in other current music. It is never at all showy, and it requires a unique type of performer who knows how to keep his personality out of the way of the music. Aesthetically the attitude seems to have more to do with Zen and nature than with our musical past.

Sometimes Corner and his fellow musicians simply hold a mallet in one place and allow a swinging bell to make contact in its own time and in its own way. Sometimes they blow tones so soft that one hears more wind than tone. Most of the time the performers are involved in independent activities and don't pay much attention to each other. Yet they always work with a common attitude, and even the sporadic rhythms which result seem vaguely logical, like the rhythm of leaves falling from a tree.

Corner makes calligraphic posters with brush strokes and verbal phrases that suggest ways of producing a sound or listening to one, and some of these were on exhibition at the Kitchen during his three-day series last week, but he does not notate his current music in any specific way. His musicians have all worked together quite a bit before, however, and all of the performances which I heard seemed clearly focused on specific attitudes. Several of these, billed under the generic title of 'Metal Meditations,' involve an extensive collection of bells, and numerous other metal objects. In some of these 'meditations' the musicians remain in one place. In others they wander around the space. Sometimes microphones are used for subtle effects.

Typical of Corner's unpretentiousness and his genuine openness to all sounds, he did not allow his programs to be dominated completely by his own ideas, but left quite a bit of room for pieces by other composers. These included a very curious piano piece by Edward Grieg, called 'Bell Ringing,' other short keyboard works by Bach, Tomkins, Rameau, Satie, Hauer, Schoenberg, and Feldman, and a fascinating piece by one of the musicians, Carole Weber, which requires several performers to play percussion instruments in the tempo of their individual pulse rates.

Most impressive, however, was a new work called 'Circular Thoughts' by another one of the musicians, Daniel Goode. This solo clarinet piece is ingenious, and the skill with which the composer performs it is nothing short of astounding. Most of the piece involves a seven-note scale which ripples upward over and over again at a terribly fast tempo. As he plays this, Goode somehow

manages to isolate certain tones with tiny accents, creating an overlay of other melodies which are sometimes quite intricate. Occasionally the basic scale-wise pattern shifts, or accidentals are inserted, sometimes so subtly that the listener is not sure whether he is hearing what he thinks he is hearing or not. On top of all that, Goode plays almost the entire 15-minutes piece without a pause, employing that rarely mastered technique of continuous breathing, where one inhales through his nose without stopping the tone.

June 6, 1974

Christian Wolff: Exercises and Songs

Anything that deals with freedom vs. control is going to have political innuendos, and some people see the performance freedom in Christian Wolff's music as a symbol of socialism, communism, or even anarchy. Wolff is obviously aware of these connotations, and he occasionally uses left-wing texts when he writes for voices. Yet he seems to be a rather mild person, certainly not a political activist type, and I am convinced that his prime concerns are on a smaller interpersonal scale. His music does have a message, at least as far as I am concerned, but it is basically a humanistic message and not really a political one.

I don't think any of Wolff's scores bring out this humanism quite so well as his latest 'Exercises and Songs,' which were presented at the Kitchen on May 26. Throughout the 90-minute program, which was split up into eight separate 'Exercises' and three separate 'Songs,' the six musicians hardly looked at each other. Each was intent on performing his own version of the score. And yet the parts all fitted together in a most satisfying way. Though full of individual variation, there was a clear sense of cooperation and balance in this little six-man musical community.

The 'Exercises,' like most of Wolff's scores, must be done without conductor, and may be played by any combination of instruments. The scores are basically just melodies, usually divided into phrases of about three to 10 notes. All the musicians follow the same score, but since the melodies may be read in either treble or bass clef, the music usually comes out in parallel sixths. Generally the musicians begin the phrases more or less together, but they proceed in their own ways.

It was a gentle, amicable sort of evening, and the atmosphere was strictly low key. No one ever got soupy with his melodic lines. No one tried to show off. No one ever got excited. The tempo never changed much. The music never sounded completely atonal, but it was never really tonal for very long either. The little phrases just kept coming, and the ends of pieces always sounded about the same as the beginnings, and the music never really went anywhere. Yet there was always something interesting going on.

Sometimes cellist Arthur Russell and trombonist Garrett List would be playing exactly together for a while, and then one of them would verge off into something else. Sometimes someone would change octaves. Sometimes Jon Gibson would shift from soprano saxophone to flute. Sometimes David Behrman would put down his viola, and Wolff would abandon his dimestore organ, and

they would both start tapping out the melodies on some cheap percussion instruments.

But most of the time the melodies would just go on, in moderately slow notes, with everybody haphazardly together. And somehow we all knew that it was supposed to be kind of sloppy like that. And no one seemed to mind at all, just because it all seemed so friendly and pleasant, and because it was such a pleasant departure from the spit-and-polish precision one usually hears from professional musicians.

In the 'Songs' the procedure is roughly the same, except that everyone sings the melodies instead of playing them. As with most instrumental groups, these musicians were not particularly good singers. And since they were not together rhythmically either, it all sounded like a songfest one might hear in a bar or around a campfire. But that is the point, I think. Wolff is making a kind of music which does not depend on slick performance, intense rehearsal, and brilliant performers. It is music which can allow performers to be themselves, and can make a satisfying sophisticated statement at the same time. Wolff told me after the concert that he has even considered carrying this attitude so far as to allow audience participation in the singing, but that he has not been able to find a way of doing that yet without oversimplifying the melodies more than he wants.

Considering the informal quality of the performance, one would think that the sociological and humanistic aspects of the music would have been easily perceived, particularly when they got to the song lyrics about the problems of oppressed Welsh miners. Yet I sensed that these extra-musical considerations were not coming across to many of the less experienced listeners in the audience, at least not on a conscious level.

In a way, that is not too surprising. It has been customary for a long time to think of music as an abstract art, and I am not sure that it even occurs to people to ask how instrumentalists are relating to each other and what kinds of choices they are making. And even when listeners perceive the general attitude, it is not possible for them to follow specifics unless they know something about how the notation works and the kinds of rules that the musicians are following. Wolff himself admits that this extramusical level often seems to pass people by, even when they hear excellent performances.

This is not really esoteric music at all, but it appears that some form of audience educating might be useful. I suppose that is what critics are for. Or maybe program notes would solve the problem. Or perhaps, as with many new artistic ideas, the music will just have to wait for a decade or two before the general public will be ready to perceive what it means.

June 13, 1974

Philip Glass in Twelve Parts

After three years of work, Philip Glass has finally completed his 'Music in 12 Parts,' and it is a major accomplishment. The work, which was presented in its entirety for the first time at Town Hall on June 1, contains four hours of music altogether, and there is no padding. It is rather complex music, extremely rich in ideas, but also strong in its direct emotional impact. And the ensemble of Jon Gibson, Dickie Landry, Richard Peck, Bob Telson, Joan LaBarbara, and Glass sailed through the long taxing evening with apparent ease.

I have already written about the rich blended sound Glass gets with electric organs, amplified winds, and an occasional female voice, and about the static or minimal or hypnotic style of his music, which ripples along on endless eighth notes. But I have never emphasized the complexity of his work, because only now, having heard all 12 parts of this piece in a single evening, can I see the degree of inventiveness and the variety of the intricate techniques which he has found within the severe restrictions of his style.

Only toward the end of Part V did I ever lose interest in what was going on, and even there the problem could have been my inability to latch onto things, rather than any lack of ideas on the composer's part. In general, the music constantly uncovered new possibilities and constantly challenged my ear and brain. And it never became dull or repetitious, despite all the repetition.

Sometimes the interest lies in gradual fluctuations between modes, like a shift between a kind of major key sound and a kind of minor key sound.
Sometimes the focus is on polyrhythms, with little contests between, say, the three four figures and the six eight figures.
Sometimes the music is simply unison melodies, but with small variations in individual instruments.
Sometimes unison melodies become parallel fifths, often so subtly that one hardly realizes the shift is going on.
In some sections, at the whim of the performer, sustained tones creep in and out, having strange effects on the moving parts.
Sometimes syncopated rhythms simply wind around each other in cycles. But if the cycles are repeated 15 or 20 times, as they often are, it is only because it actually takes the listener about that long to figure out what is going on.

Frequently figures repeat over and over, gradually adding notes and becoming longer, or gradually omitting notes and becoming shorter.

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In the more recent of the 12 parts, the music sometimes alternates between two kinds of material. Both sets of material go through independent variations as the antiphonal music shifts back and forth.

Another technique common in the recent parts is the sudden modulation. At unexpected moments, the music suddenly pops into a new key, making it hard to remember where you just were or to figure out how you got where you now are.

There are constant fascinations, and they always happen on a level of subtlety where you can't quite figure out what the hell is going on. Glass may be avant-garde in many respects, but he apparently respects the age-old art of concealing art as much as any past master.

One of the pleasures of Glass's music is his joyous optimistic tone. No gnashing dissonances, no eerie sounds, no melancholy moments, no downs. It just keeps chugging away toward some ultimate high. I'm not sure that's necessarily a good thing, as most of the music which has lasted in our culture is music which contains liberal doses of the bitter along with the sweet. But I'm certainly not complaining. A little musical optimism is a refreshing contrast to the dark expressionistic shadows of Schoenberg, Berg, and Bartok, which still hang over so much contemporary music.

As I was sitting in Town Hall that night I couldn't help thinking of a letter which had been in the Voice that week. Someone named Matthew Paris had written about how he usually stayed home and listened to records instead of going out to concerts, because he felt that concerts seldom offered anything he could not get on records. I doubt that Paris bothered to attend Glass's concert, but if he had, the experience might well have turned his head around.

If and when 'Music in 12 Parts' does come out on records, I imagine it will be a six-record album, and it will probably come to five or six times the price of a ticket to this concert. And even with a relatively luxurious home stereo set-up, Paris will never be able to reproduce this music as vividly as the live performers can produce it on their own superb sound system.

Like a lot of music being created these days, the effectiveness of Glass's subtle textures depends quite a bit on hearing them at the right volume and with just the right balance of voices. Even Kurt Munkacsi, the group's sound man, can't always get things exactly right for all parts of a hall, but he comes a lot closer than anybody's home stereo system will.

June 20, 1974

Electronic Caricatures

There is a strong similarity between animated films and electronic music. In both cases artists proceed without live performers and without a genuine human element, and in both cases this has its limitations. An animator would have a tough time trying to create a King Lear that we could take seriously, and no electronic version of a Beethoven symphony will ever get us the way a good orchestra can. Weeping scenes are not likely to touch us when the character is simply a sequence of drawings, and it's pretty hard to produce a truly soulful melody with an electronic music synthesizer.

Of course, a good animator can turn out a caricature of a policeman, or the Beatles, or Little Red Ridinghood, with amusement, and often with insight, just as a skilful composer can turn out a provocative electronic caricature of Bach or ragtime or a music box. But in both mediums the artist is basically dealing with caricatures rather than authentic human elements.

The other side of the coin has a lot to do with speed. The animator can race his characters down a road at 200 miles an hour with no problem. Composers can produce lightning-fast electronic cadenzas with similar ease. And countless special effects are possible in both mediums. But there are technical limitations too. For example, the subtle coloration of sunsets, trees, or faces always has to be greatly simplified in film animation, just as sound colors must be simplified in electronic music.

There is a fundamental artificiality in both mediums, because both were originally conceived as substitutes for live performers. It is possible to reduce this artificiality by creating animated films which avoid making reference to the possibilities of live action films, or by creating electronic music which makes no reference to traditional musical instruments, musical forms, or melodic ideas. That's more or less what happens in the electronic music of David Behrman, Gordon Mumma, or Max Neuhaus, for example. But when composers do deal with traditional musical elements, as they generally do, they have to play the game quite a bit differently on their synthesizers than they would if they were writing for instruments.

Note: The examples that continued this article do not seem very interesting today, but these opening paragraphs say something about the nature of electronic music at the time, and about why the SoHo composers were only interested when they built their own gadgets. This is in sharp contrast with European composers, who have generally avoided cheap homemade electronics.

A La Monte Young Diary: July 1973-April 1974

July 4, 1973: David Behrman tells me some interesting anecdotes about one summer in the late ‘50s when he and La Monte Young were both studying with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Darmstadt, Germany. The concerts and classes held at Darmstadt for a few weeks each summer were Mecca for the avant-garde at that time, and the young composers came from all over the world to study composition with Stockhausen, to hear lectures by Boulez and Pousseur, to check out the latest pieces by Cage, and to attend performances by David Tudor, who was reigning piano virtuoso of the new music. According to Behrman, Stockhausen’s composition classes, which met every morning, were the center of attention for most of the students, and they were strictly no-nonsense affairs. Stockhausen may have been a rebel in his music, but as a teacher he was as stern and disciplined as any German pedagogue of the ‘50s. Most of the students responded well to this approach, but Young was apparently unimpressed. Behrman recalls that he once wandered into the class about two hours after it had begun.

Stockhausen had trouble understanding this, as it was clear to him, and just about everyone else in Darmstadt at the time, that his word was practically gospel. Total serialization, it was thought, was the most important new development in music since the discovery of the 12-tone row, and Stockhausen’s philosophical-mathematical theories were supposedly laying the groundwork for music of the next generation or two. How could Young be so blase?

Stockhausen managed to tolerate the insolent young American student who was always late for class, clear up until the end of the session, when each student was to present the composition he had done during his stay in Darmstadt. It seems that the piece Young brought in was intricately derived from the number seven, and involved quite a bit of numerology of one sort or another. According to Behrman, Stockhausen reacted quite strongly to this brash work, which was almost heretical in the context of Darmstadt.

Apparently Young and Stockhausen are now on friendly terms, and see each other from time to time. In fact, Stockhausen’s ‘Stimmung’ and his ‘Aus den Sieben Tagen’ provide some evidence that the famous German composer has even begun to borrow a few ideas from his former student. In any case, their work has come close together in many respects. Neither of them has much interest in total serialization anymore - or numerology either. Both have become involved with the music of other cultures. Both have stopped trying to be music theorists. Both have moved away from electronics, placing more and more emphasis on human performers.

September 11, 1973: I go to an avant-garde concert at Hunter College, and one of the highlights turns out to be Young’s Piano Pieces for David Tudor No. 1. It is one of his early pieces, written in 1960, and the score consists simply of prose instructions explaining that the performer should attempt to make a grand piano drink from a bucket of water and eat a bale of hay. I have always thought of the piece as conceptual art and never expected it to come off in an actual performance, but I discover that I was wrong. The way Jim Burton interprets the score, the piano really starts to look like a horse, and the audience is delighted with the absurdity of the situation. So much for any theories about La Monte Young as a conceptual artist.

April 2, 1974: I run into La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela on Canal Street. He is wearing his customary long white robe, and she has on a long skirt and some attractive jewelry. Their guru, the masterful Indian singer Pandit Pran Nath is also with them, and Young starts to introduce me, but ‘Guruji’ has already walked on. The couple are friendly and tell me they think I was perceptive in some of the things I said in earlier published entries from my La Monte Young Diary. I tell them I am looking forward to their forthcoming presentation at the Kitchen, and we go on about our afternoon shopping.

April 10, 1974: I get a call from the New York Times. They want to run a piece about Young’s and Zazeela’s Theatre of Eternal Music on the 28th, the date that the week-long Kitchen series begins, and they ask me if I would like to write something. I tell them I will.

A few hours later I reach Young and Zazeela on the telephone to arrange a meeting. They are pleased to learn about the forthcoming article, but not completely. Young is particularly concerned about what kinds of photographs might run with the article. He says papers and magazines often try to capitalize on his eccentricities and find oddball personality shots instead of just showing something that will help people understand what his work is like. I tell him that as a free-lance writer I won’t have any control over layout questions, but that I can at least report his feelings.

Under the circumstances Young’s mistrust of the press seems a bit paranoid to me, but then so do a lot of other things about Young. Perhaps most extraordinary are the release forms which performers and technicians sometimes have to sign, stating that they will not give away any of his ideas. Of course, he has a perfect right to protect his work and his image in any way he can. And with such innovative work, and such an unusual life style, I suspect he might have had a few bad experiences with people stealing his ideas and making fun of his personality.

April 12, 1974: About one in the afternoon I ring a doorbell on Church Street. Zazeela answers and leads me up a flight of stairs to the loft where she and Young live and work. Young is singing a raga and accompanying himself on the tambura. It is the soulful Kirana style he has been learning from 'Guruji,' and which he practices several hours every day. There is an occasional unsteadiness in his voice, so I guess he has a way to go before he will ever master this style, but he already has pretty good control over many of the difficult sliding gestures that Kirana style singers use, and it is easy to see that his training has been feeding back into the simpler non-verbal style of his own performances.

Soon Young brings the raga to a close, and we all sit down for a light lunch. Much of the conversation involves the Orient, the two trips Young and Zazeela took to India, Young's tremendous admiration for Indian music, and particularly for the Kirana style, his conviction that it is in many ways more highly developed than Western music, and his lack of respect for more commercial and less traditional artists like Ravi Shankar.

After a while he pulls out the score for his Trio for Strings, written in 1958, just after completing his B.A. at UCLA and before beginning graduate work at Berkeley. It is a serial work, but it creeps along at the rate of about one note per minute. Young says it is his first Oriental-inspired work.

After lunch we listen to a tape of some of the impressive jazz improvising Young used to do on soprano saxophone in the early '60s. He also puts on a few sections from 'The Well-Tuned Piano,' some experiments he did around 1964 involving ways of tuning a piano.

As I leave, I try to put together Young's progression from slow motion serial music to the prose instructions that I used to think were conceptual art, to the saxophone playing, and the tuning experiments, and finally to his current career as a singer working with drones. It seems like an awfully wide range for someone to have covered by the age of 38, and it's a little hard to relate everything, but I can see a gradual progression toward a more spiritual orientation. I can also see an admirable idealism. Had he continued playing saxophone, for example, he would probably be quite successful in the jazz world by now, since that free modal style is now rather fashionable. But he followed the dictates of his conscience and his intellectual curiosity, and went on to other things.

A La Monte Young Diary: April 1974

April 14, 1974: I again visit La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela to get material for the article I am supposed to write about their forthcoming series at the Kitchen. I already have plenty of background material about Young's early serial music, his short career as an excellent jazz saxophonist, his unusual theatre pieces, his explorations into various tuning systems and his gradual progression to the Oriental-inspired style he now practices, singing against endless drones. So I ask Young if he would just give me a little singing lesson so I can actually experience what his current art is all about.
He agrees. But instead of turning on the oscillators, as he does in his own performances, he takes out the tambura and asks me to imitate some traditional raga figures. Some of the phrases are quite long, and I have to concentrate extremely hard to be able to sing them back with any accuracy. The lines feel very good as I sing them, however, and I begin to sense some of the joy of learning by rote, rather than from sheet music.

An interesting point arises concerning tuning. Different ragas require slightly different tuning of the minor third, and Young shows me how to make this extremly subtle distinction by listening to the overtones in the tabura. I begin to understand why Young feels that the Western concept of good intonation is crude by comparison.

Later Alex Dea and Jon Hassell arrive and I listen in on a rehearsal of the music they will be presenting at the Kitchen. Sine wave generators, two voices, and a French horn provide the various drone tones, while Young improvises his solo line. Intricate designs by Zazeela are projected on one wall, slowly shifting in shape and color.
Only three or four pitches ever come into play at one time, and the music is quite placid, though the inventive solo lines keep it always alive. The slight unsureness I sensed when Young was singing ragas is completely gone now that the microphones are on and he is doing his own music, without any lyrics to worry about.

Sometimes, after maybe 30 or 40 minutes, a new note will be introduced, and the music will seem a bit agitated. Soon, however, the ear becomes acclimated to the new mode, and the atmosphere becomes placid and hypnotic once again. It is easy to fall asleep during a performance of this sort, and that has happened to me at other times. But this time I stay awake, sometimes consciously listening for overtones or following the subtleties of Young's vocal lines, and sometimes just relaxing and allowing the music to wash over me. When I leave, after a couple of hours, I feel quite relaxed and at peace with the world. The music seems to have

some distinct therapeutic value, though I am in no mood to want to analyze that or figure out how it might work.

May 5: The final concert of the Kitchen series is this afternoon, and I feel like I really ought to go and listen to the whole event, which will probably go on for three or four hours, but I can't bring myself to do it. I have dropped by for short periods of time earlier in the week, so I already have a good idea of what the group is sounding like, and the idea of actually submitting my senses again to a whole performance is more than I seem to be able to handle.

I guess in the bottom of my soul I'm just not a true believer. I'm an admirer all right. I can appreciate Young's dedication and influence and talent. I can even say, with complete honesty, that I think he is one of the most vital forces in new music today. But I can't get myself over to the concert.

Those performances, with their hypnotic qualities and their extreme subtlety, can do good things for the listener and his soul. They sort of lull him into himself, and into the mysteries of sound and vibrations, and after a few hours he tends to forget all about the lesser realities. He may even sense a kind of purification going on in his mind.

But Young's performances demand a lot in return, too. Most of all they demand time and patience, but they also require an open mind, and a willingness to submit to a rather heavy dose of whatever it is that the Theatre of Eternal Music puts out, and somehow that's more than I can give today.

Of course I feel sort of responsible to go, since I'm a music critic, but I manage to assuage my guilty conscience by making up a few good reasons for staying home. After all it was less than two weeks ago that I listened to that long rehearsal session, and I have a pretty good idea of what the music is about, and I know that the performance will be on a high level, and I know that it will sound particularly good if I can focus on those lovely overtones which sometimes hover over Zazeela's singing. I would probably know more if I went over there again, but I stay home instead. I guess I just don't feel like being cleansed again quite so soon.

Perhaps my response to Young's music is similar to the way other people respond to the 'Messiah.' It's wonderful stuff, and it probably presents all the great spiritual truths as well as anything does. But somehow, about once a year is enough.

August 15, 1974

Confronting the Ears Head On

In most contemporary music, composers seem more interested in the ideas behind the sounds than in the sounds themselves. Even when they go out of their way to create some weird noise by bowing on a cymbal or thumping on the belly of a cello, they are often not interested in the sounds themselves, but rather in ideas which lie behind the sounds. The bowing on the cymbal or the thumping on the cello is a means for conveying some contrast or expressing some motivic element. It is not an arbitrary means, or an insensitive means, of course. But not an end in itself either.

I was particularly reminded of this attitude one afternoon at Community Church when I went to a lecture-demonstration presented by the composer Charles Wuorinen. In his comments the composer went so far as to call the sounds themselves a 'necessary evil.' He explained that he liked the sounds all right, but that their essential purpose was not just to be sounds but to represent relationships. From here he went on to describe how the length of the sections of one of his pieces reflected the structure of his 12-tone row, and how the sounds of the piece were all intended to represent relationships of one sort or another.

This disregard for the value of sound itself is not present in some other cultures. According to Chou Wen-chung, for example, traditional Chinese music proceeds on the assumption that 'each single tone is a musical entity in itself, that musical meaning lies intrinsically in the tones themselves, and that one must investigate sound to know tones and investigate tones to know music.' Chou's article on 'Asian Music and Western Composition' in the recently published 'Dictionary of Contemporary Music' goes on to describe the many ways of articulating and inflecting a single tone in playing the Chinese ch'in, the Japanese shakuhachi, and the Korean piri. In these traditions a single tone can be significant in itself, while in the West the assumption has usually been that a tone becomes meaningful only in context with other tones.

'A musical motif, or even a phrase, means nothing in itself,' proclaims Roger Sessions in 'The Musical Experience.' 'The single musical impulse is too short, and too isolated; it is a gesture in the void which has not acquired substance. Only through association can it really become effective.' But quite a bit of contemporary music has been moving away from the attitudes expressed by Wuorinen and Sessions and toward a phenomenological approach. Like the Chinese, many composers have become interested in the phenomenon of sound itself, and have proceeded on the assumption that sounds can be effective, and even meaningful, all by themselves.

Edgard Varese, who often talked about 'pure sound,' is probably the best example of this. If he wrote a phrase for the flute, or a shrill chord, it was not for the purpose of developing some melodic idea, or making variations on a 12-tone row, or drawing a contrast with some other elements, or emphasizing C-sharp, or preparing some transition. It was basically just because he found a value in the flute phrase or the shrill chord. He intentionally avoided fancy relationships and structural rigmarole because he wanted his listeners to experience such sounds for their own sake, without any decoding.

Quite a few composers in the succeeding generation have also taken phenomenological points of view, sometimes under the influence of Varese himself. Morton Feldman, Lucia Dlugoszewski and Chou Wen-chung all strike me as good examples. Individually they are as different from each other as they are from Varese, but that is because they are interested in different types of sounds. All three are more concerned with sounds themselves than with any intellectualized relationships between the sounds.

There may be parallel developments in other arts. Linda Nochlin, for example, mentions 'pictorial phenomenologists' in a discussion of recent realist painters (Arts Magazine, February 1974). 'They tend to affirm the art-work as a literal fact which, while it may leave its referent in the actual world, nevertheless achieves its true effectiveness in direct visual experience, not evocation.' I have no idea how significant this distinction may be among painters, but I am convinced that it is an important contrast among composers. Never a black and white contrast, of course. After all, even in a Wuorinen piece acoustical realities have some impact in their own right. And no one would ever say that Varese's music was totally void of ideas and relationships. But it is an important contrast nonetheless, and as time goes on, it may well become the major aesthetic controversy among musicians. This seems particularly plausible now, because younger composers have been carrying the phenomenological approach further and further every season.

Yoshi Wada is one example. His music is generally produced on four 'pipe horns,' which are enormous pipes with mouthpieces on them. In terms of ideas, there is very little in his music, either rhythmically, melodically, harmonically, or formally. Yet the sounds themselves are very special - special enough to keep audiences listening closely for quite a while.

There are quite a few new forms of electronic music in which composers deal with tiny variations in pitch, or tiny differences which depend on which way you turn your head when you listen. Here too the ears are directly confronted. Never mind about all those music appreciation courses. This kind of music has little to do with what we know. It has to do with what we perceive. The emphasis is entirely on sound phenomena themselves.

September 26, 1974

Scratch Music - No Rights Reserved

One doesn't usually expect much from 16-page pamphlets, but 'Nature Study Notes' is an exception. Designed to look like one of those little booklets we wrote college exams in, it defines 152 ways for musicians to improvise with one another. The booklet was compiled largely by English avant-gardists, who used to play together as the Scratch Orchestra, and it is an excellent document of what their Scratch Music was all about. It is also one of the richest collections of innovative musical ideas that I know of.

The 'Nature Study Notes' were compiled in 1969, but they are still almost unknown in this country. In fact, it was only this year that I actually saw a copy myself. But the attitudes are still highly relevant to anyone interested in communal music making, and many of the procedures suggested reflect a depth of insight which goes well beyond most of the improvisation I hear around New York, from either the jazz musicians or the classically oriented groups.

Consider these two entries, for example, both of which force the improvisers into a theatrical direction. They are the work of Cornelius Cardew, the founder of the Scratch Orchestra. 'This rite should be preceded and followed by patches of dead silence. At the sound of a champagne cork popping commence animated social intercourse. Under cover of the din, surreptitiously improvise. Cease at the sound of a gun going off.' And, 'Construct a silver pyramid. Bathe it with light. Play.' Or this contribution by Michael Chant, which presents a violent image with many possible implications. 'Two classes of performers: improvisers and stone throwers, the former class to contain more members than the latter. The stone throwers throw stones to miss the improvisers and cause no damage, with a vigour proportionate to the intensity of he sound.' Any of these instructions could be carried out in a reasonable length of time, and presented in interesting ways, all are viable as public performances. But some of the 'Nature Study Notes' go beyond the limitations of the concert hall. This one, for example, credited to Michael Parsons, would almost require that everyone be a participant. 'Place comfortable mattresses about the room. Those who feel tired lie down. The others play or sing relaxing music. A player who feels tired may also lie down. Ends when any or all of those lying down are asleep. Follow one of these instructions at a time. (1) play or sing more quietly than someone near you. (2) play or sing more continuously than someone near you. (3) play or sing at lower pitch than someone near you. (4) play or sing with purer timbre than someone near you. (Move around)' Another, by Hugh Shrapnel, is performed in transit. The performers would have to be in England to execute the instructions exactly, but they could easily adapt them to some more convenient locale. 'Walk down the riverside path from Greenwich Pier, past the Naval College, the little Trinity Hospital, the Power Station, to the Gasworks at Woolwich, picking up on route odd items, such as driftwood, scrap metal, etc. Make sounds in any way with the items picked up.' Of course, you wouldn't have to be a particularly good musician to play that one. Others, such as the following one by Cardew, could not be brought off very effectively unless the players had a variety of traditional musical skills, as well as some new ones. 'At some point in an improvisation let the absence of something strike you. Set to detecting its hidden presence and exposing it (drawing it out).' I can't help wondering what would happen if Miles Davis and his group decided to work on that. Or what would happen if the Concord String Quartet was turned loose on this one by Alan Brett: 'Play in a manner that can in no way draw attention to your self or yourself.' For all their surface simplicity, I suspect that either of those tasks would be difficult to perform effectively. And if you don't believe me, just try to imagine how you would go about interpreting the instructions if you were asked to join in a performance.

Some of the 'Nature Study Notes' are even more demanding than these. One entry asks the performers to play in accordance with the expressions they see in the eyes of other players. Another asks the players to try to imagine a score, and to play only what they see in their imagination. Another even calls for an ability to tell fortunes, or at least for a basic faith in divination. The idea is to listen to your sound and read your future from the way it 'sinks or floats.' Of course, not all of the 152 entries are unique, or as interesting as the ones I have quoted, but all in all it is a stimulating and unusual collection. Perhaps the most unusual thing about it, however, comes right on page two, where the copyright notice ought to be. Instead of a copyright notice, we read: 'No rights are reserved in this book of rites.' That is partly a political statement, of course, and reflects the Communist feelings of some of the creators, who do not like the idea of individual ownership. More important musically, it emphasizes that improvisations can only be the property of the people participating in them.

Occasionally I hear complaints that the British avant-garde stole its ideas from American artists, and it is true that their basic approach owed much to American innovators, and particularly to John Cage. But it has been a long time now since Cage first began to visit European arts centers, and in the meantime Cardew and the others have evolved many approaches on their own. And by now, there is quite a bit that Americans can learn from the British.

October 24, 1974

Mauricio Kagel in New York

Mauricio Kagel is the most prominent European composer currently concentrating on new forms of music theater. Myths, scores, recordings, and reviews of his work have been trickling across the ocean, but there has been no way for New Yorkers to find out what Kagel's theatre works are really like until last Thursday night, when his own Cologne New Music Ensemble presented two of his works at Carnegie Recital Hall. It was an impressive evening, featuring six good performers, a zillion nifty props, much spit-and-polish precision, and quite a bit of theatrical control, as well as musical skills.

It was the precision, more than anything else, which seemed to impress the New York audience. The idea of using a trombonist, for example, as a kind of actor in a dramatic situation is not at all new here. John Cage, Lejaren Hiller, Lukas Foss, Eric Salzman, Stuart Dempster, and many other Americans have worked in this direction for some time, but all of them have taken relatively casual approaches, with the performers just being themselves most of the time. In this concert, however, the personalities of the performers were totally submerged in the roles they played. Music, timing, costumes, gestures, and even facial expressions were all calculated.

It was a fascinating evening, though it's still not completely clear to me what Kagel's pieces are all about. Kagel, who was born in Argentina and has lived in Germany since 1957, works in that thorny area between the literal and the abstract, between actual theater and pure music. And much of the time I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to interpret what I was seeing and hearing, or just accept the events at face value.

'Tactil' involves three bare-chested men. Wilhelm Bruck and Theodor Ross face the audience coolly, strumming simple chords on their guitars. Kagel is frozen at the piano, occasionally playing repeated chords of his own. After a while the chords begin to go out of sync, and everybody plays at slightly different tempos. Some elements are purely visual, as when the performers swing their arms in various ways, like silent pendulums. Occasionally Kagel reaches over to a table and flicks a metal strip, causing it to bounce up and down for a while. There are a variety of these strips, and each has its own tempo. Sometimes Kagel plays along on the piano, trying to match one of these mechanical rhythms.

Finally we discover the reason for the stepladder which has been standing at the rear of the stage. One of the guitarists climbs midway up the ladder and then resumes his strumming. But occasionally he produces a very odd bass tone. I suspected some form of off-stage trickery, but learned later that there was a long wire stretched between his guitar and one of the lowest piano strings.

The piece, which goes on for about half an hour, is all quite soft. Much of the strumming is reminiscent of folk and pop guitar styles, which adds a tongue-in-cheek level, but the piece as a whole is not at all funny. The actions are too strange. The performance style is too rigid. The music is too soft. The piece seems serious about whatever it is about.

The second half of the program, a piece called 'Repertoire,' is a fast-paced collage of about 100 short bits, performed by the five young men in Kagel's group. Someone crosses the stage trying to play trombone with his foot stuck in the slide. Someone bounces a cymbal like a yo-yo, making us wonder when it will crash on the floor. Someone hits himself in the face with a beater, but we discover that he is shielded by a piece of clear plastic which, like all of Kagel's props, happens to make an interesting sound. Someone has a metronome strapped on his back. Someone comes on wearing an lp over his face. He just stands there facing the audience for a moment, scratches on the record briefly with an index finger, and then exits. Someone pumps himself up with a noisy air pump. Everyone makes use of a variety of balls and tubes. Phallic symbols proliferate.

Despite all the horseplay, the continual surprises, and the fast pace, none of this is very funny either. It isn't supposed to be, I don't think. But if it isn't comedy, what is 'Repertoire' about?

According to the program notes, attributed to a Hamburg critic, the piece sounds 'an alarm for civilisation' and asserts that 'industry can only gloss over the slow death of nature.' If Kagel's basic intention is to convey messages of this sort, then he is really in trouble, because 'Repertoire' by itself is not at all clear as a piece of social criticism. But on the other hand, we can't really treat the work on an abstract level, at least not when some cardboard tube is having a noisy orgasm. Both pieces seem to be begging us to interpret their symbolism, but neither one gives us much to go on.

Note: Rereading this article in 1989, I am embarrassed. How could I have written with so little sympathy and so little understanding about a composer who has probably made more important discoveries in new forms of musical theater than anyone else? But Paul Panhuysen insisted that the article was symptomatic of my mistrust in European music at the time, and that we must leave it in. So here it is.

October 24, 1974

In Memoriam Charles Ives

I had been planning to write something nice about Charles Ives this week, to help celebrate the centennial of his birth, but I decided not to. Not that I don't admire his example and love his music. It just didn't seem necessary. Almost every periodical I've picked up in recent weeks has contained some sort of eulogy to Ives. The concert schedules are loaded with Ives programs. Everybody has been getting on the bandwagon.

It is good that we should honor Ives so extravagantly. But I can't help noticing how deeply ironic it is that a society which practically ostracized Ives during his lifetime would turn around 20 years later and pretend that Ives is really a great American hero after all, with the charming implication that really we all must have loved his music all along. Meanwhile, I have not run across even a short obituary about the recent death of another great American composer, Harry Partch.

We may admire Ives now, but his example hasn't taught us much. America still makes things pretty tough for its musical innovators. Even among musicians, I occasionally find people who haven't yet heard of Harry Partch. And among those who have heard of him, most seem unaware of 'Delusion of the Fury,' Partch's longest, and probably his finest work. And no one can plead 'unavailable,' as the work was issued by Columbia records a couple of years ago.

But eventually people will probably discover it, and by the year 2001, when it is time for a Partch centennial, there will no doubt be dancing in the streets, concerts all over, and eulogies galore. That seems to be the American way.

October 31, 1974

Male Soprano with Wings

For several months now, I've avoided mentioning one of the most impressive performances I ever heard. The idea of reviewing a bird just seemed too ridiculous. But the little fellow I happened to hear on several mornings on Long Island last summer is still locked vividly in my memory, and I just can't ignore him any longer.

I'm not even sure what kind of bird he was. Some sort of thrush, I suppose. He had a dull color, a longish beak, and an amazing musical vocabulary. He was particularly fond of a certain television antenna, and he used to perch there for long periods of time. Sometimes he would sing for 20 or 30 minutes almost nonstop, spinning out spontaneous concerts that would make the finest flutists and sopranos green with envy.

Basically he seemed to work with about three kinds of licks. First there were the pure whistle-like tones, which sometimes slid up, sometimes slid down, and sometimes looped around in neat little curves. Then there were the harsher, raspier tones, usually squawked out in the lower register, and often produced at a louder volume than the pure tones. Then there were the gurgles, something like the flutter-tongue techniques that wind-players use, but much more flexible. He could gurgle on pure tones or on raspy ones. He could do quick gurgles, slow gurgles, and gurgles that changed in speed. He could even take a gurgle and gradually slow it down so much that it became just a series of repeated notes, or start with repeated notes and ease into a gurgle.

In fact, about the only thing he didn't do was sustain long tones, and I wouldn't be surprised if he could have done that too if he had felt like it. Maybe long tones just didn't fit his morning mood on the tv antenna. Or maybe long tones are just too boring to a creature like this, who has so much facility with the fast flashy stuff. He also didn't demonstrate much control over exact tuning. The same lick wouldn't always come out on the same pitch. But that is irrelevant, because he is basically an atonalist. I'm sure he couldn't care less about human tuning theories.

As I listened, I became interested in how the bird's complex phrases were put together. Did he do some licks more often than others? What followed what? Were there patterns of repetition? Naturally, being a human being, I figured I was a lot smarter than any bird, so I thought I'd try to figure out what the patterns were all about. I was convinced that he was just going through some automatic, instinctive routine. No doubt the fast array of licks could be boiled down to a few basic patterns. Or so I thought.

It took me a long time to become familiar enough with his licks to work out a few basic labels, so that I could even recognize one of his sequences if he did happen to repeat it. With the tremendous variety in materials and the very fast pace, it was tough going, and I had to concentrate as hard as I could. I worked at it pretty hard several different times, but I never managed to put my finger on anything. The licks came in countless variations and just about every possible sequence, and I finally concluded that this little creature could probably go on all day without actually repeating himself. The sequence of events was delightfully unpredictable. Yet the materials were all related, and the music held together just the way good human compositions are expected to.

A short time after this, I spent some time browsing in the library to try to learn more about bird calls. One of the most interesting things I ran across was a comparison between the technical abilities of one-year-old song birds vs. two-year-olds and three-year-olds. Apparently there is a tremendous growth. Even birds need to practice a few years in order to get their chops really working right.

The books also contained a few charts analyzing the frequency of bird calls at various times of day and in various seasons, some discussion about bird 'songs' vs. bird 'calls,' and a few unimpressive attempts to decode what the songs mean, on the assumption that they can be dealt with linguistically. Of course, I could have been looking at the wrong books, but my general impression from what I did find was that song birds are about as baffling to ornithologists as they are to music critics.

But the bird's song itself, though impressive, was not the whole thing. Much of my pleasure, no doubt, had to do with the circumstances of the concert. For once, I was hearing music which was completely unsullied by egotism. Which is not to say that the bird didn't have motives. I'm sure his singing had to do with mating or territorial rights or something. But at least he wasn't trying to become famous, or get more bookings, or get reviewed, or draw crowds. If he even knew that someone was listening, he didn't allow that to affect his performance.

I keep thinking how good it would be if humans could do that - find some natural easy-going way of making good music, and then just let it happen as a natural part of life, without any hype.

And I keep thinking about my listening habits too, and wondering how many equally impressive bird songs I must have missed during my life, just because I wasn't sensitive enough to stop and listen, or because I usually think of music just as a matter of human performance and electronic stereo equipment.

And sometimes I also think about the bird himself. He is probably sunning himself down South somewhere now, singing his heart out on somebody else's tv antenna. Maybe other people can hear him. Maybe some of them are really listening to him.

Note: There were several letters following this article, all assuring us that the soloist was a mocking bird.

November 14, 1974
Richard Landry

Almost every composer and musician I know is troubled in one way or another by the conflicts between live performance and recording. If one wants music to circulate, it is almost essential to make it work both ways, and yet just about every musical decision becomes a vote for one or the other. To compound the problem, a third medium, videotape, is now available, and it poses a third set of problems and possibilities.

Richard Landry has been attempting to fit his music into all three of these moulds, and it is interesting to observe how different the results are. I recently heard two of his record albums, which seemed quite ordinary, a live solo concert, which was impressive on a performance level, and three videotapes, which were successful on just about every level.

Video art is still a relatively new genre, of course, and so far, few musicians have attempted to deal with it. It is a rapidly growing field, however, and places like the Castelli Gallery, which handles these works of Landry's, now distribute videotapes to a number of libraries and museums around the country. In most cases the tapes were never intended for actual broadcast, and some of them are designed to be viewed in specific gallery situations. The three Landry videotapes I saw all involve filming a solo instrument while Landry is playing it, and each tape has a unique twist which places it in an artistic category quite apart from any musical program one might see on commercial tv.

'Sax' uses a split screen image of Landry and his saxophone. On one side we see a close-up of one hand, and on the other side we see a close-up of the other hand. The hands move, and the keys click, but Landry never blows enough air into the horn to produce an actual tone. The sound of the clicking is interesting enough all by itself, however, as the keys make a wide variety of sounds, and there is much rhythmic interest.

'Sax' strikes me as a brilliant idea, because it solves a problem which has been begging to be solved for a long time. For years I have been going to concerts and watching wind players, particularly flutists, try to make music by clicking keys. But it never really works. In a concert hall the key clicking is never loud enough to be heard easily, and even when it sounds interesting, the listener is too far away to see how it is being done. Landry's videotape solves both the aural and visual problems quite simply and quite effectively.

'Six Vibrations for Agnes Martin' is a solo guitar piece. Landry picks out a kind of dissonant blues quite skilfully, and it sounds even more skilful than it is, because of a special reverberation technique employed. Meanwhile the camera is riveted on a close-up of four upper frets. We never see Landry or his hands, but only those six strings, which, of course, vibrate exactly with the music.

In 'Hebe's Grande Bois' Landry plays a bamboo flute, and the camera locks into a tight shot of the performer's lips. The music, which again involves electronic reverberation, slides around eerily on very high tones. There is something quite sensual, almost obscene, about Landry's lips, which cover most of the screen, and they don't seem to add as much to the music visually as the hands and guitar strings do in the other tapes.

Landry, 35, has performed with the Philip Glass Ensemble since 1968, but his own music bears little resemblance to Glass's. His Louisiana roots as a jazz musician, and his facile tenor saxophone technique were far more evident than any possible Glass influence in his performance at the Kitchen Sunday night. This short concert consisted of one continuous 45-minute improvisation, unaccompanied and unamplified.
Landry began with a series of lyrical phrases, outlining an unusual mode which became the home base for the entire performance. From here he took numerous excursions into those wild areas of the tenor saxophone which many jazz-based musicians have discovered, but which are still uncharted as far as the orchestration textbooks are concerned. He was loose enough to go off into the more raucous and squealy registers of his instrument, and yet controlled enough to remember to come back to home base once in a while, and give a sense of unity to his playing. He got along fine without the usual support of bass and drums.
Landry does not seem as at home in the recording studio as he was in his live concert or in his videotapes. I heard a two-record set called 'Solos' and an earlier album of film music, and none of the music really seems to belong on a disc. Many of the bands sound like mere fragments of some music which started long before and ended long after. I kept wishing I could have been there when the recordings were made.

Another reason why this music doesn't work particularly well in recording is that its main value is the virtuosity of the players. And if there is one thing which always works better in live performances than in recording, it is virtuoso playing. Recordings put a lot of distance between virtuoso and listener. Meanwhile, the techniques which often make recordings work better than live performances don't play much of a role in Landry's albums: fancy mixes, electronic effects, stereophonic spatial effects, etc.

December 9, 1974
Suspended Bell Gives Concert

The procedure had been suggested silently by a poster hanging on one wall of the Experimental Intermedia loft. ‘Letting the metal swing back and forth,’ it said, ‘making it sound when it comes to you (just by touching).’ Now six or eight of us were sitting on the floor around a brass bell, which was suspended from the ceiling. With the help of an occasional push, the bell revolved continually in circular and elliptical patterns. The bell rang against mallets which we each held, and its music varied considerably, depending on which mallets it would hit, and how it would happen to hit them.

At first it was tempting to actually hit the bell when it came around to my side. But I soon realized that that would be missing the point. ‘Don’t be a klutz, Tom. Forget your own intentions. Follow the instructions. Let the bell determine whether it’s going to hit your mallet or not.’ Intellectually I understood, but physically it wasn’t working. When the bell did hit my mallet, it just klunked. When it didn’t, I grew impatient and moved closer into range. But then it would just klunk again. This seemingly simple problem was becoming a real challenge to my muscles, my patience, and my musical sensitivity. I could see that I had much to learn about bells and mallets and unintentional sounds. Perhaps I could learn from others.

Still holding my mallet out, I began to watch Philip Corner, who happened to be sitting near me. He had made the sign that hung on the wall, and he has been expe-rimenting with unintentional sounds for a long time. I figured he must know a lot about this kind of music - how to play it, how to listen to it, and how to enjoy it.

One thing stood out immediately. Instead of holding his mallet rigidly, as I was, Corner kept a loose grip. That way the mallet bounced a bit when it hit, and he’d get a nice ring instead of a klunk. I loosened my grip and watched him more carefully. I began to notice something more subtle. Not only was he holding his mallet loosely, but sometimes, when the bell came to him, he would actually move his thumb in a tiny striking motion.

That seemed wrong at first. Corner wasn’t following his own instructions. He was hitting the bell instead of allowing the bell to hit the mallet. But no. He was really following the instructions. Those little flicks in his thumb were not controlling the bell at all. The bell was still calling the shots. The way he did it, the little thumb-flicks were simply sensitive responses to the bell.

I tried again, but I overdid it. I could tell by the way the bell sounded when I hit it - just a little too loud, a little too distinct. It sounded as if I was hitting the bell on purpose instead of simply responding to the movements of the bell itself.

Gradually I began to be able to really go with the bell. I stopped getting both the dull klunks and the intentional rings. When the bell came around to my mallet, it responded more easily, more naturally, and I felt better attuned to Corner and some of the others. But the bell was losing momentum and I could no longer reach it. I started to move in a little closer, anxious to continue. ‘No, wait a minute.’ I caught myself. ‘You’re being a klutz again. If you move in you’re forcing your own will on the bell. If the bell is ready to die down, let it die down. Let there be silence.’ But now a newcomer joined the group. In all there must have been 20 to 25 people present that evening. Every once in a while someone would join or leave our particular group, and I hadn’t been paying much attention to these personnel shifts, but this time the change was obvious. The newcomer, a young woman, had been occupied somewhere else, and was not sensitive to the kind of music we had been making around the suspended bell. She plowed right in, knocking out some stupid rhythm, and it irritated me. ‘What a klutz. We had this nice thing going, and now she comes over and ruins it all. No. Wait a minute. Relax, Tom. It’s not just you and the bell. Other people have a right to their experiences too. You haven’t been exactly the most sensitive one around yourself, you know.’ I had begun to be patient and tolerant with the bell, but I had to try to be patient and tolerant with other people too. I held my mallet patiently, trying to continue as before, trying to keep my emotions in check. Soon the newcomer went away, and everything was as before. She hadn’t hurt a thing. Why had I been upset?

The bell was dying down again, and this time no one ventured to give it a push. We continued holding our mallets up. Perhaps someone would give it a push. No one did. I put my mallet down, figuring that this would be the end of the bell music. Others, however, still held their mallets up, unwilling to break the mood so suddenly. They were more sensitive than I had been. I felt like a klutz again. But I perceived another level. ‘That’s your problem. You keep comparing yourself to others. More sensitive than this person, less so than that person. That’s why you’re such a klutz. You’re all caught up in competing.’ I could see that I had a lot to learn if I ever wanted to be able to play this kind of music well. It’s a whole philosophy really. ‘Sounds out of Silent Spaces,’ the flier had said. ‘Meditations with Music.’ The phrases are apt, but they don’t explain how hard it is to do.

Note: This exercise came out of the whole group Sounds out of Silent Spaces, which also included Annea Lockwood, Alison Knowles, Julie Winter, Daniel Goode, Ruth Anderson, Emily Derr, myself, and others, and should perhaps not have been credited specifically to Philip Corner, although he was the one who made the score. But finally, the real performer was the bell itself.

December 23, 1974

The Evolution of Jim Burton

I recently completed my third year as a regular music critic for the Voice, and I think the most gratifying thing about those three years has been the opportunity to watch artists evolve. By going to most of the concerts, and keeping in touch with all the new music activity, I've been able to follow many New York composers quite closely as they confront artistic problems and try to work through them. And sometimes the growth is phenomenal.

Take Jim Burton, for example. The first concert of his that I saw consisted of short theatre pieces. Or maybe they were happenings. One consisted mostly of the sound of power saws as the performers gradually cut the word 'wall' out of a large sheet of standing plywood. His adventurous mind and unusual sense of humor were obvious, but so were the flaws. Only a few years earlier he had been concentrating on hard-edge painting, so this was a new area for him, and he wasn't really at home yet with time or with sound.

The next time around he offered an evening of 'Six Solos in the Form of a Pair.' By then his sense of timing was much improved, and the concert flowed quite smoothly. His sense of humor was working better than ever, particularly at one point when he appeared as a cymbal tamer, slashing at cymbals with a whip. The sounds were more effective too, though now he was writing for traditional instruments, and sometimes one could sense that he didn't yet understand them very well.

That was two years ago, and I have not reviewed his work since then. But much has happened in the interim. He worked as music director of the Kitchen, where he learned much about audiences, lighting possibilities, and the whole process of presenting concerts. He did about four versions of a witty piece called 'A Fairy Tale,' in which the performer tells a story, substituting piano sounds for various words. In each version his choice of piano sounds was more sensitive. He put together 15 or 20 other pieces during that period too, using everything from music box parts and videotapes to postcards and graphic notation.

At one point I collaborated with him on some theater pieces and had a chance to watch him carry through on specific problems. He developed a strong understanding of the difference between being oneself and playing a role - a matter which still confuses me and many musicians. He learned how to write good dialogue. He toyed with camp and slapstick. He began to sense where art ended and entertainment began, and though he loved to work right on the borderline, he always seemed to know immediately when he was lapsing into pure entertainment.

The result of all this is that now, at the age of 34, Burton has found ways around his limitations and through his artistic problems and has emerged as a fully mature artist, with a significant body of work. I think anyone who attended Burton's latest concert could clearly see that this is startingly original work, done by someone who now knows exactly what he is doing.

'Phisiks of Metaquavers' ran about 50 minutes at its premiere on Dec. 6. It is divided into four overlapping movements, which are performed on traditional instruments, bicycle wheels, amplified piano wire, and a large assortment of organ pipes.

The piece began pretty much like a normal concert. Garrett List was playing trombone. Rhys Chatham was playing flute. Jon Deak was playing bass. And Burton was playing his beloved homemade instrument, which stands up something like a pedal steel guitar, sounds like some friendly electronic beast, and is known as the 'springed instrument.' The instrumental textures vary quite a bit, and they are only mildly interesting, but soon Burton picks up two whiskey glasses, and clinks them together so that they make a wonderful sliding buzz. It's one of those sounds we have probably all heard, but only someone like Burton would ever have bothered to really listen to it - let alone put it in a piece. After a while the instruments drop out and everyone is clinking whiskey glasses. This soon shifts to an intricate group rhythm with everyone playing toy squeaking gizmos, and from here, the musicians one by one move to the bicycle wheels.

In an earlier quartet for bicycle wheels, Burton simply turned two bicycles upside down, but now he has the four wheels mounted on separate boxes. This makes it easier for the players to turn the wheels and bow on the spokes without getting in each other's way, and it also makes a clear reference to Dada. One of Duchamp's most famous 'readymade' sculptures, of course, was a mounted bicycle wheel. To make the reference doubly clear, Burton subtitles this section 'ReadyMade Rotosonoriphone Concerto.' I doubt that it ever occurred to Duchamp that bicycle wheels could be musical instruments, but they are actually quite versatile in this respect. The obvious effects are just to pick out melodies by pinging spokes one at a time, or to spin the wheel and let something click against the spokes as they go by. Here, however, Burton eschews the obvious and works only with bass bows. Sometimes the players hold their bows against the spokes while the wheel spins, and sometimes they reach through the wheel and bow on one spoke at a time. The wheels are all amplified, and the sound tends to be loud and shrill, but at one point the juice is suddenly turned off, and we hear only the acoustic sound. It is a blur of little metallic sounds, and one of the many musical revelations of the evening. When it comes to dealing directly with sound, Burton's ear is exceptional, despite his lack of conservatory training - and perhaps partly because of this lack.

From here the performers move to four amplified piano wires, stretched at shoulder height clear across the 80-foot length of the Kitchen. The four players walk along very slowly, rubbing the wires gently with one hand as they move, stimulating eerie high-pitched wailing sounds. In an effort to keep their hands moving steadily along the wire, they fall into a strange steady walk. The concentration is intense. Their eyes never waver. They keep walking slowly. The movement patterns become interesting as they pass each other going back and forth. They are doing some incredible dance. Yet at the same time, they are just musicians playing music.

After a while the musicians move, one by one, over to the organ pipes. These range from only a few inches to about 15 feet in length. Each player has an assortment. Here they play chords most of the time, attacking together, sustaining for a few seconds, and then taking a breath for the next one. As in most of Burton's music, the choice of the pitches is not very important. The music is about objects that make sounds. And organ pipes produce very special sounds when they are blown like wind instruments, instead of mechanically, as on actual pipe organs. Burton calls this a 'Phantom Organ,' and like almost everything he has ever written, there is a second level going on. Maybe it is program music. Maybe it is theater. Who cares? It looks good. It sounds good. It works.

Note: This was probably the first piece in which anyone made music with a very long amplified wire, though many artists and composers have done so since. Burton was a key figure in the SoHo music scene. He later gave up art altogether, and I don't know where he is now. I'd love to see him again, or be able to rehear this wonderful concert.

December 30, 1974

David Behrman: A 1974 Summary

The end of the year always seems to call for some kind of summary. This year it is relatively easy to pull together some thoughts I have had about minimal music during the past year, because David Behrman's December 16 concert conveniently demonstrated most of them. His music, which was part of a three-evening series at 224 Centre Street, was also quite gratifying all by itself.

Behrman has been firmly rooted in electronic music for some time. He knows almost as much about electronics as he does about music, and designs all of his equipment. Nothing is ever prerecorded. He performs everything live on his synthesizing equipment. And because his equipment is all custom-made to create the effects he wants, the result is a personal kind of electronic music, which doesn't sound much like anything other composers are doing.

Sometimes he bills his concerts as 'Homemade Synthesizer Music' or 'Music with Sliding Pitches,' but often he doesn't bother with titles at all. Titles are really irrelevant. Behrman doesn't make pieces exactly. He assembles electronic equipment which is capable of doing certain things. These things change quite a bit from year to year, and even from month to month, because he keeps tinkering with the machinery and adjusting his musical goals. Maybe we could say that everything he does with his equipment is all one composition, and that the composition changes a little whenever he performs it. But that would imply that it is a work in progress, which is not fair, because whenever he gives a concert, the music sounds as controlled and finished as one could ever want.

In any case, the score he currently uses calls for a cellist to play along with the electronic sounds. It begins with a very low electronic tone, which pulses quite slowly through much of the piece. Gradually, higher tones fade in, creating simple major-scale harmonies. Sometimes a note slips slightly out of tune, and then tunes itself again. Behrman makes continual adjustments on the controls, but many of the complex changes in the music happen completely automatically.

Perhaps five or 10 minutes into the 45-minute score the cello enters, playing sustained tones, mostly on open strings and harmonics. On this occasion the cellist was David Gibson, whose bow control is exceptional. He plays without vibrato, and the near purity of his cello tones blends sensitively with the absolute purity of the electronic tones. Often the tones connect into brief melodic lines. The music is almost rhythmless, and it has an exquisite subtlety.

One of the technical and musical niceties of the set-up is that the synthesizer is programmed to respond to several specific cello pitches. When the cellist plays one of these trigger pitches, he upsets some circuits and causes the electronic tones to slide into a whole new chord.

As the piece progresses, the interchanges between the cello and the synthesizer become more involved, and the harmonies modulate into many fresh patterns. The low pulsing tone disappears for a long time, but it returns later to wrap everything up in a neat symmetrical ending. The whole piece has a serene quality, but it is never inactive. Sometimes the pace is actually rather fast, and one must listen carefully in order to follow everything.

It is this relatively fast pace which seems particularly symptomatic of a general change in the local musical climate. I had always thought of Behrman as a minimalist. Only a year or so ago, his music crept along with a minimal amount of activity. If there was a change every minute or so, that seemed sufficient to keep the music alive. Otherwise it was mostly repetition of one sort or another. Everything was to be savored. The important thing was to experience the sounds fully, and it wasn't necessary to keep the mind occupied with a lot of events, changes, ideas, relationships, and so on.

For several years minimalism has been one of the three or four dominant trends in new music. But now it is changing, and not only in Behrman's music. I can hear the change in all of the so-called minimal composers, and I can sense it in my instincts as a listener. There was a period when it seemed really refreshing to sort of turn off the mind and just experience sound for its own sake. A single chord or a repeated pattern of some sort could capture my attention for a long time, provided it sounded alive and seemed to be saying something. Minimalism offered a fascinating new way of listening to music. But it is not enough anymore. Maybe it was never enough. Maybe we just had to go through a period of that sort as an antidote to all the complexity which dominated the post-Webern era.

Other things about Behrman's music also reflect general trends. For one thing, Behrman no longer relies solely on electronics, but like so many others creating electronic music, he now finds it necessary to add traditional instruments. He is also more concerned with melodic lines than he was a year ago, and that seems to be a particularly broad trend. Everywhere I go I hear avant-gardists returning to melody. Composers who only a few years ago were interested only in raucous noises, fancy rhythms, or electronic pizzazz are now writing melodies. And I don't mean weirdo bleep-bloop melodies either, but plain old la-la-la-la melodies.

There's something kind of reactionary about this whole '70s period we're going through. I wish I could tell you what it's all about.

Note: It wasn't reactionary at all. Composers were simply finding that even in a minimalist context, a minimum of intellectual information is necessary to hold the interest of a listener - or a composer.

January 6, 1975

Alvin Curran: Aural Cinema

Alvin Curran is an American composer, but even since his student days some 10 to 15 years ago, he has lived and worked in Rome. During that time he has evolved a sophisticated style which has more to do with emotional qualities and literal elements that any contemporary music I can think of. Listening to his solo concert at the Kitchen on December 21 was a lot like watching a film. And I don't mean just the sound track of a film. A whole wonderful 90-minute non-narrative film is all there in pure sound. The cinematic quality has something to do with the continuity. Curran doesn't use transitions the way most musicians do. He continually cuts or fades into new material.

The concert opens with some large deep wind chimes, blown by a small fan. The music pans slowly over to Curran's Putney synthesizer, which adds gentle electronic arpeggios to the sound of the wind chimes. Soon there is a series of quick cuts to a small battered-up cymbal which, with the help of amplification, makes an unlikely deep roar against the wind chimes and the electronic rippling in the background.

This fades into another scene in which Curran taps out fast rhythms on a set of tuned cow bells. The tension builds to a climax, and then the music-film cuts to another place.

It is cold here. A prerecorded tape has begun, and it sounds like the wind. We begin to focus on Curran, who is now drawing a bow across a chunk of cold metal. The sound is shrill and unpleasant. It grates.

The music cuts back to the wind chimes. They sound different now, as they are produced by the prerecorded tape. Curran's voice slowly fades in against the wind-chime background. He is singing mostly soft falsetto melodies. He doesn't have much vibrato control, and he relies heavily on the microphone, but his intonation is true and the melodies are musical.

We pull back, and the scenery becomes audible. The bird songs and running water are easily recognizable, but they sound unusually attractive. They were obviously recorded on location somewhere.

A low-register electronic melody is superimposed on the scene. Somewhere off in the distance dogs bark momentarily. We don't know why they are barking, but the effect is wonderfully cinematic.

The dogs disappear, and the electronic music dominates. Curran enters the picture again. This time he is playing some kind of trumpet, which is as beat-up as the cymbal he played earlier. The music pans slightly to one side, and we hear a new element. In the distance a woman is singing a folk song in Italian. Like the dogs, we don't know where she came from or why she is there, but she seems to belong. Everything in this unusual montage seems to belong.

After a brief flashback to the running water, we return to the electronic melody. It is in sharper focus now, and it is not as simple as it first seemed. The camera pulls back gradually, revealing that the music has many layers. The aural screen becomes busier and busier. The music is transformed into a lush rippling of electronic sound, something like Terry Riley's 'Rainbow in Curved Air.' Marimba lines may be mixed in too, but the scene is too busy to pick out anything very distinctly.

A squeaking sound intrudes. It is out of place. We begin to zoom in on that, and the rich electronic texture spills off the edges of the screen. As we move closer, we see that it is not just one thing squeaking, but a whole group of things. A flock of prehistoric birds maybe. Another one of Curran's musical symbols. The music fades slowly to a quiet scene with two electronic tones undulating softly. The running water reappears in the distance for a moment. The music crossfades back to Curran, who is now standing up twirling two plastic tubes. They whistle in tune with the soft electronic tones. The oscillators gradually fade, and the work ends with Curran all by himself, still twirling those plastic tubes.

January 27, 1975

Research and Development: Joan La Barbara

Artists, like scientists, fall into two categories. Some do basic research and attempt to answer fundamental questions. Others attempt to find fresh applications for basic principles which are already known.

Specific examples are debatable, but for the sake of clarifying the analogy, let me say that Varese was doing basic sonic research when he wrote pieces like 'Octandre' and 'Integrales.' Later, the many composers who turned his harsh repetitive sonorities into tension music for TV dramas were analogous to the engineers and product developers who convert scientific discoveries into something everybody can use.

Sometimes brilliant researchers, like Webern or Einstein, become famous and highly revered, even though their work is never really understood except by specialists. Sometimes important creative contributions are made by men like, say, Copland or the Wright brothers, who hardly did any basic research at all. Sometimes people like Stravinsky or Salk make some achievements on a level of basic research and also have a direct impact on society as a whole.

Of course, by current values, it is absurd to consider artistic advances on the same level as scientific advances, but the basic contrast between researchers and developers seems to me to be similar in both areas. In both the sciences and the arts, the two groups have different motivations, different goals, different personalities and different socio-economic functions, and often, little respect for one another. Yet they are interdependent.

All this could easily lead to other observations, but I want to leave that to the reader, if he or she is interested, and turn to Joan La Barbara. For it was this singer's January 15 concert at Washington Square Methodist Church which prompted my recent thoughts on this subject.

La Barbara strikes me as a musician who is, at the moment anyway, fully devoted to basic research. In fact, much of her recent work is not even limited to musical matters, but has broader implications. I suspect that psychologists, acousticians, and phoneticists, for example, would all have been quite interested in some of the remarkable phenomena she demonstrated. Not that the rest of us could not enjoy them too.

The first part of the program, 'Hear What I Feel,' involved sensory deprivation. La Barbara did not see or touch anything for an hour before the concert began. Then she appeared, still blindfolded, took a seat in front of a microphone, and began touching things like tinsel and jello, responding to each touch sensation with a vocal gesture of some sort.

The sounds were mostly unpitched and strongly emotional. There was never anything histrionic, however. Everything was subtle and musical, yet quite varied and highly suggestive. There were whimpers, gurgles, sexual sounds, baby sounds, demented sounds, frightening sounds. But they were presented more in the spirit of an investigation than as a work of art. How does synesthesia function? How does the mind transform touch sensations to emotions and sounds? What is the musical value of this progress?

In her 'Voice Piece: One-Note Internal Resonance Investigation,' La Barbara intones one pitch for about 20 minutes. But with every breath the tone becomes a different color. Sometimes she shapes her mouth so as to make certain overtones ring out clearly over the others, and she can place the resonance in many ways. Aside from the usual 'head tones' and 'chest tones,' she seems to have neck tones, nose tones, eye tones, and who knows how many other kinds of tones.

Her most remarkable 'internal resonances,' however, are the chords she sings. In some unexplainable way she is able to produce very low, rough-sounding pitches, a fifth or an octave below the basic one, and sustain them simultaneously with the basic tone. That's one phenomenon that would certainly have interested the science people.

'Vocal Extensions' is another highly disciplined process, which focuses on another specific problem. For this she uses some electronic equipment to create special effects with her voice and add reverberation. Here she performed with Bruce Ditmas, who stood at a table scraping, rubbing, and striking bells and other small percussion instruments. The goal was to match and blend with the percussion sounds, and La Barbara often achieved this. The vocal discoveries were not as striking as in the other pieces, however, and most of the time my attention was focused on Ditmas's highly sensitive percussion music.

La Barbara is not just making music. She is questioning the essence of human expression by exploring our oldest instrument of expression. That is genuine research at its most basic level, and it seems to me that La Barbara has already made quite a bit of headway in this exploration.

Neither she nor anyone else has thus far taken the new material into a product development stage. But I, for one, am just as glad. The phenomena she is working with are in many ways more interesting in this raw experimental form than they would be if they were shaped into some more impressive musical product, like an opera or something. Which raises another interesting question:

Why is ‘experimental’ generally considered a negative term when applied to music? I’ll leave readers to figure that one out for themselves too.

February 3, 1975

John Cage: Music from Stars

Humans sometimes display a remarkable ability to explain away things they don't like. The music of John Cage, for example. When I was an undergraduate, one of my teachers dismissed him as simply 'crazy.' Later, as Cage's influence continued to spread, that explanation didn't seem quite satisfactory, and the argument turned to 'abrogation of responsibility.' Since Cage left a few things up to performers, instead of dictating every sound, he was supposedly not taking the kind of responsibility which a composer is supposed to take. But this argument was perhaps even more naive than the first. If music was only valid in cases where a single individual dictated all decisions, it would be necessary to throw out jazz, Indian music, African music, and, in fact, just about everything that lies outside the European classical tradition. More recently the line of defense has turned to categories. Unable any longer to maintain the earlier arguments with any dignity, I now hear people explain that, although Cage has had a certain influence, it has really been philosophical rather than musical.

There is a certain validity here. Cage, like many artists, has never been very interested in art for art's sake, and his works all reflect broader questions. He has been concerned with human freedom, with technology, with Zen, with the I Ching, with McLuhan, and more recently, with Thoreau and Fuller. Frequently he discusses such topics in lectures and essays, which make him, I suppose, a philosopher of sorts. But the point, of course, is that Cage's primary mode of expression has always been music. All of his intellectual ideas have also become musical ideas - and not only in his own compositions, but in those of many other composers as well. People may wish that Cage's viewpoint is only a philosophical matter, but like it or not, it is also very much an artistic matter.

Eric Salzman's 'Twentieth Century Music' summarizes Cage's importance very well. 'Pop Art, happenings, multi-media, minimalism, concept art, and contemporary music theater all owe something, or trace their origins, to Cage; the impact of his ideas is now so generalized that one can only describe them as having entered the main stream of 20th-century art.' Two generations of younger composers now look to Cage almost as a father figure. Curiously, none of the younger composers actually use the I Ching or the prepared piano or any of his specific tools. Yet something of Cage's anarchistic political views, his appreciation of all sound, his many notation inventions, or his cross-cultural concerns can be detected in almost any avant-garde concert one hears today. On the other hand, most of the musicians who consider themselves part of the musical mainstream still see Cage as some sort of obscure tributary. And in the music community of this country, at least, his music remains almost as controversial as it was 20 years ago.

None of this seems to have affected Cage very much. Now 62, he goes on with his work as he always has, and I suspect that the results are not much different than they would be if he were universally admired or universally ignored. Much of his recent work has been involved with manipulating Thoreau texts. During the past year or two he has also spent a good deal of time going to concerts and compiling his relatively optimistic thoughts on 'The Future of Music,' a long provocative essay published recently in the magazine Numus-West. Simultaneously, he began working on a set of 32 piano pieces, written for Grete Sultan, who premiered three of them at Alice Tully Hall on January 25.

This piano series, called 'Atlas Australis,' is a major work, which has occupied him for over a year now, and it is still not quite finished. As in most of Cage's work, the composing process involves meticulous procedures, which are outlined so thoroughly in his program notes that one could almost write one's own 'Atlas Australis' by following the same procedures. The essential notes are determined by tracing over star maps, so that each note in the music represents a star in the sky. Other procedures, using the I Ching, determine whether a star will become a single note or one of 1175 possible chords, and in which octave. In each piece a few notes which are not used are held down throughout, so as to ring sympathetically, but there are no special preparations and no plucking or scraping.

I have seen the scores to quite a few of the etudes aside from the three Sultan played, and they are all pointillistic. Their countless isolated notes and chords are often quite dense, and in texture, they remind me quite a bit of Boulez's piano music. But the aesthetic, of course, is almost the opposite. With Cage there is never any sense of purposeful transitions or thematic cells, and consonant and dissonant sounds all intermingle unpredictably.

Like Czerny etudes, the pieces become progressively more difficult, thus presenting a great challenge to any pianist who wants to get through the complete set. All the pieces involve a good deal of hand crossing, because Cage likes the idea of treating the two hands independently, and not allowing them to assist one another. Both of these characteristics are political matters for Cage, who has a strong work ethic, and strong feelings about independence.

It seemed to me that Sultan did not meet the challenge of the music very succesfully. Her staccato touch was not always consistent, and I had the feeling that her dynamic shadings were not coming out quite the way she wanted them to. But I think that says more about the difficulty of the music than about the limitations of the performer. When the complete set is finished, it will become a very long evening of music and a tremendous challenge to pianists. 'Etudes

Australes' may well replace the 'Concord Sonata' and the Boulez sonatas as the ultimate tour de force for piano virtuosos.

But more important for listeners is the simple fact that every note in the music is a literal representation of some star in the heavens. Listening to Cage's rendering of the constellations and galaxies leaves me with the same sense of wonder that I have often experienced looking up at the countless stars on clear summer evenings. Or rather, as Fuller suggests, looking 'out' at them.

March 24, 1975
Morton Feldman's Instruments

There are so many kinds of fine new music current today that no one can expect to really understand them all, so we tend to oversimplify. That is particularly true in the case of a composer like Morton Feldman, whose music is so distinctive that one only needs to hear about three notes of one of his pieces in order to recognize the style. By now, I don't think anyone denies that Feldman is one of our major composers, but I don't think many people really listen to his music very carefully either.

'Sure, I know Feldman,' I hear people say. 'He's the guy that writes the soft sparse music with free rhythm.' Or something like that. And once we can identify the style, and have pigeonholed the name up in our brains somewhere, we have a tendency to stop listening and go on to something else.

I have a special interest in Feldman, however, because I studied composition with him for a time, and because I know he has remarkable insight into a lot of things. So I've kept listening to his music, and I've kept discovering new things in it. And by now, every new Feldman piece I hear sounds totally different from all the others. True, the style itself never really changes, but within that style, Feldman produces a continual stream of high-quality music. And it seems to me that he doesn't actually repeat himself nearly as much as, say, Hindemith or Milhaud did.

Feldman has always been concerned largely with the sounds of traditional instruments. Lately this has become a more conscious concern, and he has begun to use the names of the instruments as titles. He has also begun to make longer statements. Most of his recent pieces last at least 20 minutes, and one runs almost an hour. 'Voices and Instruments,' 'Piano and Orchestra,' 'Pianos and Voices,' and 'Chorus and Orchestra' are a few of the eight or 10 substantial pieces he has written since he moved to Buffalo in 1972. All are fully notated, the 'chance' techniques of Feldman's early music having been long forgotten.

One recent piece, called simply 'Instruments' (1974), received an excellent performance Friday night by the SEM Ensemble of Buffalo. The work, which lasts a little over 20 minutes, is scored for flute (Petr Kotik), oboe (Nora Post), muted trombone (James Kasprovicz), celeste (Judith Martin), and percussion (Jan Williams).

Unlike any other Feldman work I know, 'Instruments' has a kind of tonal center. Or is it a theme? Anyway, much of the time, the instruments play on a three-note cluster. As in all Feldman's works, the instruments generally play isolated tones and chords, and the texture is relatively sparse. But there are also a number of gestures which never occurred in earlier pieces. The muted trombone plays occasional glissandos. A sequence of oboe tones may become almost melodic in character. Soft-timpani and bass-drum rolls occasionally intrude. At one point a quiet swish of maracas comes in, so dramatic in the context that it seems almost scary, for all its gentleness.

I was interested in finding out what Feldman would have to say about the changes in his music, and particularly about his more recent vocabulary, which I described as dramatic elements. He agreed that the glissandos and drum rolls create a tension which his music in the '60s never had, but he feels that this tension has less to do with the materials than with the way they are used, generally entering as surprises, without being prepared in the usual ways. He also pointed out that he continues to avoid elements which have the strongest connotations, such as crescendoing drum rolls.

Later the conversation shifted to painting metaphors, and Feldman's intentions became clearer. He was acquainted with many of the abstract expressionist painters, particularly Philip Guston, and he continues to think of his music in terms of painting. He talked about how, now that he was working on a larger scale, using larger canvases, there was a greater possibility that a strange glissando or a swish of maracas would enter the picture. One could say that his pieces of the '60s were all-over paintings, which maintained a constant mood from beginning to end. But now, one sometimes finds areas in his canvases which stand out rather sharply from the rest of the music. It is also a question of color. While his work in the '60s was done largely in pastels, he now uses occasional browns and greys as well.

But the most important thing about all of Feldman's work is his uncanny sensitivity to instrumental colors. Just as an example, at one point in 'Instruments' the winds were playing the three-note cluster, and I found it difficult to tell whether they were all playing in the same octave or not. At first I thought the flute was an octave above the other instruments. Then it began to sound as if both the flute and oboe were playing an octave above the muted trombone. Or were they all in the same register? Normally I have a good ear for such things, but in this case I really couldn't tell. Without ever relying on special avant-garde techniques, Feldman finds ways of putting instrumental colors together so that they sound like somthing we've never heard before.

March 31, 1975
Charlie Morrow Composes by Numbers

I've been acquainted with Charlie Morrow and his music for about six years now, and if there's one thing I ought to know, it is that his work is unpredictable. He is quite capable of turning out a tv jingle in the morning, working on an atonal score in the afternoon, and improvising on a Tibetan scale with the New Wilderness Preservation Society in the evening. And none of these activities would interfere in the least if, the next day, he wanted to practice his experimental vocal techniques, or continue his research into the sounds made by fish, or outline some film project, or paint a multicolored poster-size score of some sort, or perhaps design an electronic circuit which would somehow improve his recording studio, or hustle over to Madison Avenue for a demonstration. For anyone else such variety might be chaos, but for Morrow it all seems completely natural. He wears all of his hats quite easily, and while he doesn't follow through on some of his projects, he completes many of them quite skilfully.

Even knowing something about the extraordinary diversity of Morrow's talents and interests, his loft concert at 224 Centre Street on March 16 caught me completely by surprise. In retrospect, I can see that his artistic projects have been moving toward more and more rational forms for quite a while, but I never thought he would go this far. Morrow's 'The Number Six' is easily the most extreme musical statement I have heard all season, and it seems particularly significant, as it is the first clear indication I have picked up that musicians may be getting interested in some of the highly deductive and logical types of expression that I have been running across in art galleries lately.

Sitting at a little table surrounded by six microphones, Morrow read for almost an hour and a half, his entire vocabulary consisting of the numbers one through six. For each number there was a particular loudspeaker. The resulting stereophonic effect plus the rhythmic way in which he delivered the numbers, sometimes speaking and sometimes whispering, was enough to justify the performance as a musical event as far as I was concerned. But the musical elements were basically decoration. The emphasis was always on the numerical sequences themselves. All the patterns became predictable after a while, yet they were always intricate enough that it took a fair amount of concentration to keep up with the logic. One of the seven parts which make up the complete piece starts off like this.

1; 1; 1, 2; 1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; 1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; 1, 2; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3; etc.

You may think, as I did at first, that there's a mistake or two there, but assuming that the typesetter didn't mess it up, it is correct, and if you ponder the sequence for a while, the exact rules will become clear. If you are asked to ponder such things for a whole long performance, you might not even care after a while. About half the audience left this performance within the first 30 or 40 minutes, and that was not hard to understand. After all, no one had ever reduced music to pure logic quite so drastically, and Morrow was not about to make concessions in the idea just for the sake of making it palatable and entertaining. It was one of those cases where the idea itself took over. Once the logic and the numbers got going, there was nothing Morrow or anyone else could do to stop them before they had completed their patterns.

By means of clarifying how Morrow arrived at 'The Number Six,' I should mention a couple of the many earlier Morrow works which led up to it. In a short unaccompanied song called 'Cloud Song,' written some months ago, there is a logical system which determines whether the singer should sing the lyrics or simply hum. The first time through, one sings the lyrics only on the first few notes of the first phrase and the first few notes of the second phrase. On each repeat, more words are added until the fourth time through, when one sings the lyrics all the way through. There are three more repeats, during which the words drop out again, though the simple tonal melody always remains the same.

At one of the New Wilderness events this winter an ensemble of singers and instrumentalists presented Morrow's version of a hymn from that wonderful Appalachian hymnal 'The Sacred Harp.' The first time through, the music was sung perfectly straight. The second time through, each accented syllable was sung twice. The third time through, the accented syllables came three times, and so forth, up to six. It was an exceedingly simple logical process, but it sent the old hymn through a remarkable cycle of metrical changes. And as in most of Morrow's systematic pieces, the logic was totally perceivable. One doesn't need to know a thing about music to hear what is going on in a case like this.

Of course, there is nothing new about logical musical processes. The old isorhythmic motet was an extremely rigid form of deductive music, and the somewhat looser 12-tone system was almost a standard vocabulary for a while. More recently, composers have devised systematic processes whereby rhythmic patterns are repeated over and over juxtaposed in different ways, until they have been presented in every possible combination. Another logical process I've encountered fairly often lately involves tacking extra notes onto the end of a melody, so that a two-note pattern gradually grows into a very long phrase.

All these processes, however, still involve working with ordinary notes. With ‘The Number Six,’ I think Morrow has made a fairly big jump into a more conceptual realm, where numbers rather than notes become the musical material. It seems similar to the jump which painting made recently from the rational gridwork and checkerboard paintings of minimalists to the instructions, number games, and geometric demonstrations of the conceptualists. Whether this attitude will become important to other musicians in the future is anyone’s guess. And only a fool would attempt to predict what Morrow himself will do next.

April 28, 1975
Jackson Mac Low: Anagramusic

When composers began to realize that they could make music from any sounds, they moved quickly into sound effects, electronic effects, new vocal techniques, and new instrumental sounds, but for the most part, they avoided one of the most obvious possibilities, word sounds. A few striking pieces have dealt with spoken sounds, of which the best known are probably Steve Reich's 'Come Out,' made from a tape loop of a Martin Luther King statement, and Robert Ashley's 'She Was a Visitor,' a choral work. A group of poets and musicians in Fylkingen, Sweden have achieved some prominence, at least in Europe, for their work with word sounds, and quite a few people have been exploring these possibilities in the Bay Area, where they often term the genre 'text sound pieces.' But few artists have really focused their efforts on making music from spoken words, and text sound pieces continue to account for only a tiny segment of the new music picture as a whole. It is a fascinating segment, however, and I have the feeling that poets and musicians are doing more and better word pieces of this sort every year.

In New York, Jackson Mac Low has probably done more work of this sort than anyone else. Mac Low is a poet by training, and many of his early works were intended to be read silently in published form, but he soon began to concentrate on sound and performance, and now, at 52, his work is so involved with sound that it really has as much to do with music as with poetry.

In the past, whenever I ran across Mac Low's work, usually at an Avant-Garde Festival, I had a hard time appreciating what he was doing. It seemed to me that, while he might be significant as a poet, he wasn't very successful in dealing with sound. His amplification and recording techniques were sometimes faulty, he had no magnetism as a performer, and he didn't seem to know much about rhythm or pitch or musical form. But after hearing the six substantial pieces which he presented in a three-hour concert at the Kitchen on April 16, I changed my mind abruptly. In this context, with good equipment, most of the sound coming out of the loudspeakers was quite clean. His modest performing style seemed refreshing. And I began to understand that, if I focused on verbal content, the musical criteria didn't matter very much.

'A Word Event for Carlota Schoolman, on her Name' is an improvisatory piece in which two videotaped Mac Lows and one live Mac Low deliver words and sounds derived from the name 'Carlota Schoolman.' This restriction is more limiting than one might expect, but it leaves room for words and phrases like 'a tan man, a new school, a lamb, blam, sun, a new clock, not a clock, a new sun, soon,' onomatopoeia like 'tataka, taratoo, moo, oolala' and a few vowel sounds which can be drawn out into melodic shapes. These melodies are not very interesting in traditional musical terms, but if one hears them simply as vowel sounds which, like all the other sounds, are derived from 'Carlota Schoolman,' they take on another kind of significance.

'A Threnody for Sylvia Plath' is a tape collage of the voices of five different poets reading heavy statements about the late poet. Here the musical interest has to do with the unpredictable shifts between dense sections and silence.

'Counterpoint for Candy Cohen' is all made from a recording of one short statement, which Mac Low spliced into a tape loop and dubbed onto 32 different sound tracks. 'The Black Tarantula Crossword Gathas' is a quadraphonic recording of Mac Low reading phrases taken from the poet Kathy Acker. And in 'Heavens' and 'Simultaneous Numbered Asymmetries,' presented by six performers who played instruments as well as reading fragments of text which Mac Low had assembled, the musical score is the words themselves. The musicians play the notes C, D, E, F, etc. whenever those letters appear in the text. This system works surprisingly well. The notes A and E are the most common, of course, but the other pitches crop up fairly often too, and there are provisions within Mac Low's decoding system which allow for occasional sharps and flats as well.

In general, Mac Low's work has many similarities to that of John Cage, who no doubt influenced him at an early stage in his career. Like Cage, he attempts to divorce his own ego from the creative process by relying on chance procedures, and he treats his material in an abstract way, with little regard for normal syntax or meaning. A word in the hands of Mac Low is subject to the same fate as a note in the hands of Cage. It may be run through a computer, scrambled unintelligibly. And in the process, it becomes something else equally valid.

May 5, 1975

Laurie Spiegel and the Bell Labs Computer

Laurie Spiegel's presentation at 224 Centre Street on April 22 included six prerecorded pieces which she has produced on the Bell Labs computer within the last six months, along with one earlier work, and none of them contain any performance elements. It was a fairly long program, and I find that I cannot recall it as clearly as I can usually recall live performances, but a piece called 'Patchwork' did stick in my ear. It is lighter than most of Spiegel's music, with nice bouncy rhythms on a five-note scale, and a ricky-tick sort of sound that reminded me vaguely of banjo music. Much of it works with repetitive sequences, but these are generally broken up in unexpected ways after a short time. Another relatively simple piece used only four tones, which sound something like tuned drums. The piece is about rhythm, and the relationships between the rhythmic patterns are intricate enough to challenge the ear most of the time, though the general mood is never stuffy.

The other pieces were more complex, perhaps more profound, and quite different from one another - so different that it is difficult to pin down Spiegel's specific stylistic characteristics. Some of the music dealt with unusual tonal harmonies, some involved a lot of stereophonic movement, and some was almost arythmic. All the pieces had been composed note for note rather than allowing the computer to work out variations on its own, all were recorded immaculately, and all are a little hazy in my memory. But as I say, that probably has more to do with my own problems with the medium than with any actual dullness in the music.

May 26, 1975
Jon Gibson: 36-Tone Logic

Most listeners probably don't worry much about whether a piece of music is logical, but for composers this is one of the most basic problems. Does one believe fully in one's intuitive processes? Or is it preferable to rely on some higher logic outside oneself? Isn't it awfully egocentric to feel that one is totally self-reliant and that one's personal intuitions can produce something profound? But isn't it a kind of cop out to resort to number systems, dice, or logical formulas?

It becomes almost a religious matter, which perhaps explains why feelings run so strong on both sides, and why the pendulum keeps swinging back and forth. For a long time, most new concert music was written with the help of systems. Most of the composers were caught up in post-Webern serial systems along with Stravinsky, Boulez, and Stockhausen, while many others leaned toward random selection systems with Cage, or statistical systems with Xenakis. Gradually the pendulum began swinging the other way. Stockhausen systematically denounced all his systems, while Carter and Crumb, who never cared much for any systems, now seem to have emerged as the most generally venerated composers in this country, at least for the moment.

It is quite apparent that the 12-tone system will never become anybody's lingua franca, and it is doubtful that statistical or random selection processes will ever become very popular among composers. But it would be foolhardy to think that music will not eventually drift back to some sort of logical systems. The beauty of numbers and logical truths is just too tempting, and the human mind is far too ingenious not to be able to find new ways of making music out of them.

Among younger composers who have returned to tonal styles, one can already see new kinds of systems emerging, and in most cases the logic of their music is far easier to hear than any 12-tone row ever was. Frederick Rzewski's 'Struggle,' for example, is a six movement work, all derived from a single melody, and one can find many logical formal devices and sets of permutations in the works of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Another young composer, Jon Gibson, has been writing particularly neat, orderly music, much of which he presented at the Kitchen on May 16. The feature of the evening was a long new piece called simply 'Melody.' This is undoubtedly Gibson's most successful work, and it is also his most elaborately logical one. Gibson made pages and pages of graphs and tables while he was mapping out this one, and his painstaking approach paid off. The piece has an absolute consistency about it, and it makes those very very smooth gradual transitions which can only be achieved when one employs a strict logical process of some sort. It reminds me a little of one of those systemic gridwork paintings which gradually move from green to yellow or from squares to circles.

But Gibson's graphs and tables have nothing to do with color, or with tone rows or chance procedures. They are simply concerned with working out variations of a modal melody. The theme has 36 notes, so everybody eventually comes out together whether he plays it in eighth notes 36 times (1 x 36), quarters 18 times (2 x 18) or in several other tempos (3 x 12, 4 x 9, 6 x 6, 9 x 4, 12 x 3, 2 x 18, 36 x 1). His graphs then have to do with how the melody comes together when stated in all nine tempos simultaneously. The tables provide refinements, defining which instrument switches to which tempo as the piece progresses. Eventually everything becomes ordinary notes on ordinary music paper.

The piece has a most attractive reedy sort of sound due to Gibson's sensitive choice of instruments and registers. With no reliance on microphones, the alto saxophone, electric organ, trombone, vibraphone, and four strings balanced so well that one could pick out any of the lines. The logic of the music became particularly transparent during the last 10 minutes of the piece, as the slower lines gradually dropped out until everyone was playing steady eighth notes. Nowhere, however, was the music obvious enough that I could actually predict detailed shifts.

'Song II,' scored for a similar ensemble, lasts only 10 or 15 minutes and involves a simpler system. A short modal melody gradually grows longer by adding a new note at the end with every repetition. The instruments are voiced in simple major and minor chords, with many parallel fifths, which gives the music a curiously medieval quality. It also has an odd choppiness, since each note is reiterated six times before going on to the next one. Again the instrumental blend is lush, and it does have a song-like character despite the absence of voices.

In 'Thirty-Two against Eleven,' which lasts only a few minutes, Gibson plays quick descending arpeggios on the soprano saxophone while a pianist reinforces the same chords. The harmonies are basically jazz chords, and the piece has a bright snappy flavor, but of course, there is a tight system here too, and one can sense that the sequence of chords is the result of some intricate logical process.

June 2, 1975

Richard Teitelbaum on the Threshold

Richard Teitelbaum began his May 20 concert at 224 Centre Street without making any sound at all. He took his place at his souped-up Moog synthesizer, started a tape recorder, and turned a few dials, but nothing happened. For a while I thought he was having trouble with his equipment, but then I happened to notice a faint humming and gradually realized that this almost inaudible sound must be Teitelbaum's music. I began listening harder, straining to hear other musical elements. In the process, of course, I began to hear a lot of other sounds I hadn't noticed before. A couple of floors above, some machines were running, stopping and starting at odd intervals. Somewhere a long ways away a trumpet player was practicing. Occasionally a passing truck became a major sound event. Teitelbaum kept me interested by playing other very soft sounds, most of which blended perfectly with the natural sounds. Working with a keyboard attachment, so that he could control the electronic sounds by touch, he would ease in a soft hum, somewhat like the distant machines, or send out a curious gurgle that could almost have come from a water line. Occasionally he would introduce a louder element, which would dominate the environment for a moment, but much of the time it was hard to distinguish Teitelbaum's sounds from incidental sounds. Not that any sound can be truly incidental in a situation like this. In the atmosphere that Teitelbaum set up, even the passing trucks sounded surprisingly musical.

This piece is called 'Threshold' because it takes place at the threshold of hearing. But it is not really a piece in the usual sense. Because of the way it works, the composer has to modify the sounds quite a bit depending on the situation, so there is no set procedure. Sometimes he uses percussion instruments. Sometimes he miscalculates his choice of sounds a bit, as he did at his concert at the Kitchen earlier this season, and the music doesn't draw people in the way it is supposed to. Sometimes it works exquisitely, as on this occasion, hushing the audience into a mood where one could, and definitely would, hear a pin drop.

Of course, it's difficult to concentrate on extremely soft sounds for a long time, and Teitelbaum did not force the point. After 15 or 20 minutes of this intense threshold music, he allowed his music to break across the threshold into sustained sonorities with rich colors. Eventually several brass players joined in, blending gently with the electronic sounds, until finally the music retreated back into the environmental sounds from which it had emerged. After intermission, the procedure was similar, except that he made fairly extensive use of prerecorded calls of wolves. These were imitated by several performers, the major one being Teitelbaum himself, who is one of the best synthesizer players around.

Teitelbaum can go for a whole evening like this without ever resorting to the simpler and more cliched electronic sounds. And I have heard him hold his own in improvisation sessions alongside players as creative and flexible as Anthony Braxton. He also uses his synthesizer in other ways, one of his favorite procedures being to control it with someone's alpha waves.

I have never heard anything which draws the listener into the sounds of silence quite the way Teitelbaum's 'Threshold' does, but the basic attitude here is very much a part of mainstream avant-garde music. Cage was the first and most important composer to become interested in incidental sounds as music, and Teitelbaum readily admits this influence. But Teitelbaum's goals also coincide with a more recent and more widespread concern for semi-religious meditative forms of music in general.

Ear-straining of the sort required by 'Threshold' is basically a meditative experience, which is not all that different from a listening problem which a Zen master might assign to a student, and quite similar to the meditative goals of other composers. Philip Corner might do it by asking us to tap on a bell for a long time. Annea Lockwood might just play a recording of a rushing stream. La Monte Young might do it by focusing our attention on proportional overtone vibrations. Stockhausen might do it by asking us to tune in on some telepathic communication going on between performers. Dozens of composers try to draw us into meditative states of mind with hypnotic, repetitious rhythmic patterns. In a way, they are all out to save our souls. But then, that's more or less what Bach's music was about too.

June 9, 1975
The New Reich: Steve Reich

Last December I wrote a piece about David Behrmann in which I suggested that he was only one of many composers who were turning away from minimalist styles and writing busier music. At the time I offered the observation more as a hypothesis than a fact, but in the intervening months, the decline of minimalism has become more and more clear. Only a few years ago there were many composers, particularly around New York, who made long pieces out of single ideas, but now it is hard to think of even one whom I could call a minimalist in any very stringent sense of the term. Along with Behrman, Sergio Cervetti, Rhys Chatham, Harley Gaber, Philip Glass, Charlemagne Palestine, Terry Riley, Laurie Spiegel, and La Monte Young all seem to me to be pretty clear-cut examples of former minimalists. It's strange how an approach to music can be so popular for a while, and then just vanish.

Another dramatic case of a minimalist turning away from minimalism is Steve Reich. Reich's latest work, which I heard at the Kitchen on May 24, has none of the brashness of his earlier works. It makes no attempt to be revolutionary or press points, and I doubt that it would be offensive to even the most conservative listeners. All of which is probably a good thing as far as most people are concerned, and the shift can be explained as a natural part of artistic growth. Still, in Reich's case, there's something that bothers me about the change in his work. Not that the new 'Work in Progress for 21 Musicians and Singers' isn't a good piece. It's quite lovely to listen to, and there seems to be a fair amount of substance underneath all the pretty sounds. But I miss the strength, toughness, and severity which characterized the unrelenting logic of his monochromatic scores such as 'Four Organs.' I even miss the repetition and the predictability.

Sometimes Reich's finest work, 'Drumming,' might seem a bit dry and unexciting while listening to it, but when it's all over one has really experienced something, and it's impossible to forget it. The new work is far more titillating, and it has good craftmanship and all that, and I enjoyed hearing it. But after the concert was over I started wondering, so what? Is music going to be any different because of a piece like this?

I guess the real problem for me is that I've always thought of Reich as a progressive, forward-looking composer. He was in the vanguard of hypnotic, obsessive, minimal music, and his way of bringing African elements into Western music was one of the most successful attempts at cultural mixing I have heard. And in all these respects, I think his work has proved to be an influence on other composers. Now most of that seems to be over. He is settling into a comfortable way of working, which is highly musical and will no doubt find a much larger audience than 'Four Organs' or 'Six Pianos' ever will. It's good music, and maybe I'll appreciate it more once I've gotten used to Reich's idiom, and stopped worrying about it's lack of chutzpah.

The new work is to be a 12-section piece lasting over an hour, though only about 35 minutes of it were presented at this performance. Like most Reich works, it is a diatonic piece, but it is more concerned with harmony than the earlier things. Each section focuses on a special group of, say, four or five notes, and much care is taken in choosing which ones to put in the bass. Much of the time the sonorities are voiced in lush major-seventh-chord sounds which remind me of cocktail lounges, and there is much finesse in the way everything is orchestrated.

The essence of the piece has grown naturally out of Reich's last large work 'Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices and Organ,' which he premiered two years ago. In that piece he was already moving away from monochromatic music, and working with a variety of instruments which played sustained and melodic materials as well as rippling eighth-note figures. In the new work, his palette has expanded even more. Along with the mallet instruments and sustained female voices, there are four pianos, which hammer out dense rich chords, and two strings and two clarinets, which color the sound in a variety of ways. In some sections the clarinetists play bass clarinets, providing strong muddy bass tones. The intricate African-derived cross-rhythms, which were the essence of 'Drumming,' are present in the new piece too, though one hardly notices them in the midst of all the harmonies and colors. And Reich's easy-going continuity, which always used to happen in slow subtle increments, is pretty much abandoned here too. One section is interrupted sporadically by loud vibraphone figures, which stand out almost like fanfares.

Over everything is a pall of lushness, which seems closer to Ravel or Mahler than to 'Come Out' or 'Music for Pieces of Wood.' But if that sounds like I'm demeaning the work, and it probably does, let me say once again that I'm not questioning the actual merit of the music. Reich is a careful worker with a good ear and a strong mind, and he never does shoddy work, especially when he spends two years working up to a piece, as he did in this case. I'm merely reacting to the sharp stylistic change he's going through, and wondering whether I like the idea of going back to some kind of romanticism, and feeling a little sorry that the era of New York minimalism has come to such an abrupt end.
Note: This was an early version of Music for 18 Musicians.

June 16, 1975
Stuart Dempster Plays Didjeridu

The whole idea of Stuart Dempster appeals to me. The idea that a good trombonist with plenty of work in the Oakland Symphony and other Bay Area orchestras would give it up to devote his time to new music. The idea that he would scuffle all over Europe and America doing solo programs of other people's music, most of which was far too new and unknown to make him famous. The idea that he focused his attention on one of the most difficult and least appreciated genres of new music, theatre pieces, and that he went to the pains of developing acting skills in order to do them well. The idea that he went all the way to the Australian outback to study the didjeridu, an instrument with a two-note range that has never been taken very seriously in the West. Such a combination of adventurousness and thoroughness doesn't often occur in the same individual.

On June 1 Dempster made one of his rare New York appearances when he provided music for Event # 142 with the Cunningham Dance Company. Assisted by a student, Phil Carlsen, the two musicians spent most of the evening playing didjeridus.

The didjeridu is simply a tube of hollow wood about two inches in diameter and four feet long. It has no keys, no holes, no slide, and no mouthpiece. It is blown like a brass instrument, and has extraordinary carrying power. The low tone is in the tuba register, and the other usually a 12th higher, but Dempster gets far more out of the instruments than two pure tones. Apparently most of his techniques come fairly directly from the Australian outback, where didjeridus play droning accompaniments for singers.

With circular breathing, both performers often sustained uninterrupted tones for long periods of time. Without ever tonguing specific rhythms, they sometimes produced another kind of rhythmic articulation, which I can only describe as a controlled sputtering. Occasionally they played quick high sounds, something like the yelps of a small dog. Sometimes they swung the instruments around while they played, producing odd spatial effects and stimulating unexpected room resonances. During one long section the two produced mysterious echoing tones by playing into a 10-gallon can.

Perhaps the most fascinating technique, and one borrowed directly from aboriginal musicians, involves changing vowel formations while playing. Sometimes one can pick out a more obvious 'hiyohiyo...hiyohiyo...' in the tone, as I distinctly did at one point. This music, which Dempster calls 'Didjeridervish,' was originally presented at the University of Illinois. It was part of a mixed media work called 'Ten Grand Hosery,' and featured a T'ai Chi master. For the Cunningham event, Dempster also presented another aspect of 'Ten Grand Hosery,' the hoses themselves.

The principle of plugging a mouthpiece into a garden hose is not new. The famous hornist Dennis Brain even performed a Mozart horn concerto on a garden hose some years ago. But that was a kind of joke, and Dempster's garden-hose music is no joke. Here three different hoses all emptied out onto piano strings, where sympathetic vibrations were picked up and amplified, thus adding curious reverberations to the hose tones. All three sounded vaguely like trombones, but distant, muffled, and cavernous. Much of the time Dempster played eerie out-of-tune chromatic melodies on high overtones. Meanwhile, the dancing was going on more or less the way it always does at a Cunningham event, but it seemed more moody than usual, perhaps because Dempster watched the dancing much of the time, and occasionally seemed to pace the dynamics of his music according to the choreography. By strict Cage-Cunningham procedures, one isn't supposed to do that, but it didn't hurt anything as far as I was concerned. Quite likely, the sparse, strong music, with its distant and sometimes mournful sound qualities, would have added an emotional atmosphere to the dancing no matter how it was paced.

Fortunately, even the didjeridu has not distracted Dempster from his repertoire of theatre pieces which he still performs. One of these, called 'General Orders,' demands to be mentioned here, because I have never reviewed it before, and because I still remember it quite vividly four years after seeing it. The short work was composed by Robert Erickson, who modeled the melodic lines after speech patterns, but at least as much credit should go to Dempster, who transformed the score into a wonderful character sketch. Standing before a lectern in an admiral's uniform, Dempster addressed his imaginary troops through his trombone with amazing acting skill, capturing the illusion so sharply that the trombone melodies really did become pompous remarks.

Another interesting thing about Dempster is that he is hard to categorize either as a performer or a composer. It seems that everything he does involves quite a bit of creative responsibility. Yet he seldom, if ever, claims sole authorship of his material. This is an unusual way to approach music, but a useful one probably related to the whole problem of taking instruments across cultural barriers. It would be risky, for example, for American musicians to attempt to perform really authentic didjeridu music, and I doubt that I'd understand it if they did. On the other hand, if one insisted on composing completely original didjeridu music, without making use of its highly developed traditional techniques, the result would probably sound naive. Dempster's compromise approach makes a great deal of sense to me.

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October 20, 1975
John Cage's 'Empty Words'

Surprisingly little is written about John Cage these days. My general impression is that people assume that they already know what his work is about, feel that the more publicized Dada-like works which made him a famous renegade really do represent his work, and have concluded that he's really just an outdated radical anyway. For me, all are misconceptions.

To claim that Cage's own writings, and the few existing critical essays about him really explain his work is to greatly oversimplify an extremely complex artist. And to continue to characterize him largely by the famous silent piece, a few raucous electronic pieces, and a couple of theatrical ideas is to ignore the bulk of his output. It is to ignore the 'Song Books,' the Variations, 'Winter Music,' 'Atlas Ecliptalis,' 'Etudes Australis,' 'Cheap Imitation,' 'Lecture on Nothing,' 'Williams Mix,' 'Rozart Mix,' the String Quartet in Four Parts, 'Speech,' the Concert for Piano and Orchestra, the 'Imaginary Landscapes,' 'Amores,' '26 Minutes 1.1499 Seconds for a String Player,' the 'Suite for Toy Piano,' and 'Mureau,' to mention only works which I am familiar with.

No one really denies anymore that Cage has influenced the course of music more than any other living composer. But few seem willing to admit the obvious fact that the quantity and quality of the works themselves are quite comparable with those of anyone writing music today.

One particularly neglected genre is the compositions Cage makes out of words. He has been particularly active in this area in recent years, though the roots of this concern go back to works like 'Radio Music' (1956), 'Solo for Voice I' (1958), and the piece for four simultaneous speaking voices called 'Where Are We Going and What Are We Doing?' (1960). Working from the premise that all sounds are viable, Cage could not avoid dealing with verbal sounds too, so words kept creeping into his music, as well as his lectures, anecdotes, and articles. But I don't think it was until the 'Song Books' in the late '60s that he really began dealing directly with verbal material as a compositional means.

Meanwhile, Cage was rediscovering Thoreau, whose sound imagery, political ideas, and love of nature he finds particularly appealing, and began reconstructing Thoreau's sound imagery into a jumbled text called 'Mureau.' The title, of course, is a combination of 'Music' and 'Thoreau,' and the non-syntactical text really does bring the two very close together, particularly the way Cage himself reads it.

Quite recently the 63-year-old composer completed another reworking of Thoreau's Journal, a long text in four parts, which he calls 'Empty Words.' The work progresses from Part I, which consists of complete words and phrases, though without normal syntax, to Part IV, where literal meaning breaks down completely into unrelated phonemes. Interspersed in all of this are some of Thoreau's drawings, also taken out of context, so that it is no longer clear what Thoreau intended them to illustrate.

At this point 'Empty Words' is still difficult to find, as the parts have been published separately in little magazines. In fact, Part II, published in Big Deal, is the only part I have managed to acquire myself. Even from this limited exposure, however, it is easy to see that, while the words may be empty of the usual kind of syntactical significance, the work itself is quite significant. Not that one would be likely to want to sit down and read it straight through. Like 'Finnegan's Wake' or 'The Waves' or 'The Making of Americans,' 'Empty Words' is not something most people would care to experience from beginning to end. But it is certainly an object to be reckoned with.

At least for me, 'Empty Words' is serious browsing material, closer perhaps to the experience of looking at a painting than to that of reading a text. For a while I looked for Thoreau images and mused over accidental word patterns. Later I became more interested in the sound possibilities of the material and tried pronouncing and listening to some of it. Then, as I began to realize how much could be found in only a few lines, I became overwhelmed by the fact that there were 12 pages in all, and that this was only one of the four parts, and that the whole thing had obviously been worked out with great meticulousness and consistency.

A work like this represents a tremendous amount of labor, and I think that is an important point. By now, everyone knows that Cage constructs his works by chance operations, via the I Ching, but I think there is insufficient appreciation for the countless hours of tedious calculations which this method requires. In this case, for example, every single element, sometimes only a single letter, was carefully selected from the Thoreau text by means of random numbers from 1 to 64, and then written down in neat columns in stenographer's notebooks. Further chance operations were used to determine punctuation, spacing, and other formal elements. By the time one puts together a page or two of text by this method, many hundreds of chance operations are required. And considering that Cage put together four long sections in this way, it is not surprising that the project took him 13 months to complete.

I find it a little hard to imagine a man as inventive as Cage sitting at his desk day after day doing routine work of this sort. But on the other hand, it is also difficult

to imagine anyone producing big highly coherent pieces without a great deal of sheer labor and self-discipline. In any case, many of his pieces are the result of a tremendous amount of very tedious work.

There are a few exceptions, perhaps the most remarkable being the 90 different short scores of Cage's 'Song Books,' which contain as much page-to-page invention as anything I can think of. These two volumes abound in original texts, theatrical ideas, curious notations, ordinary composed melodies, and dozens of whimsical inventions of one sort or another, and they were written in only six weeks.

The absence of this kind of invention in most of his works is of course quite purposeful. Cage's whole philosophy revolves around his desire to deny aesthetic choices of the usual sort and to remain open to all possibilities. So getting his own ego out of the way, and allowing the decisions to flow freely out of a chance system, is quite natural for him. But it is also a tremendously disciplined way of working. And I suspect that much of the strength and value of Cage's work is a by-product of this discipline.

There are many personal objections one might have to 'Empty Words,' for example. One might protest that it is not nice to distort Thoreau's prose. Another might not like the idea of celebrating an American hero who was an anarchist and who advocated civil disobedience. Another might conclude that since non-syntactical language is meaningless, it is also useless. Another might complain that the sounds of English phonemes are not sufficiently attractive and musical. Others would no doubt find other complaints. But no reasonable person could deny the integrity of the work. No one could find inconsistencies or flaws in the way it was worked out. And I don't think that anyone could seriously deny that working with Thoreau in this way is a substantial idea with all sorts of musical and literary implications - not to mention political innuendos.

October 27, 1975

‘Text Sound Pieces’: Charles Amirkhanian and Friends

Charles Amirkhanian is perhaps the best known of the four-person Musicians Union, which presented a program at the Kitchen on October 15. He is the music director at KPFA, the Pacifica station in Berkeley, and one of the more prominent figures in the Bay Area genre of ‘text sound pieces.’ Most of his works are short, and they generally involve carefully made multitrack collages of a few words spoken repeatedly in various combinations. Perhaps the most effective of his many brief contributions to this program was ‘Muchrooms,’ in which the words ‘too bad’ are repeated over and over on two tracks. Steely electronic noise gradually intrudes and finally obliterates the verbal material. In an interesting theatrical moment, Amirkhanian read about ‘Mr. Patchin’ and ‘passion’ and a few similar sounds, reading his text by light of a red lantern attached to his head. I have the feeling that there is real substance somewhere in Amirkhanian’s work, but I haven’t heard enough of it to be able to put the poetry, the music, and the symbolism all together.

The other members of the group all made substantial contributions to the evening. Betsy Davids is a poet who recited a strange fantasy about a bathtub. At another point, she read texts in English, then in French, then in a nonsense combination language of her own devising. Carol Law creates cartoon-like color slides, which must involve very sophisticated drawing and photographic techniques, but which seemed a bit too pop-arty for the context. James Petrillo does long sequences of color slides, as in ‘TV,’ which depicts three TV sets in an open field while the projected image gradually shifts from morning to night. Another slide sequence focused on the cracks in pavement. Another, which seemed too clearly influenced by Eleanor Antin, involved lines of folding chairs set up in ‘seatbelts’ along fields and mountainsides.

All these ideas, and many others, became juxtaposed in a fast-paced program which lasted about an hour. It was a well-rehearsed, almost slick presentation, and leaped from one diverse idea to another without ever stopping for breath. I found it difficult to take everything in, find relationships, detect messages, or even figure out whether I really liked what they were doing.

November 24, 1975
Icebergs and Paper Clips: William Hellermann

Gradually, gradually, gradually, gradually, gradually, gradually the, gradually the, gradually the, gradually the, gradually the, gradually the melody, gradually the melody, gradually the melody, gradually the melody, gradually the melody, gradually the melody added, gradually the melody added, gradually the melody added, gradually the melody added, gradually the melody added, gradually the melody added new, gradually the melody added new, gradually the melody added new, gradually the melody added new, gradually the melody added new, gradually the melody added new notes, gradually the melody added new notes, gradually the melody added new notes, gradually the melody added new notes, gradually the melody added new notes.

By the time this process had gone on for a minute or so, it was pretty clear that William Hellermann's piano piece 'Row Music: The Tip of the Iceberg' was a pretty systematic sort of piece, and I became interested in trying to follow the logic of what was going on. But then the music suddenly shifted to a continual stream of 12-tone writing. A static even quality was maintained, and everything seemed somehow related to the simple opening melody, but it was hard to get a grasp of the mechanics behind it all.

There was a logic in the way the piece gradually expanded from the middle of the keyboard to the upper and lower registers. There was a logic about the way pianist Philip Corner carefully varied the rhythms and tempos in this stream of notes too. And there was certainly a logic in the way the piece finally wound itself back to a sort of reverse version of its beginning. But it was not the obvious sort of logic one could crack on first hearing.

The piece did get me curious though - so curious, in fact, that I decided to obtain a score and try to figure out what makes it tick. Now, almost three weeks later, I still haven't been able to figure the damned thing out, though I've learned quite a bit about how the piece divides the twelve notes of the chromatic scale into two groups of six notes, and about the mechanics of the octave changes and rhythmic shifts. Of course, this is not the place for technical discussion, and such details are not especially important anyway. But what does seem important is the simple fact that 'The Tip of the Iceberg' provokes this sort of curiosity.

Composers often say that interested listeners should study the scores, but they seldom entice us into actually doing so. Generally I can find out as much as I care to find out about a piece simply by listening to it, and I seldom bother to consult the sheet music except to get the gist of the notation method or to check if the performers were doing it right. But Hellermann's kinky little piano composition was one of those rare pieces that really made me want to understand how it is made.

The remainder of the all-Hellermann concert, which took place at the Kitchen on October 25, was not concerned with the 12-tone logic so much as with paper clips. Hellermann, who is a fine guitarist as well as a composer, has become fascinated by the curious fact that, if one fastens a paper clip onto a string, the string will vibrate in strange ways, producing sounds far above and far below its normal pitch, and with a great variety of colors.

The longest and best paper clip piece was the guitar solo 'Still and All,' which Hellermann performed himself. I suspect there are interesting formal elements here too, but I didn't hear them because I was so absorbed in the sonorities themselves. Most of the time it was hard to believe I was listening to an ordinary unamplified classical guitar. There were unpitched twangs and buzzes. There were a number of percussive effects, like bizarre drums. There were high overtones with strange colors. There were twangy tunes and odd scrapings. And perhaps most striking of all, there were moments where the guitarist leaned toward a microphone and plucked deep resonant gonglike tones. The piece lasted almost 30 minutes, and Hellermann's well-paced effects easily held my attention for the full time.

In three other works on this long program, violinist William Mullen and cellist Batia Lieberman also played with paper clips on their strings. Perhaps Hellerman has not figured out the paper clip potential of these instruments as thoroughly as he has figured them out on his guitar. Perhaps these performers have not yet mastered the techniques required, or perhaps the bowed strings simply don't lend themselves to the paper clip as well as the guitar does. In any case, these instruments sounded strained and uncomfortable with their paper clips, and they didn't manage nearly as much coloristsic variety as the guitar did.

A word about Hellermann's overall style seems in order, because this 36-year-old composer is a particularly good case against the usual categorizations. Contemporary composers are often divided into two groups. One is supposed to be a brainly university-based group that descended from Webern, has no tolerance for minimalism, and spends most of its time manipulating mathematical systems. The other group is supposed to consist of independent anti-intellectuals who descended from Cage, have no tolerance for formal niceties, and spend most of their time devising weird noise-making devices and meditating on single tones.

I have always disliked this contrast, because it blurs individual distinctions, and because only a small minority of composers actually work at either extreme. In

Hellermann's music, to take only one example, one finds traditional instruments and 12-tone rows on the one hand, but minimal piano pieces and paper clips on the other hand. So much for categories.

December 15, 1975

Distant Sounds of Maryanne Amacher

One unfortunate thing about electronics is that it has tended to divert our attention away from acoustics. Technical standards for quality recordings are higher every season, but I hear little improvement in playback techniques. Composers sometimes spend months perfecting prerecorded tapes for some performance, and then make crucial acoustical decisions about loudspeaker placement and level setting in only a few casual minutes. In live performances which combine amplified guitars or organs with unamplified winds or strings, the acoustical problem of getting a good blend with these two types of sound are often not solved very well. One hears a lot of discussion about the quality of various playback systems, but the acoustical problem of whether a certain playback system is right for a certain kind of music in a certain kind of space is often overlooked.

Maryanne Amacher (pronounced a-ma-shay) is acutely aware of both acoustics and electronics, and that is the main reason why the tapes and oscillators she played with the Cunningham Dance Company on December 3 worked so well. Working at extremely soft volume levels, Amacher made her electronic and prerecorded sounds diffuse into the Roundabout Theatre so smoothly that I was never quite sure where they were coming from.

As I listened, I surmised that the loudspeakers had to be at varying distances from me. One seemed to be in front of the stage. I figured the others were up pretty high along the side walls somewhere. It turned out that there were two underneath the stage and two way back on the rear wall. I suppose a good acoustician might have figured that out, but it was not something that one would normally perceive.

This soft, almost directionless musical space which Amacher created was the critical factor in her music, which she calls ‘Labyrinth Gives Way to Skin,’ but the sounds themselves were of interest too. The most prominent were very low frequencies with indistinct pitches, which sometimes reminded me of distant jet planes. They faded in gradually, shifted and turned for a while, and then faded out again, only to come back later on. Sometimes there seemed to be two or three of them at once.

Against these sounds were more distinct motifs. One sounded like a distant cooing dove. Another was a short rising whistle which could also have been a bird. For a long while a short tone repeated itself every few seconds, reminding me of a distant train whistle. At other times I thought I was hearing distant wind or distant crickets. But the airplane-like humming always dominated.

It is not just carelessness which has led me to use the word ‘distant’ so many times in these paragraphs. It is the only word which explains the feeling of such soft music, and every image seems to require ‘distant’ as a modifier. And along with the distance came a difficulty in discerning the exact nature of every sound. While listening, I suspected that most of the music was on tape, and that a few of the birdlike sounds had been actually recorded outdoors, but that most of the sounds were synthetic. Later I learned that I had been all wrong. Almost all of the sounds had been recorded from real life. A few were electronic, but those were produced by oscillators, and were not on the tape at all. And I learned that the tape also contained some standard instrumental sounds, which I had never suspected at all.

This indiscernible quality in Amacher’s sound no doubt had something to do with the fine effect it had on the dance. It was the least obtrusive accompaniment I have ever heard with a Cunningham performance. Much of the time the sound of the dancers’ feet was louder than the music. Yet the soft sounds were doing their work, adding a gentleness, a sensitivity, and an occasional hint of outdoors to the otherwise abstract dancing, and Amacher was sensitive to the general level of activity going on in the choreography at the same time.

Of course most of the audience would not have been conscious of these things, I don’t think. After all, they were there primarily to watch the dancing. My own focus was on the music, not only because that is my field, but also because I had been wanting to hear Amacher’s work for some time. She is one electronic composer whom all the other electronic composers seem to admire, and now I can understand why. Currently affiliated with the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at M.I.T., she keeps well abreast of scientific research related to sound and perceptions. And her music reflects that kind of awareness.

December 29, 1975
Connie Beckley Sings a Spiral

She sang a tone into a microphone at the front of the room. A prerecorded voice picked up the tone and continued it while the singer proceeded to a microphone at the left side of the room. Again she sang the tone, and again the prerecorded voice picked it up. Following this procedure, the singer advanced to a microphone at the rear, to another at the right side, then back to the front microphone, then around to the left one again. In this fashion she gradually made her way around and around the room, always singing the same steady tone. But not quite the same. Gradually the pitch was rising. I was still confused. What kind of music was this? Then I looked back at my program and noticed the title: 'Spiral.' It was a spiral all right. The tone was circling around the room, rising higher and higher, and that was obviously the whole point of the piece. For a while it seemed like a curious statement for a composer to want to make. The whole piece was really just a pun. Yet it rose way above that low form of wit, touching on theatre, drawing implications about the spiral shape, and making us listen to music in a strange symbolic way.

'Spiral' was only one of a number of short pieces presented by Connie Beckley at Artists Space on December 12. This was, as far as I know, the first time Beckley had presented an entire evening of her work, and her pieces lacked the kind of complexity and depth which one would expect from more experienced artists. But coming from such a young musician, this was an impressive concert, and it dealt with an area rarely explored by composers.

In 'Song Contained' Beckley sang into a balloon, which inflated a little with each tone. After a few minutes of this, she stopped singing, tied off the inflated balloon, and hung it up, so that we could look at her 'Song Contained' during the remainder of the evening.

In 'Feat' an archer, John Oberholzer, shot one arrow across the room and into the bull's-eye of a target. The target, which turned out to be amplified, sent a little tremor into the loudspeakers. The piece may have been just one note long, but it was an unusually meaningful note.

'Conversion' involved the conversion of an idea from musical terms into visual terms. Gordon Gottlieb reiterated a fast majorchord arpeggio on six notes for quite a while. Then, at the other side of the room, a curious little machine with six light bulbs on top started flashing. I soon realized that the six lights were flashing in the same sequential pattern which the six musical notes had followed at the beginning of the piece.

'Sound Split' involved distributing around the room four cassette tape recorders, each of which played back Beckley's voice intoning a different pitch. 'Question of Perception' involved some little wooden trees, a rotating loudspeaker, a lot of prerecorded and live verbiage about whether the tree falls if nobody hears it, and a maze of logic which I couldn't quite follow.

The distinctive thing about Beckley's works in general is that they involve such matter-of-fact images, and are presented in such cool, nontheatrical, nonillusionistic ways. Encountered in a script or score, I suspect that ideas of this sort might seem simplistic. Yet in an actual performance, they can become quite fascinating. Finding the puns and interpreting the titles is a bit like solving brain teasers to begin with. But even after one grasps the basic point, the images themselves can be stimulating. I found myself thinking quite a bit about the nature of a 'feat,' a 'spiral,' and a 'conversion.' And my eyes kept drifting back to that balloon with the song inside.

I'm familiar with this same basic kind of thinking in drawings by Sol Lewitt, in happenings by Al Hansen, and in dance pieces by Sylvia Whitman, to mention only a few examples which come to mind immediately. But I don't think any musicians have moved in this direction quite as clearly and boldly as Beckley did in these pieces.

January 5, 1976

The Years of Innovation Pass On

Only a few years ago the cult of the new was still in full swing, and not only among young radicals, but among older composers as well. No place was that more clear than in the written scores, almost every one of which employed newly invented notation techniques. In many cases the necessary information could have been expressed in more conventional ways, but the bizarre symbols and graphic techniques gave the music an adventurous look and appealed to everyone's affinity for the far out.

But the substance of the music also had a lot to do with novelty. The no-holds-barred atmosphere around avant-garde jazz circles became the main statement of the music. Many other composers took their new freedom and used it to imitate music from other cultures. Others took it to junkyards to discover brand new wind and percussion instruments. Others went in a theatrical direction and looked for page-turning machines, or cueing devices, or ways of decorating trombones, or novel positions for playing the cello. 'Complexity' became the most hallowed term among post-Webern composers, and the main goal among them was to write music which was more complex than any other, hopefully in some new way. Others explored the endless methods of composing by chance. Others worked on rediscovering the human voice and making it sing strange sounds. Others talked a lot about 'expanding the vocabulary' of various instruments, and sought novel sounds inside the piano, as well as with countless new techniques for wind and stringed instruments. Often these new sounds were not very appealing, but they were innovative. That was what avant-garde audiences wanted, and the critics too generally felt obliged to give extra points when confronted with an obvious degree of originality.

Meanwhile, for those with a technological bent, there were multi-media events to be organized and synthesizers to be built. Every year new electronic devices became available, and it was not hard to find new ways of soldering them together. Even without knowing anything about electronics, one could easily take a few tape recorders and figure out some way to hook them together that had not been done before. And for those who came along too late to do one of the first multi-media pieces or build one of the first synthesizers, it was still possible to be innovative by doing the biggest multi-media piece or building the biggest synthesizer. And if bigness didn't appeal, one could always go the other direction and be equally revolutionary with smallness, which is sort of how minimalism got going.

Minimalism was loaded with angles. One could simply write softer music than anybody else. Or one could try to write the most repetitive music that had ever been written. Or one could simply sustain drone tones longer than they had ever been sustained before. Or one could pick up where Satie's 25-hour-long 'Vexations' had left off and try to write the longest piece anyone had ever heard of.

Or one could be really revolutionary, give up the traditional compositional crafts altogether, and join the growing forces of concept art. This saved a lot of time, too, because all one had to do was write down a clever brief phrase like 'Listen to the snow fall,' give it a title, claim it was a piece of music, send it to some underground publication, and wait for everyone to notice how original the composer was.

Of course, you had to be careful about this sort of thing. If you went too far too glibly, people would figure you were some kind of nut and wouldn't take you seriously. And if you went a little further, then even the other novelty-seeking artists might not take you seriously, and you might blow the whole thing. But in general, anyone who kept up fairly well with the latest innovations could find something in one area or another which would seem worth doing, but hadn't been done yet.

Of course, all these innovations had earlier roots, sometimes as far back as the '20s, but it was the '60s and the very early '70s when the big push was on, and it was an exciting time. I enjoyed living through the period as much as anyone, and even a year or two ago, I could never have written about this quest for originality with the almost satiric tone that I find myself using now. But things have changed, mere newness is no longer so important, and it seems more appropriate to simply bid a light-hearted adieu to this delightful era of novelty and innovation than to write any mournful obituaries.

Meanwhile, as I sit at my desk rereading this article and wondering how to end it, I can see that many of the ideas I've been presenting here have also been stated before in one way or the other. But it doesn't bother me. For critics too, originality just isn't the major criterion anymore.

January 12, 1976
The Years of Innovation Pass On (Continuation)

Just because an intense period of innovation has come to a close does not mean that new music is going downhill. In fact, it is probable that composers are producing more really fine music now than they did in the '60s and very early '70s. After all, the many innovations of those years have provided a tremendous amount of fresh material to work with, and now that composers are not so driven by the search for novelty, they can take time to delve more deeply into stylistic areas already known, and pay more attention to the emotional content and sociological implications of what they are doing. This basically conservative, circumspect attitude has begun to produce a number of backward-looking pieces and hybrid styles, many of which are still difficult to evaluate, simply because the accepted criteria for judging quality aren't really applicable. And in this climate, certain things have begun to seem feasible which were not at all feasible when revolution and novelty were in full swing.

Perhaps now it will be possible to find ways of writing new music which will be acceptable to symphony orchestras and their audiences as well as to composers. Perhaps composers can take more time to look inside and ask themselves what their own personal music is all about. And when something passe is required, like a Mozartean orchestration or a reference to John Philip Sousa, perhaps composers will no longer worry so much about their reputations as innovators, and can just go ahead with whatever a particular piece seems to require.

To a large extent such changes are already taking place. When I go to an audience participation event, or pick up an avant-garde publication, or hear concerts of new music, I don't find those radical look-how-groovy innuendos anymore. Nor do I sense any desire to offend conservatives. The basic concern is simply to make a genuine statement of some sort. And when audiences don't like a performance, they usually come up with relatively thoughtful remarks, rather than merely passing it off with that damning '60s remark: 'It's been done before.' Countless composers have begun relating their work to earlier styles of classical music, or to popular idioms. Instrumental composers are looking less for new sounds and more for appealing sounds. In most cases composers of electronic music are continuing to work with the same basic equipment they were using five years ago. Minimalists have invariably abandoned their most severe ideas in favor of more ingratiating approaches. Some who used to write tough abstract music are warming up and admitting outright romanticism from time to time. And everyone seems less concerned about whether a musical idea is new, and more concerned about what it means.

But an interesting thing has happened in the meantime. As the concern with originality has faded, the other criteria for quality have become more nebulous, and the critic's job has become more difficult. Until recently, I could generally go away from a concert with a fairly clear idea of who would have appreciated it, who wouldn't have, and what the frame of comparison ought to be. Some concerts were directed toward the academic community, others were aimed at the SoHo crowd, and others attempted in varying degrees to reach wider audiences. But in all cases there were commonly accepted criteria for quality, and when composers changed their styles it was easy to see what was happening.

For example, as Terry Riley and Philip Glass gave up their obsessions with minimalism, sped up their pacing, and went for a flashier kind of sound, it was a foregone conclusion that they would pick up a lot of general listeners and more or less disenfranchise themselves from the core of the avant-garde. And when Cornelius Cardew began espousing Maoist principles, it didn't take much critical acumen to see that, while he was perhaps appealing to European radicals, he wouldn't be very well received in America.

But more recently I've begun to notice composers making stylistic shifts which are hard to explain simply in terms of audience categories. Jim Burton, whose audience is pretty much SoHo-based, turns to writing songs about Wyoming, and ends up with a pseudo-country sound that offends some of his listeners almost as much as it amuses others. Steve Reich turns to a lusher and more romantic kind of music, with the result that some of his fans lament that he is losing his old toughness, others like him better than ever, and conservative listeners are forced to revamp their habitual objections. Charles Wuorinen gives up his heady abstractions and begins writing, of all things, a comic opera, which, judging from the preview last month, is likely to be incomprehensible even to the academic community. Carla Bley records her '3/4' with symphonic seriousness and a cerebral complexity which surprises me and must baffle Jazz Composers Orchestra audiences. In cases like those, it's hard to know who the music is supposed to be for in the first place, and even harder to come up with valid reasons when I don't like something.

Not long ago I happened to tune in on a radio interview with a psychoanalyst who was lamenting the way his field had become fragmented into so many little schools, each having different goals and promises, and none carrying the kind of legitimacy and prestige that the big old Freudian and Jungian groups used to have. He called it a 'tower of Babel,' and found the situation quite undesirable. But as I look around and see factions breaking apart in a similar way in new music, the situation seems desirable. It may be confusing for critics and audiences for a while, but out of all the reshuffling, there are bound to be a lot of good pieces - and they won't be mere novelties.

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January 26, 1976

What Is Improvising? Annea Lockwood and Many Others

I'm not sure what 'improvising' really means anymore. Traditionally it applied to forms of music which weren't very free at all. Jazz improvisers had a good deal of melodic freedom, but had to keep right with the chord changes of whatever tune was being played. Harpsichordists were said to be improvising figured bass accompaniments in baroque music, but they too were obliged to follow strict, predetermined harmonies. Raga improvisers didn't have to worry about harmony, but they had to keep strictly to the prescribed scale, and work with specific melodic formulas.

But then both free jazz players and avant-garde instrumentalists loosened the reins a whole lot, and their improvising sessions became almost totally unpredictable. They wanted to be free of all restrictions, and they set no conscious limitations on what could happen. Of course, if players had approaches that offended or interfered with the other musicians, they wouldn't be invited back to the next session, but that was about the only kind of restriction or censorship that existed.

In this atmosphere, a good many types of music, which in another age would probably have been considered improvisatory, were presented as actual compositions. Stockhausen, for example, wrote a set of piano fragments which could be played in any order, and which took radically different forms from one reading to another. But he didn't call it an improvisation at all. He called it Klavierstueck XI. And Cage, many of whose works were equally unpredictable, began referring to 'music indeterminate of its performance,' because to have called his work 'improvisations' would have implied that the players were not guided by goals and rules.

Gradually 'improvisation' has lost most of its original respectability and come to imply a completely uncontrolled sort of messing around, and no one wants to admit that he is improvising, except in jazz quarters where, due to such long traditions, the word has never become a pejorative. But in the meantime, if we could return to the original sense of the word, and realize that most forms of improvisation have actually been forms of highly restricted improvisation, we could say that there is an awful lot of improvising going on these days, and that a number of composers have devised ingenious new ways of doing it.

Like Charlemagne Palestine, who often sits down at the piano, without knowing how long he is going to play or how often the music will change, but with a very clear idea of the overtone effects he is going after and the basic harmonies he will be playing as he tries to get them.

Or Philip Corner, who sometimes restricts his activity for an hour or so to the simple task of blowing into a curious ceramic pot, but within that severe limitation, will allow reverberant low tones and whooshes of air to come about however they will.

Or Jim Fulkerson, whom I recently heard perform on unaccompanied trombone, focusing his efforts on three or four specific and rather unusual techniques, but without much plan for details within these sections.

Or La Monte Young, or Joan La Barbara, or Garett List, or Jim Burton, to mention only a few New York composers, all of whom set highly defined performance tasks, but end up with a variety of specific results from performance to performance.

Annea Lockwood's January 10 concert at a very new but very active loft space on 17th Street, known as the Brook, was another case in point. Lockwood is particularly concerned with sounds she finds in nature, and over the years has evolved a rather amazing collection of tapes. The recordings she has acquired of the erratic astral sputtering of pulsars, and of rumbling volcanic and earthquake activity are especially impressive. Human musicians will probably never produce sounds quite as awesome as these. She also has a number of fine recordings she has made herself of geysers, mud pools, rivers, rippling lakes, tree frogs and other wild life, storms, and fires.

For this presentation, she assembled representative tapes from all these categories, added some human breathing sounds, and set up a 10-track playback system, each track having its own carefully placed loudspeaker. For about an hour a rapt audience of a hundred or so listened to these sounds as they faded in and out, and interacted with one another. In the case of the earthquake, the speed has been jacked up to bring it into the range of human hearing, but otherwise the sounds had not been tampered with, so it was easy to identify the elements, appreciate what they represented, and understand why the event had been called 'World Rhythms.' The mix which the audience heard was concocted on the spot, which is where the improvisation came in. By mixing the ten tracks spontaneously, Lockwood was able to respond to the acoustical realities of the moment, and pace things according to the mood of the evening. But there was an additional element in the concert.

While the recorded sounds were being played, Carole Weber sat next to a large gong, hitting it rather gently at unpredictable times, adding manmade vibrations to the mixture of recorded sounds. These infrequent gong tones seemed to have a different feeling every time, and later Lockwood explained what had been going

on. A physical movement, such as hitting a gong, energizes the system somewhat, and Weber's assignment had been to sense this slight increase in her energy every time she hit the gong, wait until she had almost returned to a state of complete calm, and then hit it again, all without paying conscious attention to how she was playing the gong, or what prerecorded sounds she was hearing.

Was Weber improvising? Well, she certainly wasn't just messing around. In fact, assuming that she has the power of concentration to strictly adhere to such a difficult assignment, and being fairly sure that she does, then her actual individual will power was never engaged even for a moment. That is certainly a long ways away from the type of freedom which is often implied by the term 'improvisation.' It would be better if we could get back to that original definition. We should remind those who have been avoiding the word that, with the exception of a few very loose styles, improvisation has always involved specific intentions and tight restrictions, and does not necessarily encourage performers to express spontaneous emotions. Then we could say that all these composers are working with improvisation, simply because the exact outcome is not predictable.

All of this is only semantics, of course, but this particular problem is one which seems to be causing a lot of unnecessary confusion, at least in classical and avant-garde circles. If improvisation could become a respectable term in all quarters again, with the understanding that it covers a lot of different ways of making unpredictable music, then I suspect that many people who think they did disagree would discover they don't.

January 26, 1976

Rehearsing 'Einstein on the Beach': Philip Glass and Robert Wilson

There hasn't been much in the papers about Robert Wilson since 'A Letter for Queen Victoria' and 'The Dollar Value of Man' last season, but his Spring Street studio is as busy as ever. From 10 in the morning until 7 at night every day, a company of 26 has been preparing a new work, tentatively called 'Einstein on the Beach.' The first performances of the work, in Germany and France, will not begin until August, so it is far too early to say anything final about what it will be like. But since theatre is a new genre for Philip Glass, who has already spent about a year composing the music for 'Einstein,' it seemed worthwile to drop by one afternoon and find out what is going on.

Glass's approach in the new piece turns out to be a fairly predictable outgrowth of the work he has been doing during the past few years with amplified winds and organs, and his regular ensemble will be carrying much of the show. In fact, the piece which the group premiered last spring, under the title 'Another Look at Harmony,' is included in this score. But in addition there will be sections for solo violin, others with vocal solos, and others featuring a 12-voice chorus. The five hours of music will be divided into a number of shorter segments, generally alternating between large ensemble pieces and smaller groups. Much of the music will be carried by the chorus, which will apparently be onstage playing roles most of the time.

The vocal lines in Glass's choral music employ the same kind of rhythmic modules as his instrumental parts. The little melodies repeat over and over, shifting to slightly new patterns maybe once every 10 to 30 seconds. The only lyrics are 'do re mi' and 'one two three,' which are used simply to articulate the melodies. Most of the time the music is diatonic, though there are a few chromatic passages.

It's hard work for 12 singers to keep together on such fast rhythms, but judging from what I heard, and considering that they have several months of rehearsal time left, they just might be as crisp and unified as Glass's regular ensemble by the time the production begins its European run in August. The curious thing about this chorus, however, is that Glass has selected thin, relatively untrained voices for his group, despite the plans to perform in a large hall without choral amplification. The singers were barely holding their own against the loud electric organ Glass was playing at the rehearsal, and knowing the kind of high volumes he normally uses in concerts, I couldn't imagine how he was going to achieve a balance in this piece.

Glass says that he is interested in the natural resonance of the voice, and wants to avoid soloistic qualities, since he rarely writes solos. He went on to explain that trained voices, working with supported tone and nominal vibrato, never blend very well. I asked him if he had heard any groups like the Robert Shaw Chorale or the Gregg Smith Singers lately, and he said he hadn't. In any case, the composer was quite confident about his group, and assured me that they would be producing two or three times their present volume by the time the show opens.

Glass's way of working with Wilson appears to involve the same kind of give and take which one normally finds in collaborations where both artists respect each other, and neither is determined to dominate. But it was curious to learn how they got started when they first began working together about a year ago. Glass told me that Wilson did a lot of preliminary sketches of what he expected various scenes to look like, and that Glass began working out musical ideas based largely on these visualizations.

I was not surprised to learn this, because it had always seemed to me that Wilson is basically a visual artist, and that his feelings for the exact placement of people and objects on the stage, his color sense, and his sets are the most fundamental aspects of his work. His scenes always become animated paintings for me, and I have the feeling that if we ever have any really useful criticism of Wilson's work, it is going to come from an art critic, or at least someone who really understands surrealism, Hopper, O'Keefe and so on.

Meanwhile, back at the rehearsal, the group was completing a short physical warm-up, and Glass was asking me if I would like to sing along on a section they were about to rehearse. I jumped at the chance. I'd been hearing Glass's pieces for some time and had often wondered what it would be like to try to read one of his parts. It is obvious just from listening to the long repetitions and quick pattern shifts that there has to be a lot of counting involved. But what kind of counting? Is it tricky, difficult counting that requires heavy concentration? Is it dull drudgerous counting that bores the hell out of you? Is it the kind of counting that can alter your consciousness, as in so many yoga and Zen exercises?

It's really none of the above, though it's a little like each. Let's say we're working on pattern number 65, and our part is something like 'fa si la si.' And let's say that there is a little '4' off to the right side, meaning that after we've sung 'fa si la si' four times we've completed one sequence. And let's say that there is another '4' above the music, meaning that we have to sing four sequences before going on to pattern 66.

If you followed that, you're probably thinking, as I did, 'Glass, can't you multiply? Why didn't you just say to do it 16 times instead of going through all this four times four stuff?' And if you are pretty headstrong about your opinion, as I was, you would decide to do it your own way, and the downbeat would come, and everyone would start charging through their quick little patterns, and everything would be fine until you discovered that you weren't sure whether you were on the 12th repetition or the 14th. And meanwhile the music would be going by so fast that every time you tried to figure it out you would just become more confused.

I decided I'd better try it Glass's way the next time around, and for some reason it was a lot easier. It still took a lot of concentration, but somehow the challenge seemed fun, a little like keeping track of how many times the runners have gone around the track, or something like that. It felt good as the sequences went by, feeling the fours within the fours, or the twos within the eights, or whatever, and getting ready for the next shift. And sometimes I could make it through three or four patterns without loosing count.

The problem is that a single segment might involve 10 or 20 patterns, and there are an awful lot of choral segments in 'Einstein on the Beach,' all of which Glass expects the singers to memorize. But of course, every time I started thinking about something like that, I lost the count again.

I enjoyed the challenge of the whole thing, and I guess I was doing all right, because during the next break Glass offered me a job. I figured he was kidding, but by the time he'd mentioned it three times, complimenting my sightreading and complaining that they really did need another good musician on the tenor line, I decided I really ought to consider the prospects.

The rehearsal atmosphere seemed quite pleasant, the money would be adequate, and the months in Europe wouldn't be hard to take. But then I started thinking about how I'd have to do the four sequences of the three-note pattern four times and the eight sequences of the four-note pattern two times, and about how it would all have to be memorized, and I realized that I'd probably

never be able to muster up the kind of dedication the task would require.

February 9, 1976

How to Perform John Cage

What contemporary composer has suffered the most from poor performances? Gordon Mumma once suggested that the composer who has been most often misrepresented in performance is John Cage. Cage might seem like a poor candidate for this particular distinction, since his scores are usually undemanding technically and since he has personally supervised so many of his own performances, yet it is quite possible that Mumma was right.

It's true that Cage's works do not lock the players into specific technical difficulties, but they do offer a great deal of freedom, and most performers can handle technical difficulties better than they can handle freedom. What do you do, for example, if you are sitting in a violin section and find yourself faced with a rather vague instruction to make a sound on the bridge of your instrument? The biggest temptation always used to be, and perhaps still is, to simply shrug off the whole thing and figure, 'If that's all I have to do, why bother at all? It will only throw my strings out of tune.' The next level of enlightenment is the player who reasons, 'Hey, far out. This guy is willing to let me do just about anything.' Seeing the potential for humor, the player then attempts to bite the bridge with his teeth, tap on it with an umbrella, or something like that. And sometimes conductors, fearful of audience reactions to begin with, allow things like that to happen, figuring that it will be better to pass the piece off as a joke rather than to overtly offend the subscribers, who are really only there to hear the Beethoven symphony anyway.

Cage's real intention in a case like this would be of course that the violinist take this moment of freedom and do something sensitive with it. That means watching what the other players are doing, listening to the results, and doing something on the bridge of his instrument that fits into the context and adds to the general musical effect. But constructive approaches of this sort are seldom applied to Cage's works, and I don't mean just in those conservative centers where Cage's ideas still seem radical, but even among experimental groups.

For example, I once heard an adventurous group of young composers from Buffalo attempt to present Cage's complete Song Books in a single evening. They weren't really presenting the Song Books, of course. It would take at least three evenings to do any kind of justice to all that material. They were simply using the Song Books, and the freedom which they offer, as an excuse to present some inept theatre of their own, and the result was one of the most tedious evenings I have ever attempted to sit through. I suspect that many in the audience, most of whom left far earlier than I did, assumed that it was all Cage's fault.

After experiences like that, I particularly appreciated the all-Cage concert presented by Dennis Russell Davies and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra at the Kitchen on January 24. I understand that Cage spent quite a bit of time in St. Paul last season, and that the orchestra has performed quite a bit of his music, and it shows. There was no balking, no clowning, and no resentment. The players simply played their parts, exercising their freedom in responsible, sensitive ways, and everything came together quite musically.

This was particularly good to hear in the case of 'Atlas Eclipticalis,' which has been loudly complained about ever since Leonard Bernstein tried to present it with the New York Philharmonic in February of 1964. The third and worst of those four performances could easily have been the most unsympathetic performance any piece of music has ever had. According to Calvin Tompkins, 'The musicians laughed and talked among themselves throughout 'Atlas Eclipticalis' ; some of them played scales or melodies instead of the notes written, sang or whistled into their contact microphones, and in a couple of instances smashed the electronic equipment.' But the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's interpretation was a model of sensitive music making. The unconventional sounds were carefully made; Davies saw to it that 'Atlas Eclipticalis' was neatly paced, with an appealing beginning and ending; and the random amplification added a fascinating dimension. I found myself frequently glancing around the orchestra trying to figure out which musician was being amplified through the loudspeakers at a particular moment.

A recent Cage work called '12 Haiku' was also presented. In this case, the score is a set of Thoreau's drawings, which Cage translated into a set of parts for chamber orchestra. The music consists of dense scatterings of unconventional instrumental sounds, which represent the drawings, separated by long silences, which represent the space between drawings. But that is only the first half of the piece. The second half consists solely of a tape recording of birds, other natural sounds, and a little traffic, which Cage recorded out of his window early one morning at Stony Point, New York. The interesting thing for me was the similarity between the music and the tape, both of which shift between activity and inactivity in a pleasant and unpredictable way.

Also on the program were a quintet and a duo. 'Music for Wind Instruments' is a 12-tone piece, written at the age of 25, which charges through tricky rhythms in a rather uninteresting, and a not yet very Cagelike way. But the 'Six Melodies for Violin and Keyboard (Piano)' was a pleasant discovery for me. It comes from the same period as the String Quartet, and works with modal melodies in that same striking, unharmonized way.

The curious thing about all four of these brash, controversial Cage works is that, when they are performed as they were on this concert, they no longer seem at all brash or controversial. They don't sound pretty either. Cage is never pretty. But they do become highly musical, balanced compositions, and even take on a degree of refinement. It is staggering to think what different turns Cage's career would be taking, and how different his reputation would be, if his works were always performed the way they were at this concert. But that's an awfully big if.

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March 15, 1976
Charles Ives in Brooklyn

It is February 28, and the Brooklyn Philharmonia's 'American Marathon' has already made its way through a good many chamber and choral works and a Stephen Foster medley. Now it is time for the Charles Ives 'Unanswered Question.' Lukas Foss leans over to the microphone, apparently feeling a need to somehow underline the special importance of this work. He says simply that it is a prophetic piece which, though written in 1908, prophesies in many ways the beginning of new music.

'Is there a work that prophesies the end of new music?' comments a disgruntled man in the row behind me.

There is a small string orchestra at the front of the stage, and at the rear we see the backs of the four woodwind players, facing the assistant conductor. Foss gives the downbeat and the wonderfully ethereal string music begins. But no one is playing. All the musicians are sitting quietly with their bows in their laps. Apparently a few other players have been ensconced off stage somewhere. It is a nice touch.

My thoughts drift back to the very first time I heard this piece. It was in a record store in Denver, one of the old-fashioned kinds that used to have listening booths for customers to sample records. I was 15 or 16 and had never heard of 'The unanswered Question,' but I had heard something about Ives, and I asked to listen to it. I was transfixed by what I heard. So clear, so simple, so poetic. I didn't know that it was program music, and that Ives had assigned specific symbolism to the ethereal background of the strings, the question of the solo trumpet, and the fitful nonanswers of the woodwinds. I didn't know that this was the prophetic moment in history when Western music discovered the beauty of static repetitious processes. I didn't know that this was the first indefinite composition - the first score in which the exact coordination of different elements was not specified. All I knew then was that no music had ever touched me quite so deeply.

Now the trumpet comes in with the first statement of the question. Wilmer Wise plays the haunting six-note melody as well as anyone could, and it has a special effect since it drifts down from one of the boxes at the side of the opera house. The intervals sound as strange as ever. As many times as I've heard this piece, I never can quite remember what those five pitches are. But whenever I hear them, they sound familiar.

Now the strings on stage join the invisible players, and their slow-motion chorale takes on a lusher quality, but it is still very soft, and the curious harmonies are still unpredictable. Now the conductor at the rear of the stage gives a downbeat, and we hear the first scrambling woodwind answer to the trumpet's question.

Someone laughs. Do they really think the piece is funny? Maybe they are just amused at the idea of listening to woodwind players who have their backs turned to the audience. Or maybe the music is really getting to them, and this is nervous laughter - an attempt to keep in contact with the everyday reality they are used to.

My thoughts go back to the Ives score, which suggests that all the string players perform behind a screen, and I begin wondering why conductors never seem to do it that way. It doesn't matter, I guess, as long as there is some attempt to place the three musical elements in independent situations, and Foss's solution is probably as good as any.

I recall an issue of Soundings where Philip Corner devoted several pages to trying to analyze 'The Unanswered Question.' His subjective poetic comments did seem to say something, and they have perhaps influenced my own perceptions of the piece. But even those who know Ives's music as well as Corner does can't really explain the odd chord progressions of the string music, or the curious tonality (or is it atonality) of the trumpet line. The piece is an unanswered question in more than one way.

We are up to the fifth statement of the trumpet's question already, and the piece seems to be going by faster than it ever has. Could Foss have taken some cuts, or sped up the string music? More likely, it is only my own sense of timing which is different now. When I first heard the piece it seemed to suspend itself forever, and time almost stopped with the magic of the music. But of course, I had never heard static nondevelopmental music before. By now I have heard a lot of it, and I suspect that a conductor would have to do a 20-minute version of this eight-minute piece in order to recreate for me now the extreme timelessness which I sensed when I first heard the work.

My thoughts go back to the late Alvin Etler, and to a conversation we once had when I was studying composition with him. I had brought up the subject of 'The Unanswered Question' for the umpteenth time, and said in my cocky, studentlike way that I would like to be able to answer it some day. He was fond of the piece too, but he had already discussed it with me about as much as he cared to, so he gently pointed out that it would be more fruitful if I put away my dog-eared Ives score and studied some Stravinsky or Webern or something for a while. He was right, of course. Obsessions seldom pay off. And yet, I couldn't help feeling then,

and even now, that any composer who really understood the machinations of that piece wouldn't find it necessary to study all the others.

'The Unanswered Question' ended and the man behind me continued complaining to his wife, who had apparently dragged him to the concert. 'He could have put more Gershwin and stuff. It didn't have to be like this.'

April 19, 1976
Percussion for Professionals - And for Amateurs

At concerts of contemporary percussion music one generally expects certain things: a stage overloaded with the usual battery of commercial percussion instruments, a conductor to do a lot of intricate cueing, a zillion pages of carefully notated scores, and a repertoire oriented toward Varese, Cage, Harrison, and other familiar names. Recently, however, I heard two concerts of percussion music that broke all of these rules, and also differed a great deal from one another.

One was the March 26 appearance of the Black Earth Percussion Ensemble at the Kitchen. The three players from Illinois had brought along quite a few instruments they had made themselves, as well as the standard ones. There was no conductor and not much sheet music, since many of the pieces were memorized, and everything had been rehearsed down to the split second.

Black Earth specializes in the sort of intimate ensemble sensitivity that I occasionally hear from string and wind groups but had never heard in a percussion ensemble. Much of their finesse is due to the simple fact that the group has been together for quite a few years, and perhaps some of it is because they are based in De Kalb, Illinois. Black Earth is in residence at the University of Northern Illinois, where they all have some teaching obligations, but otherwise they are free to spend most of their time constructing instruments in their workshop, exploring new repertoire, planning concerts, and just playing together. It's a kind of togetherness and commitment which seems hard for percussionists to develop amid the distractions of urban life.

The program had a broad and unusual range. There was a work by Martin Farien that was realized mostly on neat homemade instruments, a comical interpretation of graphics by Herbert Brun, and a structured improvisation, along with more conventional works by Elliott Carter, Russell Peck, and Gerald Strang. But two pieces were especially striking.

Frederic Rzewski's 'Les Moutons de Panurge' is an exciting composition in which a highly charged melody gradually grows from one note to over 40 and then back to one again, and Black Earth's trio version of the work is spectacular. I don't think there are many mallet players anywhere who could cut the piece at all at such a fast tempo, but these three zipped through it with remarkable accuracy, and kept right together at the same time.

Also gratifying was a 'Marimbastuck' by a young Japanese composer, Maki Ishii. This is a tour de force for a solo marimba player, which depends on subtle inflections, colorations, and nuances, all of which is embellished now and then by soft effects played on various instruments by two assistant players. Here too there was the kind of ensemble sensitivity that only comes after years of working together.

Of course New York is supposed to be the place where one finds high gloss professionalism, but curiously, a percussion concert presented by a New York group on the following night turned out to be a homespun, homemade, unpretentious sort of affair. This event, which featured Skip La Plante and Carole Weber, offered a melange of homemade instruments which were simpler and junkier than Black Earth's constructions, but often sounded better. They were made out of bowls, pans, cardboard tubing, jugs, table legs, saucers, jars, fire alarms, roofing material, and junk metal, not to mention a large collection of wind chimes which incorporated all sorts of ringy and jingly things.

So much care had gone into the instruments that the music had to sound attractive, and it did. Admittedly La Plante is limited as a composer. One piece combined seven rhythmic motifs in a way that was hard to follow and did not always seem appropriate to the instruments used. In another segment, which had been written as accompaniment for dance, he had not quite managed to turn the music into a convincing concert piece. Yet the sounds were so arresting that they didn't really need much in the way of compositional skill or performance polish, and La Plante's conducting of one audience participation segment turned out to be a high point of the evening. Perhaps 30 delighted volunteers (myself included) selected small instruments and formed a circle, and La Plante gave cues from the center.

All in all it was a stimulating concert, which made me vow to get down to Canal Street soon and pick up some odds and ends for making my own wind chimes. And that, incidentally, is not a bad idea for anyone, now that open-window season is so close at hand. Of course wind chimes don't provide much in the way of performance precision. But that's Black Earth's department.

May 3, 1976
Meredith Monk's 'Quarry'

When I went to Meredith Monk's new work, 'Quarry,' I happened to be with a friend who had never seen any of her work before. I warned him that he might have difficulty interpreting the imagery, and that he might find Monk's extraordinary singing style hard to appreciate at first. But I also felt quite confident in assuring him that there would be no flaws in pacing, no banal moments, and no unexpected audience responses. I have found that Monk just doesn't make those kinds of mistakes anymore.

After the performance we found that we had widely different interpretations of the mother-father-child triangle, the autobiographical significance of the piece, the meaning of the strange silent film in the middle of the production, and the political implications of the six 'dictators.' But we agreed that most of the ambiguity had been carefully laid out, and that Monk was completely in control of what she was doing, and, in short, that she had made no mistakes.

Technically I suppose 'Quarry' has to be classified as 'experimental,' but there is nothing truly experimental about it. Monk has been working in this basic style for nearly 15 years, after all, and she handles the elements of her unique art as easily as other artists handle arabesques or dominant seventh chords. In fact, it seems to me that her control has become even greater during the past few years, as her musical technique has become more and more facile.

Sometimes Monk's works can seem like bizarre collections of processions, dances, songs, and pantomimes. But 'Quarry' comes together as a single form throughout, and I think its cohesiveness has much to do with Monk's evolution as a composer. The nostalgic, repetitious organ music, which dominates the lengthy work, somehow pulls together the Victorian furnishings, the sick little child, the clouds, and the Old Testament couple, and makes all these elements seem as if they really do belong on the same stage. On a less obvious level, recapitulations of musical segments occasionally set up specific relationships, and characters are sometimes defined by musical information. Most of what we know about the little girl, played by Monk herself, is conveyed vocally. And the 'Requiem' at the end would not seem like a requiem at all except for the somber modal melody the chorus sings.

Admittedly Monk's training as a musician is limited, and admittedly this sometimes shows. Her melodies and harmonies are not the kinds that one would come up with from reading harmony books, studying Stravinsky scores, or exploring ancient modes. And her rhythms don't have the kind of technical sophistication one finds in composers who have studied Indian talas, jazz drumming, medieval isorhythm, and African polyrhythms. She writes, or rather works out, musical patterns that almost any of us might stumble across on a keyboard or in our voices, provided that we knew exactly the effects we were looking for, and had the necessary discipline, courage, and judgment.

Monk, of course, has all of these things, and she applies them to her music as rigorously as to her theatrics. That is particularly true of the unique vocal technique which she has discovered and perfected, and which I have attempted to describe in other reviews. But it is also true of her keyboard and choral works. There is not a lot of musical variety in 'Quarry,' but she does make quite a few sensitive distinctions in mood within her narrow range. As I hear it, the main ingredients are always eerieness, nostalgia, and rhythmic vitality, but she carefully mixes these elements in different proportions depending on the context.

There are other subtleties. I doubt that most people were aware of it, but the music associated with the bedside radio always came from a small loudspeaker on stage, rather than the central sound system, so it had a particular kind of presence and directionality. Also effective were the occasional rings of a bicycle bell, which invariably turned out to be exactly in tune with whatever music was going on at the moment. By now Monk is listening to everything in her work, just as she has always looked at everything.

May 10, 1976
Steve Reich and 18 Other Musicians

There was an immediate standing ovation following the premiere of Steve Reich's 'Music for 18 Musicians' at Town Hall on April 24, and very few people remained in their seats. It is not surprising. Regardless of aesthetic orientation, few people can resist a performance as sharp as this one. In fact, few people have ever even heard a large ensemble deliver a long intricate work with such impeccable precision. Certainly no symphony orchestra can afford the kind of rehearsal time that this sort of playing requires, and it is rare that any chorus or instrumental group comes so together. And Reich's musicians did it without a conductor.

'Music for 18 Musicians' is a good composition too, though different from earlier Reich works. Here he is not working with a single inevitable process, but rather with a sectional form. After a long introduction, which states 11 basic white-note chords, the music progresses through 11 contrasting sections based on these chords. The sections are separated by moments of relative inactivity, during which some performers shift instruments, and everyone gets ready for the next section. Then a player strikes a few notes on the metallophone and cues in the next section.

Throughout the 55-minute work, there is a steady stream of fast notes, played mostly on the marimbas and pianos. Some players played only the strong beats, some played only the offbeats, some overlaid tricky irregular rhythms, and no one ever seemed to be the slightest bit off. The tempo was about as steady as an Accutron watch. Meanwhile two clarinets, cello, violin, and four female singers filled in sustained tones or brought out specific melodic patterns.

When Reich previewed a segment of this work a year ago, I was surprised that it sounded so lush. It didn't seem quite so lush at the premiere, and I suspect that he has changed some of the more mellow cello, clarinet, and metallophone lines he started out with, but the piece is still much warmer than his all-percussion works. The amplification is not especially loud, and some sections drift into extremely expressive minor-mode-like tonalities. The basic chord of the final section has an almost impressionistic quality to my ears.

But as in all Reich's works, the greatest interest is rhythmic. I never became quite as involved in picking out rhythmic patterns as I do in his more hypnotic pieces. It was too frustrating. Just about the time I'd start to understand something, the music would shift to a new section. But I did pick up on patterns here and there, and I was particularly interested at one point as I began to follow a melody three notes long circling through a rhythm eight notes long, and always coming out different. Throughout the work, rhythmic patterns continually grow, shrink, and shift accents, always with admirable subtlety.

There is a great deal of craftmanship here, not only in the rhythmic intricacies, but in the harmonies and instrumental colors as well. I suspect that the work would hold up well under repeated hearings, and all in all, it's an excellent piece. So perhaps I should just end my review with that. But other considerations press me to add some additional thoughts, some of which would apply to Philip Glass as well.

Reich is in a special situation now, due to the success he has been having during the past few years. The bulk of his mature work is all available now internationally in the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon label, and Reich's performing ensemble has appeared all over. At least in Europe, and perhaps here as well, he seems to be regarded as the main representative of the new wave of classical American music. So I find myself asking whether I can really support him on that level, and feel a strong reluctance.

Many other avant-garde genres are equally good, and it seems too bad that these are often over-shadowed by Reich's sleek, well-marketed product. What about La Monte Young, who really started the whole hypnotic thing, and whose music takes a quiet more meditative form? What about ingenious electronic composers like Gordon Mumma or David Behrman? What about Max Neuhaus, Pauline Oliveros, Philip Corner, and others in Reich's generation? Their work may not have the immediate impact of Reich's, but it is ultimately at least as fresh and profound as his is.

And what about performer freedom? In a way, I think that is what bothers me most. Ever since those first indeterminate works in the early 1960s, one of the main precepts of the American avant-garde has been a concern for the individual, and a dislike for the regimented performing discipline that we inherited from Europe. There's something very American about that, and it seems like an important value. If we have learned anything from those radical years, it seems that we should have learned to appreciate watching people making music without giving up their personal freedom. Reich grew out of all that, but somewhere along the line he gave it up. Now, as I watch Reich's musicians going through their paces with such precision, I can't help noticing that they look even more machine-like than the players in traditional orchestras do, despite the lack of a conductor.

None of this in any way contradicts the fact that Reich is a skillful composer, that 'Music for 18 Musicians' is a fine piece, and that the group's ensemble precision is a rare achievement. But perhaps it will raise some doubts in the

minds of those who have come to think of Reich as the American avant-garde composer.

May 17, 1976
Barbara Benary Brings Java to Jersey

Ordinarily student ensembles are not reviewed, especially in New York, where there is so much professional music going on. But when I heard the Gamelan Group of Livingston College at the Kitchen on May 1, I knew very soon that this was going to have to be an exception. The ingenious homemade instruments, with their tin can resonators, made a wonderful sounding gamelan. The process of a group performing these metallic percussion instruments struck me as an unusual healthy form of music education, and at the same time, I found the resulting music much more listenable than that of most student ensembles. And perhaps most impressive, the ensemble blended Indonesian traditions with current Western ideas quite successfully.

As more and more Western composers and groups have incorporated eastern ideas into their music, I have become increasingly aware of the possible pitfalls. We've all heard pieces of cultural imperialism, in which Western musicians patronizingly import a few exotic tunes the way colonial exploiters imported tea and bananas. Sometimes Eastern instruments or compositional ideas are imported with only a superficial understanding of how they work, as when one hears Indian melodies without the essential Indian drones in the background. And, of course, attempts to turn, say, koto music into piano music, always end up paradoxical. When composers don't know much about the music they are borrowing, they are often insensitive to its basic needs. But when they know a lot, they tend to make literal transferences, and that doesn't work either. Barbara Benary and her ensemble have managed to steer around all these problems and evolve a repertoire that flatters both Javanese and American traditions, fusing them into something unique that everyone can be happy about.

Much of the success of the evening had to do with Benary's two compositions, both of which employ improvisation. In 'Convergences,' individual musicians repeat patterns of various lengths until they 'converge' with patterns of different lengths played by other players. There is a fair amount of freedom as to when a player begins what pattern, and the musicians seemed to be enjoying the game-like process involved in playing the piece. At the same time, however, the texture was always a steady rhythmic rippling, very much as in traditional Javanese compositions.

In Benary's 'Braid,' the musicians maintained steady intertwining rhythmic patterns, but with some freedom as to which pitches to strike within these patterns. The result was a complex series of little changes that could be considered contemporary American minimalism, but again, the atmosphere and means of playing the instruments was strictly Javanese. I had the feeling that Indonesian listeners would have been able to follow what was going on about as easily as I could, and might have enjoyed it just as much.

A cross-cultural approach coming from the other side was provided by Ki Wasitodipuro, a gamelan master from Jogjakarta, who had spent time teaching in California. Here the actual music was strictly traditional, with a thick texture of intertwining parts that could only have been written by one who grew up with the intricate techniques of Javanese music. But there was also a vocal line, and even without understanding a word of Wasitodipuro's language, it was easy to discern that the text had something to do with the 'freeway' and his California experiences.

The remaining work on the program was Philip Corner's Gamelan-I, a meditative piece containing long silences. The work began with single strokes every 64 beats on a large gong, which, incidentally, was the only instrument that didn't sound much like its Indonesian equivalent. Gradually the smaller instruments chimed in with parts that sounded every 32 beats, every 16 beats, and so on, until the music was rippling right along. Eventually it opened back up for a slow ending. The piece is not a slave to its arithmetic, though it certainly reflects a contemporary Western formalistic kind of thinking. But it also has a ceremonial austerity that seems to reflect Zen Buddhist traditions, a performing style that reflects Corner's 'Metal Meditations' for other metallic instruments, and a steady multi-leveled texture that comes straight from Java.

Benary is not the first one to build a Western equivalent of a gamelan. I understand that a musician who graduated from the world music program at Wesleyan University, as Benary did, constructed a gamelan at Goddard College, using milk cans for resonators. In John Grayson's anthology on 'Sound Sculpture,' William Colvig describes how he built a gamelan with Lou Harrison, using a design similar to Benary's. I hope other Westerners are putting together gamelan ensembles, too, because this medium has much to offer, and it produces a kind of music that Westerners can handle without years of specialized practice.

Granted, Benary's ensemble was not always as together as those Indonesian groups that have been playing in gamelan orchestras all their lives, but their playing was not at all bad, and they did appear to genuinely enjoy what they were doing. I think there's something about the teamwork of a gamelan, and the sumptuousness of that sound, that draws people together in a special way. And when diverse cultures come together at the same time, the result is most satisfying.

May 24, 1976

Pauline Oliveros and Philip Corner: Meditation Music

One important genre of new music is consistently overlooked because it never takes place in widely advertised public events, but rather in workshops and relatively intimate gatherings, where everyone can feel free to take part. It involves meditation, and thus overlaps somewhat with the activities of meditation groups and sensory awareness groups, but it has been developed by composers and must be considered primarily a from of music.

In a way this is a new form of religious music. Of course, it has nothing to do with organized religion, but it does owe much to Eastern religious teaching, and it is oriented toward spiritual values. It is not a popular activity, and never will be, any more than Zen meditation or philosophical debate ever will. Yet it is an important development - particularly since it has independently attracted two of the most stimulating musical minds I have ever come in contact with - Pauline Oliveros and Philip Corner.

Oliveros is a California composer who has been working in this direction for some time. Several years ago I attended a session she led at the Cunningham Studio. Much of the evening was devoted to 'Teach Yourself to Fly,' an absorbing situation in which one is asked to breathe normally, very very gradually allowing one's breath to become vocal sound. I gained some useful nonverbal insights that night, but one shouldn't expect much to happen without an appropriate atmosphere and an experienced leader. I don't think you can really 'teach yourself,' despite the title.

Recently I have been studying Oliveros's 'Sonic Meditations' XII-XXV, published in the winter issue of the Painted Bride Quarterly. They are clearly expressed, and rich in implications. One meditation involves saying a single word very very slowly, others involve group chanting, some deal with imaginary sounds, and any of them could probably keep serious meditators busy for several sessions. One can be quoted in toto, since it is defined so briefly. But don't confuse brevity with simplicity:

Re Cognition

Listen to a sound until you no longer recognize it.

Other recent Oliveros works are intended for formal presentation to an audience, but these, too, sometimes involve elements of meditation. In a large theatrical work called 'Crow II,' for example, part of the music is for four flute players, who are asked to determine which pitche to sustain by attempting to send and receive telepathic messages. The audience is also invited to try to tune in on any psychic messages and anticipate what pitch the flutist will play next. Regardless of whether any psychic communication actually takes place, the problem becomes an absorbing meditation, especially for the flute players, and brings an air of intense concentration into the performance situation.

Corner's work with meditation music has gone on mostly in the context of 'Sounds out of Silent Spaces,' a group which he formed several years ago, and which I have been participating in this year. The format varies. Sometimes quite a few guests attend and participate, and sometimes only the regulars are there. Sometimes Corner's ideas dominate, but a good many of the group's activities originate with other individuals. The mood and profundity of the sessions can vary greatly, but my personal experiences with two of Corner's meditations demonstrate what the high points can be like.

One afternoon about eight of us set about the task of simply sustaining a unison 'oo' for a long time. With the men singing in their upper range, the women in their lower range, and everyone remaining very soft, the blend was so remarkable that after a while it became difficult to distinguish one voice from another. On a material level, I became conscious of the way the tone moved around slightly in space, depending on who was taking a breath at the moment, and of the tiny fluctuations that occurred when someone would drift slightly out of tune. On a more spiritual level, the tone became something like a mandala, and after focusing my attention on it for some time, my whole self, as well as merely my voice, seemed to become part of that tone.

Another meditation sometimes done in 'Sounds out of Silent Spaces' has to do with trying to sing extremely low tones. Like most meditation problems, this is not easy, and one can't expect results every time. But once, when my concentration was particularly keen, and the atmosphere particularly tranquil, I found a deep resonance somewhere in my chest that I had never found before and may never find again. Some would no doubt consider this a mystical experience, but being basically a skeptic, I simply considered it a minor triumph in a general quest for greater self-awareness.

May 31, 1976
Jon Deak's Dire Expectations

A new melodrama by Jon Deak proved to be the highlight of the New York Philharmonic Prospective Encounters concert on May 14. This work, 'Dire Expectations,' lasts perhaps 20 minutes and involves Eli and Cynthia. During the romantic garden scene, Cynthia explains that she can't marry Eli because of her father the Evil Scientist. Brave Eli goes to seek out the evil man who stands between them, and Cynthia tries desperately to stop him. Despite her, Eli struggles through the stormy night, finds the secret passageway, confronts the evil man in his secret laboratory, and there meets his doom, thus bringing the romance and story to a sudden tragic end.

All of this would be fairly standard satire of pulp magazine cliches except that it is done without voices. The characters are played by instruments, who speak their lines in sliding speechlike melodies, a technique that Deak has dubbed Sprechspiele. The instruments can not make themselves completely comprehensible, but with the help of the printed libretto, I found it quite easy to follow the dialogue - easier, in fact than on many other occasions when I have tried to follow translations of foreign language operas. The bass player Michele Saxon, in the role of Eli, had particularly good diction, making good use of a wah-wah pedal to help simulate vowel sounds, and delivering the full pseudo-emotional impact of such lines as 'Cynthia! What are you doing out on this stormy night?' There was also plenty of just plain music for the conductor Pierre Boulez and the ensemble. There was the dinner music, during which the percussionists rattled dishes and silverware. There was the tension music, stimulated by the evil omen of the chandelier. There was a brief satire of popular music, as Eli sang to his beloved, 'There's an ache in my heart just for you.' We also heard birds-in-the-garden music, storm music, murder music, and a sad epilogue, and in all cases, Deak seemed quite at home with the cliched styles he was alluding to, and able to rise above them.

Compared with American listeners, Boulez is probably not too familiar with 'The Drunkard,' the Lone Ranger, the Shadow, the soap operas, the monster movies, and such sources, and he sometimes did not make the satire as pointed as he might have. He did, however, keep the ensemble well balanced, and allow the plot to unfold clearly.

June 7, 1976

Four Versions of Christian Wolff's 'Burdocks'

Indeterminate music, which Cage, Brown, Feldman, and Wolff began writing in the '50s, still poses some interesting questions. If the outcome is uncertain, how do we know whether we are hearing a particular piece? How different can a piece sound and still be that piece? Consider Christian Wolff's 'Burdocks,' written a few years ago for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. I have heard quite a few versions of 'Burdocks' by now, both with and without the choreography, and at an ensemble concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on May 15, I heard four more. These performances have all varied drastically in length, instrumentation, and general mood, because the score leaves things of this sort up to the performers. The piece is no casual matter though. In fact, one could spend a good hour just reading and absorbing Wolff's basic instructions. There are limits to the performer's freedom, and as I have become more familiar with the 10 parts of the score, it has become clearer and clearer just what those limits are. Sometimes they are exceeded.

For example, one of the BAM performances that purported to be an interpretation of 'Burdocks' actually wasn't at all. During the opening bars I could tell that the two members of the Roger Lax Ensemble were following a procedure suggested in part II, but from there on, I could discern nothing that had any direct relationship to the score. I'm not saying that the performers didn't think they were playing 'Burdocks.' They may even have been trying to play 'Burdocks.' But they were not using Wolff's specific materials, were not following the rules, and were going way beyond the limits of the piece.

An ensemble from Livingston College gave the piece a light touch. They chose to deal with Part VI, which simply provides a few accompanimental rhythms and a melodic line. The melody is 22 beats long, can be read in either treble or bass clefs or both, and can be played continuously or with interruptions. Wolff has never worked in a jazz idiom, and I suspect that when he wrote Part VI it never occurred to him that, when played continuously in the treble clef at a fairly brisk pace, his melody can be made to sound like a repetitious kind of low-key jazz. But that is exactly what occurred to the musicians in this ensemble, many of whom seemed jazz-oriented. At the same time, however, they never actually changed the tune or broke the rules, and I had the feeling that Wolff would have been pleased to hear musicians relating his score to their own sensitivities in this way.

A wind quinted from the New England Conservatory had a much different approach. These musicians were technically quite proficient, and they could handle the intricacies of Ligeti or Carter almost as smoothly as professional groups that have been together for years. But in the meantime, they have also developed a very fast sense of pacing. Whereas the Livingston group elongated that one melody of Part VI into a relaxed, gradually evolving performance of 10 minutes or longer, the Boston wind players went through that material plus three or four other parts in less than 10 minutes. Again, I don't think this is what Wolff had in mind when he wrote the piece. The 10 parts, after all, were intended for performance with a full evening dance work. But again, I suspect that he would have been pleased. The musicians followed the instructions scrupulously, but they also followed their own musical instincts. In other words, they used freedom responsibly, and that, to a great extent, is what 'Burdocks' is really about.

A group from York University in Toronto presented yet another approach. There were some 20 players, which was larger than any 'Burdocks' ensemble I had ever heard before, but the approach was quite similar to performances I have heard organized by Wolff himself. There was much emphasis on coloristic variety, and a number of toy instruments and sound effects were deployed in that direction. It is within the rules to overlap parts, and even to play two or three parts at a time. The Toronto group was apparently doing this, as the texture was often quite dense, and I sometimes had difficulty determining just what part was being played by whom. Still, the music was clearly 'Burdocks.' Meanwhile, this provocative, challenging score continues to be played fairly often, and I suspect that this is only the beginning of a long history of 'Burdocks' interpretations and misinterpretations. Eventually, perhaps listeners will begin to realize that Wolff is not responsible for both.

June 21, 1976

Serious Music Can Be Too Serious

The term 'serious music' is now taboo, because it implies that only those within the hallowed European classical tradition are serious about their art. Naturally jazz musicians, Indian musicians, and others resent this implication, and I always avoid the term. Lately, however, I've been hearing some awfully serious music, and I've begun to think that the term really was an appropriate one. In fact, some classical music, especially in some of its contemporary manifestations, is so serious that I can hardly listen to it.

One has to look around a bit to find any pieces of contemporary classical music that have much sense of humor, and often qualities like sensory appeal and emotional expressiveness are also overcome by a kind of deadly seriousness. This happens with particular frequency in the academic world, where musicians sometimes want desperately to be taken seriously by their colleagues in other fields. But it also happens occasionally among experimentalists who, convinced that establishment culture is all phony, glossy, and superficial, decide to devote themselves to more serious questions of acoustics, electronics, or whatever. It happens in a lot of serious music.

One prime example is a work the Brooklyn Philharmonia played this spring. The piece was only 18 minutes long, and the forces consisted solely of a solo speaker and about 20 instruments, but these limitations did not keep the composer from claiming to deal with God, time, cosmos, death, man, the man, and being, in more or less that order. The texts ranged from the Upanishads to T.S. Eliot, and were read intently in six different languages. Needless to say, the material was quite condensed. Nietzsche's version of the human situation was capsulized in one short section, for example. The beginning of the cosmos was dealt with in the final couple of minutes. Often the atonal music shifted around widely in an effort to live up to the pretensions of the occasion. It was a terribly serious piece.

Now I have nothing against seriousness, but there is a limit. I can go as far as, say, 'Hamlet' or the Ninth Symphony. If I am in a good mood, and a good performance is going on, my brain really goes to work, and I can gat wrapped up in such things as much as the next person. But I think the reason I can do so is because even these works are not all that serious. There are plenty of comic moments in 'Hamlet.' And Beethoven eases off in his scherzo, not to mention the 'Ode to Joy,' which is actually fairly easy listening much of the time. Moreover, although these are long works, they attempt to communicate only a limited number of profundities. Even Shakespeare and Beethoven never attempted to bite off as much as this contemporary composer did. Perhaps he is just more serious than they were, though I find it much harder to take him seriously.

Actually, quite a bit of serious music is too serious for me to take seriously. Elliott Carter's Third String Quartet has no philosophical pretentions, but the last time I put on my recording and attempted to unravel some of the logic in this jungle of logically placed notes, I began to feel really ridiculous attempting such a hopeless task. I just gave up and put on something else. I sometimes have a similar reaction when I attempt to deal with the more serious efforts of Charles Wuorinen or Roger Sessions, just to pick a couple of obvious examples.

But the problem is not limited to highly complex pieces. It sometimes arises in simple ones as well. For example, this spring at the Kitchen I heard a concert of taped pieces that seemed overly serious in a completely different way. One 45-minute work dealt with 'the death of Chuang Tzu' and consisted solely of sustained breathlike sounds fading in and out. The sounds were pleasant, the recorded quality was excellent, and I drifted along with the idea for quite a while, noticing subtle differences between various sounds, and pondering what I remembered of Chuang Tzu's dream-and-reality theories. But 45 minutes is a long time, and eventually I became restless. I attempted to revive my interest by wandering around and listening from different parts of the room, but then I lost interest in that, too, I spent most of the last 10 or 15 minutes wondering why the composer was pressing the point so far, and how he could seriously expect me to be interested in those breathing sounds for such a long time, when there weren't even any performers to watch.

Admittedly, someone who is genuinely involved with meditation and mandalas would perhaps have appreciated this long, restful span of breathing sound and know how to deal with it. Similarly, someone who is intensely involved with the specific techniques of intricate pitch and rhythm manipulation, might be able to maintain a high level of interest while listening to complex pointillistic works. And perhaps someone who knows many languages and has read most of the world's philosophy and poetry might even have been able to deal with that Brooklyn performance. But most of us are not quite that serious about our musical intake, and I sometimes wish that composers weren't either. It could get to be a serious problem.

July 19, 1976
Amateur Music: Christian Wolff and Others

Most contemporary music is addressed strictly to professional performers. Neither the serialists nor the composers of indeterminate music showed any real interest in amateurs, and it has been a long time since Bartok, Hindemith, and Orff did. But lately I've been noticing more activity in this direction. One new work I heard at the Kitchen this past season made the point particularly well.

Christian Wolff's music has gradually become less and less dependent on professional polish, and in his recent 'Wobbly Music,' I sensed that he had finally gotten to the core of something that is important to him, and perhaps to everyone. 'Wobbly Music,' was written specifically for a student chorus at Wesleyan University, and it is truly music for amateurs. In fact, there is no way that a professional chorus could ever deliver the work as convincingly as dedicated amateurs could. And yet it is a fine piece of music, with a strong message and a sophisticated construction.

'Wobblies' was, of course, a nickname for the revolutionary International Workers of the World, who flourished here and in Europe early in this century, and much of Wolff's piece is based on their songs and texts. The music speaks for the common man, and it seems to demand a certain lack of polish in some of its folk-song-like solo verses. Similarly, in a section where solidarity is symbolized by a gradual transition from hodgepodge antiphony to strong unison, these undergraduates, with their Levis and their sometimes strained voices, were able to drive the point home much better than professionals could.

Many other examples of good amateur music have been springing up, too, particularly in experimental quarters. This spring I reviewed a concert by Skip La Plante and Carole Weber which enabled everyone to make some attractive music with homemade percussion instruments. Another week I dealt with a student gamelan ensemble from Livingston College, which has been exploring sophisticated types of new music through this amateur, communal, Indonesian medium. Another week I wrote about the meditation music of Pauline Oliveros, Philip Corner, and others, almost all of which is addressed to nonprofessionals. Another week I wrote about Kirk Nurock's 'Audience Oratorio,' which anyone can participate in. Some time ago I discussed 'Nature Study Notes,' a large collection of British and American avant-garde scores, most of which do not require specific instrumental technique. This fall Schirmer Books is issuing a large anthology, compiled by Roger Johnson, which will also include a great many pieces that can be played by nonprofessionals. The Aesthetic Research Center of Canada has published several volumes that reach out to amateur musicians. And with a little research, this paragraph could no doubt be expanded into a hefty bibliography.

The point is that amateurs have a lot more up-to-date material to draw on now than they have for a long time, and much of it is as sophisticated and listenable as scores written specifically for professionals.

August 2, 1976

Gavin Bryars's Work Is Good Four Ways

Sometimes I think that the crucial question in evaluating music is not simply whether it is good or not, but in how many ways. There are plenty of pieces in every category that excel in one way or another. But once in a while one finds a piece that crosses many boundaries, has many facets, and somehow manages to excel from a whole lot of points of view. That is the case with a piece by the British composer Gavin Bryars. The work, 'Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet,' occupies a side of a recent album issued on the new and modestly named Obscure label.

To begin with, 'Jesus' Blood' is good as a piece of avant-garde minimalism. One little vocal tune repeats over and over and over, maybe 50 times in all. It's just another tape loop really, but as in all good minimal works, the material keeps revealing more and more about itself. The tune never changes, but my perception of it shifts continually.

'Jesus' Blood' is also excellent religious music. Neither the melody nor the voice are at all refined, but I believe the man totally as he sings. 'Jesus' blood never failed me yet. This one thing I know, that he loves me so. Jesus' blood never failed me yet.' He conveys the kind of sincerity and conviction that any cantor or gospel singer tries for, but which only the best ones achieve.

'Jesus' Blood' also excels as a documentary recording. The singer is not a professional gospel singer at all, but just an ordinary London tramp. This recording of his meandering song reminds me of some of the best photographs I've seen. It's one of those everyday street images that somehow turns out to be utterly poignant. Incidentally, a filmmaker, Alan Powers, deserves credit for capturing this anonymous tramp's song on tape. But Bryars deserves credit for rescuing it from Powers's outtake file.

On yet another level, 'Jesus' Blood' is some of the best easy listening I've heard in some time. After the bum's tune is heard six or eight times, strings begin to accompany him. Later on, Bryars gradually adds guitar, bass, woodwinds, horns, harp, brass, oboe, organ, and vibes. The arrangement moves through a series of lush orchestrations, worthy of the classiest Muzak arrangers.

Call it minimalism, call it religious music, call it documentation, or call it easy listening. Any way you look at it, Bryars has put together a good piece, and it is impressive that he could make it work on all these levels at once. Incidentally, the piece is also likely to make you cry, which I suppose makes it good kitsch, too, but that's another problem.

The other side is devoted to 'The Sinking of the Titanic.' This is also a first-rate piece, though in only two ways. Most important and most unusual, it is a first-rate documentary. That is something that is rarely done in music, and it is a most interesting direction. In this case, Bryars did a great deal of research about the sinking of the Titanic, reading all the reports, diary notes, and recollections he could get his hands on. He investigated the story about the ship orchestra playing hymns on the deck as the ship went down. He tried to determine what hymns they played and what the composition of the sinking orchestra was. He found names, dates, times, and places, and, with an obsessive thoroughness, went about attempting to recreate the general sequence of events.

The music itself is an Iveslike collage, and that is the second way in which it is good. The strings play very slow uncoordinated versions of the authentic hymns, while choirs, voices, and unidentifiable elements obtrude faintly in the background, like ghostly memories.

Brian Eno, a former member of Roxy Music with a reputation in avant-garde English rock, founded the label and has also produced three other Obscure albums that I know of. One, his own work, is a refinement of the kind of static sound, that he and Robert Fripp used on their largely electronic album, 'Evening Star.' The new 'Discreet Music' is lush synthesizer music, with simple melodic materials that vary mostly at the whim of a digital recall system. The other side, 'Three Variations on the Canon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel,' collages snatches of Pachelbel at different tempos in the various instruments of the string orchestra.

The effect on both sides is slow, gentle, abstract, and realtively unchanging, and the mood reminds me of Morton Feldman. Unlike Feldman, however, Eno presents his work strictly as 'discreet' background music. The album doesn't have the kind of careful detail that allows Feldman's work to hold up under repeated hearings, but it is effective on its own terms.

Two other Obscure albums offer some fascinating shorter pieces. One is devoted to homemade instruments by young British composers, and the other contains unique ensemble pieces by Christopher Hobbs, John Adams, and Bryars.

All in all, these four Obscure records add up to one knockout, one standout, and several bands of worthwhile novelties, and that is an excellent batting average for a new record company. If it keeps going like that, the label is not going to be obscure for very long.

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September 13, 1976
Sound Sculpture Sings

'Sound sculpture' refers to a wide variety of acoustical sound-producing devices. The category ranges from simple wind chimes and tin-can devices to lavishly complex instruments, all of which make music in one fashion or another, and many of which are visually interesting at the same time. Even in New York it is difficult to experience much sound sculpture firsthand, but I am discovering that there is a lot of it around.

There is a practically interesting drawing of 'Whispering Busts,' from a book by Athanasius Kircher, published in 1560, which depicts sound 'sculpture' in a particularly literal sense and which places the whole category into historical perspective. Kircher's drawing lays out a plan for constructing sound-carrying ducts from various plazas so that everyday sounds can be heard emanating from traditional sculptured busts. Kircher was probably never allowed to install such a system, but the idea is charming. It might even work.

A 19th-century book by John Tyndall, 'The science of sound,' describes a number of fascinating sound-producing devices, including one in which a vibrating gas flame produces a loud pitched tone. Tyndall was basically an acoustician, and he would not have dared to present such things as music in Victorian England, but by current definitions his 'singing flame' is certainly a valid musical instrument, one which would seem to have fascinating potential.

Aside from the late Harry Partch, whose unique percussion and stringed instruments are relatively well-known, the two Partisian brothers Franáois and Bernard Baschet are perhaps the most prominent sound sculptors of our time. In the early '60s I heard them present a concert of their 'Structures Sonores' in New York. The instruments consisted largely of spectacular assemblages of steel prongs to be stroked and struck, and shapely aluminium sheets to act as resonators. The sounds were extremely mellow and pleasant, but the music struck me as banal, and much of it would probably have been just as acceptable in a piano arrangement. Apparently the Baschets have moved a long ways since then, however. More recent works include large outdoor constructions which can be played by gallery visitors directing water jets at different parts of the sculpture. On one occasion the Baschets designed a sort of musical fountain for a grain company, in which grain was to fall onto oscillating buckets that would tilt onto vibrating bars when filled.

A number of other sound sculptors are dealt with in the recent book 'Sound Sculpture,' edited by John Grayson. One of them is Reinhold Pieper Marxhausen, a man in his fifties who serves as chairman of the art department at Concordia Teachers' College in Seward Nebraska. Most of the Marxhausen's sculptures are small metallic object studded with spines or prongs in various arrangements. The objects have foreboding appearance, but they no doubt yield extraordinary sounds when held to the ear and plucked, as the sculptor intends. In a less formal outdoor vein, Marxhausen also likes to tune picket fences, to be played by running along with a stick, and he likes to place tin cans under the leaves of a roof, to be stimulated during rainstorms.

Luis Frangella carried his latter principle a bit further in his 'Rain Music' series. This Argentine artist, who has been working at MIT's center of Advanced Visual Studies, allows rain to fall on large assemblages of tuned drums. Wind and rain also stimulate moving elements, which can slap onto the drums like flexible sticks. Frangella's installations create solid roofs, so that the listeners can remain dry underneath.

Harry Bertoia, an older man working near Bally, Pennsylvania, constructs large bunches of metallic spines, which can be stimulated by gallery visitors with their hands. If one can believe recordings of such things, Bertoia's rich conglomerations of metallic rustlings must be a spectacular aural experience.

Stephan Von Huene, of the California Institute of the Arts, has a more mechanical approach, often utilizing punched tape similar to piano rolls, hooked up to pneumatic devices and organ pipes. These instruments play themselves, and might almost be considered music boxes.

David Jacobs, of the fine arts department at Hofstra University, also devises machines that drive air into pipes, and he obtains deep rich sonorities. Some of his instruments, called 'Wahs, wahs,' also employ large rubber tubes constructed from inner tubes, which sprawl around the floor like giant worms.

And then, of course, there are New York composers such as Jim Burton, Skip La Plante, Yoshimasa Wada, and Carole Weber, whose sound sculptures I have written about before, and there are countless others who do similar things with electronic devices, and whose work somehow seems to belong in another category.

Of course, the musical value of sound sculpture cannot be judged without physically experiencing the actual works, and it is likely that some of the works I have described would not be as interesting to hear as they are to hear about. But I have experienced many successes in this genre, and I have little doubt that there is some good sculpture tucked away in corners of Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and other out-of-the-way places. Hopefully, some enterprising museum or concert

producer will someday bring it all together so that we can experience such things first hand.

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October 4, 1976

Intermedia Today: William Hellermann and Richard Kostelanetz

One heard a lot about 'intermedia' during the '60s, when so many artists were exploring areas that somehow fell between traditional mediums like painting, poetry, and music. But by now things have quieted down a lot. Many intermedia artists have returned to traditional mediums, and I don't think anyone today bothers to look for new mediums simply for the fascination of discovering new mediums. Some artists continue to turn out good work in hybrid forms, however, including two whom I encountered recently. One is a composer who exhibits musical scores as wall hangings, while the other is a writer who produces rather musical multitrack recordings of verbal works.

William Hellermann has always been concerned with the visual appearance of his scores, but not until his recent series of 'Eyescores' has he presented them in purely visual terms. The Center for International Arts recently exhibited a dozen or so of these drawings, along with several pieces of sculpture. All of the works incorporate simple images, with staff lines and notes somehow represented, and many involve puns of one sort or another. 'To Prevent Decay' depicts toothpaste flowing from a tube down onto the bristles of a toothbrush, with many little notes inscribed on the bristles of the brush, as well as on the flow of toothpaste. Other drawings depict notes pouring out of a bottle, or floating as ocean waves, or tucked away in little boxes. In one of the sculptures music notation is inscribed on the sides of test tubes.

Unlike some visually oriented music notation, Hellermann's scores are also intended to be performed, so Hellermann and five other musicians offered audible interpretations of three of them at the center on September 18. Their interpretations all had a placid feeling, not only because of the choice of gentle instruments, but also because of the ingenious modal system that the composer employs in these pieces. The scale is basically pentatonic, though it points curiously toward one key in the upper register and another in the lower register.

'For the Third Time' was interpreted as a canon for two flutes and a clarinet. 'At sea' became a long, repetitious, gradually crescending solo for electric piano. The program concluded with 'Behind Bars,' for which these instruments were joined by two guitars and a vibraphone. This score depicts a runner behind crisscrossed strips of music, and a runner was incorporated into the performance as well. About 15 minutes into the piece, Sara Alexander began jogging around the room, and the players began to play their melodies in synchronization with her rhythm. In both ensemble pieces the musicians played from the peripheries of the space, and as often happens in these spread-out situations, they had occasional difficulty keeping together, both in pitch and rhythm. In general, however, the works were played effectively by Rhys Chatham, Phil Corner, Lynn Cushman, Dan Goode, Hellermann, David Koblitz, and Rob Waring.

Richard Kostelanetz is one of those artists who likes to explore every medium he gets his hands on. In fact, he has one work called 'Openings & Closings' that can be experienced either as a stereo tape, a book, a set of wall hangings, a video tape, or a film. The verbal content is the same in all cases but, of course, the effect must vary drastically from medium to medium. I have come across quite a few Kostelanetz works, and as with a lot of current experimental writing, I often have trouble finding my way into the material. But when I can get some inkling of the random, systematic, or intuitive processes used in putting it together, I often become fascinated, and occasionally I find the work valuable in a purely musical way.

That is particularly true of Kostelanetz's 'Foreshortenings and Other Stories,' a stereo tape about 20 minutes long that Kostelanetz presented on September 19 at a Chelsea loft called the Gegenschein Vaudeville Placenter. 'Foreshortenings and Other Stories' is a simple boy-meets-girl story that begins with a meeting in a park and ends with sex in an apartment. The story alternates regularly between left and right channels. On one side a solo Kostelanetz voice explains what the man did, and from the other side a little chorus of overdubbed Kostelanetz voices makes statements about what she did, and the statements continue back and forth until the characters finally get laid. But that's only the beginning. We then return to the park, and the couple meets all over again, but this time various statements along the way are omitted. By about the fifth or sixth repetition, the story has been shortened to only a few statements. But that's only the 'foreshortenings,' and we still haven't gotten to the 'other stories,' which consist of a number of additional variations. Kostelanetz tells us the story backwards, and sideways, and in less logical sequences. He interchanges the male and female roles, and he tells the story with the characters imitating one another's actions.

All this manipulation is more like the variation techniques practiced by composers than like any conventional kind of literary development. The result sounds musical as well, since the rhythm of the left-right alternation is controlled, and the choral voices are well blended. Filtering and reverb effects are frequently used to change the timbre of the voices, and sometimes these effects struck me as arbitrary, but in general 'Foreshadowings and Other Stories' is a sensitive piece of music. Or rather sound poetry. Or rather tape collage. Or is it really still a story? Or... well, 'intermedia' is a useful term.

October 11, 1976
John Cage Goes to Boston: A Bicentennial Premiere

It's been quite a while since I've listened to a piece of music with chills running up and down my spine almost the whole time. But that is what happened when I went to Boston to hear the Boston Symphony Orchestra premiere John Cage's 'Renga with Apartment House 1776.' There are a number of reasons why this was such an exciting event.

Partly it was the sheer density of the music. Cage has often talked about multiplicity, and many of his works involve dense clusters of different ideas, but I don't think he has ever put together quite so many elements quite so clearly as he has in this 30-minute work. 'Renga,' which can also be played as a separate piece, is an already dense score for large orchestra. 'Apartment House 1776' adds four quartets and four instrumental soloists, who play altered versions of traditional American material, and four soloists who sing in diverse American styles. I don't think we ever heard everyone all at once, but there were generally at least five or six independent elements going on at a time. Partly it was the simple fact that the Boston Symphony Orchestra was finally actually playing graphic music, and playing it well. Their parts consisted solely of fragments of Thoreau drawings, but the musicians interpreted their lines and marks with apparent concern, and conductor Seiji Ozawa saw to it that the sounds all blended into a sequence of attractive atonal 'pictures.' Partly it was the symbolism. When a Jewish liturgical singer like Nico Castel, a jazz singer like Jeanne Lee, a deep-voiced hymn singer like Helen Schneyer, and an American Indian like Chief Swift Eagle all begin singing music from their own traditions simultaneously but independently, the result is a vivid image of our melting-pot culture, or rather of what our melting-pot culture ought to be. The different ethnic musics blend easily, without competing with one another and without sacrificing their inividual ideals. And all of this takes place against a background of instrumental music from the Revolutionary War period, and all of that takes place against a complex orchestral background based on Thoreau. If one could somehow translate all those sound elements into visual ones, it would make a magnificent mural.

Partly it was the marvellous moments when the tonalities of the singers, the solo instruments, and the quartets would somehow merge with the orchestra, and everyone would be in the same key. These moments were pure accidents, of course, but there were several of them, one of which lasted for a good 10 seconds. Sheer coincidences. Impossible to plan. Breathtaking.

Partly it was the associations with Ives. I guess I always knew, or at least suspected, that Cage had a lot in common with Ives, but here the two composers even sound a little alike. Dense collages of independent ideas. Massive energies. Very American.

Partly it was the care that Cage had taken in preparing the work. As in other pieces, the composer prepared hundreds of pages of material for the players to choose from, and in this case his preparation involved extensive research into early American hymnals, fife tunes, fiddle tunes, and even early American drum cadences. Much of the prepared material was never played at all in this performance and much of what was played couldn't be heard. But all of that inaudible music is part of the piece too, and it does make a difference. Partly it was the social tensions. Boston is Boston, after all, and it was almost a foregone conclusion that, regardless of what the piece sounded like, a fair number of people would feel duty bound to walk out on the piece, and that the critics on the Boston dailies would submit casually negative reviews without even bothering to think up respectable arguments to defend their points of view. But it was equally inevitable that many open-minded listeners and a few Cage devotees would be there to counter boos with bravos. It seemed to me that the bravos won out, but it was a close contest, and it may be an even closer contest when Boulez and the New York Philarmonic play the work on November 5.

Partly it was Symphony Hall itself. This was my first visit to this acoustical wonder, and everything they say seems to be true. I don't think I've ever heard cymbals and trumpets sound quite so brilliant, and even soft pizzicatos resound easily in this long wooden hall.

Partly I suppose it was my own predisposition to like almost everything Cage produces. As I have come to know his music better, I have found that he never writes a piece without having a strong idea to hang it on, that he never really repeats himself, that he always works things out diligently, and that he rarely makes serious miscalculations. Centainly there were no miscalculations in this piece. In fact, even the audience reaction probably came out just about the way he had planned.

October 25, 1976

Julius Eastman and Daniel Goode: Composers Become Performers

There are probably more composers-performers today than ever before. Many composers have had traditional performing skills, but people like Paganini and Rachmaninoff, whose music really depended on their performance abilities, have been rare. Now one could make a long list of avant-garde composers who create works for their own unique performing styles. Joan La Barbara, Meredith Monk, Charlemagne Palestine, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young are a few obvious examples. The genesis of the performance art category had encouraged this phenomenon, as have other socioeconomic factors. But of course, there are also purely artistic reasons why musicians sometimes prefer to write for themselves instead of for other performers. In some cases composers really seem to find themselves once they begin looking inside their own voices and instruments, and come up with strong personal statements that never quite came through as long as they were creating music for others to play. That seems to be true of both Julius Eastman and Daniel Goode. As far as I know, neither of them produced any particularly striking statements in their early years, but later on they began to concentrate on solo works for themselves, and their art started coming together. I have known Julius Eastman primarily as a versatile singer-actor. I've seen him in a variety of roles at comtemporary music concerts, and he generally performed well, regardless of whether the occasion called for strictly traditional skills or complete zaniness. Of his own music, I can recall hearing only three pieces, none of which made any lasting impression. So I was not prepared for the completely new Julius Eastman transformation who sat down and began playing in a kind of jazz piano style at Environ on October 9. He didn't have quite the energy and dazzle of a Cecil Taylor or a Keith Jarrett, but he came close to that, and there was a lot of finesse and control in the way he could ease into brief moments of repetition and then slip off into something completely different. But this high-energy, free-jazz style turned out to be only his base of operations. Later he began singing along in a crazed baritone: 'Why don't you treat me like a real woman?' and later, 'Open, open wider.' At another point he began telling a long, fast, and mostly incomprehensible story. Sometimes he would come to an abrupt silence and just wait there for a minute or two. Once his hands left the keyboard, and he just thumped out finger patterns on the wood for a while. During one rather long section, he simply reiterated three soft notes in different sequences. Once he broke away from his jazz base simply to play a slow chromatic scale that didn't end until he finally reached the top note of the keyboard a minute or two later. Things went on like this for maybe 80 or 90 completely unpredictable minutes, and what should have been a completely incoherent concert was actually quite satisfying. In a way, the music is about incoherence, and about some zany musical place that only Eastman knows how to find. Of course, his next solo performance will probably go off in seven other directions, but I have the feeling that this basic approach to solo improvising will be keeping him busy for some time.

Daniel Goode has found his strongest and most personal statements right inside his clarinet. Some time ago he mastered the art of circular breathing, which enables him to hold tones endlessly, and a few years ago he began using this technique with spectacular effect in a piece called 'Circular Thoughts.' Here he keeps a lightning-fast modal figure going on and on and on while his lungs and tongue shift the accents from one place to another. Out of extremely limited materials and simple, logical rhythmic progressions, there emerges a tremendous variety of phrasings and syncopations.

But Goode has other interests, too - like listening to birds. For several summers now he has been particularly interested in some thrushes he found in Nova Scotia, whose complex calls he managed to capture on his tape recorder. The calls are too shrill and too fast to hear clearly, but he found that by playing them back at half speed, he could perceive the many little slides and grace notes in some detail. He also found that this brought the bird calls into a very high clarinet range, so he practiced for a couple of years, and now he does them almost as well as the birds do. And these are not free translations, as in Messiaen's bird call music, but literal imitations of some of the fanciest calls around. Of course, I guess Goode is still just a half-speed cheater as far as the birds are concerned, but from a human point of view, his virtuosity with these many little bird roulades is extremely impressive.

I have heard Goode twice this fall. In a solo concert at the Experimental Intermedia loft he played a recently expanded version of 'Circular Thoughts,' along with some clarinet versions of fiddle tunes he has collected from Nova Scotia folk musicians. In a joint concert with Philip Corner at Carnegie Recital Hall on October 5, which opened a series devoted to composers from the Rutgers University system, he was assisted by four other flutists and clarinetists. Sometimes working against a background of Nova Scotia fiddle tunes, they all played the difficult figures of Goode's Nova Scotian thrushes quite creditably. Only Goode's own clarinet seemed to catch the most subtle innuendos, however. Come to think of it, I doubt that other clarinetists will ever play 'Circular Thoughts' as well as Goode does either. Like Eastman's current work, it's really a solo art.

November 22, 1976
Frederic Rzewski: The People United

I have come to be leery of political art. Often more concern goes into the politics than into the art, and even when the craftmanship is good, I often find myself still wondering whether a well-made advertisement for a political point of view is ultimately any more valuable than a well-made advertisement for an automobile. But as I listened to Ursula Oppens play Frederic Rzewski's latest piano solo at the Boesendorfer Festival on November 4, I quickly forgot all my qualms and became completely caught up in an extraordinary piece of music. This set of 36 variations is a huge and complex work that sprawls all over the keyboard in just about every conceivable way, accumulates remarkable energy, changes constantly, and keeps going like that for over half an hour. There are very few pianists who would dare to even attempt such a demanding work, but Oppens played it brilliantly. She seemed completely secure in all of the widely contrasting sections, and never lost the thematic thread that ties the piece together. The piece really works, and on several different levels at once.

The most obvious level is political. The work is called 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated,' which is simply a translation of the Spanish title of the pop-style political song which provides its theme. This catchy little minor mode tune was composed in Chile by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayun, and became a symbol of the Allende regime. It's basically a rousing, triumphal sort of melody, but it doesn't sound nearly as triumphal now as it must have sounded before the coup. I understand that it is well known in various South American and European countries.

But let's move on to a more musical level. Rzewksi was not afraid to let his virtuoso piano piece sound like popular music now and then. He starts out with a fairly straightforward statement of the tune, and ends with a big pompous version of it, but in between the idiom varies drastically. Often the piece sounds a little like Beethoven. Sometimes it sounds more like Liszt, Scriabin, or Prokofiev. Once in a while it wanders into post-Webern textures and current avant-garde techniques.

Aha, you say, just another case of all the eclectic things we've been hearing from Peter Maxwell Davies, George Rochberg, William Bolcom, and so on. Not really. Rzewski never seems to be quoting or copying, and it is absolutely clear that he is not satirizing. Everything comes out of that little tune, and out of the composer's own variation techniques. The stylistic connotations of various sections seem almost coincidental. He simply allows the texture to drift back and forth in musical history without showing any particular favoritism between tonal and atonal, classical and popular, romantic and pointillistic. These things just all come together quite naturally in a single unified statement. This strikes me as a remarkable achievement. I can't think of any other work that is rooted in the whole tradition of Western music the way this piece is.

But there is also another level on which Rzewski's Harvard-Princeton intellectual needs are satisfied. After the performance I spent some time studying the score and was impressed by the careful organization of details. The last half of a variation generally mirrors the first half in some way. Lines that occur in one hand frequently return upside down in the other hand a couple of bars later. The theme is hard to find in many variations, but I could always find at least a few notes of it if I looked long enough. The overall plan divides the 36 variations into six groups of six variations each. The last variation of each group becomes a quick recapitulation of the other five. There is also a modulation scheme which takes the d-minor theme and transposes it up a fifth with each variation, so that the piece rotates around the 12 minor keys. Of course, such things are not apparent on first hearing, and probably irrelevant as far as most listeners are concerned. Still, it seems important to recognize the integrety and thoroughness with which the piece is worked out. This may be political art, but it is certainly not talking down to the masses.

Aside from simply being a good piece, it seems to me that 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated' is also a landmark in Rzewski's own development. Now 38, he has been concentrating on politically oriented pieces for at least five years, and has produced some excellent ones. Those I know, however, speak in specific avant-garde vocabularies, and their appeal is pretty much limited to those who like that kind of music. The recent work should speak to everyone.

December 6, 1976
Creating the Context: Max Neuhaus

I sometimes think that no piece of music in and of itself means very much. The real meaning has to do with where you put it. Attach a high price tag and display it in a posh concert hall and it means one thing. Feed it into a car radio and it means quite another thing. Home stereos, discotheques, elevators, and city sidewalks all have their own connotations, and if you tell me that most of these contexts have arisen as a means of accomodating various types of music, I can reply, with equal validity, that most music is written as a means of accomodating specific outlets.

Most composers and performers are aware of all this, I think, but they are generally content to work within the confines of established contexts. Max Neuhaus is not, and for about 10 years now, he has been creating not only new pieces of music, but new situations to put them in as well. Some readers will probably recall Neuhaus's 'Waterwhistle,' an underwater piece which he has presented in a number of swimming pools around the country. Thousands of pedestrians have encountered 'Walkthrough,' a weather-controlled electronic installation which bleeped continously for about a year and a half in the arcade of the MTA station at J Street/Borough Hall in Brooklyn. Many have heard 'Public Supply,' a radio piece in which listeners telephone in their own music, which Neuhaus then distorts, and mixes, and sends out over the air. Thinking back about my own experiences with Neuhaus works, I generally recall the situations more vividly than the sounds, but the pieces seem meaningful and significant in any case.

Neuhaus seems to be working continuously on new circuitry for new projects, though few of them have actually been presented in New York the past couple of seasons. That is primarily because his projects generally require lots of expensive equipment and a great deal of cooperation from guardians of public facilities. This season, however, he will be more in evidence. He has a large project for National Public Radio scheduled for January 2. This is a 'Radio Net,' for which people from five major cities will be able to telephone in whistling sounds, which will then be manipulated at a central point via Neuhaus circuitry, mixed together, and fed out over the network as a two-hour audience-participation composition. He also has his eye on a ventilation shaft on one of the islands in Times Square, where he hopes to obtain permission to install continuous electronic sounds to be heard by passers-by. Meanwhile, on November 19-21, he installed a new work called 'Round' on lower Broadway.

'Round,' sponsored by Creative Time, Inc., was installed in a large, oval area in the ornate rotunda of the U.S. Custom House. An oval ring of 16 face-up loudspeakers was placed on the carpeted floor, with a smaller ring of 16 more loudspeakers inside it. When I arrived on Sunday afternoon, listeners were sitting and lying casually around the area, and I decided to sit down between a couple of loudspeakers in the outer ring. It was immediately apparent that sustained electronic sounds were moving around the space, and I soon realized that whatever faded in on the loudspeaker at my right would pass on to the loudspeaker on my left a beat later, and from there to the other 14 speakers of the outer circle. Every eight beats a new sonority would pass by me, and the music just kept rotating.

The sound color itself was nothing remarkable as present-day electronics go, and the basic pitches were all overtones of one fundamental low pitch. Often a high, insistent, seventh overtone would dominate, and sometimes I would be more aware of higher overtones. Sometimes the deep fundamental would swell, but it didn't seem to move around the way the higher tones did, and would sometimes seem to rise around the whole room. The balance fluctuated continuously, and I found it impossible to predict what would happen next. All I could be sure of was that once every eight beats some version of the sound would pass by my particular point in the space, and sometimes inklings of signals would go by during the other seven beats as well. I moved in toward the inner circle of loudspeakers and found that the same thing was going on there. For perhaps 20 minutes I found the situation quite engrossing, and looking up at the ornate oval ceiling above me, I was pleased by the sensitivity with which Neuhaus had related his sound installation to the architectural shape of the space.

After listening to 'Round' for a while, I decided to try to track down Neuhaus and find out more about what makes the piece tick. He invited me into a keep-out area where the equipment was and cordially answered my questions. Unlike many Neuhaus pieces, I learned, this one does not depend on any sort of weather information, audience activities, or other extraneous input, but finds variations all by itself through the complex interaction of four basic signals. The strange behavior of the low fundamental tone occurs because two signals are out of phase with one another. As I understand it, the low tone becomes louder when the listener happens to be in one of those points of time and space where the two signals are in phase with one another, and fades out completely at time-space points where they are canceling one another out.

I was glad to learn these facts, and rearmed with this information, I was ready to go back into the rotunda and appreciate the music all over again from a more educated perspective. Neuhaus, however, did not feel that the technological facts should affect the listener. That's why he had tucked the equipment away in an inaccessible corner and had provided no program notes. This led to an interesting discussion. Neuhaus claimed that analysis can ruin music, and that people should

respond to ‘Round’ purely on an intuitive, musical level. I insisted that questions about how things were made represented simple, desirable, intellectual curiosity, and that people could appreciate the intricacy of what was going on and enjoy the music much more if they had some idea of what caused it. Of course we didn’t resolve this age-old controversy, but we did reach a compromise as far as the immediate problem was concerned. I told him that if I wrote about ‘Round’ I’d feel obliged to include some information about how it worked, but that I’d also put in something about how unimportant he felt such things were. Neuhaus thought that would be fair enough, and I’m still not sure who was conning whom.

But the essential thing is still the basic situations Neuhaus creates. In this case he makes use of a largely unused public space, finds a sensitive blend between new sounds and old architecture, and brings people together in a unique, informal situation. When he puts electronic sound installations on street corners, he politely confronts pedestrians with the opportunity to be more aware of the sounds around them. When he puts music in swimming pools, he gives us a whole new perspective on sound perception and the experience of being underwater. And when he presents ‘Radio Net’ on January 2, he will be setting up a nationwide audience participation piece, which strikes me as a most provocative way to start off a new year.

December 13, 1976

Is There a Greatness Shortage?

True greatness is becoming a rare phenomenon. No president since Abraham Lincoln seems to be universally regarded as great. Books about the great composers generally end with Brahms and Wagner. And since Einstein's death, no one seems to be widely regarded as a truly great scientist or mathematician. Curiously, however, greatness still abounds among performers of classical music. I would estimate that there are about 12 sopranos, 11 tenors, 10 conductors, and eight violinists who are known to be great, by common consent, and that is without counting any of the deceased. Greatness does not seem to be quite so common in lower registers, though there must be at least four or five each of violists, cellists, mezzos, and baritones who are routinely counted among the greats. There are even a few great bassos and string-bass players. It is apparently more difficult for organists and wind players to attain greatness, though a few of them are also considered great. And I almost forgot all the great pianists, of whom there must be at least 25. Altogether the list is extraordinary long. In fact, it is so long that the people at Lincoln Center have been able to provide us with a continuing stream of these people on their Great Performers series.

Even in the other arts, all of which have been prone to producing great men and women, it is difficult to find living artists who are universally acknowledged to be great. The last great actors all seem to be more or less in the generation of the Lunts and the Barrymores. Some would want to include Beckett among the great playwrights, though many would not extend this list beyond Chekhov and maybe O'Neill or Brecht. I occasionally hear people refer to Martha Graham, Maya Plisetskaya, and Margot Fonteyn as great dancers, though it would be difficult to find additional living dancers whom everyone would be willing to place on this exalted level. In the pop world, countless artists have produced 'greatest hits,' but only Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington are thought of as great, and they are both dead. There seem to be quite a few conflicting opinions about today's great painters and great filmmakers, though I think that most people would agree that these lists, too, are quite short. And among photographers and architects, I cannot think of a single living practitioner who is consistently and indisputably considered great.

For some time, it has struck me as quite remarkable that there should be such an abundance of greatness among performers of classical music and such a rarity of it in every other field, and last week I set about trying to figure out how this extraordinary situation might be explained. I was unable to reach any definitive conclusions, but I did come up with some hypothesis which hopefully will help to illuminate this interesting question.

It is possible, for example, that it is simply easier to perform classical music than to do other things. If this is so, it is only natural that a fair number of people would attain pinnacles of achievement in this area, despite the increasing rarity of greatness in other professions. But this explanation is probably an oversimplification.

Another possible explanation arises if we consider a study made quite recently by an obscure geneticist who claims that greatness is an inherited trait. According to this researcher, greatness genes tend to be paired with other genes that cause individuals to have a tremendous desire to sing and play musical instruments. Unfortunately, the unpublished findings of this study are not sufficiently conclusive to provide any certainty in this matter. However, if this geneticist succeeds in present attempts to devise standardized tests for accurately measuring greatness, he may eventually be able to prove this hypothesis.

Another theory is that greatness is not inherited at all, but learned. Considering how many great violinists, great pianists, and great singers end up teaching in conservatories, it is conceivable that at least a few students every year would learn how to become great themsleves, merely through contact with their teachers.

Another hypothesis has to do with the fact that singers and instrumentalists spend most of their time dealing with 19th-century music. Since greatness is essentially a 19th-century, Nietzschean, Hegelian concept, it seems plausible that it would be more common among those who spend their lives steeped in the great music written by the great composers of this great period. When one looks at the problem in this way, it seems only natural that greatness should have become less common among those of us who have already moved on into the 20th century. Carrying this hypothesis a step further, we might speculate that, if the current trend continues, there will be no more great men and women at all alive by the mid-21st century - not even in the classical-music field. And perhaps such a development would seem more like a relief than a tragedy to our grandchildren.

One other possibility is that true greatness is as rare among performers of classical music as in other fields, and that the greatness observed in so many sopranos and violinists and such is more a tribute to agressive publicists and eager critics than to their actual abilities. Needless to say, this is not a popular theory, particularly among lovers of classical music, and it is perhaps impolite to even bring it up. But I felt I should include this possibility, simply in the interest of completeness.

A more radical and more realistic hypothesis is that true greatness in human beings does not even exist, and never has. Greatness did seem to make sense a

hundred years ago. There was a time in there when it really was possible to believe that certain individuals had some miraculous traits that made them superior to everyone else, and that it was these supermen who gradually advanced civilization. But now it is once again quite reasonable to maintain that even the most gifted persons, in the most glorious periods, are still mortal and have limitations and foibles just like everyone else, and that it is absurd to draw that sharp, mystical line between the great and the ungreat. There is a problem here too, however. If we try to do away with greatness altogether, then we have to say that even Shakespeare and Beethoven were not truly great. Most people are still too nostalgic about greatness to want to go that far, and promoters of classical music would never dream of accepting such a heretical idea.

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December 27, 1976

How to Find Michael Galasso and Guy Klucevsek

Exploring obscure corners of musical activity has been a consuming pastime of mine for a long time, not only when I have been working as a critic, but at other times as well. The chances of coming across a brand new Varese, or witnessing the birth of an important new musical idiom, may not be very good on any particular night, but there are other rewards. Sitting in an audience of only 30 or 40 brings one very close to the music, emotionally as well as physically. When a performance turns out to be exciting, it can be especially exciting to be among the few people witnessing it first hand. If it does not, there is still a good chance that the event will be dull in some unique way, and that itself can be interesting. And perhaps most important, listeners at such events have a chance to make up their own minds, without having to filter out a lot of preconceptions picked up from ads, reviews, and word of mouth.

I must admit that some of my recent visits to experimental events in SoHo have been disappointing. In one case, the amplification was louder than my ears can take, and I was obliged to leave after 10 or 15 minutes. Another concert turned out to be an attempt at one-man extravaganza. The artist played several instruments creditably, and made intelligent use of a synthesizer and tape-delay system, but since he was dividing his efforts between this and his masks, and his puppets, and his acting, his short piece barely sustained at all, and it never did actually draw me in. In another case, a composer had gathered a few friends together for an evening of informal little theatre pieces. The extremely self-conscious performers clowned around a lot, and their friends in the audience seemed to find it all hilarious, but I became increasingly annoyed. Anyone who did not know the people involved would have had much difficulty understanding the jokes, making the necessary excuses, or finding any musical or theatrical significance in the proceedings. The general atmosphere struck me as SoHo insularity at its worst.

Two other events, however, turned out to be well thought out and quite worthwhile. One was Michael Galasso's program at 112 Greene Street, which I heard on December 2. Galasso is already known for the music he has provided for three Robert Wilson works, but he has seldom presented his pieces outside of theatrical contexts. He works in a perpetual-motion idiom with steady streams of fast notes, a bit reminiscent of works by Steve Reich and Philip Glass. But there is more concern with attractive scales and harmonies, and there is often an almost Middle Eastern soulfulness.

Galasso played violin throughout the evening, and he is a good violinist, though perhaps not quite good enough to do full justice to his difficult violin writing. His fast non-stop bowing patterns and his difficult cascading lines fit nicely on the instrument, but they demand the same kind of total smoothness and control that we have come to expect in first-rate Paganini performances.

One piece, 'Prologue to Echo Ranch,' involved also a cello and two flutes. The instruments came together in a most attractive mixture of sustained tones and running lines. I suspect that Galasso's talent for ensemble writing is at least as great as his talent for creating unaccompanied violin pieces, and both seem quite promising.

Guy Klucevsek's December 5 concert at the Kitchen was billed as 'Music for 548 Reeds,' which is just a roundabout way of saying 'music for solo accordion.' Accordion? Well, why not. Pauline Oliveros produced a lot of fine new music on the accordion, and William Schimmel has found a number of fascinating new techniques with it. The instrument is versatile enough to accomodate any number of experimental composer-performers.

Klucevsek's approach goes in the direction of acoustical investigation. 'Phantasmagoria' involves playing clusters with both the right and left hands, and then making gradual transitions from one side to the other. For normal purposes the reeds on one side sound the same as those on the other, but this minimal work allows us to compare minute differences between them. 'Coruscation' employs a fast repeated figure. The two hands gradually go out of synchronization with one another and shift through intricate combinations of the basic pattern. 'Tremolo' involves exchanging trills back and forth between hands. 'Differences' consists of loud sustained tones and clusters, but also generates different tones. Difference tones are a well-known acoustic phenomenon, but are difficult to produce, let alone to control. It was impressive to watch Klucevsek conjure up these soft, low tones, which seemed to be oozing in through the walls. I did not sense a strong originality or an artistic maturity in Klucevsek's work. Throughout the concert, however, I sensed integrity, curiosity, seriousness, real listening, and real grappling, all of which are healthy and relatively uncommon qualities.

Two stimulating concerts and three disappointments do not add up to a terribly impressive percentage, I suppose. In my experience, though, the chances of real musical excitement are not significantly better at Carnegie Hall, and quite apart from my function as a critic, it seems to me that attending such events is a valuable way to support the arts. Supporting the arts is usually considered a matter of big cash outlays. But those who are really concerned with the future of rock, or jazz, or experimental music, or whatever, can make equally meaningful contributions by simply taking out a couple of hours now and then to poke around in some of the more obscure lofts, bars, and storefronts and checking out

unfamiliar names and unpredictable events. It is unhealthy when young musicians end up playing time after time for a few friends. Independent listeners decide for themselves when to clap, when to complain about the amplification level, and whether to go back to the next event. This kind of input can be especially valuable, and all too often it is missing.

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January 24, 1977
David Tudor's Homemade Pulsers

In case you've never read my reviews of electronic music before, I strongly believe that the best work is almost always done by people who design their own circuitry for their own purposes. Another example of first-rate, homemade electronic music is 'Pulsers' by the electronics wizard and former piano virtuoso David Tudor. Unfortunately, the only way I can see of doing critical justice to the piece is by describing it accurately, and that isn't going to be easy, but let me try.

'Pulsers is mostly about rhythm. Tudor has assembled a variety of homemade electronic components that create their own rhythmic patterns. One goes chugga chug chugga chug, another goes rrrrrrrsplat rrrrrrrsplat, another goes ticka tacka tocka tucka ticka tacka tocka tucka, another goes chunka plunk chunka chunka plunk chunka plunk chunka chunka plunk, and so on. For his January 7 performance, he had six discreet channels working, so at times quite a few patterns were churning away at once. With the touch of a dial any one of them might speed up, slow down, shift its accent, fade in, or fade out. Some of the patterns seemed to be going through rather complicated changes without the aid of manual adjustments. For almost an hour the patterns shifted continually, and the changes happened so quickly that it was often not possible to keep track of everything. The piece could be considered minimal in that its basic materials are relatively restricted, but it is certainly not the kind of repetitious slow motion that one usually associates with the term 'minimalism.' 'Pulsers' is also about sound. It seems to me that most electronic music attempts in some way to be attractive, but Tudor hasn't worried about that. During much of 'Pulsers' the loudspeakers seem to be trying to clear their throats. They sputter and snap, and just do what the circuitry tells them to do. When Tudor built his system he apparently didn't waste much time worrying about tuning, filtering, decorating, adjusting attacks, and such things. He just allowed the circuits to do their raucous things without that sort of encumbrance. At the same time, many of the sounds are unique, simply because the rhythm-producing circuitry itself is so sophisticated, and because of the very lack of coloristic futzing and decorating. I like the integrity of this approach, which reminds me a bit of some of the equally sophisticated homemade electronic music of Gordon Mumma.

'Pulsers' also has a theatrical side. I always enjoy watching live electronic music being made, even when the equipment is unfamiliar, and even when I can't see the specific switching and dialing movements of the operators. The machinery itself has a strong presence, and since the chances for error or malfunction are at least as great as in concerts of instrumental music, there is always a performance tension. Tudor was especially interesting to watch. His tableful of equipment must have included at least 15 or 20 separate little components, all of which seemed to require more or less constant attention. A twist here, a twist there, a pause to check some connection, an adjustment somewhere else, a delicate fade-in movement, another adjustment, and so on. At least one hand was always in the move, and when he made an adjustment, one could immediately hear what he had done. He remained extremely cool, slouching and smoking most of the time, but a virtuosity came through all the same.

Somewhere around the middle of the performance an additional element appeared. This was a tape recording of Takehisa Kosugi playing his electronic violin. I'm not sure how Kosugi's electronic violin works, but in this context it sounded a little like a theremin, a little like whale calls, and something like a wolf turned loose in a gymnasium. Its tone slid all over the electronic rhythms, and its more expressive, more soloistic personality added a unique perspective to the basic 'Pulsers' music. I learned later that Tudor had hoped that Kosugi would be able to play his electronic violin live with the performance, which seemed like an excellent idea to me. In fact, that is probably about the only way in which Tudor might improve on what he already has.

Coincidentally, I happened to rehear one of Tudor's earlier electronic successes, 'Rainforest,' a few days later in the televised performance of the Merce Cunningham company. This work, created in the late '60s for the Cunningham dance of the same title, involves no conventional loudspeakers. Instead, electronic signals are fed into barrels, pieces of metal, water sprinklers, and other objects, each of which responds with its own distinct resonance. Like 'Pulsers,' is it an ingenious system that really works. Unlike 'Pulsers,' the emphasis is more on sound colors than on rhythms. I was pleased to discover that the color comes through even on a small tv set.

Several younger composers who work with Tudor shared his three-night stand at the Kitchen: Linda Fisher, John Driscoll, Phil Edelstein, and Bill Viola. Of the works I heard, I particularly liked Driscoll's 'Listening Out Loud,' which involves two musical-saw players, and a nifty bit of circuitry that responds sympathetically to the wails of the saws. The performance was shorter and the situation was simpler than in the Tudor piece, but the music was engrossing all the same. Again the sounds were unique, the performance element was strong, and the electronic set-up had that nice homemade feeling.

February 7, 1977
Yoko Ono's Snow

As usual, I've been going to a lot of concerts. On my desk at the moment are several different programs from events which I've attended recently, and which I suppose I really ought to report on. But the snow that has been falling so abundantly has made me aware of some nonhuman music that seems more important. Of course, it's a good thing we have human music too, but once in a while it seems worthwhile to take out a week to consider ideal music, like snowflake music - music that involves no human frailty, no vanity, no money, no careers, and no messages. Just pure natural music.

Snow is a special thing for me, as it must be for most people. That soft coldness, that delicacy, that short life, and all those perfect crystalline structures are so... well, it's foolhardy to try to describe such things. I also have vivid personal recollections of Conrad Aiken's short story 'Silent Snow, Secret Snow,' and I frequently recall a conceptual score in Yoko Ono's Grapefruit, which has something to do with listening to the snow. Of course, listening to snow is absurd. Everyone knows that it is silent, as in Aiken's title. Even when it lands right on your face you don't hear it. Yet the idea of listening to it is attractive all the same, and this image sticks in my mind as one of my favorites from the scores of conceptual music that avant-gardists did in the '60s. Only maybe this one isn't purely conceptual.

One snowy afternoon recently I was leaving a rehearsal with a friend who happened to be carrying a lovely umbrella. I commented on it, and he told me it was Chinese, and that he had particularly appreciated the way he could hear the snow under its tighty stretched fabric. I was dubious, and as we walked down Broadway, I couldn't hear a thing. But then we turned onto a side street, and as the traffic sounds faded, the snow became audible. It was an incredibly delicate sound. Imagine the softest, lightest rain you have ever heard, and then imagine that the sound is not taking place on an umbrella right over your head, but about 20 feet away. Something like that. In any case, it sounded great, and we just listened to the snow for a block or two.

Later, as I began thinking about the sound of snow, and considering writing about it, I found myself listening to my feet as I walked along snow-packed sidewalks. That sound is familiar to all of us who live in snowy climates, and writers in English even seem to have agreed on a word for it. I haven't taken any surveys, but I'm fairly sure that 'crunch' is by far the most common word to describe the sound of footsteps in the snow. But as I listened, really listened, I began to hear something else. It's something much more gentle than that. 'Crunch,' after all, is something you do when you bite down on a piece of celery, and the word sounds very much like 'crush.' Our feet don't do anything that violent to the snow, they just pack it down a bit. It isn't exactly a crunch, it's a... Well, I guess there isn't any word for it, which explains why writers have made do with the wrong one, and which also shows how linguistic approximations can distort our perceptions. For years I have assumed that my feet really did crunch when I walked in the snow. I trusted language conventions instead of really listening.

Now that I really had listened to the snow, and heard it, I went back to Yoko Ono just to recall exactly what her piece had said. I took down my copy of Grapefruit, opened it up, and sifted through until I came to her 'Snow Piece,' which is actually 'Tape Piece III.' My memory, it seems, had distorted the piece quite a bit. The actual text read as follows:

Take a tape of the sound of snow

falling.

This should be done in the evening.

Do not listen to the tape.

Cut it and use it as strings to tie

gifts with.

Make a gift wrapper, if you wish, using

the same process with a phonosheet.

By that time the snow had stopped falling. Too late to make a tape recording. Maybe next time.

February 28, 1977
Laurie Anderson at the Holly Solomon Gallery

Anyone who wandered into the Holly Solomon Gallery last month was confronted by, of all things, a jukebox. It was a big stereo model, all lit up in the usual way. If you pushed a few buttons, it would play any one of 24 singles by Laurie Anderson, and the day I was there you didn't even need to feed it quarters. On the walls of the gallery were a number of wall hangings, also by Anderson. Most of them were first-person anecdotes, conveyed by a carefully lettered text and a photograph. Some of the wall hangings matched up with jukebox tunes, and some were independent. I had the feeling that the artist would probably have liked having a tune for every wall hanging, and a wall hanging for every tune, but that some of her ideas just didn't quite lend themselves to both mediums.

Anderson is perhaps best known as a performance artist. I've never seen her perform, but have read a little about her work in this vein. There is a piece called 'Duets on Ice,' for which she places a small loudspeaker inside her violin so that her instrument can play prerecorded violin music in duet with live violin music. I've also heard about a 'Duet for Violin and Door Jamb,' which she apparently performs standing in a small doorway, so that the bow occasionally knocks against the doorway as well as moving across the strings.

The singles on Anderson's jukebox were in an artsy sort of semi-popular vein. Like most jukebox numbers, they were largely vocals, about three or four minutes long, and they generally conveyed a story or poem. But most of the other conventions of pop music were broken, if not completely ignored. Number 114, for example, was called 'New York Social Life.' Speaking voices expressed insincere concern for one another, made casual unspecified lunch dates, and generally carried on in a cool, frivolous way, against a background of unpleasant, raspy string sounds produced on a tamboura. In 'Unlike Van Gogh,' number 143, Anderson related a personal story about working as an art critic. The music in the background includes a chant on the words of the title, a high plucking rhythm, and a bass line. Number 121 admitted a number of extraneous sounds, such as a boat horn and a parrot. Number 100 featured a talking jew's harp that conveyed a text almost comprehensibly. Number 103, 'Like a CB,' lamented the intrusion of CB signals on home stereo equipment, and itself had a brief CB-type intrusion.

Most of the songs had a personal, almost primitive touch in one way or another, but they were produced quite professionally. The stereo mix was often knowing, and Anderson sometimes overdubbed several vocal lines skillfully. Her violin playing came in several unusual forms, all of which she handled well, and she has real control over her singing when she wants to, as in number 102, 'Talk to Me (Lucille).' She also made good use of Scott Johnson's guitar and Peter Gordon's sax on some numbers.

There must have been an hour and a half of music in all, and since other gallery visitors kept selecting things I'd already heard, I could see that it could take all day to get through the complete repertoire. So I left before hearing everything, but not before gaining some clear impressions. Anderson is a good musician, and a good record producer, and though she seems to be steering a clear, strong path into a unique, semi-popular, semi-avant-garde area, she is also running into a dilemma. It has to do with one basic question: Is the gallery situation necessary to the music?

I began asking myself that question before I had even left the exhibit, and even after thinking about it for a couple of weeks, I'm not sure of the answer. I can't help feeling, though, that the exhibit involved some contradictory motives, and I can't help wondering just a little about the integrity of the project. If the art-gallery and jukebox situation is really necessary in order for the music to make its statement, then the music should not even be discussed except as a part of a multi-media exhibit, and it should certainly not be issued on an ordinary LP, as it apparently will be before long. On the other hand, if the music has its own integrity, then why bother to put it in a gallery situation? Why not just present it as music?

One can't generalize about such things because so many works do function in more than one medium. Ballet scores become pure orchestral pieces, operas become record albums, books become movies, sculptures become theatre sets, and there is no reason why a gallery exhibit shouldn't occasionally become a recording. Usually, however, works have to undergo a great deal of translating, revising, and adapting before they really come alive in a second medium. In Anderson's case I sensed a bit of opportunism, an attempt to have it both ways, and I sense a bit of cynicism in my response. I just can't stop suspecting that maybe the exhibit was a covert publicity stunt, an attempt to con us into noticing some music that we probably wouldn't have paid much attention to in a more conventional presentation. And I can't help feeling uncomfortable about having noticed.

March 7, 1977

Avant-Gardists Reach Toward the People: Alvin Curran, Ingram Marshall, David Mahler, and Warren Burt

I don't know the reason. Maybe soon we will no longer need the idealistic avant-gardism defined by rugged individuals like Ives, Partch, and Varese. Maybe that kind of extremism just doesn't interest composers as much as it used to. Maybe audiences and grant money are influencing trends. Maybe it's all a matter of economics. Maybe it's just the '70s. In any case, those loft and gallery concerts in Lower Manhattan are often not the somber, elitist, probing events that one normally expects in avant-garde sectors. One still hears tough, individualistic experimenting, to be sure, but one also hears quite a few events that are mellow, accessible, and even entertaining. Sometimes pazz and jop elements enter in. Sometimes there is an emphasis on lush sounds, old-fashioned lyricism, and even nostalgia. Some events are so thoroughly unobjectionable that I find it difficult to understand why the music hasn't drifted into film scores, experimental rock, and other commercial mediums. I've noticed a great increase in concerts of this sort around SoHo during the past few years, and this season there have been more than ever. Let me describe four extremely accessible concerts that I heard, all within the course of about a month.

Alvin Curran's concert at the Kitchen was a solo performance. He began by playing a toy piano, then switched to a real piano as the prerecorded voice of a small boy faded in. The boy was counting in Italian. Gradually Curran began to feed in some twittering from his portable synthesizer. Then we heard real birds chirping on the tape, and Curran took out his ocarina and played some virtuoso licks along with them. There was no clear narrative connection from one thing to the next, and the sequence of events didn't seem to have much to do with the title, 'Light Flowers, Dark Flowers,' but some tenuous poetic thread connected everything satisfactorily. As we continued through the 90-minute work, presented without interruption, we heard the boy's voice telling a fantasy story about landing on the moon, with synthesizer accompaniment; we heard Curran do some lovely falsetto singing; and we heard a final return to toy-piano music, similar to that which began the piece.

Curran, now 38, evolved his style over quite a long period and from quite a few sources. Since 1973 he has been concentrating on long solo pieces, such as this one, that bring together his jazz background, his Brown-Yale background, his current life in Italy, his years with the group Musica Elettronica Viva, his work in writing scores for Italian films, his taste for the unpolished sounds of ocarinas, toy pianos, and such, and his love for birds, dogs, ocean waves, and other natural sound sources. He sings well in several different vocal styles, has recently developed an excellent piano technique, and sometimes plays brass instruments well, too, as on his recent album 'Canti e Vedute del Giardino Magnetico' (Ananda records, Via dell'Orso, 28, 00186 Rome). It is lovely music, and I think almost anyone could enjoy it.

Ingram Marshall, a composer-performer from California, presented a somewhat similar continuous solo work in a loft on North Moore Street. This hour-plus work, 'Fragility Cycles,' was largely prerecorded, though Marshall also fed live synthesizer sounds into the mix, and he occasionally played a gambuh, an end-blown Balinese flute. This piece was a veritable panorama of lush stereophonic sound, with more or less continuous reverb, and it came across with a gloss reminiscent of many commercial film scores. The music moved from resonating vocal 'cries in the mountains,' to flute solos, to an electronically distorted Sibelius symphony, to processed speech sounds. Swedish as well as English texts were transformed in the adroit multitrack mixtures, and everything blended smoothly into a big, velvety piece. It was a superpleasant concert, and while a familiarity with Sibelius would have been useful, one didn't really need to know anything about music or avant-garde developments to appreciate what Marshall was doing.

David Mahler's concert at the Kitchen was also easy to follow. One tape piece was longish and static, but not to an extreme degree, and the rest of the program was quite straightforward. Mahler sang several simple, personal, almost pop-style songs, and he invited the audience to try out little sound-producing gadgets laid out at one side of the room. In one piece, which I liked a lot, he manually pulled a piece of tape back and forth across tape heads. The sound on the tape was one spoken word, 'Aviva,' which, of course, sounded almost the same when he pulled it the other way. The program was a short, modest, homey sort of affair, quite direct, and quite accessible.

Another example was a program presented by Warren Burt on the Monday-night series at St. Marks in-the-Bowery. Burt's background is strictly classical avant-garde. A few years ago I heard some of his electronic pieces, which I remember as somber and intricate. But now he has other interests. The first half of his program was a reading. The text was an actual Communist diatribe he had found somewhere, but he had changed the political terms into musical terms and had turned it all into a satire on Socialist Realism. The second half of the evening was a set of original pop songs with guitar accompaniment. The tunes were pleasant and the lyrics were often witty, though it must be admitted that Burt's performance level was quite a ways below night club standards.

As I said, I don't know why avant-garde composers such as these have been seeking wider audiences and moving toward more accessible styles. Nor am I sure I like the idea. On one hand, I keep thinking about Off-Off-Broadway, about

how it began around 10 years ago as a vital experimental genre with brilliant discoveries every season, and then gradually became a sort of farm-club system for commercial theatre, and I keep hoping that the same thing won't happen in music. On the other hand, I'm a little tired of hearing long, drawn-out experimental works that explore only one small experimental question, and I'm glad to see composers reaching out to general listeners - especially with someone like Curran, who does so in such a sensitive, personal way.

March 28, 1977

Takehisa Kosugi Happens Again

For a time it seemed as though much of the avant-garde work of the early ‘60s would be completely forgotten. I’m referring particularly to a subdivision of happenings, probably best described simply as events, that used to take place in Judson Hall, Judson Church, Yoko Ono’s loft, in early avant-garde festivals, on various Fluxus programs, and sometimes in experimental corners of Tokyo. The audiences were generally small and the programs were seldom reviewed or otherwise documented. The artists themselves saw no need to keep the pieces in repertoire, and kept moving onto new things, and the work became all but invisible. Now, however, a shop called Backworks has begun collecting and selling scores, programs, and other mementos from the period, some of which have become rare and rather valuable, and there is also some interest in reviving these works in actual performance. Recently, for example, there was a revival of Takehisa Kosugi’s ‘Anima 7,’ which has got to be one of the classics of the genre.

Kosugi was born in Tokyo in 1938, and by the early ‘60s was a regular contributor to avant-garde events there, as well as in New York and in Europe. He did a number of slow-motion pieces. He did some conceptual scores that remind me a bit of Zen koans, as in ‘Malika 5’: ‘Watch a flower until one of them falls or all of them fall.’ He also did some very nasty conceptual texts, like ‘Music for a Revolution’: ‘Scoop out one of your eyes 5 years from now and do the same with the other eye 5 years later.’ Later he formed a little group called the Taj Mahal Travelers and began playing a unique electric violin. He hasn’t been in the United States for some time, so far as I know, but judging from the number of anecdotes I have heard, he made a strong impression on the artistic community when he was here.

Like so many events created at the time, the only score to Kosugi’s ‘Anima 7’ is a rather brief set of verbal instructions. The composer explains that the performer is to take an action that normally would be done in a short time, and perform it over an extended period. He goes on to suggest that one might spend 15 minutes to half an hour slowly taking off a sport coat or drawing a bow across a stringed instrument. He concludes by pointing out that such actions must be completely silent, but that they are still basically aural and musical, just as darkness is basically visual.

Of course the piece is not nearly as simple as its score implies, because it has to be understood in the context of the composer’s attitudes and his own way of interpreting the work, and with some awareness of the way the score has been interpreted by the composer’s colleagues. Yasunao Tone recalls one of the first performances of the work in Tokyo around 1963-64, in which Kosugi spent the duration of the piece slowly lifting a marionette into the air, and another in which he took off his coat, while several other performers did their own slow-motion actions. On one occasion Tone himself took part, presenting one hyperslow-motion wink. Philip Corner recalls a performance in New York in 1966 in which he slowly rose from the audience and mounted the stage, while Kosugi took off his coat, and four or five other people did other actions. Specific memories fade with the years, but it is clear that the piece was conceived as a somber ritual, and that it was not intended to be easy for the performers. If you don’t believe me, try any of these things, particularly the 15-minute wink.

The revival of ‘Anima 7’ took place at the James Yu Gallery on March 12 as part of the opening event of the three-week Counterweight series. It was presented as a duet with Tone and Charlotte Moorman. For a while it was not apparent that the piece had started, but eventually I noticed that Tone was gradually raising his left hand slightly, although he was otherwise motionless. Soon his right hand also began to rise, and he finally gripped the lapels of his coat. A few minutes later his coat began to slide over his left shoulder, ever so slowly, ever so steadily. His concentration was incredible. Now and then a muscle would flinch slightly from the tension. It soon became clear that he was in the process of taking off his coat, but with that discovery, the piece began to become more interesting rather than less so. How long would he be able to sustain that kind of movement? What would he do once the coat was off? Would he take off more clothes? It was as suspenseful as a detective story. In fact, having made that parallel, it seems like a bad idea to report on exactly how Tone completed his action. You may have a chance to see him in ‘Anima 7’ yourself sometime, and I’d hate to spoil the ending for you.

Meanwhile Moorman was sitting there with her cello, gradually raising her bow, drawing it across the lowest string, and bringing it back down again. I couldn’t hear a sound, although one person sitting way down front reported that the bow did make tiny sounds as it crept along the string. Moorman’s performance was also well paced, though she did not appear as intensely involved in the action as Tone was.

The performance set me to wondering how many other good pieces there must be in that early ‘60s repertoire. I suspect that there are quite a few, and perhaps this would be a good time to revive and reexamine them. In fact, many of these events might be perceived more clearly now than when they were new. They no longer have much shock value, at least for anyone who has followed the course of avant-garde history, and we can begin to perceive individual works, instead of only seeing style. In 1965 stylistic questions were so close to home that everyone just about had to take sides. One was either a progressive, and more or less

obliged to go along with anything brash and iconoclastic, or one was a traditionalist, and committed to disliking anything that didn't fit the going definition of music. By now, though, it should be clear that this is just another branch of music history, that it produced good works and mediocre works, just like the other branches, and that we really ought to investigate what is there. In many cases I suspect that performers could also present these pieces better today than anyone did in the early '60s. We have learned much about performance art in the ensuing years, after all, and we have also developed a number of gallery situations and performance series that would make excellent contexts for the early '60s repertoire. I'd particularly like to hear some of the early events by Nam June Paik, Philip Corner, James Tenney, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, La Monte Young, and Yoko Ono.

Note:
There was one very well attended Fluxus revival concert at the Kitchen two years after this (see Voice April 9, 1979), but in general this repertoire is largely forgotten. Curiously, we seem to be changing from a culture that only respected music of previous centuries, to a culture for which even music that is only 20 years old is considered passe and irrelevant.

April 18, 1977
Charlemagne Palestine Ascends

When I got home on April 3 after hearing a Charlemagne Palestine concert, I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream at myself for having missed a number of Palestine concerts in the past year or so. I wanted to scream at a musical establishment which is still blithely unaware of Palestine and has yet to invite him into its hallowed halls uptown. And right now I want to scream at 150,000 Voice purchasers in hopes that maybe a few of them will spend more than three minutes reading the remainder of this column and thinking about what it says.

I'm not given to screaming, but perhaps that's an appropriate response to Palestine's new work 'The Lower Depths: Descending/Ascending.' It's a loud, relentless piece, and Palestine plays it with the kind of energy that would make even Cecil Taylor seem like a patsy by comparison. I don't mean to say that you would like it. The piece is admittedly not a pretty thing to witness, and I'm not even sure that I like it myself. It is more frightening than anything else. But it seems important because it goes so far. How is it possible for someone to hammer away at a piano keyboard so furiously for almost an hour, with only one quick break? Is it mysticism, hedonism, or just plain masochism that turns Palestine into a wild animal when he sits down to play? And how much force does it take to break two, not one but two piano strings, especially when one is playing a Boesendorfer, which is reputed to be the best made piano around?

It hurts to play the piano for an extended time the way Palestine does. I tried it once, and found to my dismay that my muscles and bones began to ache after only a couple of minutes. Now, granted, one could become conditioned to this kind of physical task and build up endurance, but ultimately the situation must be like long-distance running. One can get in condition and build endurance to a point, but beyond that point, conditioning is mostly just a matter of getting used to the pain. Palestine drinks a lot of cognac and smokes a lot of clove-scented Indonesian cigarettes when he presents a program like this, and no doubt these substances help to deaden the pain a bit, but ultimately only sheer determination could get anyone through such an ordeal.

There are shades of the Iggy Pop-Chris Burden self-mutilation syndrome in Palestine's work, though he does not capitalize on this the way they do, and tries to keep the focus on the sound and the music. Still, as I watched him knock himself out, he seemed more like a sacrificial victim than a musician.

All performers are sacrificial victims to some extent. They offer themselves to public view and invariably take risks, so that onlookers can witness some sort of minor miracle and watch one of their fellow human beings avoid calamity. There is always the possibility that Horowitz will blank out and be unable to complete a Beethoven sonata, just as there is always the chance that the sword swallower will slit his throat. And the fact that such things don't happen makes us no less aware of the possibility that they could happen. At the nitty-gritty core this is what all live performance is about, and this is why even the most sophisticated filming and recording techniques have never been quite able to replace live performance.

With Palestine and others the performance risks are beginning to get a little nasty. Burden really could be killed if he does his being-shot-at act too often, and it may take a real miracle to pull Palestine through many performances like this one with body and soul intact.

But I don't want to give the impression that 'Descending/Ascending' is a work of undisciplined passion. In fact it is extremely disciplined. This piece is divided into three long sections, which the composer has been presenting on separate nights this spring, but which he plans to put together into long one-night performances next fall. The first section begins in the middle of the register and gradually works its way down to the lowest register. The second section remains only on the lowest couple of octaves, which on the Boesendorfer includes four additional notes not present on other brands. The third section, which was the one I heard, begins in the extreme bass register and gradually works its way back up to the middle of the keyboard.

The first thing I noticed on the night of the ascending was that the floor was shaking. It was hard to believe the thunderous power with which Palestine suddenly began hammering on two notes with a fast left-right-left alternation. The sound of these bass notes was equally hard to believe. Since he plays with the pedal down, one hears not only the notes he is actually playing but also a large complex of high- and middle-register tones ringing off the other strings. On another level one also hears a rat-a-tat of percussive sounds, probably created by the action of the hammers hitting the strings. Every once in a while Palestine moves one hand up to a fresh note. Occasionally he moves around between several notes, and one hears fragments of modal melodies. But mostly one just hears a barrage of piano sound. From time to time the tempo slackens slightly, and one begins to suspect that Palestine is running out of steam the way he ought to. But then he suddenly redoubles his effort, and the sound explodes louder and faster than ever, and one is reminded that the floor has been shaking the whole time. Incidentally, Palestine routinely announces that there is no amplification or electronics involved. Otherwise listeners often attribute the sounds to electronic manipulation and hidden loudspeakers. That is particularly true in the relatively confined quarters of his loft space on North Moore Street, where he has been

presenting his work this spring, and where the 11-foot ceiling allows few overtones to escape.

After witnessing Palestine's recent endurance test, I began to realize that a number of his works must involve pain, like the more harmonious but extremely vigorous 'Strumming Music' he used to play at the piano, or the body pieces where he chants loudly while running violently or throwing himself on the floor. He is not a sacrificial victim in the strict Aztec sense, but he does live dangerously.

Note:
It is too bad that Charlemagne Palestine's name is so often forgotten in discussions of American minimalist music, as he drew larger audiences than any of his colleagues around this time, and his performances were very special. He continued doing extremely exhausting concerts such as these for several years, most often as a pianist, until he burned out and shifted to the visual arts.

April 25, 1977
Robert Ashley Documents the Aether

Judging from the image on the color-tv monitor, we are on a boat gradually approaching the Golden Gate. The soundtrack consists of Robert Ashley talking to David Behrman about his music. I figure that the two men are also on the boat with the camera, and I expect to have a view momentarily. The camera doesn't cooperate with my desires, however, and continues to focus straight ahead. Then, after maybe 10 minutes, it rises and begins to circle overhead, looking down on the buildings of San Francisco. A tricky cut? A flying boat? I eventually realize that I must be seeing all this from a helicopter. Ashley and Behrman continue to talk on the soundtrack. Their conversation is quite informal, with many incomplete sentences and some very long pauses. Breezes blow in the background. About 15 or 20 minutes into this videotape, the camera comes back to ground level. There has still not been a single cut. Off in the distance we vaguely make out two men sitting at a picnic table. Gradually we get a closer view and discover Ashley and Behrman, in perfect lip sync.

The tape runs on for another 40 minutes. Sometimes the camera flies away, returns, and finds the speakers standing on a hill or walking somewhere. Most of the time we must be content to watch them from a distance, or not see them at all. The soundtrack continues to be informal but insightful. There are no cuts.

By the time the hour is over, I realize that I have experienced not only some remarkable camerawork by Philip Makanna but also a perceptive portrait of Behrman. The tape reveals him as a quiet, modest man who doesn't like looking at the camera any more than this camera likes looking at him. His short answers often leave the interviewer at a loss for words. He frequently deflects the conversation away from himself and onto other topics. Ashley points out during the interview that his music has an intimate quality and is intended for small audiences. Everything fits together.

On a more subtle level, the tape also made me understand a little more about Ashley, who is the producer and director as well as the interviewer. I remembered that for some years he has been doing performance pieces that involve spontaneous conversation, and I begin to appreciate the amount of study that has gone into making his talking performances seem so casual and unstudied.

This is only one of the 14-hour-long tapes that make up Ashley's 'Music with Roots in the Aether,' on view at the Whitney Museum through April 20. There is an hour-long interview and an hour's worth of musical performances devoted to each of the seven composers included in the series. Some of the settings and camera angles used in the performances are as unlikely as those used in the interviews. During the performance of Behrman's 'Music with Melody-Driven Electronics,' the camera frequently looks on via mirrors so that one loses a sense of direction. Gordon Mumma is interviewed while oiling his bicycle, and is shown playing his musical saw in an unpopulated amusement park. Philip Glass talks mostly about money and practical matters and becomes distracted by children playing in the background, while the camera occasionally picks out twitches in his fingers. Terry Riley gives his interview while milking his goat in rural California, and then goes into a sort of rustic-modern house to play some of his solo organ music. Alvin Lucier is represented by three works, one of which takes place during the interview. Pauline Oliveros does one of her often discussed but seldom heard accordion-and-voice performances. Ashley himself is interviewed by an assistant, and presents a theatrical work called 'What She Thinks.' The series reveals a good deal about the artists, and presents their works with care and understanding.

I think the main reason Ashley feels this music has 'roots in the aether' is simply that it is not completely notated. Of course, it is not exactly improvised either. In most cases the performers may make only extremely limited choices. In Glass's music they must even stick to prescribed melodic fragments. In all cases, however, the sense of timing and pacing is rather free. Neither the composer nor the performers can predict how the music will take shape in a particular performance, or how long the performance will last. Some of this is determined by, well, the aether.

For Ashley, I think his title also implies a lack of historical roots, but I'm not sure about that. Certainly all of these composers owe debts to John Cage and other composers who launched a general approach to indeterminate music in the '50s. All of them have been influenced to one degree or another by Eastern ideas, and I sense a spirit of jazz here and there. Certainly they all have been influenced by developments in electronics. On the other hand, none of their works sound much like anything that came before. But whether their music has specific historical origins, or whether it did to some extent spring out of the aether, it must all come from about the same place. All seven composers are around 40 to 50 years old, all are Americans, all are probably as well known in Europe as they are here, and all create relatively static pieces that generally take a long time. They do comprise a sort of category, however nebulous, and perhaps the most valuable thing about Ashley's videotapes is that they help define this category. Furthermore, by putting everything together, they make it clear that something significant has been going on within this category. Of course, Ashley does not claim that these seven names should be regarded as any sort of definitive list or school. In fact, he had originally planned to include one or two others in the series, and it would not be difficult to see a number of other American

composers, and perhaps even a couple of British ones, as part of the same basic phenomenon.

I have been emphasizing the subject matter of 'Music with Roots in the Aether.' But documentaries are also works of art in their own right, and it seems to me that this one is particularly successful, even though it's as long as about eight or 10 typical feature films. Ashley's settings sometimes verge on the bizarre, but they always end up seeming appropriate in one way or another, both in the interviews and in the performances, and as I mentioned, his own extremely casual talking and interviewing method is an art in itself. Not only does the no-cuts technique present a unique challenge that Makanna's camera meets ingeniously time after time, but it is also appropriate to the long, unbroken continuities of the music. That lone camera moves slowly and somewhat predictably, a bit like the music itself, but neither is ever boring. There is no editing on the soundtrack either. The tapes come spectacularly close to actually capturing a live-performance quality.

At one point, after having seen quite a few of the tapes, I suggested to Ashley that 'Music with Roots in the Aether' might well be his own finest creative work, but he only shrugged. Perhaps he thinks of it mostly as a documentary of other works rather than as a work of his own, perhaps he was just being modest, or perhaps after almost 20 productive years as a creative artist he just finds it too difficult to make such comparisons.

May 9, 1977

Artists Meet at Niblock's Loft: Malcolm Goldstein

Avant-gardists have always had their meeting places. If they didn't, there would be no way for them to get to know one another, no way for collaborations to develop, no way for movements to evolve, and no place to have arguments and pass along technical imformation. Often cafes or bars have served this purpose. There was a place called Pfaffs, on Broadway near Spring Street, where New York artists gathered way back in Walt Whitman's era. The Cedar Tavern was the legendary rendezvous point of the '50s, and there have been many other places at other times. In recent years most communication between New York composers seems to take place at out-of-the-way concerts. The artists like to converge on places where there is lots of activity, little publicity, a pleasant noncompetitive feeling, and ample opportunity to hang around afterward and talk shop. A few years ago the Kitchen became better known, better attended, and more professional, it developed a more formal air and became less popular as a meeting place. Gradually the shop talk and socializing has shifted to Phill Niblock's loft at 224 Centre Street, where concerts go on frequently under the aegis of the Experimental Intermedia Foundation.

On an average concert night in Niblock's spacious third-floor loft, the audience might consist of 15 or 20 of the performer's personal friends, 15 or 20 musicians and artists, a handful of curiosity seekers drawn by an announcement in the Center for New Music calendar, and perhaps a couple of administrators or critics with a taste for the new. As the spectators enter they toss $2 in a contribution bucket and perhaps pour a glass of free wine (tres ordinaire) before taking a seat. A few sit on straight chairs, but the majority usually end up sitting on the floor, leaning against a pillar, or sprawling on a bed or sofa. Sometimes it is necessary to move Niblock's son's tricycle or relocate a mike stand to get comfortable, but no one complains. The music is always scheduled to begin at nine but seldom gets underway before 9:15. Everything is very casual. After the programs, which vary in quality almost as much as in style, many stay on to drink and talk, and some may stay for hours.

This year the loft has been particularly active. Niblock organized the programs in clusters of four or five each month, and when the May cluster concludes on the 16th, there will have been about 30 events during the 1976-77 season. I have not been able to keep very close tabs on that much music, but I did attend four out of the five concerts in the April bunch, and I'm glad I did. Jon Deak presented a work called 'Street Music,' which might be described as a semiclassical one-man-band act. Gregory Reeve presented free improvisation at his trap set, assisted by saxophonist Earl Howard, and also played tapes of two of his notated instrumental works. Joseph Celli presented a varied evening involving his own oboe playing, four percussionists, a homemade film, and a nude female dancer. But it was Malcolm Goldstein who made the strongest impression on me, and he did so without even relying on Niblock's superb sound system.

Goldstein simply improvised on his violin, all by himself, and he went on nonstop for 80 minutes. I never imagined that any violinist, playing any unaccompanied solos, could hold my attention for such a long span of time, but Goldstein hardly lost me at all. He played with high energy, lost lots of bow hair, and never got into a rut. Sometimes he played furiously. Sometimes he withdrew into mournful melodies for a few bars. Sometimes he fell into a tonality, and sometimes he drifted into various types of atonality. Often he settled into curious sound explorations, playing somewhere between ordinary tone and ponticello tone, or working with slow-bow grunts, or plucking strings with both hands at once.

Frequently he sputtered out frantic phrases of 40 or 50 sounds in only a few seconds. These little barrages were always fascinating, as they were faster and more frantic than anything one could possibly do from written notation. Of course, many would say he was faking, but when phrases of that sort come out totally different and equally impressive every time, it seems to me that the faking is taking place on an extremely high level.

I also appreciated the split-second sensitivity with which Goldstein made use of accidents. Many kinds of accidents can happen to any violinist, and usually do. The tone can get a little off, or attacks can be noisy, or an odd overtone can sneak in unwanted, and usually we just have to pretend we don't hear such things. Goldstein, however, followed up on his accidents. I won't say he actually looked for squeals and scratches and such, but when he came across them, he played them for all they were worth, and often they turned out to be worth a lot. Some of my favorite sections were ones that developed when Goldstein ran across some fluke, repeated it, focused on it, and let it evolve. It's actually an old trick. Jazz musicians use it, improvising dancers use it, and I suspect that most of the world's improvisers are at least aware of it. Still, it was gratifying to see the technique employed so well, and on a violin.

Of course, no concert situation is ideal, and there are drawbacks to Niblock's loft as well. A major problem, as I see it, is that audiences tend to be awfully tolerant, and sometimes too tolerant. Artists can get by with almost anything, and occasionally do, simply because the atmosphere is friendly and no one wants to break the bad news. That's rare though. Of the concerts I've attended in the past few seasons, almost all have showed distinct originality, most have been quite competent, many have been stimulating, and a few, like Goldstein's, have been

as rewarding as any concerts I hear anywhere. But even if the artistic levels were lower, the series would still be worthwhile, since it is the current meeting place.

May 23, 1977

Gordon Mumma and Alvin Lucier Make New Connections

In rare cases, technological skill and artistic ability occur in equally impressive amounts in single individuals. In this respect, I particularly admire David Behrman, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma, all three of whom presented their work at the Diplomat Hotel ballroom in the recent series sponsored by Artservices. Behrman is still working with homemade circuitry that emits plaintive automatic harmonies in response to particular pitches played by live instruments, as in concerts I have reviewed in the past. But both Mumma and Lucier presented material that was new to me, and so rich that in one column I can do little more than describe what happened.

Mumma calls his latest work 'Some Voltage Drop.' Like most of his music, this is not a set composition so much as a set of materials. Everything changes and develops from performance to performance. On May 9 he began with a tape of a Central Asian folk singer and then overlapped into a complex and raucous improvisation on a specially designed synthesizer. The next section became theatrical as Mumma lit carbide lamps and put a teakettle on to boil. Behrman joined him, wearing a miner's hat and occasionally blowing on a harmonica. Mumma began playing his musical saw, as he often does, and eventually the wailing of the saw began to blend with the whistling of the teakettle. As the overhead lights faded, the glow of the carbide lamps began to suggest a camping scene. In the next section Mumma played a remarkable electronic instrument, built by Paul DeMarinis, which emits curious rhythmic bleeps when a hand is placed over its vital parts. The performance ended with a brief tape of loud vigorous drumming dedicated to Salvador Allende.

The symbolism of this performance was far richer than in any Mumma work I have heard before, and I am not sure I understand it thoroughly, but a few things seem clear. In his interview with Robert Ashley in the 'Music with Roots in the Aether' series, Mumma talks a great deal about folk instruments. I think he feels that the DeMarinis instrument, the Central Asian singer, the musical saw, the specially designed synthesizer, and the harmonica are all contemporary folk mediums, because they resist notation and thus defy the central dominating culture. One could see the campfire scene as a reference to guerilla warfare, which would tie in with Mumma's concept of anti-establishment folk culture, as well as with his pro-Allende sentiments. The synthesizer music provides an additional symbol, since the particular circuitry is called 'Passenger Pigeon.' Passenger pigeons became extinct in 1914, according to the program notes, and Mumma's synthesizer will also become extinct someday, since he removes one component every time he plays it. But I have still only scratched the surface of this complex work as a whole, and the complex emotions it aroused in me. I would have to be able to answer many questions about Mumma's casual performance style, his preference for raucous sounds, and his remarkable technical skills before I could be satisfied that I understand his art thoroughly.

On May 2 Alvin Lucier presented four works, each of which went on for 20 to 30 minutes. All conveyed quiet ritualistic moods, and all had strong visual elements. The means of producing sounds were rather elaborate in each case, but these techniques were always justified, because the result was always music that could not be produced in any other way.

For 'Tyndall Orchestrations' Lucier sat at the center of the space with a Bunsen burner. Joan La Barbara was at one side producing soft screechy vocal sounds. Birds sang in a similar manner via a tape recorder. The flame on the Bunsen burner flickered in response to the sound, and sometimes went out. At the four corners of the space, four additional performers lit additional Bunsen burners and placed glass tubes over the flames. The flames flickered and produced soft sounds within their resonating glass tubes. The lighting added additional atmosphere, as it did throughout the evening. This piece, incidentally, is based on the work of the 19th-century acoustician John Tyndall, whose book The Science of Sound ought to be required reading for all musicians and composers, and for everyone who tends to think that electronics has made acoustics obsolete. Tyndall experimented with foghorns, sound lenses, the effects of weather on sound, and on other acoustical phenomena, as well as with these 'singing flames.' In 'Music on a Long Thin Wire,' a wire some 50 feet long was stretched across the performing space. Lucier sat at one side controlling electronic equipment. I didn't quite understand how the vibrations of the wire affected the sound, but the music came out as curious electronic phrases that wailed slowly up and down, sometimes became guttural, and often took unexpected turns.

In 'Outlines' one assistant moved a microphone around the contour of a full-size canoe, another assistant walked slowly away from a large loudspeaker, and Lucier did a little imaginary trout fishing, casting his fly line back and forth through the air. The resulting music was soft, high-pitched buzzing. I found it difficult to pay attention at first, because the sound didn't change much and was a bit reminiscent of fluorescent lights and other environmental sounds that I am accustomed to blocking out. Later, however, I began to notice that whenever I turned my head the sound changed drastically. There were really a whole lot of little buzzes hovering around my head. I became fascinated with trying to figure out which one was loudest, trying to pick out my favorite, and generally enjoying this completely new sound experience.

In 'Bird and Person Dyning' Lucier very gradually approached the center with little microphones mounted in his ears. His eyes were closed most of the time.

He listened intently as he moved. At the center of the space was one of those electronic birds that you have probably seen in variety stores, where they are sold as tree ornaments. From the loudspeakers around the space a variety of electronic tones faded in and out, accompanying the repetitious little tree ornament. But there were other tones that slid up and down faintly inside my ears. As in most of Lucier's work, some of the acoustical and electronic techniques behind the music were a mystery to me. If I had asked around, I could probably have found someone who could explain how everything worked, and often such pieces arouse my intellectual curiosity enough that I do that. But with this piece, and the others on this program, I found I was quite content to let the music retain its mystery.

May 30, 1977

Joel Chadabe's Singing Machine

Joel Chadabe's 'Settings for Spirituals,' which I heard on an Experimental Intermedia concert on May 15, combines a fine singer with an equally virtuosic machine, and both come out very well. They seem to be friends, and they really cooperate, making music as well as they can.

In this brand-new work, which was presented on tape, Irene Oliver sings five or six traditional spirituals in an expressive, traditional way, while an electronic tone tracks her up and down, note by note. The computer-controlled electronics apparatus is fully automatic. It works fast, sensing instantaneously where the soprano is going and how to follow her there, and sticks with her like a magnet. Certainly no unrehearsed second soprano could follow the melodies so accurately.

In the last song the machine is completely replaced by a traditional piano accompaniment, for reasons that I don't quite understand. This seems a little like relieving a pitcher who has been pitching a no-hit game. But the piano accompaniment does provide a sharp contrast, and helps one to appreciate the imitative feats of the earlier electronic accompanist.

Chadabe's machine is not merely a virtuoso imitator. It sometimes follows special rules of its own. In one song the electronic tone enters only when the soprano exceeds a certain volume level. In another the circuitry selects its own pitches, a few notes above or below the soprano. In another the machinery offers a completely independent accompaniment of quick notes, spread over a wide range, while the soprano continues smoothly in her normal register. In that case one is hard put to figure out exactly how the machinery is processing the vocal information and determining its path. But from the context, it is obvious that this too is an automatic process, and that the logic of the system is simply going beyond what the ear can decipher on first hearing.

Chadabe is not using a machine to characterize the villain, to stimulate a dialogue, to draw cartoons, or to allow us to pity the lifelessness of machines and feel superior to them. He treats his circuitry with great respect, allowing it to perform superhuman feats and impress us with its virtuosity and subtlety. At the same time, the human element comes off quite well, since Oliver's large voice touches the spirituals at a soulful depth I have seldom heard except in recordings by Paul Robeson.

The 'Settings for Spirituals' shows us the best sides of both humans and machines, and the relationship between them becomes clear. We understand that the machine is necessarily dependent on Chadabe and his soprano, that it can do wonderful things well beyond human capabilities, that humans excel in other ways, that the two can work together beautifully, and that when we decry conflicts we see between the human and the mechanical, we are really just flailing at windmills.

June 6, 1977

The Music Talks: Lucio Pozzi and Robert Ashley

Many recent performance pieces involve talking or discussing, often with audience interaction. One might have expected an idiom like this to come from poets, playwrights, and other verbal people, but curiously, it has been developed largely by composers and visual artists. I would not claim that this is music, but then it doesn't have much to do with any other traditional discipline either, and since I have been interested in this area for some time, I decided to investigate some of the work currently going on. It was particularly convenient to do so last month, since a number of mature, relatively well-known artists presented works at NYU on a series described as 'discussion as an art form.' I attended at least part of all six of the live performances included on the series, and two of them were quite provocative.

Lucio Pozzi's evening was especially stimulating for me. He held forth in Lassmann Hall from 6:30 until 10 one night, and visitors were permitted to come and go as they pleased. Most stayed for at least an hour or two. A pistol, a bunch of blank cartridges, and four pairs of little plastic dinosaurs were carefully placed on a well-lit table in the center of the room. Pozzi sat at one corner of the table, facing a clock which he set to ring after 30 minutes. Whenever the bell went off, Pozzi moved to another corner, reset the clock for another half hour, and placed it in front of him at his new position. Meanwhile he talked casually with people in the audience.

Naturally people wanted to know why the gun was there, and what the dinosaurs and the clock were all about, and Pozzi talked about such things in a friendly, unrehearsed way. Not that he attempted to provide authoritative answers. Basically the props were just images he liked, but he offered some of his own interpretations and associations, and listened with interest as other people suggested theirs. Frequently the discussion drifted on to completely unrelated topics. One rather long segment, for example, was mostly about dogs. But Pozzi and his props remained the focal point, and before long the discussion always returned to the basic situation. Someone would want to know if Pozzi was happy with the way his 'performance' was going, or whether he had made any special plans for the next half hour. Occasionally someone might offer an explanation as to why a particular person had gone home, or suggest that we return to the subject of chocolate.

The discussion was largely chit-chat of one sort or another, and the content seldom reached any profound levels, yet I sensed something quite profound about what was happening. We were not just having a discussion, we were enticed into becoming aware of the whole experience of having a discussion. This was not enough for one woman, who apparently expected a lecture on aesthetics and seemed to feel cheated, since Pozzi had not prepared any intellectual verbiage. Pozzi tried to explain that he thought discussion was interesting for its own sake, but she was not convinced and eventually made a dramatic exit. Of course other people reflected other attitudes, and by the end of the evening I began to see 15 or 20 participants as distinct characters in a rather complex scenario.

The same space was set up quite differently for Robert Ashley's event a few nights later. Spanish-language newspapers were spread neatly around the floor, leaving only a narrow aisle down to the center, where there was a telephone with the receiver off. Ashley was nowhere to be seen. Through loudspeakers we heard a low-fidelity blend of Spanish talking and music, probably emanating from local AM stations. Once in a while Ashley's voice could be heard coming through the mix, but he was either reading numbers or else unintelligible.

The situation remained unchanged, but quite a few people stayed on anyway, milling around, talking to one another, theorizing about where Ashley was, and figuring that eventually something would happen. After 45 minutes we were still stuck with the lo-fi sounds we couldn't understand and the newspapers we couldn't read. But then one of the bolder visitors decided to have a closer look at the telephone, which looked quite foreboding on its sharply lit island in the middle of the room. He happened to say something into it, and much to everyone's surprise, his voice was heard through the loudspeakers. Ah-hah. Now we're getting somewhere. Can Ashley hear what someone says into the telephone? Will he respond? But just as I was contemplating these questions, the man decided to find out what would happen if he hung up the receiver, and presto, he disconnected everything. Now there wasn't even any lo-fi music to listen to. Several people tried dialing the number that Ashley was allegedly transmitting from, but they only received a busy signal. The piece was over.

For a while I wondered if the performance had backfired. Obviously it might have gone on much longer and much differently if we had explored the telephone/microphone more before hanging up, and perhaps that would have been more interesting. On the other hand, I suspect that Ashley anticipated this outcome, along with umpteen other possible outcomes, and had decided we could have whichever one we stumbled onto. I like that.

June 13, 1977
What Is Minimalism Really About?

Just as I was getting ready to leave a loft concert, an inquisitive young man, perhaps 20 years old, approached me. Apparently someone had told him I was a critic, and he figured I might be able to understand the music he had just heard. 'Why are so many people playing minimal music these days? What is it all about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say and settled for a brief generalization. 'It has a lot to do with repetition.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through a nearby window one could hear a truck passing by. At the other side of the room one of he musicians was talking to a friend who had come to the concert. In front of me, the young man was looking into my eyes, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't think repetition was very interesting and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned with that, and decided to try me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say this time, and settled for another generalization. 'It has a lot to do with tiny variations.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through the nearby window one could hear another truck passing by. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was disconnecting his electronic equipment. In front of me, the young man was staring at the floor, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't think tiny variations were very interesting and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned with that, and tried me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say this time, and settled for another generalization. 'It has something to do with hyper-clarity.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through the nearby window one could hear a car passing by. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was beginning to pack his electronic equipment into cases. In front of me, the young man was staring at a loudspeaker, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't think hyper-clarity was very interesting and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned with that, and tried me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say to him this time, and settled for another generalization. 'It has something to do with encouraging more subtle perceptions.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through the nearby window one could hear a car passing by. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was packing his electronic equipment into cases. In front of me, the young man was staring at the floor, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't think encouraging more subtle perceptions was very interesting and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned with that, and tried me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say this time, and settled for another generalization. 'It has something to do with making music less dramatic.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through the nearby window one could hear another car passing by. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was packing his electronic equipment into cases. In front of me, the young man was looking me in the eye, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't think nondramatic qualities were very interesting and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned with that, and tried me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say this time, and settled for another generalization. 'It stems partly from certain Asian and African attitudes.' It was not a complete answer, of course, but I thought I'd settle for it for the time being and see how he responded.

Through the nearby window one could hear a group of teenagers talking and laughing. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was buckling straps around the cases that contained his electronic equipment. In front of me the young man was staring at a loudspeaker, intent on the subject of minimalism and trying to work it all out.

He talked a little about how he didn't see that Asian and African attitudes were very relevant and about how he didn't think anyone could be seriously concerned about such things, and tried me again. 'So what is it really about?' I thought for a moment about what I ought to say this time, and tried another approach. 'Well, like any kind of music, it isn't really about ideas, and it can't really be explained

in words. It can only be demonstrated. And even then, every demonstration is going to be a little different, and no one demonstration will ever be definitive.' It was not a complete answer, but it seemed to make more sense than the others.

Through the nearby window one could hear another truck passing by. At the other side of the room one of the musicians was carrying his loaded electronic equipment toward the exit.

Note:
Probably the best article I ever wrote.

June 20, 1977
Maryanne Amacher at the Kitchen

Many composers capture sensitive electronic or concrete sounds on recording tape, but only a few manage to get them from the tape out into a performance space with equal sensitivity. Maryanne Amacher is one of them. For her May 27 concert at the Kitchen she set up her equipment in a small room rather than in the main performance space. She must have spent hours testing the acoustics, fiddling with levels, moving loudspeakers around, and such things, because as she mixed it all together for the audience, magical things happened, and most of the magic was not on the tape itself but in the playback technique.

I never did figure out exactly where the loudspeakers were. Apparently they were tucked away in closets and adjacent rooms in very special ways. It was difficult to tell exactly where any of the music was coming from, and yet each sound took on a particular spatial characteristic. One extraordinary loud buzzing seemed to be twirling around the ceiling somewhere. Other low tones seemed to roll out of one wall, or several walls. And some sounds had such a distant quality that it was hard to believe their source was even in the same building. One segment, perhaps 30 minutes long, consisted entirely of these distant sounds, often mysterious and sometimes nearly inaudible. Almost all of Amacher's sound sources are natural rather than electronic, but she records them in unique ways so that one would never guess where or how they had been picked up. Some listeners were annoyed with her rambling remarks before and after the tapes, and it was true that her comments were neither necessary nor particularly informative. But it would be difficult to find faults in her music.

June 20, 1977

Carole Weber's Music for Homemades

Skip La Plante and Carole Weber have made some good progress with their homemade instruments since I last reviewed their work about a year ago. Michael Canick and Alice Eve Cohen have now joined the group, and the foursome presented a stimulating evening on May 28. Most of their instruments are percussion devices such as mailing-tube xylophones, wine-jug gongs, odds-and-ends wind chimes, cat-food-can shakers, table-leg claves, and wash-tub drums. They also have a crude homemade koto/zither, and make good use of a glass pane, a bicycle wheel, spare organ pipes, and photographic light shades. And they are really listening to all of these things. I wouldn't say that any of their instruments are virtuoso tools yet, but many of them sound quite musical.

I particularly appreciated a segment credited to Weber, and originally created for choreographer Phoebe Neville. As presented here, the work divides into five short sections, each of which features a unique blend of percussion instruments. The piece conveyed some attractive moods, particularly in the sections where Weber added vocal effects. The other works on the long program did not always combine the instruments in effective ways, and there was a tendency to try to fit everything into square clear forms without yielding to formal possibilities suggested by the instruments. But the two audience-participation events at the end of the program both worked. In the first we all blew on bottles and organ pipes in a long countdown. In the second we were invited to chant according to principles suggested by Indian chakras. The event took place in the Frances Alenikoff studio on lower Broadway, and Alenikoff did a brief improvisatory dance.

June 20, 1977
Bob Sheff for Twelve Hours

Bob Sheff presented a 12-hour event at the Kitchen on May 22. From noon until midnight he showed videotapes, played audiotapes, played piano, and generally presided over the affair, which might be better described as a musical open house than as a concert. Much of the work presented was actually created by, or in collaboration with, other musicians whom he has encountered around the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College, where he works.

When I arrived that afternoon, Sheff was showing his color video-portrait of a young man named Sam Ashley. On the screen, Ashley was walking around, sleeping in the grass, and just being himself. On the soundtrack he was ad-libbing a monologue of rather perceptive teenage observations, while the singing voice of Joan La Barbara lingered in the background. About 10 or 20 people were viewing the tape, conversing, helping themselves to refreshments, or just hanging out. It was the casual sort of mood that only California musicians seem to be able to create or to find meaningful as an artistic statement.

When I dropped by again in the evening, Sheff was playing audiotapes extracted from new music concerts at Mills. The atmosphere was similar to that of the afternoon and did not lend itself to serious listening, but my ears pricked up with John Bishoff's 'Silhouettes.' This was simply a recording of passing cars, but electronic tones had been mixed in, subtly following the rise and fall of the engine noises, and creating an arresting sound image. A while later I was also drawn to some unique sensual percussion music, which turned out to be Jim Hobart playing a homemade instrument made out of empty jars filled with hard beans. Later Sheff sat down at the piano and improvised with saxophonist Peter Gordon. They occasionally interrupted the music to tell anecdotes.

The curious thing about events of this sort is that they seem to have arisen as a reaction to the elitism of formal concerts, and yet they end up being elite themselves. The few people who showed up without knowing Sheff or any of his friends seemed to have trouble relating to what was going on. The approach is almost the opposite of the cerebral concerts one finds in so many university music departments, but it results in a similar sort of clubby insularity.

October 10, 1977
Pauline Oliveros Meditates

As I enter a dimly loft space on Warren Street, Pauline Oliveros is sitting cross-legged on a little platform. She raises her hand in a ceremonial greeting whenever someone comes in the door. It is the first concert of a new series sponsored by the Samaya Foundation. After a while Oliveros takes up her accordion and begins playing a drone. This is the 'Rose Mountain' series, which she's been doing for four years, but which I have never heard except in a short recorded segment. She controls the bellows well and pulls the tone out quite steadily for perhaps 15 or 20 seconds, and then pushes it in equally steadily for a similar span of time. Pull again. Push again. After a while she adds another note, and another, and eventually she begins singing sustained tones along with the accordion. But the basic mood remains tranquil. Pull again. Push again. The sonorities drone on without ever changing very much or very often.

She appears unusually calm and centered as she plays. Now in her mid-forties, she is in her prime as an innovative musician. There isn't even a hint of self-conscious rebellion, nor do I sense that she is just testing out new ways of making music. Most of that is in the past for her, and now the music comes from some specific personal place, which she seems to understand thoroughly. She has a good reason to appear calm and centered.

Soon I realize that the vowel sound is changing. Sometimes it is closed, as in 'hay,' and her voice takes on a reedy quality that almost disappears into the sound of the accordion. Sometimes it is more open or more rounded, and the voice stands slightly apart from the instrument. I begin to wonder how she decides what vowel to use next. There seems to be a logic there somewhere. Pull again. Push again. The changes are subtle and not very frequent, but something is happening.

Later I begin to hear something that has been going completely over my head. Because the reeds on an accordion are never absolutely in tune, if one listens closely one can hear little pulses or beats as the reeds vibrate against one another. But the curious thing is that these beats are a little different when the bellows move out than when they move in, since different reeds are involved. For a while I fix my attention on specific pitches and listen to the tempo of the beats. There seems to be a logic there somewhere, and for a while I begin to wonder if Oliveros is even controlling this subtle aspect of her music. Pull again. Push again. The instrument breathes slowly and steadily, but there are subtle differences between its inhaling and exhaling.

Eventually I begin to realize that something is also going on in the harmony. I haven't been concentrating as well as I sometimes can and I haven't been paying much attention to what notes have been dropped and added, but somehow the music seems to be creeping into new keys. I am a little surprised by this. Most of Oliveros's work is involved with meditative states and spiritual values, and doesn't usually have much to do with harmonic progressions and rhythmic patterns and other more down-to-earth musical techniques. But this piece seems to move around quite knowingly, and I begin to suspect that there is some intricate tonal system at work. That seems almost necessary, because pieces of music don't move through intricate modulations as smoothly as this unless someone sits down and figures it all out. Pull again. Push again. The sonority is so simple and steady, and there never seem to be more than two or three pitches at once, but somehow it is drifting somewhere.

I listen specifically to the harmony for a while, but little changes take me by surprise, and I get confused and eventually give up. There seems to be a logic to these gentle modulations, but I can't figure it out. Pull again. Push again. Any particular moment sounds very much like any other particular moment, but something is happening.

After the concert, which lasts about an hour, everybody is zonked out by the hypnotic tranquillity of the whole thing, and it is another five or 10 minutes before people begin to stir from their seats. I decide to hang around for a while until I have a chance to ask Oliveros how all of those neat key changes work, and her answer astounds me. It seems that she doesn't quite know either, because this music is also a meditation, and all of the music theory stuff is largely a side effect. As I understand it, the general idea is that when she feels the sonority should change she purposely leaves it where it is, and when she finds that she is content to listen to it just the way it is, she allows it to change. So there are you. In an oversimplified sort of way, you know the complete score, and you could even try singing it or playing it on some instrument yourself. All you have to do is think about whether you want the sound to change or not, and then do the opposite. And you'll get wonderful beating rhythms, and a unique, intricate tonal system, and some of the most sophisticated minimal music around. Simple, huh? Well, maybe. After you've worked at it for as long as Oliveros has.

October 24, 1977
Rhys Chatham's Music is Hard to Hear

Rhys Chatham's latest music, presented by the Experimental Intermedia Foundation on September 29, is not sensuous at all. It is expressed through an extremely soft, high-register electronic tone with no harmony whatever, and it presents itself gently, content with a tiny audience in a tiny space. Its main purpose is to investigate how we perceive sound, and I suspect that the style has been influenced by the composer Maryanne Amacher, and probably many acousticians and psycho-acousticians.

The audience that night was confined to a small portion of a quiet loft space at 537 Broadway, enclosed in white drapery. Chatham sat at the center with a couple of electronic tone generators and some mixing and amplifying equipment. After a brief explanation, the music began, but it was a long time before I could hear it. Eventually I began to perceive a barely audible whistling, which rose and fell in gradual increments. The loudspeakers were nowhere to be seen, and the difficulty of locating the sound was one of the appealing mysteries of the music. Another was the way the tone would disappear and reappear.

Sometimes it would rise beyond my range of hearing, or soften to a point where it really was inaudible, but often I wasn't sure whether I was hearing it or not. Everyone has extremely soft little ringing sounds in their ears all the time, and Chatham's

music is close enough to those sounds that everything gets mixed up. Reality and illusion take on a new dimension. Of course, our individual ears vary quite a bit, and when I compared impressions later on, I found that some people had heard more of Chatham's music than I had, while others had not heard as much. Someone who was 80 years old, or who had a hearing defect, probably would not have been able to hear any of it.

One could say that Chatham's music does not have a purely musical form, since the main thing that guides its progress is the composer's desire to demonstrate certain aural phenomena. Nor can Chatham take complete credit for those portions of the concert that were really produced by our own inner ears. But even if you prefer to consider it psycho-acoustic research rather than art, you must still admit that this is the kind of research that could only be done by a musician with a pair of very keen ears, and that it provides us with some unprecedented listening experiences.

Note:

This was about the end of Chatham's career as a soft musician. Shortly afterward he shifted abruptly to a super-loud guitar ensemble.

December 5, 1977
Seven Kinds of Minimalism

By now most listeners seem to be aware that many composers are interested in minimalism, that minimal music is generally not as severe as it was five years ago, and that the basic concerns have to do with repetition, long sustained tones, and extremely subtle variations. But it is also commonly assumed that all minimal music resembles whatever particular examples one is familiar with. Recently, thinking about some of the minimal pieces I have heard this fall, I was struck by their stylistic range and came up with a graph, based on some minimal pieces I have not yet written about, which shows roughly how these particular pieces contrast in severity and rhythmic vitality. I do not intend to imply that some areas are preferable to other areas, or that this is a complete picture. I can think of quite a few pieces which would have to be placed outside the edges of this particular graph, because they are especially extreme in one direction or another. Also, of course, one might consider many other criteria besides severity and rhythmic vitality. But perhaps this device will clarify the variety of possible approaches.

David Behrman, David Gibson, and Phill Niblock presented their latest work on a joint concert at Niblock's loft. Behrman's computer is smarter than ever, responding with increasing sensitivity to the tones of live instrumentalists - on this occasion, cellist David Gibson and English hornist Joseph Celli provided the human input, playing beautifully controlled sustained tones. Behrman's computer figures out what the musicians are doing, decides on a response, and shifts its own little electronic tones into the appropriate harmonies. The music moves gracefully, almost tenderly, always revolving around a basic set of white-note harmonies. There is an additional theatrical element now too, because Behrman has recently devised little panels of lights that enable the performers to know when the computer has processed their information. I couldn't quite figure out the code, but I found myself watching the lights much of the time anyway.

David Gibson has a new piece for vibraphone, but it involves sounds that you have never heard from a vibraphone. Apparently he has devised a means of controlling the exact speed of the vibrating mechanism so as to generate different tones. However it works, one hears low eerie tones inside one's ear along with the high-pitched vibraphone colors. The music is one long melody, which gradually changes tempos as it moves through chromatic patterns.

Phill Niblock presented another one of his tape pieces in which sustained tones grate against one another, filling the air with constantly shifting pulsations or beats. The music is loud, cold, almost dehumanized, and yet very sure of itself. He presented his music, as he frequently does, in juxtaposition with some of his 16-mm film, and I think I am finally beginning to understand the relationship between the two. Niblock handles his microphones somewhat the way he handles his camera, simply setting them up in a particular situation and letting them run, with as little tampering as possible. Later, long strands of film and recording tape are spliced together with the same detachment. In both cases the end results are sensitive simply because the basic process makes sense, not because of little personal touches that could have been added along the way.

Max Neuhaus recently installed a 24-hour electronic-music device on one of the islands in Times Square. It lies underneath a large grating, which several thousand people walk over every day, but no one seems to actually pay any attention to the music. The basic sound is simply a hum, but its overtones slowly fade up and down, and sometimes they seem to be moving around underneath the grating. The music is drab and unattractive, and blends right in with the other unattractive sounds of Times Square. I don't think I will ever just stand there and listen to it the way I used to listen to the lovely electronic beeping of the installation that Neuhaus set up at the entranceway of the Transit Authority building in Brooklyn a couple of years ago. By comparison, I find the Times Square piece disappointing. Lately, however, I have been thinking about all the pedestrians who walk over the grating everyday, and about how totally unaware most of them are of the sounds around them, and I have begun to understand that Neuhaus's installation makes a rather strong statement about our sound-calloused culture. If the equipment stays up for a few years perhaps enough people will eventually become aware of it that the point will get across.

It took me a long time to begin to appreciate Harley Gaber's 'The Winds Rise in the North.' The first time I tried listening to it, the string-quartet harmonies seemed awfully intense, the players seemed unable to control their long tones without a lot of unsteadiness, it seemed to take forever to get from one set of sounds to another, and I didn't even finish the first side. When I put the album on again recently, the string-quartet harmonies seemed awfully intense, the players seemed unable to control their long tones without a lot of unsteadiness, it seemed to take forever to get from one set of sounds to another, and I listened to all four sides with increasing interest. The music is tough and demanding and comes from some austere spiritual center that may or may not mean anything to you.

Joel Forrester presented an eight-hour solo-piano concert at the Kitchen. When I dropped by, around the third hour, he was taking a break, meditating with a friend. After a while he went back to the piano, began a repeated figure, added some countermelodies, settled into a strong beat, gradually improvised his way up to a rousing climax, wound down after about 45 minutes, and took another break. The music was repetitious, but it was also showy, pretty, quite accessible,

and reminiscent of a kind of piano improvising that has become fashionable in modern-dance classes during the past few years.

I can't be completely objective about Philip Corner's 'Elementals,' since I was one of the performers, but I find it impossible to ignore. 'Elementals' is a general concept, which can be realized by unvaried repetition of any sound at any tempo, but for his recent realization of it at the Kitchen, Corner selected the C-sharp above middle C, and the tempo of 60 notes a minute. He rounded up several dozen musicians who agreed to come at various times during the week, so that the note could continue, night and day, for five days. The idea was to keep the sound as constant as possible, but, of course, as singers, pianists, guitarists, and wind players entered and dropped out, the note took on a variety of colors. And, since the performers are human, neither the pitch nor the tempo was really accurate very often. So far as I know, however, at least one or two people were keeping the tone going in one way or another for the complete 123 hours of the performance. The music was severe, restrained, and sometimes quite lovely, but as the week progressed I began to feel that its real significance was not musical so much as social, and that it was not intended for an audience so much as for the performers. The event brought many musicians together, allowed them to really tune in on one another, encouraged them to spend a few hours practicing musical self-denial, and demonstrated a rather remarkable degree of appreciation for the principle of minimalism among local musicians. It also demonstrated quite dramatically that, as we attempt to eliminate more and more variety, we always end up discovering that more and more interesting things remain uneliminated. That, I think, is how minimalism got started, and why it continues to be fruitful.

January 9, 1978
The Content of John Cage

In John Cage's music the idea behind the piece is as important as the piece itself because his work is never really abstract. It is always about something. These extramusical aspects of his work are often played down, but as I listened to four recent Cage works presented on two consecutive nights at the Kitchen last month, I found that the nonmusical imagery occupied my mind more than the music did.

'Atlas Australis' is about the stars. As in 'Atlas Eclipticalis,' an orchestral work written some years ago, Cage took detailed star charts from an astronomy reference book, and translated each star into a note of piano music. Thus the listener is really hearing the stars in the sky, through the most powerful telescopes available. When the music thins out, we are hearing a patch of sky containing relatively few stars. When the music becomes denser, we are hearing thick clusters of stars. And when the music goes on for well over an hour, and we realize that the pianist has only played the first half of the piece, and that the piece utilizes only the southern sky, visible from Australia, you begin to form a clearer idea of how many stars there are up there.

'Branches' is about plants, and all of its sounds are produced by stroking, flicking, scraping, or otherwise stimulating various plant materials. A large pine cone, a small cactus, and materials less easy to identify were mounted on a small table, and Cage performed the piece alone. I was struck by this unique form of communication between plants and people. If it were just a matter of pretending that the plants materials were talking (or singing) to the audience, the idea might seem naive, but there was more to it than this. All of the plants were amplified, via a unique sound system designed by John Fulleman, so we heard the plants through a dense layer of technology. Furthermore, Cage performed the piece, which lasted about 23 minutes, with intent concentration. He followed a stop watch, watched his score, and produced each sound with great care. As with so many Cage works, the performance situation can seem absurd, and from time to time I was tempted to chuckle as Cage ceremoniously plucked on a pine cone. At the same time, the piece is quite serious. It brings humans, technology, and plant life together in a unique and cooperative image. It enables us to witness the plant materials as if through a powerful microscope, probing way inside them and discovering the sounds they contain.

'Cheap Imitation' is about Eric Satie. One of Satie's most curious and celebrated works is 'Socrate,' which is one of the first truly static, nondramatic European compositions, and the title 'Cheap Imitation' is of course tongue in cheek. The piece is actually a rather respectful homage to 'Socrate.' Essentially, Cage maintains Satie's rhythmic patterns, but subjects the notes and timbres to chance processes. The first 'Cheap Imitation' was for orchestra, a later version was for piano, and on this occasion a new version for solo violin was presented. What we really have, then, is recycled Satie, and I found myself sensing the spirit of 'Socrate,' thinking about the relationship between Satie and Cage, wondering what Satie would have thought about it, and hearing the music as a strange Satie-Cage hybrid.

'Inlets' is about water, conches, and the sea. For this piece Cage has assembled a marvelous collection of conch shells, some over two feet long. The performers fill them with water and rotate them under microphones, producing unpredictable sounds. One thinks of the sea animals that used to live in the conches, and the divers who brought them up. The conches seem to be communicating with us, much the way the plant materials do in 'Branches.' I could easily get flowery describing such things, but Cage's imagery never seems flowery or sentimental.

I have not said anything about how these pieces sound, because I wanted to concentrate on the ideas behind them, but of course the sound is important too. It seemed to me that Grete Sultan played the stars in a rather dull labored way, though some found her approach appropriate. Since neither the tempos nor the dynamics of this music is precisely prescribed, it will be most interesting to compare future interpretations. The sounds of the plant materials in 'Branches' were extremely delicate, with ample silence between them. The technology could be heard as much as the plants, and many of the sounds benefitted from echo or reverb effects. 'Cheap Imitation' is of course much thinner in the solo violin version than in the piano or orchestra versions, but soloist Paul Zukofsky easily sustained interest for the duration of the piece.

'Inlets' offered the most unusual sounds. I became quite caught up in the little gurgles, glugs, and swishes that resulted as Cage, David Tudor and Takehisa Kosugi manipulated their water-filled conches, and these sounds varied a lot depending on the size of the conches. Garrett List blew on a conch, making a shocking loud entrance, continuing without interruption for several minutes and sounding quite grand. John Fulleman's crackling fire tape played a less important role, but combined nicely with the other sounds.

But even if the sounds of the plants and the conches had not worked out so well, and even if the performances had not been so good, there would still have been much to think about because the ideas behind the pieces were so strong and clear. The same can be said about almost everything Cage produces, whether it is about Thoreau, about politics, about radios, or about the flaws in a sheet of paper. This consistent clear-sightedness in the way he establishes a solid

ideological underpinning for each piece is perhaps the most remarkable thing about his remarkable work.

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January 16, 1978

Alison Knowles, Shoes, and Gertrude Stein

The life-as-art approach has lost a good deal of momentum in the past 10 years. Painters no longer frame their dirty rags, sculptors no longer make constructions from odds and ends found on the street, choreographers have lost interest in working with nondancers, composers have given up writing for car horns and typewriters and vacuum cleaners, and happenings are all but forgotten. But a few artists have continued to work within these general parameters and have found ways of doing so that make the basic attitude still viable today. Alison Knowles is one of them.

When Knowles presented an evening of her work at Franklin Furnace a few weeks ago, the highlight of the evening for me was a 10-minute interpretation of two old shoelaces, performed by violinist Malcolm Goldstein. Knowles's score was a large sheet of vellum, perhaps four feet high and 10 feet long, which had been run through a blueprint machine with a couple of old shoelaces stretched end to end along the center. With the sheet mounted on the wall, a sharp sepia image of the two shoelaces could be seen, actual size, with all the little kinks and frayed ends characteristic of well-used shoelaces.

Goldstein treated the wall hanging as an explicit musical score, beginning at the left and gradually working his way across, observing the contour of the line as he played. The music came out in a long, sustained sound, with gentle rises and falls, and a curious twist here and there. The tone became a bit frazzled as he interpreted one frayed end. He played the duller, smoother stretches with as much care as the curious kinky stretches and, since the image was large enough for the audience to see clearly, we could follow the score ourselves quite easily.

The rest of the program included a short group interpretation of another Knowles blueprint, which did not work so well, and some selections from Knowles's recent 'Gem Duck,' which were quite pleasant. 'Gem Duck' is a book, recently published by Pari and Dispari, which is devoted to old shoes, graphic images of shoes, graphic images about shoes, legible and illegible texts on shoes, and a glossary of shoe-manufacturing terms, all collaged into a seemingly random assortment of pages that are most gratifying to look at. Much of he material is also nice to listen to. At this performance Alison and her daughter Jessie took turns reading segments, each prepared on a different kind of paper. Whenever one of them came to the end of a segment, they fluttered the page a bit before putting it down. I didn't pay much attention to the sounds of the fluttering papers at first, but after a while I began to tune in on this, and to appreciate the vast difference between the sounds of different kinds of paper.

It is not surprising that Knowles would have wanted to explore paper sounds in this context. While her background and training is largely in graphics, she has also presented music events involving dried beans, making a salad, amplified footsteps, and other everyday sounds. A few years ago she assembled large collections of small found objects, wrote brief instructions suggesting how to sound them, and passed them out in audience-participation contexts. She has also designed many ritual events, produced many conventional prints, and set up semi-theatrical environments, but in all cases her sources are usually ordinary, non-art objects.

It seems to me, however, that the ultimate Knowles work is probably the organization of the public readings of Gertrude Stein's The Making of Americans. For four years now, increasingly large groups of well known artists, unknown artists, Stein fans, SoHo residents, and passers-by have come together to pass the New Year by reading and listening to this 925-page book. This year the 50-hour marathon took place at the Paula Cooper Gallery.

I am on shaky grounds when I attribute the origin of this project to Knowles. Knowles herself eschews credit, insisting that at least two other people were equally responsible for getting the Stein reading off the ground that first year. And there are probably at least six people who would like to claim credit for it. But my own observations that first year led me to conclude that Knowles was probably the main instigator and, in subsequent years, I have begun to feel that the project is one of her most personal and most characteristic statements.

To begin with, Knowles never invents her own material, but works with things that already exist. In some cases that means using beans or shoelaces or a glossary of shoe-manufacturing terms. In this case it means using a Stein text. Knowles is also concerned with the social implications of her pieces. In some cases that means setting up audience-participation events to perform a food ritual together, or to scrape on found objects and listen to them together. In this case it means bringing people together to read and hear a neglected American classic. Also characteristic of Knowles is an exceptionally modest stance. In some cases that means refusing to take credit for the sounds produced by a piece of metal found on the street or for the rich implications of a well-worn heel she photographed. In this case it means refusing to take credit for the fact that other people are reading and listening to a Stein text.

Perhaps most characteristic of all, every Knowles piece seems designed to allow her to remove herself eventually from her artistic role. When she asks musicians to interpret old shoelaces, she seems to be hoping that the process will go on, and that musicians will continue doing such things without her requesting them to. When she suggests, as she did in 'The Identical Lunch,' that we go to a cafe and

have a tuna-salad sandwich as if we are performing a piece, she seems to be wishing that people would bring a greater sensitivity into their daily lives, so that artists would no longer have to encourage them to do so. And when she set up - or helped set up - the first Stein reading, she seemed to be hoping that more people would discover this remarkable book and would enjoy coming together to read it, and that readings of this sort might continue without requiring any leadership from her. That seems to be exactly what has happened.

The composer Charles Wuorinen once wrote: ‘My career in composition is directed toward integrating myself with my work, and my work into the world; so that both of us can disappear together.’ I’ve always liked that statement, though it never seemed particularly appropriate to Wuorinen. It does, however, seem to express what Alison Knowles wants to do - and does.

March 13, 1978

Trembles from William Hellermann

He begins by clicking a little steel bar against the end of his amplified acoustic guitar, slowly moving down, so that the bar clicks a little louder, between the two rows of tuning pegs. Gradually the louder clicking takes over from the softer clicking.

(The composer-performer is William Hellermann, and the scene is Phill Niblock's loft, where Hellermann premiered his new guitar solo, 'Tremble,' as part of the Experimental Intermedia series last month. The sounds are relatively soft, but they have a rich resonance because they feed into an air mike and a contact mike, are amplified through Niblock's fine sound system, and have a 20-foot ceiling to bounce off of.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar occasionally tinkles against the end of one of the strings. Gradually the tinkling has taken over from the clicking.

(The little steel bar in his right hand trembles erratically against the instrument in a quick tight motion. Little fluctuations in tempo and unpredictable accents seem to be determined by his trembling muscles, rather than by any conscious control. The resulting rhythms are more biological than musical, and fascinating to listen to.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar occasionally knocks against the wood just above the first fret. Gradually the knocking has taken over from the tinkling.

(By this time the logic of the piece is pretty clear, and there is little doubt that Hellermann is going to keep trembling the little steel bar on his guitar until he gets to the bottom of his instrument. If it were a murder mystery, we would probably stop reading, but it's music, and it sounds good, and the fact that we can predict where it's going seems more reassuring than frustrating.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar occasionally rings against the strings. Gradually the ringing has taken over from the knocking.

(One thing I like about the piece is the way it reflects the structure of the instrument. This music is not merely idiomatic for the guitar, it uses a sequence of sounds that comes directly from the structure of the instrument itself. There's something appealing about the objectivity of the idea.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar occasionally clicks against one of the frets as it moves down the strings. Gradually a combination of clicking and ringing has taken over from the ringing.

(Written language is of course inadequate in cases like this, and I can't expect you to know very precisely what the clicking and ringing really sound like. But perhaps it will help if I say that none of the sounds are quite like anything I've heard before, and remind you that they are all being amplified over a fine sound system.)

Quite a few minutes later he has moved past the fingerboard to the area over the sound hole, and then his left hand begins its way down the fingerboard. Gradually the strings have shortened, and an ever-changing sequence of quick chords has taken over from the combination of ringing and clicking.

(By this time the piece has been going on for perhaps half an hour, and Hellermann is showing signs of fatigue. Muscles rebel tremendously when asked to make quick little trembling motions for an extended period of time, but Hellermann presses on. The performance becomes not only a musical act and a commitment to a logical process, but also a display of dogged determination, if not outright masochism.)

Soon he breaks the logic of the piece by moving his left hand back up the fingerboard, where it came from. The ever-changing sequence of quick chords moves into a lower register, though by this time one is also quite aware of high tones, which are produced by the short ends of the strings, between the little steel bar and the bridge he is now approaching.

(Later I asked Hellermann why he had broken the downward logic of the piece at this point, and he explained that he was heading for a G that matched the resonant frequency of the room, providing a special sonority for the end of the piece. For me this effect did not seem worth marring the otherwise neat logic of 'Tremble,' but I'm not really complaining, since it was the only false move in the whole performance.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar begins booming right next to the bridge. Gradually the booming has taken over from the ringing chords.

(By this time I am trying to figure out how this exceptional piece fits in with Hellermann's work as a whole, and I am not having much success. Much of his work is humorous. None of it, so far as I know, deals with a simple logical

progression as obsessively as this. And I have never seen him play with the kind of extreme performance energy required here. ‘Tremble’ is quite a new direction for him, I think.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar begins cracking on the bridge itself, right next to the microphone. Gradually the cracking has taken over from the booming.

(This is the loudest point in the piece. He is not attacking the bridge hard enough to actually hurt the instrument, but the bar in his trembling hand comes down with fairly solid whacks, and by the time the cracking gets through the loudspeakers, it sounds like the room is full of carpenters. The piece has almost reached the 45-minute mark, and Hellermann’s right hand must be nearly numb with tension. By now it’s strictly a matter of mind over muscles.)

A few minutes later he has moved down a little farther, so that the bar begins tapping softly under the bridge. Gradually the soft tapping has taken over from the cracking, and the piece comes to an end.

(This is one of the most involving pieces of severe minimalism I have heard in a long time, and I am tempted to end with a parenthetical regret that only 15 or 20 people were there to experience it. But the fact is that Hellermann had originally planned to present one of his older, safer pieces, and it was only at the last minute that he worked up his courage to try ‘Tremble’ in public. Bold experiments of this sort simply can’t happen in widely advertised concerts, which underlines once again the value of small, informal showcase outlets such as the Experimental Intermedia series. Now that we know the piece works, Hellermann will probably be trembling all over, but the excitement will never be quite the same as it was that first time, when neither he nor anyone else quite knew whether he would be able to get through it.)

March 6, 1978
Garrett List Brings Them Together

Garrett List is finding a new way of fusing jazz and classical, and one which, to my ears at least, offers both idioms at once, and on all levels. List has been working in this direction for some time, writing many songs that sounded jazzy, composing instrumental pieces that sounded classical, and working in improvising ensembles that could go either way. But in his February 10 concert at the Kitchen, I sensed that it all had come together.

Most of the time the style leaned neither toward one side nor toward the other. Nor did it bounce back and forth between the two. Somehow the music remained serenely in the middle, drawing on both the energy of jazz and the formalistic control of classical music, without ever sounding quite like either. Much of the success of List's recent concert had to do with his fine ensemble of 10 musicians, which included fine players from both camps: Dave Burrell, Akua Dixon, Gayle Dixon, Mel Graves, Byard Lancaster, Ursula Oppens, Carla Pool, Rolf Schulte, Sadiq Abdu Shahid, and Genie Sherman.

The first half of the program was devoted to four of List's 'Orchestral Etudes.' I particularly like 'Elevator Music,' which moves along in 3/4 time, allowing the musicians to select their own notes from a sequence of written chords. The notation technique is derived from Christian Wolff, whose music always sounds classical, but the method of playing this notation allows for more rhythmic character, and the result is lilting, almost jazzy.

'Slugging Rocks,' the newest work from this series, slugs along at a slow steady beat. At first the musicians play only two or three pitches, but gradually the spaces between the slow beats are filled out with more pitches and faster rhythms. Occasionally a solo line rises out of the texture. The piece leaves room for improvising, room for a big climax, room for the musicians to enjoy themselves the way musicians generally do. But there is also a respect for strict controls and logical processes that one finds in recent classical music.

The second half offered a new work, 'Standard Existence.' The piece has lyrics by Jacki Apple that convey the general tone of the piece.

Last night's revolution

Caught in the chain of evolution

It's turning cold, growin' old...

In spite of your resistance

Standard existence

Has got you nailed.

The first movement plumbs these doldrums with a statement by a sad, resigned housewife, extracted from Stud Terkel's Working. The second movement digs a little deeper with the Jacki Apple poem. The third touches bottom with an account of the death of the composer's father. The purely instrumental music of the final 'Dance' comes up smiling, trying to accept the whole situation, but without lifting the mood very much. In all four movements the somber emotions of the piece are conveyed neither with the open-throated wailing of a grimacing saxophonist, nor with the correctness of a well-dressed soprano, but with an in-between delivery that I found quite believable.

The work is a touching statement of a kind of '70s futility, which I think many of us have been feeling lately, but the most touching moment of all was List's own trombone solo for the third movement. He hardly played a note. He just breathed in and out of his horn, allowing little moans and sputters and whishes that seemed quite expressive of the final breaths of the man who was dying in the accompanying text. It was gratifying to hear these special trombone sounds taken in an emotional direction, rather than serving merely as motifs, as they so often do in recent classical music. But it was also gratifying to hear these special trombone sounds taken in the direction of subtlety, rather than serving merely as vehicles for raw emotion, as they so often do in recent jazz.

June 5, 1978
The Kitchen Grows Up

The Kitchen has grown up. Many still seem to regard this vital avant-garde center as a slightly glorified loft, which is sort of the way it began seven years ago. But its May 20 benefit concert was more like a function at an established museum of new video and music, which is sort of what it has become. The Kitchen music program is now far better funded, far better staffed, and far more active than the older contemporary music organizations in New York, such as the Composers Showcase or the Group for Contemporary Music, and the atmosphere has changed a lot. For the benefit there were not only chairs for everyone but also a couple of ushers, a healthy list of patrons and friends, potted plants on the stage, and even tuxedos on the male staff members. And despite scant advertising and special $10 ticket prices, the space was filled to its capacity of about 250 for both the 6:30 and the 10 p.m. programs. Moreover, the new director, Mary MacArthur, gives one the impression of a real professional in the field of arts management, the kind of person that a foundation would be likely to trust. The crucial point, however, is that the experimental music the Kitchen has nurtured has also grown up. Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Robert Ashley, and Steve Reich don't appear in slightly glorified lofts much anymore. Their work now seems more appropriate to, well, to an established museum of new video and music.

I have not written much about Glass, Monk, and Reich in the past couple of years. Their music was most exciting for me when they were first evolving it, and when I was first discovering it. I still enjoy hearing their work, however, and this is a good opportunity to update my impressions.

The most gratifying thing for me about Glass's rich blend of electronic organs and amplified winds and voices has always been the sheer joy and sensuality that somehow come through. This is curious, because I know that Glass has more abstract things in mind, and to be sure, there are also many intellectual rewards within his rhythms and harmonies. But these intricacies would not hold my attention nearly so long if they were not presented with such exuberance. Some of his more recent pieces have been shorter, simpler, aimed at a more popular audience, and less substantial in my opinion, but that is not the case with his 'Fourth Series Part I,' which he presented here. Since this is an organ solo, the texture is naturally thinner than in his ensemble works, but the sensuality and intricacy are still there, and hearing his solo performance, I was particularly impressed by Glass's performing ability. His fast tempos were always steady, he kept tricky three-against-four patterns right in synch, his feet never missed the pedal tones, and the sudden shifts between the long hypnotic sections and the shorter more decorative sections were always right on.

The most gratifying thing for me about Monk's music has always been her own unique singing. Now, however, I have begun to realize that her music probably has as much to do with acting as with singing, and I'm not sure whether that has to do with increased awareness on my part, or a more internalized performance attitude on hers. In any case, when she sings her unaccompanied 'Songs from the Hill,' I now hear not only a series of curious and precisely defined vocal techniques, but also a series of curious and precisely defined characters. One song seemed to be coming from a mysterious little crying girl, another from a mysterious old braggart, and so forth. These excerpts were followed by music from 'Tableau,' which she now does with the assistance of Andrea Goodman and Monica Solem, who play recorders with unusual skill, as well as helping Monk to sing her wordless melodies and play her piano accompaniments. Here I am sure the music itself has grown, as well as my own perception of it. The voices match much more closely than when I first heard the piece in Town Hall a couple of years ago, and here too the theatricality is quite strong. I found it easy to fantasize characters and situations as the music moved through its many contrasting sections.

The most gratifying thing for me about Reich's music has always been the fascinating rhythmic worlds he creates by approaching relatively simple basic patterns with such inventiveness and, at the same time, such intellectual rigor. The basic techniques may all have come from Ghana, but the music always ends up sounding like American minimalism. Sometimes the finished works fall a little on the dry side, or a little on the pretty side, but in his 90-minute 'Drumming' Reich seemed to reach the very core of his idea and produced one of the few works less than 10 years old that I am already willing to consider as a masterpiece. This presentation of the first part of 'Drumming' suffered slightly since Reich filled in the vocal rhythms himself instead of using the female singers who generally do them, but on all other counts it was a stunning performance. Watching the proceedings from the third row, I especially appreciated the exceptional talents of Reich's percussionists, who often have not received their fair share of the credit. People like Russ Hartenberger, James Preiss, and Glen Velez, who performed on this occasion, never miss a beat or a bongo or permit an unintended accent. They phase back and forth across one another's tempos with perfect ease, and seem to enjoy themselves fully at the same time. Clearly the 'Drumming' ideas could never have become the 'Drumming' masterpiece if Reich had not found musicians like this to work with.

Robert Ashley's work tends to be less accessible than that of the others, because by the time people begin to figure out what he's doing, and how important it is, Ashley has usually gone on to something else. Typically, the Kitchen audience seemed a little confused by 'The Bank,' a segment from his latest series, 'Private

Parts.' Here Ashley reads disjointed half-explained stories in a mellow monotone against lush semi-popular instrumental accompaniments provided by his friend, 'Blue' Gene Tyranny. It is true that the kinds of multi-media events Ashley did at the Once Festivals in Michigan in the '60s were recognized as seminal events a few years after he did them. It is true that his later ventures into spontaneous-conversation-as-art are now well remembered, sometimes imitated, and discussed with increasing frequency. It is true that his recent documentary video series 'Music with Roots in the Aether' is gradually beginning to be appreciated. And in a few years people will probably begin to grasp 'Private Parts' too. I've heard two performances and one recording, and I'm still not too sure what is going on. I have begun to notice, however, that Ashley's monotone voice is not really a monotone, but rather a moving tone that bears some relationship to the background music. I have the feeling that, as with most of his works, I will eventually learn how the piece works and how to listen to it, and that then the music will suddenly sound quite direct and self-evident. So far I'm still confused by 'Private Parts,' but I am clearer about Ashley himself. He is an unusually adventurous artist who risks much, generally keeps a few years ahead of the trends, and pays a high price in terms of audience acceptance. He is older than any of the other artists on this program, but he is also the only one of them who chose to come to this highly visible concert with a challenging new idea instead of a safe old one. More power to him. It is refreshing to find avant-gardists who continue to be avant-gardists, even as they approach 50.

Laurie Anderson's work tends to be far more accessible than that of the others. She presented a series of her songs, which have pop music and cute lyrics; worked with an ensemble of seven musicians, which didn't seem to have rehearsed much; told some stories, which were first-person anecdotes about her many travels; and ran about 20 minutes over her share of the time, which seemed unfair to the other artists as well as to the audience. She has an attractive personality and apparently a rather large following. But despite a few clever lines and a few effective projections, her work seemed trivial in comparison with the solid musical rewards of the rest of the program. It didn't quite seem to belong in the sophisticated context of an established museum of new video and music, though I suspect it would have seemed acceptable and perhaps genuinely entertaining in, well, in a slightly glorified loft.

June 12, 1978

Recent Concerts of Phill Niblock, Yoshi Wada, Jim Burton, and Jon Deak

Phill Niblock still concentrates on drone tones, packed only a few cycles away from one another, and amplified rather loudly, just as he did when I first began hearing his music some six years ago. One doesn't notice the progress of his work that much from concert to concert and year to yaer. Now, however, thinking back, I am beginning to realize that, despite the severe stylistic restrictions Niblock has adhered to, his music has actually developed a good deal since I began listening to it. Gradually the instrumental sounds on his prerecorded tapes became more realistic, more sensual, and more controlled in pitch. Gradually he began using live performers in conjunction with the tapes, sometimes instructing them to wander around the space as they played their drone tones, so that the live sound and the prerecorded tracks mixed in your ear in varying proportions. Gradually he figured out how to induce audiences to wander around in the space and listen to the sound from different positions, which is the only way one can fully appreciate the variety contained within this type of minimalism. Gradually he applied his basic procedures to a number of different wind and stringed instruments, achieving slightly different results and slight increases in finesse as he went along. In his recent Kitchen concert he moved away from his usual wind and string sounds to write a piece for timpani and tape. As always, the music droned on a tight cluster of pitches, but the rumbling drums added a new, almost vicious, dimension. Percussionist Jan Williams played with intent control, as did cellist David Gibson and bassoonist Arthur Stidfole in other works. Two of Niblock's fine nonnarrative films, mostly following hand movements, were shown in silence between the musical segments.

A few years ago I reported on the music Yoshi Wada was making with immense 'pipe horns,' consisting of a ton or two of plumbing that produced deep ethereal tones when played with brass mouthpieces. More recently I noted some music he made against an immense concave wall of sheet metal that vibrated when he sang into it. Now he is working with an immense tube, about five feet in diameter and 15 feet long, which produces cavernous overtones when someone sings inside. This spring the structure was installed at the Samaya Foundation space on Warren Street. Wada and Richard Hayman sat cross-legged at the center of the tube, singing improvised modal music. The first half of the evening involved the equivalent of our harmonic minor scale, and the second half was a kind of natural minor with no second and no sixth. Wada can chant bass tones with a remarkable half-gruff edge, and Hayman made some use of his extremely clear falsetto, but in general the singing was nothing special. This piece is not really about fine singing, however. The focus, as in all of Wada's work, is on the thorny acoustical problems he confronts, the immense structures he builds, and the visual spectacles he creates.

Jim Burton has drifted rather far away from the music he became known for in New York a few years ago. There was always a lot of theatre and comedy in his work, whether he was playing his 'springed instrument,' appearing as a cymbal tamer, amplifying bicycle wheels, writing a piece for toy frogs, or recycling old music-box parts. Now he lives in Buffalo, and his art seems to have shifted from somewhat humorous music to somewhat musical humor. His evening of 'Hard Pore Corn,' at the Kitchen, has little to do with sound, but instead offered an amusing Superman take-off, a hilarious professional lecture on quarks, a one-man-band routine, and other sketches, using several trunkfuls of prop creations, costumes, and prerecorded sound effects. Working with him in this concert was Jon Deak, who presented a new work of his own called 'Invocation.' Allegedly Deak's string bass was built in Italy in 1734, and allegedly a man mysteriously disappeared in the same neighbourhood in that same year, and allegedly he was very attached to some string bass, perhaps this very one. Deak performs a little ceremony to invoke the spirit, and eventually we begin to hear a small voice from somewhere inside the bass. It's a goofy but delightful little fantasy.

July 3, 1978

More Than a Percussionist: Bob Becker

I had not intended to write about Bob Becker. I was well aware that he was one of the more accomplished percussionists around, but that in itself did not seem particularly noteworthy, and when I went to his program with dancer Kyra Lober at the Open Eye on June 17, it was simply because it seemed like a pleasant way to spend a Saturday evening. I didn't even bother to try to obtain a press ticket. By intermission, however, it became quite clear that Becker is much more than just a fine percussionist and that someone ought to say so.

One thing that sets Becker off from other percussionists is the stylistic breadth he has attained. He has played an extremely varied repertoire with Paul Winter, Steve Reich, and Chuck Mangione as well as at Marlboro and the Casals Festival, and is a key member of the percussion ensemble Nexus. But he has also studied tabla and mrdangam with Indian teachers, and Ghanaian drumming with African teachers. And somewhere along the line he also became proficient on the mbira, sometimes referred to as a kalimba or thumb piano. With this kind of background, it is a simple matter for him to take on Japanese temple bowls, or Pakistani cowbells. I'm sure that he could even make my kitchen table sound good were he so inclined. But I doubt that he'd bother. If one thing is more important to him than fine percussion playing, it would be fine percussion to play on. Some of the instruments he worked with in this concert were themselves works of art.

Another thing that sets Becker off from other percussionists is his creative approach to playing. He doesn't seem to refer to himself as a 'composer,' and none of the pieces he played on this occasion had the pretensions of actual 'compositions,' but most of them were not really improvisations either. Generally he works with simple structures, perhaps merely as a long crescendo, or a sequence of isolated tones, or a set of permutations. Compositionally, such procedures might even seem simplistic if played by an ordinary percussionist. But in Becker's highly skilled hands, they never do.

Another special thing about Becker is the way he has learned to work with dance. He and Lober work together with the kind of mutual concern that one senses between guitarists and flamenco dancers, and which I seldom feel between ballet companies and their pit orchestras, or between modern dancers and their tapes. At this concert the music and dance seemed equally important. Each was to some degree subservient to the other, both seemed to involve equal amounts of preparation time, and probably neither would have evolved without the other.

Several times I have heard musicians present long, meditative pieces that consisted solely of rolling on gongs or cymbals, but I have never been so captivated by this kind of music as I was when Becker played his 'Cymbal.' Working with two extremely resonant Zildjian cymbals, he began so soft that at first all one could hear was two deep humming tones. Very gradually, and with exceptional steadiness, these tones became louder, and a few overtones faded in. Occasionally Becker would underline one of them by tapping subtly on a bell of a particular pitch. Eventually the rich resonances of hundreds of overtones became audible, as they do on fine cymbals, and I could even hear sirens wailing somewhere deep within the sound. He stopped suddenly and allowed the cymbals to begin dying away just as the church bells outside began to ring nine o'clock. It seemed almost as if Becker had timed the piece to end that way, and judging from the care with which he handled everything else that evening, I wouldn't be surprised if he had.

Lober joined him in 'Stillpoint,' which began with the lights very low. It took me some time to realize that the extremely soft hum I was hearing was not the result of some distant fan, but was being produced by Becker. He was caressing the rim of a large Japanese temple bowl in slow steady circles, and continued to do so throughout the piece. Four smaller temple bowls eventually made brief entrances, but that's all that happened musically. It was enough.

In 'Windings,' Becker played a set of Pakistani cowbells. They klunked along happily, like all cowbells, but produced precise pitches at the same time. Here, the enticing thing was the peculiar scale that contained Becker's improvised cowbell melodies. I heard it as C, C-sharp, D, E, G, A, C.

'Astral Light' was an unstructured improvisation that included a little bit of everything. The piece lacked the discipline and clarity of the rest of the evening and was, it seemed to me, the weakest segment for both dancer and musician. It was a pleasure, however, to see how closely the two could follow one another in an unstructured context.

Becker's 'Seven Variations' were performed on seven Chinese tom-toms without the dancer. Right from the beginning the drumming was much too fast for me to ascertain whether the music really was 'based on the number seven,' as the program claimed, but as a performance the variations were another tour de force. Becker is more fluent with two sticks than most musicians are with 10 fingers, and if you think I'm exaggerating, just listen to the lead mallet lines in the Umbrella direct-to-disc album, 'Nexus Ragtime Concert.' The program ended with 'Mbira,' in which Becker plucked out polyrhythmic patterns on a traditional mbira with a large gourd resonator, playing variations on a traditional melody

from Zimbabwe with as much ease as the African musicians I have heard in field recordings.

September 4, 1978
New Forms for New Music

Whatever happened to the symphony? the tone poem? the song cycle? the oratorio? the cantata? the sonata? the prelude? the rondo? One might occasionally run across a composer who still turns back to one of them, but by and large these forms are dead. They were supposed to die. We killed them and we were glad we did. As music made its brash way through the 20th century, we decided we didn't need standard forms anymore. We were going to be emancipated from all of that. The 20th century, or at least the second half of the 20th century, was to be wide open. Composers could still write string quartets, concertos, operas, and sets of variations occasionally, since those forms were not quite worn out yet, but there was really no need for any of it. The new music could now break all the rules, make up its own forms, and do whatever it wanted.

It was a nice idea, but wasn't very realistic. Composers, like other groups of human beings, always seem to fall into standardized procedures of some sort. Of course, they don't know they are falling into standardized procedures. Artists never do. For example, it was not until composers had been writing sonatas for a century or so that anyone ever completely defined 'sonata form.' Today's music also fits into basic forms, and eventually someone will be able to define them all, and the new forms will probably turn out to be at least as rigid as any of the old ones. It is premature to lay down any hard and fast rules, but when I sat down to try to make a list of today's standard forms, I was surprised to discover that I could already delineate six of them fairly specifically.

The post-Webern form: Post-Webern pieces are generally scored for ensembles of diverse instruments, and last from six to 20 minutes. As in the works of Anton von Webern, from which the form was derived, the music involves careful manipulation of intervals, usually with the help of a 12-tone row. The music must be intricate and atonal, with new variations appearing constantly, and little or no repetition. Major chords, strong rhythmic pulses, and lyrical melodies must be carefully camouflaged, if they occur at all. This is probably the most widely used of all 20th-century musical forms, and it completely dominated music series, especially in America, throughout the '60s. It has declined gradually in popularity in the '70s.

The multi-media form: This spectacular contemporary form always involves projections and electronic equipment, as well as instrumentalists, and usually dancers as well. As much of the activity as possible must be presented simultaneously. Normally such performances call for a large cast and take place in gymnasiums, ballrooms, or other open spaces. Usually a sociopolitical message is conveyed. Multi-media pieces were most frequent and most spectacular during the late '60s, though they are still encountered occasionally in less frenetic variations.

The performer-and-tape form: This form generally calls for one to six performers and lasts about 10 to 15 minutes. The tape is prepared in an electronic music studio, and the main concern is to set up a dialogue between humans and machines, usually with dramatic tension between the two. Both must have more or less equal time. In many early examples the electronic sounds and the instrumental ones were sharply contrasted, but as electronic equipment became more sophisticated, the tapes began to blend with the instruments and sometimes imitate them. The form began almost simutaneously with the advent of purely electronic pieces, but it soon proved to be far preferable for concert-hall presentations. The genre has never been particularly popular, but it has held remarkably steady, with new performer-and-tape pieces continuing to crop up every season.

The hypnotic form: Hypnotic pieces may be written for almost any instrumental ensemble, but they must always be rather long, extremely persistent, and highly repetitious. The tempo must be rather fast and must remain exactly the same throughout. The main concern is to lull the listener into a sequence of melodic or rhythmic patterns that shift very gradually as the music progresses. The form sprang up rather suddenly in America in the late '60s, when Terry Riley's 'In C' became widely known, and several composers launched successful careers writing hypnotic pieces. Hypnotic pieces in this strict form are not written so often today, although less well-defined types of repetitive or minimal music crop up constantly.

The sound poem: This form involves making music by manipulating words. In most cases speech sounds are recorded, altered, mixed, collaged, and otherwise made into prerecorded tapes. In other instances sound poems may be performed live. The most important requirement is that the piece be a genuine sound expression, and not merely a translation of words that could be conveyed effectively on the printed page. Many early precedents can be found, such as the 'Ursonata' of Kurt Schwitters, although the form was not explored with any regularity until the late '60s and early '70s, when a number of poets became more interested in public performance than in publication, and a number of musicians became interested in working with speech sounds. Sound poetry still accounts for only a tiny percentage of the new music launched every year, but the genre seems to be gradually growing in popularity, particularly in California.

The performance-art form: The main requirement in this form is that composer-artists perform the pieces themselves. The works may involve instruments, sound effects, talking, singing, theatrical devices, or all of these things, but they must

be presented by the artist, with or without assistants, and must be highly individualistic. The content is usually autobiographical, conceptual, or comic, and the performance often utilizes highly developed vocal skills, or other individual performing skills, that only the particular artist can execute. Works in this form must not be addressed specifically to a musical audience, however, since most of the performance outlets for this genre are in museums and galleries. Little songs, dances, or jokes, which would be considered frivolous in most other art forms, are often acceptable in performance art. The genre evolved in the early '70s and now flourishes particularly around New York.

Of course, the genres I am calling today's 'forms' may not seem parallel to the 'forms' of the 19th century. But that is only natural, since the music itself is so different. The rules that defined 19-th century forms pertained largely to the relationships between themes and the ways in which a composition was to be divided into sections. Now the concerns are different, and the rules are about other things. Of course, many contemporary works turn out to be hybrids, just as many 19th-century works turned out to be crosses between symphonies and tone poems or between sonatas and rondos. And occasionally someone like Eric Satie comes up with something that defies all of the categories. But these are only exceptions to the networks of rules that determine the vast majority of music. Ultimately every age is left with a rather small collection of generally accepted procedures.

September 25, 1978

Nigel Rollings Has Some Good Ideas

My first encounter with the music of Nigel Rollings occurred some weeks ago, when the young British-American composer was accompanying a theatrical event in Washington Square Park. He was playing on several rackfuls of interesting percussion and homemade instruments, but the general knockings and ringings he was producing did not seem so interesting, and I only stayed a short time. Last week, however, I noticed that he was presenting an evening solo concert, and I decided to have another listen. I was glad I did. This September 9 program, which took place at Rollings's Front Street loft, included 12 short pieces. None of these were very long or very profound in themselves, but the concert as a whole turned out to be a most stimulating hour and a half.

Rollings's formal training was in architecture and graphics, but he soon drifted toward new music, publishing a little magazine and following the activities of the Musicians Coop of London, a group that includes many jazz based experimentalists such as Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Tony Oxley, and Paul Rutherford. Four years ago he came to this country, where he earns his living as a graphics designer and devotes much of his time to making music. Like many with visual arts backgrounds, he loves to pick up odd objects he finds on the streets, and he often manages to turn these into musical instruments. He did almost no public concerts, however, until this spring, when he began a series of monthly presentations at his loft. This economical format is perhaps a rather cautious way for a composer to introduce his work to the public, but it offers maximum preparation time and minimal pressure, and in general strikes me as a good idea. Rollings has many other good ideas. In fact, it seemed to me that there were more good ideas in this concert than I have heard at any concert by any young composer in some time.

Several pieces were played on the chord organ. As you probably remember, this instrument was designed some years ago as a means of selling organs to people who don't know how to play them. As on the autoharp, one can find the right chord simply by pushing one button, thus relieving the users of having to learn the notes of the chords, and enabling them to concentrate on finding the melody. The instrument no doubt achieved its main purpose, which was to make money for the organ companies, but it was never taken very seriously in music education circles. Composers of experimental music also overlooked it, despite their interest in practically every other kind of organ. Enter Rollings, who found an abandoned chord organ on the street one Christmas Eve, took it home, and began to discover possibilities others had overlooked. Its chords, for example, are always voiced in the same restricted range, and that alone gives the instrument a unique sound. If you push two chord buttons at once you can sometimes make the chords pulsate against one another in odd ways. If you handle the buttons delicately enough you can kind of ease one chord in while you ease the other one out. If you manipulate the buttons quickly you can make extremely fast chord changes. All of these techniques would be more or less impossible on any other kind of organ, and thus Rollings came up with some lovely, repetitious, modal, nostalgic, minimalistic organ music that doesn't sound at all like any of the other lovely, repetitous, modal, nostalgic, minimalist organ music that people have been turning out so profusely. That was another good idea.

One especially attractive segment of the concert was played on a vertical pane of glass about two feet across and five feet high. Rollings sprayed water liberally on both sides of the glass and began rubbing his fingers across it. At first he stroked the glass in simple motions that produced short phrases. Later he moved in larger circular motions that throbbed in longer phrases. Later he moved in big slashing movements that groaned in vigorous phrases. Many musicians would also have wanted to tap the glass, knock it, click it, and scrape it, but Rollings restrained himself, thus achieving a well-focused piece that was all about rubbing. The performance seemed to be basically an improvisation, but he must have practiced quite a bit, as he always seemed to know exactly what kind of sound a particular motion would produce, and he was able to move sensitively from one phrase to the next. Just a wet pane of glass. Another good idea.

At several points in the program Rollings turned on his short-wave radio. It was a powerful receiver, and he turned the dial with much respect for the distant signals it picked up. Eventually he would find a spot he liked and would leave the dial there, where the radio would provide a strange background while he drew a bow across some cymbals, or played some prerecorded piano music, or stimulated some of his homemade wind chimes. Many composers have used radio sounds, but I have seldom heard such arresting ones as those Rollings tuned in. Once he stopped the dial at a point where two humming sounds were moving in and out of phase with one another, throbbing gently and unpredictably. Sometimes he would find a frequency where three or four indecipherable signals would mix together at varying volumes, perhaps with bits of static sputtering around them. Another good idea.

Everything on the concert might be described as minimalist in nature. One segment was played exclusively with metal-tipped mallets on two suspended cymbals, and the keyboard segments generally involved simple phrases that repeated over and over. Other moments were devoted to dropping ball bearings into a metal lamp shade and casually dumping ping-pong balls onto his assemblage of instruments, which, incidentally, also included fire-alarm bells, heating pipes, a crude homemade stringed instrument, and an ingenious

homemade clicking device. Like most minimalists, he never has a whole lot going on at once and never decorates the essential ideas very much. Unlike most minimalists, however, he doesn't permit his individual pieces to go on for more than a few minutes. Frequently, too, the repetitive materials shift suddenly, veer into an unexpected turn, or otherwise break their own logic. That was particularly true in the chord organ music. Like some other younger composers I have encountered recently, Rollings is not content to lay down a couple of basic premises and respectfully allow the music to follow its course unhindered. He likes to tinker with his material, play games with it, even contradict it. One might call this 'mannered minimalism,' and one might dislike it, but one can also become totally fascinated by it. Another good idea.

Of course, Rollings is not alone in any of this, and in fact, his work fits rather neatly into the larger context of experimental music. His radio sounds, his toy piano, his homemade wind chimes, his found objects, and his general openness to all sounds clearly have roots in the kind of explorations that John Cage, Lucia Dlugoszewski, and others began many years ago. Philip Corner, Carole Weber, and Charlie Morrow are a few of the other New York composers who have also discovered that one can obtain a variety of high-quality bells quite inexpensively by shopping at the Canal Street fire-alarm shops instead of the music stores, and I am told that musicians have picked up on this solution in London and other cities as well. Fire-alarm bells have practically become standard instruments. Meanwhile, I have heard other cymbal solos by Bob Becker and Michael Canick just in the last few months. Anna Lockwood explored sounds of glass in some depths a few years ago. Skip La Plante, Jim Burton, and others have devised homemade instruments as ingenious as any of Rollings's. And of course, Cage and Dlugoszewski continue to find new objects that make new sounds. There is nothing particularly unique about the direction Rollings is taking. But he is obviously aware of how others have traversed the same ground, he is able to skirt the main pitfalls and adept at finding shortcuts, and he does have a knack for coming up with, well, good ideas.

Note:
I have never heard Rollings's name again, and I told Paul I suspected he had disappeared from the experimental music field. 'That's not surprising,' Paul replied, 'People like that usually disappear. They are just doing music for a short time, for their personal pleasure. But that's why their work is so refreshing and interesting.'

October 9, 1978
A La Monte Young Diary: Oct. 1974-Sept. 1978

October 1974: I run into a friend who has just returned from Rome, where La Monte Young, Charlemagne Palestine, and a number of Indian musicians have been performing in the East-West Music Festival at Galleria L'Attica, and he tells me an interesting anecdote. It seems that Young actually sold a piano as an art object. He signed it, collected a lot of money, the whole bit, just the way sculptors do. This strikes me as quite a coup for a musician, though perhaps it should not be too surprising in the case of Young, most of whose supporters are part of the art world, where such things happen every day. The piano was tuned according to Young's special system, which keeps the intervals in simple ratios rather than in the equal temperament system standard in the West. Part of the deal is that the composer is supposed to maintain this art object periodically, so that it stays tuned to his special scale.

May 4, 1975: I visit a gallery space at 141 Wooster Street, where Young has been presenting his 'Well-Tuned Piano' to New York audiences. Perhaps 60 to 80 listeners are there tonight, and Young sits at the piano in dim light, wearing his usual white toga, with his hair tied back. He starts out by moving his fingers slowly on perhaps half a dozen notes, one of which particularly collides with my Western pitch sense. As I listen to the strange chord and gradually become accustomed to the 'out of tune' note, sometimes it begins to sound right and the others turn sour. Tuning systems like this can be quite disorienting.

Every so often Young changes the chords, revealing a new set of intervals. The choice of new chords seem intentional, and these changes keep the music from becoming tedious, but it is still not very interesting. He's obviously improvising, and when he goes off into something with rhythmic character he soon loses the momentum. He hardly deals at all with the melodic possibilities of his strangely tuned chords. In short, he doesn't seem to be getting much mileage out of his system, and after about an hour and a half I become restless and I want to leave. I'm told that the performance is supposed to go on for three hours, and I feel a little irresponsible for not staying, but there are some other things I ought to be doing, and I figure I'm not likely to get much out of the music if I force myself to stay, especially since I haven't been able to really concentrate on anything he's played for the last 20 or 30 minutes. As I am leaving, I hear Young shift back to the chord that opened the performance. 'This is where I came in,' I think to myself, as I put my shoes on and escape quietly.

May 7, 1975: The owner of Young's gallery telephones me on behalf of the composer. They were disturbed that I didn't stay for the whole performance and felt I wasn't giving the piece a chance, since the formal structure of the three

hour piece is so important, and since the music is so profound, and since Young is such an important innovator, and since etc. etc. Maybe. Still, it does seem that any real masterpiece ought to be able to make a fairly strong impression on its first 90 minutes. Maybe I just don't have the patience to deal with Young anymore. Maybe I ought to stop trying to write about him.

May 11, 1975: I run into a friend who has just arrived in New York. He's planning to go hear 'The Well-Tuned Piano' and asks me about it.

'I don't care for it much,' I explain. 'He's got this elaborate tuning system, which is kind of interesting, but he doesn't do much with it. No good melodies. No rhythmic ideas. No tonal or harmonic activity to speak of. He just wiggles his fingers on the keys, changing chords every 10 minutes or so. It's really a work in progress, I think.' 'Hasn't he been working on it an awful long time to consider it still a work in progress?' my friend responds. 'He's been using that tuning system ever since 1964, you know.' The remark surprises me because I didn't know, or else have forgotten, that Young devised his tuning system that long ago. In thinking about it later, however, the piece still strikes me as a work in progress. Young always has worked slowly, but he has great determination with every project he undertakes, and he usually comes up with something in the end. He played saxophone for many years before he developed his fast modal improvising style, which was quite effective and ahead of most of what was going on in jazz circles in the early '60s. It took him many years to develop his static droning music into the more sophisticated electronic installations and live performances that he presented at his Theatre of Eternal Music. And after about five years of intensive study of the kirana style, under Pandit Pran Nath, he still doesn't perform any Indian music in public. Young is extremely patient, and perhaps we too should be more patient as we wait for his 'Well-Tuned Piano' to come together.

In a way, working with an invented tuning system is even more difficult than the other challenges Young has committed himself to at various times. It can take a long time to adapt our ears to intervals we aren't accustomed to and understand how they can work together. I'm sure Young has at least an intellectual understanding of every interval he uses, but it isn't so easy to figure out how tonal centers are going to function on some bizarre new scale, and to work out a rich and meaningful approach to melody and harmony when dealing with a pitch world that has no precedents. I suppose it's possible that to Young's ears the 'Well-Tuned Piano' is already functioning in a highly developed musical system of some kind. But the real problem won't be solved until he figures out a way to present the music so that we can hear it too. So far as I can see, it's still a work in progress.

September 19, 1978: Young has been keeping a very low profile, at least around New York, and I haven't heard any of his music for a very long time. Now he is presenting the 'Well-Tuned Piano' again, and while I still have bad memories of hearing it three years ago, I decide I should go over to Young's 6:00 performance at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery on West Broadway and find out how the piece has developed. When I arrive the spacious room is dark, except for the theatrical lights focused on Marian Zazeela's paper rings, which undulate very slowly in the air and cast mysterious colored shadows onto the white walls. Thirty or 40 listeners are gathered, most of them sitting or lying on large Persian rugs, when Young comes out in his accustomed toga and begins playing the grand piano at one corner of the room. It's supposed to be a first-class, custom-made Boesendorfer Imperial, but for the first few minutes it doesn't even sound like a piano. He plays softly, and the instrument sounds so odd and tinny that I begin to wonder whether the microphones over the instrument are connected to some sort of weird amplification system. After 10 minutes or so, however, the sound doesn't seem so strange, and I figure that my ears just weren't accustomed to the odd tuning. Gradually Young settles into a limited set of pitches, and I begin to tune in on his frequencies. I know enough about tuning systems to tell the difference between, say, a Western major third and and acoustically perfect 5:4, and to appreciate the special serenity that seems to result when intervals are tuned in simple ratios, and I begin to enjoy some of the harmonies Young is finding. But the room is dark and stuffy, and I soon fall asleep on one of the posh Persian rugs. When I wake up it is approaching 8:00, and I decide to take in another performance a few blocks away rather than trying to cope with the hours that still remain in this one.

September 21, 1978: I realize that I didn't really give Young's music a chance the other night, but I also realize that it is unrealistic to expect myself to stay with him all the way from 6:00 until after 10, which is how Young's current solo performances have been running. So I brace myself with dinner and a couple of cups of coffee and go to the gallery around 8:00. This time I find it quite easy to adapt to the tuning system, and I appreciate the sound of the instrument more than before. A couple of times I think I am hearing a harp, but most of the time the instrument sounds like a good piano, though softer and gentler than most good pianos. The music itself is also attractive.

The performance is clearly an improvisation, but it's not much like the one-chord jazz Young used to improvise on saxophone or like the ragas he currently improvises with his voice. The general procedure, at least on this night, is to play some simple two-note chords for a while, let them settle into something, move into a longer section, eventually relax back into another sparse interlude, and then take off somewhere else. The long sections tend to be mostly tremulos. Sometimes he sticks with just four or five notes for a long time, keeping the

pedal down and letting the piano build up resonance. It's similar to the kind of tremulo music Charlemagne Palestine frequently plays on his Boesendorfer, but Palestine is much more physical and drives the instrument into producing high-frequency fuzz and whistling. Young just keeps moving his fingers around the middle of the keyboard until an odd sort of humming begins to ooze in around the notes.

There is nothing very fast or virtuosic about Young's technique, but he plays well, and I can begin to appreciate his unique tuning system, not to mention the energy it takes to present a solo concert of this length. Some of the longer sections are particularly effective too. My favorite is a raga-influenced episode that reminds me a bit of the kind of textures Terry Riley gets out of his electronic organ. Here Young simply plays a repeated arpeggio in the left hand and overlays a smooth melodic line with the right. If it weren't for a weird tuning of the third, a wrong note in the bass, and an unexpected modulation in the middle of the whole thing, the section might pass for a raga improvisation in the minor mode. But unlike raga improvisers, Young never falls into a very clear beat. In fact, I don't hear anything all evening that I can really tap my foot to. Young is going for sonorities so much that he doesn't have much time for rhythm. But many of the sonorities are quite pleasant, as well as being quite odd, and I stay until the end of the performance, managing to focus on the slowly progressing music most of the time.

September 25, 1978: I reach Young on the telephone and learn a little about the modifications that have been made on the piano he was playing. The most basic change is that the instrument has been rebuilt with single strings, instead of the double and triple strings that are customarily used throughout most of the piano register. That certainly explains why Young's instrument is relatively soft, and why it sometimes has a harp-like quality, and I suppose I should have been able to detect this alteration from hearing the music. I guess I'm just so accustomed to the idea of pianos having triple strings that it never occurred to me that this one might not.

I also explain to Young that I find it easier to appreciate his tuning system now than I did in 1975, and offer the theory that this may be because now he tends to focus on only four or five notes at a time, while before he often improvised on larger chords. The larger groups of notes contained so many oddly tuned intervals that the ear just couldn't take them all in. He seems surprised at this observation, as if he had forgotten how he used to play, but agrees that he probably has changed in this way, and that this may be what makes the music more accessible now.

When I ask him why he tends to stay in the middle of the keyboard, he answers, quite reasonably, that this is because one cannot hear exact tunings as clearly in the most extreme registers.

As we talk, it becomes clear that Young is still obsessed with originality, as he frequently reminds me that he was the first one to do this or that. I want to tell him that 'first' doesn't matter much and that 'best' is what really counts, but I decide to keep the conversation friendly and change the subject to Indian music. By now Young has been studying the kirana style for seven and a half years, and he says he feels he has pretty well mastered about a dozen ragas, but that his guru knows over 300, which means he still has a long way to go. Few people would have the energy to take up such serious study of such a demanding style at age 35, the way Young did. But then, Young has always thrived on difficult challenges, and he is patient enough that he often goes further with them than anyone expects him to. In fact, patience may be his greatest asset, and 'The Well-Tuned Piano,' which he's been working on now for 14 years, is a good example of how it serves him.

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October 16, 1978

The New Tonality in Works of Steve Reich, Frederic Rzewski, and Brian Eno

The new ECM release of Steve Reich's 'Music for 18 Musicians' arrived in the mail the other day. This is not my favorite Reich work, nor am I convinced that the long fade-out at the end of side one and the fade-in at the beginning of side two do much to enhance what otherwise sounds like a live performance. But there are certain advantages in listening to music at home. In this case there was a piano nearby, and as I listened to the album, I became interested in picking out the pitches Reich was using, and attempting to figure out how the piece worked harmonically. This pastime proved most interesting, and I began pulling down other recordings that seemed relevant. By the end of the evening I decided that the Reich work is in a special kind of D major, that Frederic Rzewski's 'Coming Together' moves in a very different kind of G minor, that Brian Eno's 'Discreet Music' sits in another type of G major, that one could easily find 20 or 30 other composers working in similar ways, and that the new tonality can be defined as a general phenomenon. I figured I ought to write something about how the new tonality works.

The greatest difference between the new tonality and traditional European tonality is that the recent music doesn't have much to do with chord progressions. You don't hear clean shifts from dominant to tonic chords in the new tonality. Instead, you hear basically a scale, and the chords and melodies that arise may be any combinations of notes from this scale. Since there is no concern for the chord progressions that propelled traditional European music, and which continue to propel most pop and folk music as well, there is no need for a strong bass line to carry the progressions. There is often, if not always, a tonal center, but this is usually just the note that comes up most often at the most important points. It does not have much sense of finality. And when this tonal center changes or modulates, it is usually just a question of shifting the emphasis from one note to

another, rather that bringing in a whole new set of chord progressions, as Beethoven would have.

Reich shifts the tonal center frequently and quite craftily in 'Music for 18 Musicians.' According to Reich's program notes, the piece follows a slow sequence of 11 chords, but I hear it as a sequence of tonalities. The first main section of the piece sits on a D-major scale, and the music really does feel like D-major to me, even though there are no actual D-major chords. Most of the time most of the scale is present, and this makes for sappy harmonies, which in combination with the overdressed instrumentation of clarinets, strings, voices, and mallet instrumets, makes the piece as a whole awfully lush. But other things are going on underneath the lush. After a while, the weight shifts toward A-major, and eventually to a bright E-major feeling. By the end of side one, we drop into C-sharp minor. Side Two takes us from C-sharp minor back through E major, A major, F-sharp minor, and eventually all the way back to D major. Of course, this is not a triumphant return to the tonic, the way it would have been in a 19th-century symphony. The music just drifts back. It's a return, but no big deal.

Of the many recordings of new music that are almost totally unknown, Frederic Rzewski's Opus One album is about the finest one that I happen to know about. When I run into listeners who feel that avant-garde music is too insular or too intellectual, or just irrelevant, I try to find a chance to play this album for them, because it changes their minds almost every time. I've listened to it many times, been touched by its political messages, felt its rhythmic power, and strained my concentration to the hilt trying to follow its melodies as they gradually grow longer and longer, but this time I began thinking of Rzewski's music as a case of the new tonality. Of the three pieces on the album, 'Coming Together' is particularly interesting in this way. Here the sound is basically G minor, though it uses only five of the seven notes normally occurring in G minor and might be more properly considered a mode. The scale is simple and it works well, but the really interesting thing comes toward the end, as one of the melodic progressions gradually winds itself into a corner, where it begins to produce a whole lot more B-flats than Gs. The shift is gradual but, in this limited context, crucial. The music begins to feel like B-flat major, seems bright and optimistic, and fits the climax of the text perfectly. It also fits Rzewski's rigid melodic system, which gradually eases the music back to the G-minor realm.

Brian Eno's 'Discreet Music' is not quite so crafty, and like many overdubbed electronic works, it sometimes falls slightly out of tune, but it is a good example of the new tonality, and a good piece to mention here, since it is relatively familiar. Here the scale is G, B, C, D, E, and since either G or D is generally present in the bass register, the music has a simple, relaxed G-major feeling. Listening carefully for shifts in the scale, however, I began to think I was occasionally hearing the pitch A in the upper register, I never really could hear it, and concluded that I was picking up an aural illusion or overtone of some sort. But then, toward the end of the piece, there it was. A little line with an A in it. Eno had kept this note practically inaudible until the very end, and then, finally, let us have it. That may not seem like a big deal, but in music this clean and simple, the addition of one new tone can be a major event. It is in this piece, at least if one is tuned in on that frequency.

These are only a few examples of how the new tonality works. A few weeks ago I reviewed a David Behrman album, which is a particularly sophisticated and

successful case in point, and there are many others, including quite a few that are generally considered jazz. For so much music to return to old-fashioned keys after 50 years of dissonance and atonality might seem to be a reactionary development, and I doubt that anyone would have predicted this 10 years ago. It is not really reactionary, however. The new tonality did not arise out of any particular respect for Beethoven and Mozart. It came about primarily, I think, because the younger composers began studying ragas, listening to scales from Africa, Indonesia, and other parts of the world, and observing that there were a whole lot of good ways of writing music with simple scales and tonal centers. Considering music from a cross-cultural point of view, one has little choice but to conclude that the dissonance and atonality that has dominated Western classical music is a very odd phenomenon and that, for all its assets and power, it just doesn't have much to do with music as a whole in the world as a whole. It is understandable that young composers in the '60s would have wanted to find a more universal musical language that related to the larger picture. Being trained in Western music, they have generally stuck with the Western tuning systems and Western instruments, and they have evolved a kind of tonality that does relate back to European music of the 18th and 19th centuries. But only partly. When Terry Riley titled one of his early works 'In C,' he didn't mean 'in C major' exactly, and he certainly didn't mean that he was working with tonic and dominant chords again. He was really working 'in C something else.' It was a new tonality.

November 27, 1978

Documentary Music: Gavin Bryars, Philip Corner, and Others

Little, if anything, has been said about 'documentary music,' but it seems to me that there is a lot of it going around these days. I don't mean to define a specific school or category, and I certainly don't mean to suggest any exact parallels between what composers are doing and the activity in documentary films or documentary art. I simply mean that a great deal of recent music is documentary in a general sense. Most music is totally creative, totally a figment of some personal imagination or process, but documentary music merely records some pattern or event found in the real, non-imaginary world. It translates facts into sounds. This is a new idea. The closest 19th-century and early 20th-century composers ever came to actually documenting anything would be those operas or tone poems that claimed to recreate some legend or historical incident.

I'd been familiar with 'The Sinking of the Titanic' by Gavin Bryars in its Obscure Records version for some time. And after hearing Bryars's live presentation at the Kitchen on November 11, which included live piano music and a number of projections related to the Titanic, I decided this would be a good place to begin describing documentary music. Bryars's work is essentially a sound collage, running about 25 minutes, consisting largely of sustained string music along with fragments of piano and barely audible speaking voices. The piece has a solemn quality and is an effective historical memorial, but it is much more than that. It is actually a detailed reconstruction of the incident. The string music consists of the specific hymns reported to have been played by the Titanic musicians as the ship was sinking, the instrumentation is exactly that of the ship's orchestra, and the voices are actual statements of observers. The complete score, published in Soundings magazine in 1975, includes 34 pages of other details Bryars took into consideration in composing the work, and even suggests that the piece is to be corrected at the dictate of future research. 'The piece is an open one,' the composer explains, 'and materials subsequently found are included in it and are integral parts.' A few weeks ago I heard another arresting case of documentary music when I attended a rehearsal of New York's own gamelan ensemble, Son of Lion. One of the works I heard that evening was a new composition by Philip Corner called 'The Barcelona Cathedral.' Corner was conducting in big slow beats that fell heavily once every few seconds. With each beat about 10 mallets fell onto the metallic percussion instruments with a tremendous clang. A variety of pitches resulted, and the general effect was much like a big church bell. The piece went on for nearly half an hour, always with that same relentless beat but with slightly different effects. A church bell never rings exactly the same way twice, and in Corner's work too the attacks would vary slightly, and my ear would be drawn to different details as the clangs decayed. Later on, some members of the group inserted little upbeats, which sounded almost accidental and clearly reflected the accidental little sounds that clappers often make on bells in between their serious strokes.

Corner had not done any library research in this case, but he had obviously done a good deal of ear research during his recent visit to Barcelona, because this was not simply a fantasy on the sound of church bells. It became quite clear that Corner was actually trying to actually create the actual sound of the actual church bell he had actually heard.

The difference between documentary music and other music often reminds me of the difference between photography and painting, and 'The Barcelona Cathedral' is a particularly clear example of the photographic approach. Like a photographer, Corner was basically just trying to capture a perception, get it in focus, and convey it to an audience. Of course, many elements of personal taste ultimately enter in. Why did he choose a bell as subject? Why this particular bell? Why did he decide to recreate the experience with the gamelan ensemble instead of with an orchestra or a synthesizer? But that is like asking why Diane Arbus liked to take pictures of abnormal humans and why she took them in black and white instead of color. Such questions are relevant, of course, and clarify that basic artistic choices are still at stake, but they do not negate the fact that, essentially, both Corner and Arbus were simply documenting perceptions.

The methods used to create 'The Sinking of the Titanic' and 'The Barcelona Cathedral' are by no means the only ways of composing documentary music. Many other composers have done it in many other ways. One of my favorite examples is Annea Lockwood's 'River Archives,' which consists entirely of recordings she has made of rivers, streams, and creeks around the world. This is basically a kind of catalogue, but unlike Messiaen's rather freely elaborated 'Catalogue d'Oiseaux,' for example, this one allows nature to speak without human intervention. Other composers have taken a different approach by writing melodic lines that follow the precise contour of a mountain range, the Manhattan skyline, or other lines found in the nonmusical world. Most of Petr Kotik's melodic lines are literal translations of patterns taken from graphs that are themselves documents which record the movement of experimental rats. John Cage's music documents star charts, the flaws in pieces of paper, drawings of Thoreau, tunes from the American Revolutionary period, and numerous other significant and insignificant bits of information that have interested him over the years. The list could go on and on. One might even suggest, without stretching the point too much, that any reasonably strict form of chance composition is a documentation of how the dice fell on a particular occasion.

The methods of writing documentary music vary greatly, as do the results, which is why I would not want to consider this an actual category or school. But they

all have something important in common. They all allow the details of a composition to be dictated by something other than the composer's imagination. They attempt to reflect some truth, some content, some organizational principle that goes beyond the whims of a composer.

There is a certain modesty in the approach, and I like that, just as I always have liked the modesty inherent in photography. Documentary composers do not attempt to do everything by themselves but are content to accept a little outside material and leave a few things as they are. It's okay to let the sounds of the Barcelona Cathedral just be themselves. It's okay to simply listen to a river. It's okay to just express the facts of what happened on the Titanic. Coming on the heels of an era in classical music when composers were expected to express only themselves, I find the idea most refreshing.

December 11, 1978
Morton Feldman Writes an 'Opera'

Many of us who have followed the highly abstract output of Morton Feldman over the years were surprised to learn that he had composed an opera, and it is perhaps still questionable whether he really has. 'Neither,' which was written for the Rome Opera two seasons ago and received its first New York performance on the Group for Contemporary Music series on November 21, might be better described as an hour long art song. Samual Beckett's libretto consists of exactly 87 words, which are sung exclusively by a solo soprano. The only truly dramatic moment in the performance at Borden Auditorium at the Manhattan School of Music was the soprano's entrance. After a few minutes of introductory music by the large onstage orchestra, the singer slowly ascended on a platform behind the musicians, where she remained, score in hand, for the rest of the performance. Is it an opera, an art song, or just another remarkable Feldman work? However one might choose to categorize it, 'Neither' is a gorgeous piece of music, and quite possibly the richest, most rewarding work in the whole Feldman catalogue.

Like most of Feldman's compositions, 'Neither' is concerned primarily with dense atonal harmonies and unusual blends of instrumental color. Here, however, the composer works with a wider variety of instruments and a larger span of time than usual. If most of his pieces are easel paintings, this one is a wall-sized mural, and it is so loaded with activity that there is no room for the silences that play such an important part in other Feldman works. The music flows easily from one section to another, each of which contains its own unlikely combinations of celesta, contrabassoon, harps, tuba, piccolo, low violins, high cellos, or whatever. The instruments are played in conventional ways, but they come together in unconventional combinations, and there is much more repetition than in most Feldman works. A sustained chord may repeat 15 or 20 times, and a couple of other ostinatos may be following out their own reiterations in their own tempos at the same time. The repetitions are seldom exact, however. Little bits of the sonorities are always dropping out, shifting around, and otherwise breaking the rules somewhere in the almost inaudible background.

Meanwhile, the soprano line comes and goes. This extremely demanding role continues on one or two notes for long periods of time and remains above the treble clef the whole time. One senses the difficulty and expects the performer to show signs of strain long before the piece is over. But the performer on this occasion, Lynne Webber, had exceptional endurance and remained completely in control the whole time. Feldman seems to know just how much danger is possible within the context of a still singable role. But then, Feldman has been flirting with performance hazards for a long time. This might even be considered one of his chief stylistic characteristics, and it is clearly one of the reasons why he so often asks performers to play his pieces supersoft, way down on that dynamic level where one cannot be completely certain whether a tone will sound or not. While other composers are more concerned with making their music sound easy, and hunt for the most playable and singable lines they can find, Feldman prefers the kind of fragility he finds on the brink of the impossible. It is a risky but extremely effective way of writing music.

The orchestra of the evening consisted entirely of students from the Manhattan School of Music, but they had rehearsed the score intensively and had it well uder control. Charles Wuorinen conducted with great ease, despite the constantly changing meters and obvious difficulty of keeping the dense texture sensitively balanced.

December 18, 1978

Ethnomusicologists in Concert: Paul Berliner and Others

Ethnomusicologists, like music historians, usually spend their time studying relatively esoteric matters, and their influence on actual musical practice is generally quite indirect. In recent years, however, several graduates of the world music program at Wesleyan University, now in their thirties or early forties, have cropped up in these pages, and not because of studies they have conducted but because of concerts they have given. Among them are Bob Becker, who plays percussion instruments from all over the world; Barbara Benary, whose group frequently performs music by American and Indonesian composers on a tin-can gamelan; Ralph Samuelson, who plays classical Japanese music for shakuhachi; Steve Gorn, who plays jazz as well as ragas on his bansurai flute; and David Reck, who sometimes plays traditional Indian music on his veena, occasionally composes works derived from non-Western traditions, and wrote a fine book, The Music of the Whole Earth. These artists may not perform in non-Western styles as authentically or as proficiently as some native instrumentalists, but they have very good ideas about how non-Western music can and should be conveyed to modern American audiences, and are building some useful bridges between European-American traditions and the music of other continents, bridges that help us to hear the rest of the world more clearly and make us more receptive to native artists. While the specific talents and pursuits of these Wesleyan musicians are quite different, they have many mutual concerns, and collectively I think they are beginning to have a significant impact here. One might even go so far as to talk about a Wesleyan School.

Another important member of this group is Paul Berliner, whose music I heard for the first time when his group, Kudu, performed at the Alternative Center for International Art. The kudu is a tapered horn made from the antler of the kudu, a large African antelope. It curves along for about three feet and is played horizontally, by blowing into a hole near the small end. It is the most beguiling instrument I have come across in some time.

Berliner opened and closed this December 2 program with rich, mournful solos on the kudu, which has a sound somewhere between a conch horn and a French horn. There is one finger hole, at the very tip of the small end, and Berliner could flatten the pitch in slight increments by moving his other hand into the large end. Since there are only three or four overtones on the instrument, the kudu has a very limited scale, but this may be its greatest asset. With no notes in between to stop him, Berliner could slur across wide intervals with perfect ease, and since he had the vibrato control and general finesse of a good trumpet player, he could put it all together into seductive phrases.

The bulk of the concert was devoted to mbira music. Berliner plays the mbira dzavadzimu, a three-manual, 24-note mbira, which has been cultivated for many centuries by the Shona culture in Zimbabwe. Berliner studied the instrument with native musicians for some years and seemed quite at home as he thumped out the buzzy, polyrhythmic lines of its complex repertoire. Most of this music was strictly African, and Berliner was clearly treating his adopted idiom with high respect and great understanding. He also sang from time to time, and here too he used glottal stops and followed African traditions.

But some aspects of the performance were not so African. The back-up musicians, bassist Bill Harrison and drummer Jim Goodkind, gave the rhythms a distinctly jazzy sound. Berliner had written many of his own lyrics, in English, and a few times he even picked up his trumpet and drifted into a style that came closer to jazz than to African music. Throughout the evening, however, he maintained a delicate balance between Africa and the West, and it seemed to me that he mediated between the two cultures quite sensitively. There were numerous references to African nationalism and to the political significance of native African music, and there were points at which he invited the audience to sing, clap, and even dance along, thus simulating the more informal performance situations one normally finds in Africa.

I could follow much of what was going on, but I also found myself wishing that I knew more about the mbira and African music in general. So I obtained a review copy of Berliner's brand new book, The Soul of Mbira (University of California Press), and spent most of the next couple of days reading it and listening more closely to some of the related field recordings Berliner collected a couple of years ago on the album Shona Mbira Music. I found the book almost as rewarding as the concert. It goes into enough technical detail that one could almost learn how to play the mbira dzavadzimu solely from the information given in its pages. But at the same time, the language is nontechnical, and most of the book relates to broader cultural issues of African nationalism and the current situation in Zimbabwe.

I was particularly grateful to Berliner for clearing up one problem that has long confused me, not to mention a few generations of ethnomusicologists, namely, the absence of a consistent tuning system in Africa. It is absurd to think that Africans don't hear pitch as precisely as people of other cultures do, but it seems equally absurd that in every village, and on every instrument, the African intervals come out a little different than in every other village and on every other instrument. Berliner clarifies that, for Africans, tuning is a variable, personal matter rather than an absolute, official, standardized sort of thing. He tells of one mbira player who has used five slightly different tuning systems in the course of his career. On one occasion the man was so touched by the precise intervals used

by a visiting ensemble that he immediately commissioned an mbira maker to build him some new instruments tuned in that way. Most Western musicians, with their absolute, official, standardized ears, would have heard little or no difference.

The book provides much other information about how few pieces there are in the basic Shona mbira repertoire and how many variations can be played in each one, about Shona poetry and singing styles, about the younger mbira players who often irritate their elders by breaking the rules as they play, about the intense feelings mbira players have for their instruments, about how the mbira relates to Shona traditions of ancestral worship, about how Shona musicians sometimes learn musical variations in dreams, about how mbira music induces trance in religious ceremonies, and about the political significance of the music. In much of Africa the guitar has taken the place of native instruments, and I suppose that the guitar was preferred in the Rhodesia of Ian Smith. But in the Zimbabwe of the Shona, the mbira is very much alive.

Note:
This seemed like a necessary exception to our rule about not including any of many articles on ethnic music in this collection, since the subject is a kid from Chicago, and since the opening paragraphs outline the activities of the ethnomusicologists of this generation as a whole. Again, I must remind the reader that almost all of the composers discussed in this book had a keen interest in non-Western music, and that their interaction with ethnic music and ethnomusicologists was crucial in the evolution of this music at this time.

January 1, 1979
James Tenney Returns

James Tenney has become more of a legend than a reality around New York, because he has not lived here since 1970, and his works are seldom presented in local concerts. But he is a very vital legend. When a full evening of his works was presented at the Paula Cooper Gallery on December 17, the whole avant-garde music world seemed to turn out, from John Cage on down. Many remembered Tenney and his work from the '60s, when he appeared at annual Avant-Garde Festivals, helped organize the important Tone Roads series, participated in Fluxus events, and was generally active in experimental music. Some remembered him as the outstanding pianist who, according to the legend, has presented unmatched performances of the 'Concord Sonata,' and from memory. Some had known him or studied with him at the California Institute of the Arts, or at York University in Toronto where he currently teaches. Many were familiar with the provocative Tenney scores that have appeared in issues of Soundings. All seemed to have a genuine admiration for the man, his intellect, his adventurousness, his music, or at least his legend, and this program of eight pieces, organized under the aegis of the Reich Music Foundation, justified the expectations.

Tenney's 'Three Pieces for Drum Quartet' (1974-75) are particularly strong works. The 'Wake for Charles Ives' is for four tenor drums, the 'Hocket for Henry Cowell' is for four bass drums, the 'Crystal Canon for Edgar Varese' is for four snare drums, and the basic concern throughout is with the old-fashioned device of canon. Tenney's approach to counterpoint is very new, however. The rhythmic themes begin sparsely, but as the other parts enter, the activity gradually becomes extremely dense. In the case of the bass drums, the material is sustained rolls, which rumble dramatically around the corners of the room. In all cases, the logical organizing processes are crystal clear, and the music is quite sensual at the same time. The best of both worlds.

The earliest work on the program was the pointillistic 'Monody' for solo clarinet (1959). The influence of Schoenberg and Webern is quite clear here, but Tenney's atonal lines frequently fall into loops that repeat themselves several times before curling off into new regions. Thus the piece has a clarity that is extremely rare in the post-Webern repertoire. Virgil Blackwell deserves special mention for his woderfully controlled performance of this difficult piece, full of high Cs, although the performance levels throughout the evening were respectable.

'Blue Suede' is a tape collage that makes use of Elvis Presley's voice, along with a vocabulary of electronic sounds that are quite sophisticated for a work composed in 1961. 'For Ann (rising)' (1969), composed with the help of a computer, also involves electronics, but here the sole object is to obtain the effect of a tone that slides up and up and up, endlessly. The piece is basically just a feat of technological sleight of hand, but Tenney did the trick better than others who have tried, and the result can generate a variety of sensations and implications.

'Tangled Rag' is a Scott Joplin imitation, but it is worth noting that the piece was written in 1969, long before Joplin's current vogue. In fact, according to some reports it was Tenney who first interested Joshua Rifkin in rags, and who indirectly stimulated the whole rag revival. But that's just another part of the legend. 'Tangled Rag,' performed in Tenney's string quartet arrangement, has a nice, mellow. laid-back feeling. There are a few odd twists in the harmony, but basically it's a real rag, and a lovely one.

The most recent works on the program were 'Harmonium' No.4, 'Harmonium' No.5, and 'Saxony' No.2, each composed in 1978. All are strong mimimalist statements that hover around one basic sound and follow more or less predictable variations. In 'Harmonium' No.4, five strings, four winds, and a vibraphone play sustained tones, with individual musicians gradually swelling and fading in dynamics, while a tape-delay system plays back everything they do some 15 seconds later. The piece progresses through chord changes in hyper-slow motion, again producing a rewarding combination of clarity and sensuality. The same basic procedure is followed in 'Saxony' No.2, but this piece is for three saxophones and tape-delay, which means thinner chords and brighter colors.

Nothing on the concert was much like anything I had heard before, except for the Drum Quartet, which I had heard before. But 'Harmonium' No.5, for violin, viola, and cello, strikes me as particularly unprecedented. In fact, it seems to point the way to a whole new genre. Like 'Harmonium' No.4 and 'Saxony' No.2, the piece is basically just a series of chord progressions. But here there is no tape-delay, and instead of simply sustaining tones, the musicians play carefully calculated arpeggio figures. As a result, the tones of the chords constantly pass from one instrument to another, and the harmonies flicker in a most ingenious and beautiful way. It's the kind of music that will probably never be done completely smoothly unless some group decides to spend six months working on it. But even without an ideal performance, the work is quite effective.

With such a large body of distinctive music to his credit, one might expect Tenney, at age 44, to be better known, and I'm not too sure why he isn't. Basically, I suspect that he is just not particularly interested in fame. He tends to write concise pieces that take little time, involve few players, and support a minimum of frills, rather than big impressive showpieces. He follows his curiosity into a variety of stylistic areas rather than honing out a consistent and

easily recognizable style. And when he finds it necessary to write odd chord changes, use a complex tuning system, or insert a Varese quotation, he doesn't bother to simplify for the sake of the untrained listener. I suppose he's essentially a musician's musician, but his work offers plenty for everyone else too, and it unearths enough fresh ideas to keep dozens of composers busy for years.

Note:
His ideas kept me busy, in any case. In fact, looking back, I can see that 'Harmonium' No.4, like Charlie Morrow's 'The Number Six,' was to have an important influence on my own composing. Tenney has influenced many composers, and he is clearly a key figure in the evolution of minimal music. Because of his pro-American biases, however, he has never particularly sought European exposure, and Europe has never particularly sought him, and his work remains little known outside the U.S. and Canada.

January 8, 1979
A Phill Niblock Update

Phill Niblock's music seems more important to me every year. That's partly because I'm gradually able to perceive it more clearly, partly because Niblock keeps finding new possibilities and fresh refinements, and partly because it is created with an attitude that is much less common than it used to be. The opportunism and caution and economic concerns of the '70s have transformed many avant-garde composers into semi-classical composers and have brought a general decline in grassroots experimentation. But Niblock is still the stubborn, patient, idealistic individualist, and his music is as uncompromising as ever.

I've tried on several occasions to describe the Niblock sound, and I always end up instead with a description of how it is achieved. One can say that he works with loud sustained tones, that he piles them together in multi-track versions, that the tones are produced originally on conventional wind and stringed instruments, that they are purposely out of tune, and that the resulting frequencies beat wildly against one another. But the actual effect seems to defy verbalization. Niblock's music has no precedents, invites no comparisons, and doesn't even suggest any methaphors to me. It is simply itself and must be heard to be believed.

Most of Niblock's pieces run about 20 minutes, generally focusing on a single instrumental sound, and when possible a live performer wanders around the audience playing live sustained tones against the prerecorded ones. On his december 21 concert, I was particularly drawn into one piece in which trombonist George Lewis played against trombone tones that had been recorded by Jim Fulkerson in 1977. The trombone frequencies, played in two different octaves, beat against one another with unusual intensity, and since Lewis is quite adept at circular breathing, there was never a let-up. But there was much more. In fact, the informal concert went from 9 p.m. until after 2 a.m. There were English horn tapes with Joe Celli playing live, bassoon tapes with Arthur Stidfole, clarinet tapes with Daniel Goode, bass flute tapes with Eberhard Blum, cello tapes, string bass tapes, and a few that combined different sonorities. There were also many reels of Niblock's 16-mm films, which are perhaps as important as his music, although I am so unfamiliar with current experimental film activity that I hesitate to try to discuss them. Besides, the Niblock look is about as hard to describe as the Niblock sound.

Niblock's work used to strike me as one fairly undifferentiated mass of clusters, but by the end of the five hours I was hearing quite a bit of difference between the trombone tapes and the cello tapes, between the four-track recordings and the eight-track ones, between the pieces that take place in one octave and those that use two. In one case, where several pitch areas were involved, I even began hearing the shifting pitches as very slow chord progressions.

January 15, 1979

Whatever Happened to the Avant-Garde?

Perhaps the most interesting thing about avant-garde music at the moment is its scarcity. Of course, plenty of concerts around New York are billed as the latest, newest, most adventurous thing, but real, tough-minded, grassroots experimentation has become rarer and rarer. Most of the new music I hear lately is semi-classical, nostalgic, relatively accessible, derivative, influenced by jazz and popular idioms, or in some other way aimed at a relatively general audience. Even at the Kitchen, where only a few seasons ago one could count on hearing fresh approaches to electronic circuitry, severely restricted types of minimalism, odd experiments with acoustics, and other types of basic musical research, one is now more likely to encounter light evenings of performance art, pop-classical fusions, or the kinds of modern dance programs that are also presented in four or five other places around New York. The change was inevitable. After all, the '60s could not go on forever, and it is quite remarkable that they lasted as long as they did. During this unique period, when a large segment of a population was genuinely interested in the 'freaky' or 'far out,' some highly innovative artists were able to gain acceptance much sooner than they normally could have. But the pace was bound to return to normal sooner or later. And now that we have reached a point where genuine innovation is about as rare as it was in 1955, it seems worthwhile to reflect on how we got here.

One reason for the shift has had to do with retrenchment in commercial music. If the Love of Life Orchestra or the A-1 Art Band or Theoretical Girls or Earl Howard had come up in the '60s, they would probably have been able to find a toe-hold in the record industry. Now, however, the commercial labels take no chances, which means that such musicians have to look elsewhere for support and exposure, and often they end up in the same lofts, galleries, museums, and avant-garde festivals that originally served only the more severe forms of experimentation.

Another factor is the evolution of performance art. After many years of intermedia activitiy, those trained in the visual arts now frequently present performances rather than exhibiting objects, and like the semi-classical music groups, they have no outlets in the commercial world. But they also have few outlets on the museum-and-gallery circuit, so they too end up on experimental music series even though their work is generally not very experimental or very musical.

Funding policies have probably also had an influence. Theoretically, institutions or concert series concerned with innovative music are not judged by their attendance records, since their goal is not to convert the masses but to provide a showcase for the not-yet-acceptable. But all the same, committees tend to be more impressed by forums that have growing audiences, and program directors who are dependent on grants generally feel some pressure to increase their box office if they expect their grants to increase concommitantly.

Much of the trend has to do with the same generation gap that has been observed in all areas. With jobs more scarce, recent college graduates are obviously more concerned with making a living, less concerned with revolutionizing society, and not at all anxious to do time in a garret for some more-or-less abstract cause. Things were much different for those of us who participated in early civil-rights demonstrations, identified with the free-speech movement, and had to deal with the draft. In that era one could always fall back on one of the readily available jobs in teaching or social work or computer programming, so making a living was not much of a challenge, and spending time trying to put together some idealistic, experimental, unprecedented sort of music could be an attractive alternative, despite the poor financial prospects.

The music of rugged individuals can still be heard. In fact, in browsing through the columns I have written in the past year, I noticed that they included reviews of works by eight composers who are involved in basic research of new ideas, as opposed to the development and popularization of older ones. But I also noticed that all eight of them were approaching 40, if not 50.

January 22, 1979

Pinball Music

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon, and I was killing time in the West End Bar on upper Broadway while I waited for a friend. For lack of anything better to do, I wandered toward the back, where a few students were playing the pinball machine. It was an ordinary machine, except for the new digital scoring lights, but I sensed a special drama in the way the ball bounced around from bumper to bumper and slot to slot. It wasn't until several balls had made their way through the maze of switches that I realized the fascination was in the sound. The pinball machine was not just ringing and clattering the way most of them do. It as making some real music.

Tink tink... tink.. tink tink tink tink... tink... tink

..... tink.... booooooooooooong..... tink tink tink

..... tink.. tink tink..... tink tink tink tink.... tink

.. tink..... bacoaoaoaoao tink.... tink..... tink.

The machine had a relatively large vocabulary of electronic sounds and an appealing beat, and it followed a distinctive scale with a clear tonal center. The ordinary little 10-point bumpers produced ordinary little short notes. But when you rolled the ball into the center hole you triggered off a louder tone that temporarily resolved the musical line. And when you managed to ease it under a particular gate you discharged a sequence of 17 very excited notes. And if you got it through the big bonus slot, the circuitry rewarded you with a rather elaborate melody. There were other motifs, including some that slid up and down, which I never was able to associate with any particular movements of the ball.

Tink.... tink tink..... tink.... tink tink tink tink

... tink tink tink tink.. tink..... tink... dong dong

dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong

dong dong dong dong..... tink tink... tink... tink tink

tink..... tink baoaoaoaoao tink tink... tatatatatah

tatah.

As in most good music, the system was too elaborate to decode on first hearing. I never did figure out why the machine would sometimes cut off the 17-note figure before it was finished, and just which switches took precedence over which other switches. Of course, even if I listened for days I could never be sure of hearing the whole piece, since there are an infinite number of routes a ball can take. After a while I lost interest in matching ball movements with sounds. I turned the machine over to another player, looked the other way, and enjoyed just listening. I concluded that this was some of the most animated, fascinating electronic music I had heard in a long time, that the main appeal had to do with the thousands of possible sequences and rhythms, that advances in computer technology had obviously opened up a whole new world for pinball machine designers as well as for electronic music in general, and that whoever worked out this particular program had an excellent musical ear.

Tink... tink..... dong dong dong dong dong dong

dong dong dong baoaoaoaoao.... tink... tink tink tink

..... tink.. tink tink..... tink tink tink tink

..... tink.. tink..... baoaoaoaoao tink tink baoaoaoaoao..... tink tink..... tink.

I made a note that I had been listening to the 'Six Million Dollar Man,' made by the Bally Company, and determined to pursue the topic of recent pinball machine music. After four phone call and a letter, I managed to make contact with Tom Nieman at the company's Chicago office and asked some questions. When did the machine come out? Just this fall. Who was the bright musician who programmed the sound for the 'Six Million Dollar Man' ? He doesn't work there anymore, and Nieman couldn't remember his name. Could they find out and maybe send me some other information on current pinball machines? Yes, but three weeks later the package had still not arrived. Did they have more models with good music? The spring line was going to be even more sensational, Nieman assured me, because it was to feature a machine called 'Kiss' that would play electronic versions of that group's greatest themes. With that I more or less gave up hope on the notion that commercial pinball machines would ever develop their potential as a unique new musical medium.

Tink..... tink.. tink tink tink tink tink tink tink

..... tink tink tink tink tink tink

... booooooooooong... tink... tink.... tink.....

tink..... tink tink tink tink tink booooooooooong

... tink tink..... tink..... tink tink.

The subject still fascinated me, so I made a trip one afternoon to the pinball haven at Times Square, which has the largest collection of machines around New York that I know of. Of course, listening to an ensemble of 30 or 40 is very different from listening to a solo performance in a bar on a Sunday afternoon, but it was easy enough to determine that other manufacturers had also converted to computer equipment. Musically, however, I couldn't find much. One machine had its electronic tones and dull rhythms all neatly tuned to a major chord. One played two simple tunes, and not much else. Most were still oriented toward simulated airplane crashes, exploding ships, squealing brakes, and related sound effects. Oh well, how much musical sensitivity can we expect from pinball machine manufacturers? We should be grateful that it happened even once.

Tink tink tink..... tink tink..... tink

..... baoaoaoaoao booooooooooong.... tink tink tink

tink.... tink tink tink..... tink.. tink.. tink..... tink

tink tink tink tink tink... dong dong dong dong dong dong

dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong dong

dong..... tink tink tink.. tink tink..... tink

..... tatatatatah tatah.

February 5, 1979

Young Composers Series: John Adams, Michael Nyman, Paul Dresher, Ingram Marshall

My head is still swimming from all the music I confronted at the New International Young Composers Concerts Series, sponsored by the Reich Music Foundation. At least half of the time the compositional level was extremely high, and many of the works reached into areas of musical style that have never been encountered by New York concertgoers. I don't think it's possible to fully process that much information in only a few days, but I can at least offer a few generalities and a few basic observations on four composers who were represented on these three concerts at the Guggenheim Museum, January 16-18.

John Adams, 31, teaches at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he directs a new music ensemble and frequently presents experimental music to San Francisco audiences. His 'Shaker Loops' was probably the most effective single piece in the series, but it shouldn't have worked at all. If music is going to charge ahead with Beethoven-like energy, and move through widely contrasting moods, then it's obvious that it must have some kind of overall dramatic structure that makes sense. Transitions have to be prepared, climaxes have to be reached at exactly the right time, and so on. It's similarly obvious that music based in minimalism, with repeated figures, simple harmony, and lots of repetition, has to stay on an even keel and progress only very slowly and subtly. Yet Adams takes seven stringed instruments, writes rather simple textures of sustained tones, tremolos, and repeated figures, and proceeds to break all the rules by blithely submitting his materials to sudden modulations and drastic mood changes, without preparing anything. And somehow he makes everything work. The highly charged 'Shaker Loops,' which the composer conducted himself, seems to open up a whole new area of formal possibilities. Adams's virtuoso piano piece, 'Phrygian Gates,' played with this same basic cobntradiction between developmental form and minimalist form, and it too succeeded, at least in this performance by Ursula Oppens. Adams's pianistic vocabulary of rapid-fire repeated tones, modal harmonies, and rippling textures did not seem quite as inventive as his string writing, however.

Michael Nyman, 34, is from London, and some of his music criticism is already familiar here, particularly through his book Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond. Aside from the two Nyman works presented at the Guggenheim, I heard several tapes and an informal lecture the composer presented, and I also saw two films he had scored when they were shown at the Kitchen. In discussing British experimental music, Nyman had emphasized the modest, reserved, restrained quality he felt it had all, and it seems to me that Nyman's own work is perhaps the most modest, most reserved, and most restrained of all. His music is so understated, in fact, that it comes dangerously close to seeming simplistic. But there is always a touch of sophistication in the orchestration or the form of the rhythm, and the result is usually not simplistic at all, but quite charming. My favorite Nyman work is his droll 'Bird List Song,' in which about 10 instrumentalists play a sequence of four dominant seventh chords over and over and over, while the vocalist sings the names of birds. The volume is loud, the rhythms are square, and the music sounds vageuly like rock. The sophistication in this case lies in the inner voices, which shift in instrumentation from time to time. While the performance at the Guggenheim was adequate, I preferred a recorded version played by the London-based Michael Nyman Band, which made use of a rebec and banjo as well as more conventional winds and percussion.

Paul Dresher is only 27, but this ambitious composer from San Diego is already writing long, multileveled pieces that have a good deal of substance. His 45-minute 'Z' contains a section for mallet instruments that sounds quite derivative of Reich's 'Drumming,' but it also involves a unique progression in which six percussionists play in different tempos, utilizes a unique recording of a wailing Philippine tribal woman, and makes a strong, though not very clear, political statement. 'This same temple' is a Dresher work for two pianos that puts together effective polyrhythmic textures with notational techniques that I had never encountered before.

Ingram Marshall lives in San Francisco, where he has taught, written criticism, worked in radio, and directed a concert series. His contributions to the Guggenheim series were 'Cortez,' a prerecorded tape pice, and 'Non Confundar,' a work for strings, clarinet, and flute, with electronic processing. Both pieces are moody, and it is here, more than anywhere else in the series, that I am tempted to use the word 'neo-romantic.' But of course, Marshall's expressive inclinations are far removed from Howard Hanson's. Marshall works with pure sounds rather than melodic themes, and electronic reverberation rather than opulent orchestration. Still, the resulting emotions remind me very much of Sibelius, whom Marshall appreciates very much, and Mahler, from whom he borrowed some 'Non Confundar' material. I used to feel it was the electronic veneer that made Marshall's music seem saccharine to me, but I'm beginning to realize that the basic problem has more to do with my own less romantic inclinations. I probably wouldn't be swept away by his lush pieces if he did them with the Philadelphia Orchestra either. But many certainly would.

February 26, 1979
From a Citizens Band

A month or two ago I received an attractive little volume called Music for Citizens Band, Volume One. A citizens band, in this case, is simply a group that gets together to play music their own way. The booklet is only 48 pages long, but it contains about 40 specific scores and improvisation formats, along with numerous suggestions and ideas and references to other sources, and it's about the best thing I've seen along this line since 'Nature Study Notes' was compiled by the Scratch Orchestra in London some years ago. It had been in the back of my mind that the volume warranted a review, and I had even written a rough outline. I would begin by giving a little history of musical anarchy and some of the free-form ensembles in the '60s, drawing a few comparisons between jazz and classical approaches. Then I'd go on for a while about Will Parsons, the percussionist and composer who put this anthology together in San Diego, and who had previously been quite active forming improvising ensembles in Iowa City. Then I'd talk a little about specific items included in Music for Citizens Band, and about the seven-inch record that comes with them. Somewhere along the line I'd try to stress that the kicks in free-form music are often greater for the performers than for the listeners, but that even when the experience is only meaningful for the performers, it's still meaningful, and I'd end up by encouraging everyone to gather their friends together and form their own citizens bands.

However, the day I began threading these thoughts together also happened to be the day that some old friends were coming over for dinner, so another possibility immediately presented itself. Why not just wait until the right time, then show everyone the new booklet, suggest that we try some of the procedures suggested, and see what would happen? That way I could condense the basic facts and devote most of the space to reporting on a real-life attempt to form an impromptu citizens band.

That evening I broached the topic by simply passing the book around. Each of the other three browsed through the pages with some interest, and it looked as though the group was about to transform itself into an ad hoc citizens band. No one, however, wanted to suggest working on any particular score, and I didn't want to organize things myself, so we were stuck until one member of the group offered this provocative observation. 'The problem is that if you're sympathetic with the philosophy of the book, as I think we all are, then you don't have to rely on the scores in the book. You can make up your own score.' With that the discussion became more animated and we soon decided to put together a piece ourselves, one that would summarize the events that had taken place that evening. It would begin with a bell sound, representing the ringing of the doorbell two or three hours earlier, and would proceed with some of the musical and verbal themes that had come up while we had been sitting around the dining table. One person found a washboard to play, another selected a whistle, another took down some bells, and I went to get a little bamboo flute. No one wanted to play the piano, which was probably just as well. The piano would have tended to dominate the other instruments, and this way everyone had a more or less equal chance.

Our improvisation went on for almost 15 minutes, and since we recorded the proceedings, I can tell you pretty accurately what happened. We stuck to our script at first, beginning with bells and a clattering of footsteps and washboard rhythms that represented the entrance of the guests. Then the flute introduced a theme and a whistle joined in, and eventually the bamboo flute, and all the time the bells continued softly in the background. Suddenly an alarm clock went off. This was completely accidental, but no one minded, and we absorbed that sound into the texture too. Later there were some more conventional musical moments when the flute and whistle would imitate one another quite closely, or when everyone would fall into the same tempo, or when someone would return to an earlier theme. At one point someone trickled beer on the floor, which was a private reference that I didn't understand. After a while there was some chanting and singing on the subjects of Sunday school, Spinoza, Playboy, various colleges, and 'pull my finger,' which were private references that I did understand, although they wouldn't have meant much to someone who hadn't heard the conversation earlier that evening. The tape proved quite revealing, because I could spot certain points when I had been so self-involved that I had failed to listen to others, and other points when the preoccupations of my friends had shown through. In short, it was a pretty good jam session as far as we were concerned. Even without the benefit of virtuoso solos, the music sounded fine. All four players played more or less equal roles. And there was some good group communication on a level that hadn't been possible around the dinner table.

But were we a typical citizens band? And did our response to the booklet really live up to Parson's expectations when he compiled it? Certainly the purely musical results would have been better if we had rehearsed the score of Chris Kearney's 'Fortress,' a unique setting of 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,' which looks fairly easy in its short page of instructions and sounds wonderful on the accompanying record. We could have kept a tighter formal grasp on what we were doing if we had followed Parson's own 'Quartet Possibilities' or Jon English's 'Sequent Cycles.' Certainly the procedures suggested in the contributions of Pauline Oliveros or Kenneth Gaburo would have taken us to more profound individual depths. Still, in another way, our own solution went right to the heart of what this anthology is all about. 'The 'best' compositions for any Citizen's Band will be written by the members themselves,' says Parsons in

his introduction. Of course, Parsons would want us to go on from here, to be self-critical, to rise above our present lmitations, and to work toward music that would be of public as well as private interest. Maybe we will. At least we got started, and I hope other citizens bands will also get started as a result of this useful little volume.

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March 19, 1979
Richard Teitelbaum, George Lewis, William Hawley

In America, the most neglected music is not that of our own minority groups, but rather that of majority groups in the rest of the world. Afro-American idioms, salsa, reggae, and works by women composers receive ate least some space in the press, but we have a tendency to forget all about Asia, Africa, and a few other continents. So I've become an affirmative action critic, trying to improve the balance by focusing my recent attentions on a gamelan ensemble, a santur player, and some shakuhachi music. As a result, however, I've gotten way behind in reporting on new music activities around New York, so I will have to be brief about three recent concerts presented by Richard Teitelbaum, George Lewis, and William Hawley.

Teitelbaum's program at the Kitchen probably shouldn't have surprised me. I already knew thet he was a fine synthesizer player, and that he was deeply involved with Japanese music, and that he likes rather loosely structured improvisatory forms. What I didn't know was that lately these elements have been coming together in a more sensuous and accessible way. Unlike his soft, severe, 'Treshold Music,' which I reviewed a couple of years ago, his February 27 concert was so outgoing it was almost romantic and so dense in activity it was almost Ivesian.

2Blends' features subtle exchanges between Reihi Sano's shakuhachi phrases and Teitelbaum's carefully tuned synthesizer sounds, but it soon opened up into a freer texture that included trombonist George Lewis and made use of a large sound vocabulary. 'Shrine' was an impressive synthesizer solo which, with the help of an echo device and a lot of fast keyboard work, built up extremely lush textures. But while so much recent electronic music uses only pretty sounds, Teitelbaum always kept some buzz or edge in the mix so that the result was never quite syrupy. There was also a good deal of brainwork involved in the way Teitelbaum knitted together radically different themes in 'Shrine.' Also on the program was music he created for a recent film called 'Asparagus.' george Lewis has been around New York for a couple of years, butI had never heard the music of this young trobmbonist myself until his February 25 concert at the Experimental Intermedia series. Between internationally known artists like Vinko Globakar and Stuart Dempster, and young virtuosos like Jim Fulkerson, Jon English, Garrett List, and Peter Zummo, the experimental trombone field is already rather crowded, but there will always be room for one more when someone like Lewis come along. He not only plays well, but he has an excellent ear, and he seems to understand improvisation from four or five different jazz and classical angles.

Lewis's opening improvisation made particularly effective transitions between sections of conventional virtuoso playing, sections employing fresh combinations of trombone sounds and vocal sounds, and sections that grumbled and sputtered in highly personal ways. Later he accompanied himself with a collection of ingenious cassette tapes, most of which he had made on his own little synthesizer. He also hooked his horn up to a microphone and then bowed on the bell, which somehoew produced the notes of an augmented seventh chord. Other lovely effects were produced by tapping the amplified bell with a mallet. His final Lyrical improvisation against organlike harmonies sometimes sounded more like youthful enthousiasm than like genuine lyricism, but in general Lewis struck me as a mature artist, and an extremely talented one.

William Hawley is another talented young musician. He studied at Cal Arts and now lives in New York, and his work is minimalist in the strict sense of the term. His program of chamber music at the Kitchen on February 21 included a vibraphone duet that restricted itself to one pitch, a piece for cello and piano that was all sustained fifths, and electronic work that repeated a single electronic sound over and over, a piano duet that slowly shifted back and forth between two chords, and a quintet that passed through sonorities at a snail's pace of about one change every minute. The music was generally soft and sparse, and seemed to owe much to Morton Feldman, but it showed a degree of originality as well.

'Sobetsu' was Hawley's longest and most recent offering, and probably the best. there were never more than two or three pitches at once, but they were sustained in lovely combinations of colors by the flutist, the violinist, the pianist, and the two vibraphonists. The chords changed periodicailly, and often somewhat surprisingly, as the music drifted through its long sequence in slow, unpredictable rhythms. 'Seven Steps' was similar except that the instrumentation here was two pianos, and the harmonic vocabulary was more limited. The fascinating thing about the prerecorded work 'Wave (for Kyoto)' was that I could never tell for sure whether its electronic sound was actually changing, or whether my ear was simply hearing it in different ways. The curious sonority moved from one side of the room to the other, over and over, in little whooshes. In 'Lumina' two vibraphonists played a single note throughout, but they played it with so many different mallets and touches that it came out in a lot of different ways. At least four different overtones emerged quite distinctly when the note was played with some of the harder mallets, and the quality of the sounds ranged from quite mellow to almost violent. Hawley's Music for Cello and Piano seemed less successful. Both performers were quite skilled, but the two-note chords they were asked to play were so unchallenging for the pianist that they sounded almost simplistic there, and so challenging for the cellist that they always came out annoyingly imperfect on that instrument.

If a few more weeks could be squeezed into the month of March I would also write about David Tudor's electronic score for Laser Concert even though, at least from a musical point of view, the work did not seem to meet the high standards of some of Tudor's other works. It would be good too to devote space to the fascinating psychoacoustic theories of Henry Flynt and Christer Hennix, even though their prerecorded music did not have its intended effect on me. And someone should at least try to come to grips with 'Blue' Gene Tyrrany's fresh approaches to improvisation, even though I doubt that anyone but him quite understands how they work. But lately there seems to be an even greater need to consider some of the fine music coming to us from other parts of the world.

April 9, 1979
An Old-Fashioned Fluxus Concert

What was Fluxus? It was a genre of performance art that happened 10 years before the term was coined. It was a form of dada that happened 30 years after dada. It was what happened when young followers of John Cage gathered together in the early ‘60s. It was a style that drew minuscule audiences and no critics whatever when it was alive. And it is a matter of some nostalgia today, so much so, in fact, that the Kitchen had to turn away several hundred people when it presented a good old-fashioned Flux-Concert on March 24.

I would like to try to unravel the Fluxus style, its history, its influences, its many links between Tokyo and New York, and its effect on more recent music and art. I would like to collect first-hand reports from those who were there. I would like to comment on George Maciunas, the self-proclaimed patron saint of Fluxus, and on the tabloid newspaper celebrating his death that I purchased at the concert. I would like to discuss the recent work by Alison Knowles that was also included on this program. And I would like to go into detail about the particularly memorable performances by Yasunao Tone, Larry Miller, and Philip Corner. But it seems preferable to focus on these ‘60s pieces themselves, many of which are quite witty, some of which are profound, a few of which are both, and all of which will be totally forgotten unless there continue to be revivals of this sort. Here are a few of my favorites among the 33 short works included in this event.

‘Snowstorm No. 1,’ by Milan Knizak

Ten performers throw white paper airplanes to the audience. The audience throws then back and the activity continues. After perhaps five or six minutes, people in the audience begin to realize that the paper airplanes are actually the programs for the concert. The programs distributed, the concert continues.

‘Two Inches,’ by Robert Watts

Two performers gradually unroll about 10 feet of adding machine paper and stretch it out between them. A third performer comes out, judges the center, cuts the paper in two, and that is the end of ‘Two Inches.’ One realizes that Fluxus art had much to do with word plays, that the paper was about two inches wide, that it was cut in two, that it had inched its way out into the long stand, that the title had several implications, and that everyone in the audience probably interpreted the piece differently.

‘Wall Piece for Orchestra to Yoko Ono,’ by Yoko Ono

A nine-person orchestra lines up, a tenth person takes his place as a conductor, and a downbeat is given. The musicians walk over to the side and hit the wall instead of playing their instruments.

‘Piano Work,’ by Philip Corner_â

The performer appears, crawling on his hands and knees, his shoulder braced hard against the front leg of a grand piano. With some strain, he gradually wheels the instrument out to the middle of the performing area and maneuvers it into a particular spot, thus finishing his ‘work.’ ‘Remote Music,’ by Larry Miller

A carefully moulded hand in a black sleeve begins to descend from the ceiling headed directly for the piano keyboard. Gradually it stretches farther and farther out of the sleeve until the climactic moment when it lands directly in the middle register. The music finished, the hand slowly rises back up to the ceiling.

‘Duet for Brass Instruments,’ by Joe Jones

A trumpet player and a soprano saxophone player begin blowing on their instruments, making extremely strained, muffled sounds. A condom begins to inflate on one end of the trumpet, but the one on the end of the soprano saxophone develops a leak and remains limp.

‘One for violin,’ by Nam June Paik

A wooden block is placed in the center of the performing space. A performer enters and places a violin on the block. He grips it firmly around the scroll and gradually, very gradually, raises it over his head. Is it a valuable instrument? In one instant of extraordinary shock, the violin crashes down and splinters into at least a hundred pieces.

‘Constellation No. 11,’ by Dick Higgins

The performer asks everyone in the audience to think of a word and to select a number between one and 10. He then gives a 10-count downbeat, asking all of us to say our chosen words on our chosen counts, thereby producing a short spontaneous poem with a bizarrre variety of images.

‘Gang Sang,’ by Dick Higgins

About eight volunteers are recruited from the audience. The performer asks them to stand at one side, facing the same direction and then instructs them to place one foot in front of the other and shift their weight onto the front foot. He repeats

his instruction over and over, thus producing a very awkward group walk, which ends with the volunteers stepping out into the crowded front rows of the audience.

‘Micro,’ by Takehisa Kosugi

The performer steps up to a microphone, pauses dramatically, and then, in a sudden moment of extreme violence, wraps a piece of cellophane around the microphone. The loudspeakers erupt. The performer walks away and the cellophane gradually unwinds itself, producing more amplified crackling of a much milder and much less predictable sort.

‘Fruit in 3 Acts: Act 1 - Pear, Act 2 - Apple, Act 3 - Watermelon,’ by Ken Friedman

The pear is thrown to the audience. The apple is placed between two boards and squashed flat the instant the performer jumps on the top board. The watermelon is thrown out the window and splatters onto Broome Street with a sound that carries faintly back into the hall.

‘Symphony No. 3 (in the water) (Flux-version II),’ by George Brecht

A toy boat with a sheet of music for its sail floats in a basin about four feet long. A trumpet player and a trombonist stand at one end, a French hornist and a saxophonist stand at the other end, a referee says ‘go,’ and the instrumentalists begin blatting at the sailboat, trying to move it across the basin with the air that comes out of their horns. The trumpet player and the trombonist win.

‘Overture,’ by Ben Patterson

Ten performers line up across the stage. The one on the end opens a cardboard box and takes out a slightly smaller cardboard box, which he passes on to the next performer. The second performer does likewise, and this procedure continues until the tenth performer ends up with a tiny plastic box. He opens it, takes out a balloon, and blows it up. The word ‘finis’ can be read on the inflated balloon.

April 23, 1979

Takehisa Kosugi and Akio Suzuki: Stunning by Coincidence

It was a quiet Tuesday afternoon, and I was not ready for the experience that awaited me at the Cooper-Hewitt museum. After browsing around the photographs, wall hangings, and sculpture, which are part of the current 'MA, Space/Time in Japan' exhibit, I wandered into the performance area. I was stunned to find 10 priests facing the wall, absolutely still, meditating, completely undistracted by the gathering audience. A few minutes later I was stunned again to discover that those totally lifelike priests were statues. Then began the most stunning performance of new music I have attended in months.

Akio Suzuki appears on the small stage and takes his place behind an attractive piece of sculpture. Six coiled springs are stretched vertically between black cylinders mounted on a frame. He strokes one of the springs gently and it resounds with a strong, deep sound. He strokes again, scratches, plucks, moves from spring to spring, tests the resonances, listens. He is clearly improvising. There is no sense that he is playing specific rhythms, or making a composition, or asserting his will on this remarkable instrument he has made. He drifts with the music, allowing the springs to make their own sounds in their own time. After a while he stretches one of the springs out across the stage and sings into the black cylinder on one end. His voice resonates for such a long time that he can catch breaths without disturbing the tone. The resulting sound sustains without interruption, and its resonance spreads eerily around the whole room at once.

Takehisa Kosugi has still not appeared, but one can hear a sporadic clicking from behind the back wall of the stage.

Suzuki moves back to the six vertical springs and plays them some more. Then he bends over what appears to be a small glass table. He begins rubbing on the table in small circular motions and produces a sound that could have come from a wine goblet. He is not trying to dominate the glass. Maybe he is allowing the glass to dominate him. No. They are equal. They are both part of nature, and they are simply flowing together. It's a special kind of sensitivity that's hard for Westerners to understand, but which seems completely natural in this Japanese setting.

Kosugi can be seen now, and we realize that the clicking emanates from a fishing reel. Slowly, ceremonially, he walks to the front of the stage, gradually letting out a line that is stretched to some point behind the stage.

Suzuki returns to the six vertical springs, but now he plays them with a pair of mallets. As he moves from one spring to another, one can hear that the basic pitches of the springs have been carefully tuned.

Kosugi has gradually made his way from the front of the stage out through the audience. The clicks from the reel come in clusters whenever he takes another step. He walks with great concentration, listening to the reel and holding it carefully, but never trying to tell it what to do.

Suzuki moves back to the small glass table, this time producing little clicking sounds.

Kosugi has disappeared into an adjacent gallery, and the clicking of the reel is fainter. The line he has stretched out over the audience sways slightly in response to the movements at the performer's end.

Suzuki is now stroking a corrugated surface on the floor with a wooden stick. The sound is similar to the clicking of the reel, but the similarity seems more coincidental than intentional.

Kosugi remains out of sight, but the clicking continues. The line he has stretched out over the audience reflects the line of a long coiled spring that is also stretched over the audience, but this too seems like a coincidence. We are in a very subtle artistic world where there can be no direct relationships, no Western rationality, no look-what-I-made. Only coincidence.

Suzuki continues playing on the corrugated surface, but he is also listening to the clicking of the reel.

Kosugi reappears in the doorway, and we realize that now he is reeling the line in instead of letting it out. He is intent on what he is doing, but he is also listening to the sound of the stick moving across the corrugated surface.

The two performers now come together in one of the oddest and most beautiful duets I have ever heard. They never force a relationship. They never attempt to imitate each other. They don't take turns making their similar sounds, but they don't not take turns either. They are not controlling, organizing, composing. Yet they are listening, sensing. I have seldom seen two performers so completely tuned in on the same types of sounds, the same performance attitude, the same philosophy, the same sense of what music ought to be. They are at one with the reel, the stick, the situation, and each other. And while I realize that I am romanticizing in an inappropriately Western way, I can not help feeling that they are tuned in on some sort of basic life flow.

Suzuki eventually gets up and moves over to the black cylinder at the end of the coiled spring that stretches clear across the room.

Kosugi eventually finishes reeling in his line and disappears backstage again.

Suzuki now focuses on his new black cylinder and, with one little tap, produces the most amazing sound of the afternoon. The tap races down the coiled spring, resonates in the black cylinder at the other end, races back, races down again, and makes five or six round trips before fading off into silence. It is an ingenious sound discovery, unlike anything I have ever heard before. The effect could easily hold my interest for 20 minutes, but the inventor-sculptor-performer lets us hear it only a few times. How odd. I can't think of any other musicians who would work for 15 or 20 minutes with a familiar everyday sort of clicking and would then toss off a brilliant sound discovery like this in less than a minute. What elegant pacing.

Kosugi reappears with his violin. He improvises short phrases, some of which revolve around only two notes, and some of which are more active. The phrases have unique individual curves that remind me of the quick brush strokes of a calligrapher. And each one has a few little flaws too. Places where the ink or the sound doesn't quite fill in. Places where a brush hair or a bow hair wanders a little to one side. The violinist moves a lot as he plays. Many phrases begin standing tall and end in crouch. The music seems to emanate from his breathing, from his body. I don't think his brain has a whole lot to do with it. He seems quite at home on his instrument, and I have little doubt that he could play Bach respectably if he wanted to. But now he is not striving for any specific, thought-out results. The sounds have a more physical origin, and the scratchiness or mellowness of the tone seems more a matter of muscular accident than conscious decision. Sometimes the phrases are quite strident, but since they are disconnected from the will, they never seem aggressive.

Suzuki is now balancing a small board on one end. Sometimes it falls to one side and clicks against a dowel he holds in his right hand. Sometimes it falls against the dowel in his left hand. There is something quite elegant about the choice of wood and the appearance of the grain. It is clear that this man has produced a lot of sculpture. His sensitivity to materials, colors, and lines is apparent in all of his instruments, and one senses a sculptor's eye even in the little piece of wood he is playing now. Sometimes he moves over to a metal plate, rubbing on it with a stick, and producing rough sounds that relate more closely to the violin music.

Kosugi continues playing his violin, or perhaps allowing the violin to play him. As always, he and his partner remain tuned in on one another, listening, flowing, and allowing the coincidences to happen until, as another kind of coincidence, they stop playing and end the performance.

It was a quiet Tuesday afternoon again, though I felt much different from before. I went up to speak with Kosugi, who is best known to New York audiences for his extensive work with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and he provided several interesting footnotes to the concert. The activity of reeling a line out and in, for example, was actually a realization of the brief, conceptual, verbal scores he wrote in 1961 in his 'Animus' series. Experimental music, I learned, is still largely ignored in Japan, even when the aesthetic seems totally Japanese, and the two do not expect many performing opportunities there.

May 14, 1979

Jon Deak, Ben Johnston, Yoshi Wada, Philip Corner, Laurie Spiegel, Emmanuel Ghent

Because I have been concentrating on folk idioms and non-Western classical forms, I have not reported on new music as thoroughly as I used to, but I still keep track of it as much as I can, and the quality seems to be higher than ever. Moreover, the energy is going out in many different directions at once. In the last months or so, for example, I heard a particularly delightful theatre piece, some unusually provocative conceptual music, a new musical instrument with exceptional character, a superb performance of a piece of graphic music, and some of the best computer music I have ever encountered.

The theatre piece was Jon Deak's 'Passion Be My Destiny.' For some time Deak has been writing music in which instrumentalists play actual dialogue, imitating the rhythms and intonations of specific sentences. Usually these pieces have been short and the English translations of the music have been provided in program notes, but this recent work is a full evening piece, and here the translation arrives, just at the right moment, via projections. An important improvement. As in other Deak melodramas, the dialogue comes mostly out of pulp magazines and the musical language comes mostly out of old movies and corny tv scores. There are moments of high camp, moments of great hilarity, and a love theme that almost brings tears to our eyes, but most of all there is music, a continuous flow of it, and it knits themes and moods together so smoothly and so inventively that the work transcends its intentionally trivial material. In fact, a week after the concert I realized I had completely forgotten the plot, although much of the music still rang vividly in my ear.

The performance, presented at the Kitchen, was conducted effectively by the composer, and the musicians were strictly first class. Violinist Marilyn DuBow and cellist Jerry Grossman played the star roles of Barbara Banner and Anthony Awestruck with appropriate flair, hornist David Jolley played three or four roles with exceptional control and understanding, and five others all made valuable contributions. To put it in Deak's own terms, the world may tear apart and still I'll love 'Passion Be My Destiny.' The conceptual music was by Ben Johnston. The Illinois composer presented a variety of works on a recent Experimental Intermedia concert at Phill Niblock's loft, including his humorous trombone solo, 'One Man,' two prerecorded electronic works, and a theatre piece for oboe and tape. But the most recent, and for me the most provocative, piece of the evening was 'Insurgence.' Here Johnston simply read a verbal score describing an imaginary performance that involved, or would have involved, a number of panelists reading a text, a moderator-conductor-dictator, a few instrumentalists, and some technicians who eventually took over. There were a number of symbols and a zillion details in the rather long verbal description, all of which blended into a carefully constructed commentary on contemporary society and politics. 'Insurgence,' like Johnston's 'Vigil,' is really a lecture that describes a musical performance rather than a piece of music per se, and as in the other works discussed in this column, the idea was not new. It was just better done than any conceptual music of the '60s that I can remember.

The new musical instrument was built by Yoshi Wada, and it was essentially a massive set of bagpipes. The eight pipes were powered by a large air compresser which had to be placed on the fire escape of Niblock's loft in order not to drown out the sound of the instrument, which itself was quite loud. Some of the pipes came from actual bagpipes while others were jerry-rigged out of plumbing equipment, and each of them could be turned on or off with a little faucet. The ingenious music machine produced a big fat chord of bagpipe sounds that stayed more or less in tune and provided a rich background for Wada's amplified singing. The piece is a work in progress, and I suspect that both the improvised modal singing and the pipes themselves will go through a number of changes before even Wada himself is totally satisfied with the work, but the instrument, the sounds, and the idea itself are of such massive proportions that I see no point in nit-picking.

The graphic music was by Philip Corner, and like so much graphic music, it was written in the '60s. But what made the work so relevant to the present was how it was interpreted. I think composers always wanted their graphic scores to be transformed into serious musical experiences, but performers seldom knew how to do this, and sometimes I don't think the composers were too sure either. By now, however, all of that is much clearer, and a performer like Pete Rose can take a score like Corner's 'Sprouting,' play it on his recorder, and end up with something quite gratifying. Rose worked with a set of about a hundred graphic images scored on little sheets of transparent material. He distributed a handful of these at random on a sheet of music manuscript paper and then played whatever he saw as accurately as he could. It seemed to me that Rose interpreted the piece with exceptional integrity, understanding, and skill. He took close to an hour, played whatever he saw with great care and control, never cheated, never clowned around, never let his ego get in the way, and never allowed himself to worry about what the audience might think. It was a cool, placid, and wonderfully unpredictable hour.

The new computer music I heard was by Laurie Spiegel and Emmanuel Ghent. In this case the value of the pieces had much to do with technological developments. Earlier experiments with computer-generated sound tended to be short, labored, colorless, or all three, but by now those composers who really know how to handle the medium can produce extended works with some ease,

and with a variety of color too. Spiegel's work dealt with long sustained tones that gradually faded in and out in a constantly shifting texture that was often quite dense and rich. Ghent dealt with a lightning-fast melodic line that sputtered away on one set of notes for a while, then moved on to another, then another, and so on, producing the feeling of chord changes without using any chords. Both pieces were joined with computer-generated video images that gradually moved through abstract patterns a little the way the music did. Spiegel had produced her own visuals, while Ghent had collaborated with Ken Knowlton. All of the work had been done at Bell Labs.

Note:
It is particularly unfortunate that this collection does not include more about Yoshi Wada's remarkable instrumental inventions. Often, as here, I heard the pieces before they were fully developed, and before I fully appreciated what he was doing. The bagpipes, like his earlier 'pipe horns,' were important experiments, which influenced younger composers such as Arnold Dreyblatt, and were later well received in recordings and in European presentations.

June 4, 1979
Petr Kotik and Gertrude Stein

Petr Kotik is one who has been feeling something for a long time. In his early feeling of this thing he was not one who was really feeling what he was feeling, and he was certainly not one who was really knowing what he was feeling. He was only beginning to be one feeling this thing. Being a patient one, he went on feeling what he was feeling and trying to really feel what he was feeling and trying to be one who was knowing all about this thing. He was a patient one and he was already beginning to be knowing what he was feeling and to really feel what he was feeling, but he was not yet one who was really doing what he was feeling. Even in his early feeling of this thing he was knowing that what he was feeling had something to do with what Gertrude Stein had been feeling in her early feeling, and he was already knowing that it had something to do with music. As he went on feeling what he was feeling, he was becoming more and more certain that this thing had something to do with music, but in his early feeling he could not really feel what it was that he was feeling, and he could not yet be one who was really knowing what he was feeling, and he was certainly not yet knowing how to make wonderful music out of this thing.

In his early feeling no one else was really feeling what he was feeling. Hardly anyone was even trying to be feeling what he was feeling. But he was a patient one, and being a patient one, he was always taking much time trying to be one who was really feeling what he was feeling and trying to be knowing more and more about this thing and trying to make wonderful music out of what he was feeling. In his early feeling of this feeling hardly anyone was caring, and no one was feeling what he was feeling, and no one was really caring. But he was certainly feeling something, and he was needing to be feeling what he was feeling. He was needing to be one who was really feeling what he was feeling, and he was needing to be knowing all about this thing and how to make wonderful music out of it. Being a patient one, he went on feeling what he was feeling and knowing more and more about this thing. He was never seeming to be caring that no one else was feeling what he was feeling and that hardly anyone else was even caring what he was feeling. He was a patient one.

In his later feeling of this feeling he was beginning to be one who was really feeling what he was feeling, and he was beginning to be one who was knowing more about this thing and more about how to make wonderful music out of it. Still hardly anyone was really caring what he was feeling. But being a patient one, he went on feeling what he was feeling and trying to be knowing more and more about it. He went on feeling, and he was beginning to be really feeling what he had been feeling in his early feeling. He was one who was ending his early feeling of this feeling, and he was beginning to be one who was really knowing what he was feeling and really knowing how to make wonderful music out of it. He was still a patient one and he was still feeling what he had been feeling, and he was still needing to be knowing all about this feeling, but he was ending his early feeling of this thing. He was still not one who was knowing everything he was needing to be knowing about this feeling, but he was knowing something about it, and he was certainly ending his early feeling of this thing.

In his later feeling of his feeling he was beginning to be knowing more and more about all of this. He was beginning to be knowing that he was one who was needing to be using Gertrude Stein's 'Many Many Women' and that he was needing to be using all 82 pages of it. He was a patient one, and he was beginning to be knowing more and more about what he was feeling and how to make wonderful music out of this thing. He was beginning to be knowing that he was needing to be writing more and more pages of music for more and more musicians. He was beginning to be really feeling what he had been feeling in his early feeling. He was beginning to be really knowing all about this feeling. He was one who was beginning to be knowing how to make wonderful music out of this thing.

Being a patient one, he went on feeling what he had been feeling ever since his early feeling. But now he was beginning to be one who was knowing more and more about this thing. He was beginning to be one who was really feeling what he was feeling and really knowing how to make wonderful music out of this thing. He was beginning to be one who was really knowing what he was needing. He was one who was needing six fine singers and six fine instrumentalists. He was one who was needing to be making wonderful music for seven hours. He was beginning to be one who was also knowing what the listeners would be needing. He was beginning to be one who was knowing that to be hearing this wonderful music the listeners would be needing to be coming and going as well as hearing. He was beginning to be one who was really knowing what he would be needing and what the listeners would be needing. He was really feeling what he had been feeling ever since his early feeling of this feeling, and he was one who was really knowing what he was needing to make wonderful music out of this thing. Being a patient one, he was still feeling what he had been feeling ever since his early feeling, and he was still caring about this thing.

For a long time he was one who was waiting. He was one who was needing to be waiting. He was one who was needing to be raising money. He had already ended his early feeling of his feeling, and he was one who was already knowing what he was feeling and how to make wonderful music out of this thing. He was still one who was needing to be feeling what he had been feeling ever since his early feeling of it, but he was also one who was needing to be waiting. Being a patient one, he was waiting. He had been going on feeling his feeling ever since

his early feeling of it, and he was now knowing all about it. He was one who was knowing how to make wonderful music out of this thing. But he was also one who was knowing that he was one who was needing to be waiting. He was needing to be waiting for three years. He was a patient one.

At the Whitney Museum on May 15 he was no longer one who was needing to be waiting. He was one who was only needing to be sitting down and making wonderful music out of this feeling he was still feeling. The six fine singers were singing, the six fine instrumentalists were playing, the listeners were coming and going, and everyone was seeming to be caring. He was one who was finally really feeling what he had been feeling ever since his early feeling, and finally knowing all about it, and finally knowing just how to make wonderful music out of this thing.

July 2, 1979
New Music New York New Institution

For all the value of the 53 specific pieces included in the 10-day festival of New Music, New York, the discussions surrounding them were perhaps even more valuable. And for all the confrontations and new insights, the mere fact that the affair had taken place was perhaps most valuable of all.

This was not just another music festival, but a genuine landmark in the evolution of a genre. The event, hosted by the Kitchen, marked the first time that such a broad spectrum of experimental music had ever been put together into a single, highly visible package. Critics from consumer magazines, jazz magazines, and entertainment magazines, which normally ignore experimental music, arrived in significant numbers. Nine critics from across the country arrived to participate in the Music Critics Association institute held in conjunction with the festival. Representatives from about 50 groups that present new music in one format or another arrived from all over the country to hear the music, to talk, and to form an organization for their mutual benefit. John Duffy, whose 'Meet the Composer' program is expanding to support new music in more and more states, arrived to coordinate his efforts with theirs. There were representatives from the National Endowment and other funding organizations, representatives from European radio, along with publishers, scholars, and music professionals of all sorts. And there was such public response that the Kitchen, with its capacity of 250, had to turn away dozens, if not hundreds, for every concert. In effect, the event turned out to be a kind of new music trade show, and a more vital one than even the most optimistic seemed to anticipate.

This is particularly significant for music that has always been considered experimental or avant-garde and has thus far evolved strictly on the fringes of official culture. The activity has been gradually increasing all around the country, but I don't think anyone quite realized how much it has been increasing. Now it suddenly becomes clear that the genre has accumulated quite a bit of support and momentum, that it is becoming organized on a rather broad scale and that, from here on, it will be pretty hard to sweep under the carpet. In short, new music is now an institution.

Of course, this particular institution was never intended to be one. It was more often thought of as a guerrilla unit, or a collection of guerrilla units. After all, a place devoted to new music and video, and having no intentions whatever of selling food, does not name itself 'The Kitchen' if it is looking forward to the day when it will be well established and when the name will be a constant source of public confusion. Yet for better or worse, the Kitchen, along with the And/Or Gallery in Seattle, Real Art Ways in Hartford, 1750 Arch Street in San Francisco, and all the others, is not just a guerrilla unit anymore. It is clear that such places are now being administered quite professionally by people who know how to raise funds, know how to work together, and even know how to put on a trade show. Most of the groups represented are now stable enough to think two seasons ahead instead of one, solvent enough to consider taking on rather grandiose projects and capable of making decisions that will have significant impact on the history of music. At the same time, they are becoming significant targets for all kinds of criticism, and must now be ready for the blows that will inevitably come from left-out composers, irate consumers, and competing artistic categories. They, like the composers they present, can no longer hide along the fringes of American culture.

This situation raises a number of questions, several of which were expressed emphatically by composer Ivan Tcherepnin: 'Is not the stand being taken, viz. to 'establish' the Experimental music scene and provide an endowment for its sustenance also tying the participants into the system, which will eventually incorporate it? Isn't there an implicit complicity with Big Business and Government involved here?' Many would say that the greatest value of avant-garde work throughout this century has resided in its subversive nature. Questioning bourgeois values, raising political issues, redefining art, throwing stones. But many experimental musicians and perhaps the whole movement, now exist in a glass house of their own. The milieu has changed, and the term 'avant-garde' seems less and less appropriate.

Laurie Anderson's work had never impressed me much before, but her three songs from 'Americans on the Move' did. Her lyrics here have something to say, the music is inventive, she uses electric violin in unique ways, and her singing and general charisma are hard to beat. Some were speculating that, with the help of a good record producer, she would emerge as the '80s' answer to Patti Smith.

'Blue' Gene Tyranny presented the only political statement of the festival, unless there happened to be another one on the June 9 concert, which I had to miss. Tyranny's 'The White Night Riot' is an expertly mixed collage of documentary recordings and electronic effects, with some simple staging involving two men who walk around slowly, eyeing one another. The subject is Harvey Milk.

One of the biggest surprises for me was the realization that there's now a fairly distinct generation gap within experimental music. Perhaps I should have noticed this before, but I still tend to think in terms of the artists who have been making it for some time. Reich and Glass, Ashley, Behrman, Lucier, Mumma, Monk, Corner, were all represented, and aesthetic similarities can be observed among all the composers of their generation. But the festival also included a number of musicians in their twenties or early thirties, and in them I began to hear a

somewhat different set of similarities. The older group derived much from Cage and almost nothing from popular culture, while the younger group almost reverses these priorities. While the song form is almost never used by the older composers, it occurred several times in works by the younger ones. While the older group tends to play synthesizers, homemade electronic devices, piano, or other standard instruments, the younger group is more likely to be involved with electric guitars or with some of the performance art trend of the '70s. The influence of Eastern philosophy is far more apt to be felt in the older group, while loud volumes are somewhat more common among the younger.

It is not really a question of accessibility. One could hear rather severe approaches in the older composers like Corner, but Rhys Chatham, 26, is equally severe in his current work, in which the relentless restriking of drums and guitar strings is varied only by subtle changes in the way the harmonies are allowed to ring out in the high register. And if Don Cherry was able to please just about everyone with his friendly manner as he sang and accompanied himself on an African stringed instrument, Peter Gordon, 28, reached everyone with a good old-fashioned tenor sax solo, played against a hard-rocking pretaped accompaniment with idiosyncratic chord changes.

Phill Niblock's music came off extremely well. Eight tracks of prerecorded oboe and bassoon tones, all slightly out of phase, beat wildly against the live oboeist and bassoonist who wandered around the space. Niblock's music is purely sonic, with no actual melodies, harmonies, or rhythms, and the importance of these massive sonorities is becoming clearer and clearer.

Ned Sublette did a strange and rather courageous thing. Having found a set of lyrics related to the Sublette family in a collection of frontier ballads, this composer from Texas and New Mexico set them to an old-fashioned modal melody of his own devising, and sang the results himself. His singing ability is marginal and there was no accompaniment to cover it up, and yet the long ballad was quite convincing.

Another contrast which began to interest me had to do with the religious and the secular. Of course, this is not the sort of context where one is likely to encounter religious titles or hear settings of actual religious texts. Specific references of that sort always become denominational in some way, and new music audiences are not nearly homogeneous enough to enable one to make denominational statements without offending someone. Still, religious instincts make themselves felt in all human societies, and they have had much to do with the evolution of experimental music. Composers, perhaps more often than their contemporaries in any of the other arts, have been quite aware of spiritual values.

Pauline Oliveros is a case in point. On the opening night of the festival, she came on stage and simply offered a few brief instructions to the audience. 'Sing a tone on one breath, sing someone else's tone on the next breath, and continue in this way.' Then she just closed her eyes and waited. It was an act of faith, and an uncooperative audience could easily have ruined the whole thing, and yet, as the gorgeous choral texture began to rise very gradually out of the audience, it began to seem almost impossible that anything could go wrong. There was something irresistible about her, about her belief, and about how she was able to somehow plug herself, and us, into an almost cosmic experience. The result was not really a Buddhist statement, and certainly not a Christian one, and yet it was a devotional act. Something mystical, something superhuman seemed to be controlling that performance, and even those who would rather not think about such things were respectful of the atmosphere that took over the space. As the last voices were dropping out, after perhaps 10 minutes of this unrehearsed chanting, the room fell into an extraordinary peacefulness.

As the week progressed, I began to hear other works in religious terms. Annea Lockwood's prerecorded mixture of natural sounds seemed like a clearcut example. Alvin Lucier often refers to his work as a kind of alchemy, and it does seem to involve a semi-mystical manipulation of electronic phenomena. The random structures in the excerpt from Petr Kotik's 'Many Many Women' and the rational permutations of Jon Gibson's work also seem connected with higher forces. And Charlie Morrow's contribution, in which he chanted for a few minutes and then told us what visions he had had during his chant, was an overt case of trusting powers outside human control.

On the other hand, much of the repertoire seemed clearly secular. These pieces are rooted in the here and now, and convey greater respect for human skills than for outside forces. A few examples might be Jon Deak's one-man-band act, Jill Kroesen's songs, David van Tieghem's toy instruments, Larry Austin's somewhat humorous lecture-as-song, Tony Conrad's shaggy-dog piano piece which ends with the piano being played by a machine, and Jeffrey Lohn's neoclassically structured work for a rock ensemble.

In discussing the concerts with others, I noticed that some listeners tended to derive quite a bit more satisfaction from religious works, while others preferred the more secular, and that many of my own favorite pieces had been of the first type. Most experimental composers, like their audiences, seem to have drifted away from organized religion long ago, but that does not mean they have abandoned the spiritual. In a way, one might even say that a place like the Kitchen serves as a non-denominational shrine as often as it serves as a place of entertainment.

Philip Corner presented one of his many recent works for gamelan. This one, 'Gamelan: Italy Revisited-III,' is for four players, and it involves a repeated two-note phrase in which one note gradually becomes longer while the other gradually becomes shorter. Eventually they merge into simultaneity. The work goes on to treat a three-note and a four-note phrase in a similar way. The music is the height of simplicity, yet it is difficult to perform and challenging to follow in detail, and it attains a profound meditative calm.

Joel Chadabe made a strong impression, partly because his latest set-up involves two theremins, partly because it is so interesting to watch him move his arms in and out of the theremins' field of sensitivity, partly because he first explained how the whole rig works, and mostly because his computer responds in a language of rich sounds, well-chosen harmonies, and exceptional variety.

Some participants asked why this collection of experimental music did not include more work from the jazz tradition, much of which is as innovative as anything in the classical avant-garde. Despite the performances by Cherry, Jeanne Lee, and George Lewis, the festival was clearly weighted toward white musicians, but the reasoning seems to me to have more to do with recent history than with overt racism. As I see it the black-dominated loft jazz scene has evolved right alongside the white-dominated experimental scene throughout this decade. Loft jazz has been quite visible and succesful in its own way, and for an institution like the Kitchen to attempt to take this genre under its own wing would be far more patronizing than constructive. Moreover, I am beginning to feel that the most important racial issues go beyond black Americans vs. white Americans to involve a lot of other groups. A truly ecumenical festival of new music in New York would have to include some of the klezmer musicians I wrote about two weeks ago, along with shakuhachi players, khamancheh players, Irish groups, Balkan groups, and so on.

Brian Eno sparkled off other controversies. This articulate figure from the rock world, who took part in two panel discussions as well as presenting an informative lecture called 'The Recording Studio as Compositional Tool,' began the week somewhat arrogantly. He told us that experimental music involves too much intellect and not enough sensuality, that creating charisma is a useful and even necessary thing, and that experimental composers should think more about marketing their work. By the end of the week he had admitted that works which were not sensual for him might still be sensual for someone else, was soft-pedaling the charisma theme, and seemed to agree that music should not be considered merely as a commodity. On the other hand, much of Eno's practical point of view did seem to be getting across. It would have been difficult for any composer attending those sections not to concede that, as Eno points out, the phonograph record, rather than the public concert, is the major means of musical communication today. The exchange proved useful on both sides.

But what seemed to make the strongest impression on festival audiences was the sheer diversity of the experimental music they heard. I have frequently written about this, but of course, such a point never comes across in print as strongly as it can in an actual demonstration. Those who do not follow music activity very closely seemed quite surprised to discover that almost none of the work resembled the familiar Reich and Glass models by which the genre is often defined.

Jon Gibson played better than I have ever heard him play before. His circular breathing was fully under control, and his soprano saxophone sound was really sumptuous. His new work, 'Criss Cross,' is a rather fast white-note piece that is of some interest in itself, but with unaccompanied pieces of this sort, it is the performing that really counts.

Gordon Mumma presented his 'Schoolwork,' playing his musical saw with Ned Sublette's melodica and Joe Hannan's bowed psalter, and the high sustained sounds of these instruments produced remarkable blends, as well as occasional difference tones. The piece is conceived as a kind of folk music, since there is no score, and the work can only be learned firsthand, by working with someone who already knows it.

As listeners confronted unfamiliar samples of meditation music, unfamiliar instruments, unfamiliar types of electronic music, and unfamiliar performance styles, they seemed on the verge of giving up the search for any unity or cohesiveness in the genre. As a result I found myself trying to figure out what characteristics were shared by all of this music.

There are actually quite a few. None of the works here climaxed in anything like the usual sense. None involved a dialectic between two opposing sets of material. The vast preponderance of the work was tonal or modal rather than atonal. Most of the works involved elementary performance skills, and only a few could be considered virtuoso pieces in the usual practice-five-hours-a-day sense. Most of the pieces were not notated on conventional music staves, and often could not have been, due to the nature of the materials. In almost all cases the composers performed their own works. Many of these points had been emphasized by John Rockwell, who organized the music critics' institute, moderated many of the panels, and played an important role throughout the 10 days.

The music itself was up and down, as large programs of music usually are. The low points occasionally made me wonder if the artists in question were really ready for this kind of exposure, but more often they reflected the restrictions inherent in the festival situation. With the small stage, the 15-minute time allotment, the low budget, and the need to set up and break down quickly, the conditions presented obvious difficulties for composers who work best with large ensembles, large timespans, large budgets, or large conglomerations of equipment. Still, the vast majority of the music was professional and provocative, and not a single piece struck me as imitative of something else. I think the genre will survive quite well, even as an institution.

Note:

The New Music America festivals have continued to grow, to pull together the largest new music audiences ever in the United States, and to attract financial support from foundations that normally only contributed to the symphony orchestras. If the enlarged format has occasionally induced organizers to select shorter works and more accessible styles, in order to please so many people all at once, the festival has also been very positive in providing nationwide communication for everyone concerned with new music.

July 23, 1979
The Role of Number One

The role of the United States as 'Number One' has dwindled rapidly. In 1976 our gross national product, per capita, was only fifth in the world, preceded by three small oil countries and Sweden. The value of the dollar has declined dramatically, every year Japan and West Germany take over a larger percentage of technological businesses, and our share of the world's exports has dropped from 22 per cent in 1948 to about 13 per cent in 1976, and probably less today. Middle Eastern interests own vast properties in the United States, and it has been announced that a West German bank is purchasing the World Trade Center. Our rate of inflation, our average life spans, and our infant mortality rate all score a little worse in comparison with the other countries of the world as time goes on.

Our problems are not, as Newsweek suggested in its cover story a few weeks ago, simply a matter of a few little problems that can be easily remedied by directing more money into research, reducing government restrictions, and changing a few policies in Washington. It is an inevitable trend. For almost a hundred years colonial powers have been losing control of the world, and the developing countries have been gaining more control. The class structure of the nations in the world has been evening out. Loss of economic and political control in Cuba, the Arab States, and Southeast Asia are only some of the more obvious examples. Eventually we must lose almost all of our colonial interests, just as the Dutch, the French, and the British have. Things are changing.

Political and economic control have always gone hand in hand with cultural control. Louis XIV could control the art and music of France because he controlled the politics and economics of France. The Moors could bring guitars to Spain because they brought armies to Spain. Latin became the lingua franca of Europe because Rome controlled Europe. Catholicism became the religion of South America because Spain controlled South America. Generally the cultural domination need not be enforced or legislated. It happens quite naturally - once it is established who the role model is.

Symphony orchestras and neckties became standard around the world because European and American interests controlled the world. Jazz and rock records and Coca-Cola were purchased around the world because American cars and American guns were purchased around the world.

But they don't buy many American cars and guns in Libya anymore, and they don't buy many American records either, and they don't have many symphony orchestras either, and they don't speak much English either.

And that's fine with me, because I'm tired of American symphony orchestras, and I'm tired of being 'Number One,' and I'm tired of going around pretending that I'm superior to everybody else, and I'm really interested to know what kind of music the Libyans will make left to their own devices, and I don't mind sacrificing our balance of payments a little bit to pay a Libyan group to come over here and give some concerts, and I figure my life will be a whole lot richer on the day I can say to myself: 'Hey, I'm not just an American anymore. I'm not just 'Number One.' I'm part of the planet Earth. I'm 'Number Everything.'' Things are changing.

When we first began to be interested in the cultures of the rest of the world, it was little more than curiosity: 'Very clever these Chinese. Of course, they never progressed beyond the simple five-note scale, but I like some of these melodies. Properly orchestrated, they might sound rather charming. And wouldn't one of those African masks look nice on the mantle? They're so exotic. And cheap too. The natives work for only pennies a day, you know.' Later a few, mostly anthropologists and artists, began to dig deeper. How do other cultures live? How do they think and see and hear? Henry Cowell begins teaching the first course in ethnomusicology in America, and he approaches it not with mere curiosity, but with genuine respect. John Cage begins studying with Daito Suzuki, not with mere curiosity, but with genuine respect. Lou Harrison collects and learns to play Chinese musical instruments, not with mere curiosity, but with genuine respect. Meanwhile, most composers were concerned with what they call the 'international style.' But it is hard for me to come across that term without recalling one memorable night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, when, during an intermission symposium at one of the Meet the Moderns concerts, Lukas Foss asked Yuji Takahashi what he thought about this 'international style.' Takahashi paused for a long time, and then he leaned into the microphone and said 'Yes - there is an international style - and it is European.' Yuji Takahashi turned 40 last September. It is his generation, my generation, our generation, that needs to figure all of this out. We have a lot of questions to answer. For example, isn't it possible that the true avant-garde music center in New York at the moment is not the Kitchen but the Alternative Center for International Arts, that little place on East 4th Street where they present Japanese classical music, Indian folk singing, African epic singing, mbira music, khamancheh music, hayagum music, and William Hellermann all in one season? Isn't it just possible that the Kitchen syndrome represents the last of the ethnocentric movements in new music and that the Alternative Center represents the beginning of an international movement in music? Isn't it possible that the Kitchen is only looking 10 years ahead while the Alternative Center is looking 50 years ahead? Isn't it possible that the most important music of the 21st century will be coming from Nigeria and Hong Kong and Bolivia rather than Europe and the United States? Isn't it possible that one day the Muzak in our elevators will be arranged for ouds or

koras or santurs? And most important, most important of all, isn't it crucial for artists to begin thinking about forms of music that will communicate to more than one ethnic group?

I love Steve Reich's 'Drumming.' In fact, I love it so much that, if I was asked to choose one piece, above all the others, which could be presented as a genuine masterpiece of the SoHo avant-garde, I would choose 'Drumming.' To hear all four movements of that work, performed live, is to hear a flawless work of great joy, and intricacy, and subtlety, and clarity. And since the percussionists Steve Reich employs are among the finest in the Western world, the piece trips along with a kind of immaculate precision that would be hard to match.

But my enjoyment of the music is always mixed with a taste of guilt. You probably already know that, prior to embarking on 'Drumming,' Steve Reich had spent some months studying in Ghana. And you probably know that most of the rhythms in 'Drumming' came out of what he learned there. But you probably don't know that his teacher was a man named Gideon, and you probably don't know that Gideon also received his rewards for the work that had been done. While Steve Reich and Musicians were touring Europe, becoming famous, and solidifying their Deutsche Grammophon contract, Gideon was offered a chance to leave his post with the Ghana drummers and dancers and was given a position as artist-in-residence - at the State University of New York in Brockport. That's spelled B-R-O-C-K-P-O-R-T and it's somewhere in the vicinity of Rochester.

Can we blame Steve Reich for wanting to learn what he wants to learn, and wanting to launch a career the way all Americans are taught to launch careers? Of course not. Can we blame Gideon for just doing the Ghana thing, the way all Ghanaians are taught, instead of figuring out a way to translate it all to European instruments and sell it to the white man? Of course not. Can we blame the particular individuals involved in a thousand similar cases? Of course not. That's just the way the world works. So far. But that will be changing too.

And that's fine with me, because I'm tired of American cars and American guns and American soft drinks and American popular music, and I'm tired of the international style which is European, and I'm tired of being 'Number One,' and I'm tired of going around pretending that I'm superior to everybody else, and I'm tired of exploiting the rest of the world, and I'm looking forward to the day when we'll be 'Number 10' - or 'Number 15.' Of course we won't be able to go around the world telling everybody else what to think and what to buy and what kind of music to listen to anymore. And we won't be able to afford to waste oil anymore. But I think we'll still have plenty to eat. And I suspect our perspective will get a little clearer too, and I'm looking forward to it. Because I figure our lives will be a whole lot richer on the day when we begin saying to ourselves, 'Hey, we're part of the planet Earth. We're 'Number Everything.'' Things will be different.

Note:
The rhetorical tone of this article is due to the fact that it was originally presented as a speech, in connection with a panel discussion on 'The Relationship Between New Music and Third World Music' which took place on June 14 as part of that first New Music America festival. This was the end of something for me, and it marks a six-month gap in the present anthology. I continued the column throughout this year, but wrote little on minimal music. The reports on Meredith Monk, Maryanne Amacher, Pauline Oliveros, and Frederic Rzewski were all short and without enthusiasm. Instead, I focussed even more on ethnic music, wrote twice on pop groups, reviewed some recordings, wrote about modern dance accompanists, and made some trivial aesthetic observations, none of which seems at all interesting ten years later. From this whole period the only article that we wanted to include in the anthology is the following one which fits Glenn Branca into the picture. Partly I think I was just tired, and partly I think I had the feeling after the New Music America festival that the music I had been writing about was pretty well established and didn't need me anymore, now that it was receiving coverage in the general press. Also, I was extremely occupied with my own music, as the fall of 1979 marked my own first trip to Europe, a tour in which I presented 10 different concerts, most often playing my 'Nine Bells,' which was new at the time.

In any case, with this article of July 1979, the '70s were already really over for me and my journalism, and we considered just ending the anthology here. But by January of 1980, I had found a new energy, writing articles about some important figures, whom I had neglected before, and making other observations that somehow seem to be part of this book, even though the point of view is much more international.

September 24, 1979

Contradictions and Glenn Branca's Static

Ordinarily I avoid writing about pop forms, not only because it's not my department, but also because I don't keep up very well in this area. Moreover, I realize I have strong biases against some of the basic premises of the music. I simply lose interest when I sense that a piece is addressed primarily to teenagers, involved primarily with the physical and sensual rather than the intellectual and spiritual, tailored to current market trends, or created primarily to make money. Of course, there are many jazz artists and a few rock groups who don't work in these ways, and some classical, avant-garde, and 'ethnic' artists who do. But by and large these latter approaches are more idealistic, and more meaningful for me, and it seems preferable to leave the hits to those who have less trouble accepting their premises.

Still, despite my biases, musicians working in popular mediums occasionally reach me as deeply as anyone. If I were to make a list of the favorite albums I've encountered in the last few years, it would certainly have to include 'Egon Bondy's Happy Hearts Club Banned,' by the Czech rock group the Plastic People, and 'Zombie,' by Fela and his Nigerian musicians. Of course, neither of these was a best seller, to say the least, which probably means that my own tastes are totally irrelevant to the criteria that prevail in these areas, and that anyone who wants to be with it should not listen to me.

Having clarified my perspective a bit, let me move on to two more-or-less popular music groups that impressed me recently. Both are younger and more inexperienced than the Plastic People and Fela. Yet both have some of that same kind of honesty and directness. They seem driven solely by personal and musical motives, and I found myself believeing their music.

The Contradictions, whom I heard in a loft on lower Broadway on September 7, play what might be described as classical Latin jazz. The classical element is provided by violinist Francine Schwartzentruber, cellist Martha Siegel, and flutist Sarah Plant, and by the arrangements, which involve little improvisation, some intricate harmonies and rhythms, many textural inventions, and some subtle doublings. The second ingredient comes mostly from the two percussionists, Daniel Santos and Oseiku, who concentrate on Latin instruments and Latin rhythms. The jazz can often be heard in the guitar styles of Jeffrey Glenn and Rodrigo Villaseca, in the saxophone playing of Arkady Kofman, in the piano work of Peter Eggers, and in the chord changes. But within those basic boundaries, the 16 short pieces played by the nine member ensemble were quite varied.

'Prokofiev's Cat' is a witty Latin take-off on 'Peter and the Wolf.' 'Dawn Light' featured violin and cello playing in octaves against insistent piano chords and reminded me a little of Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time.' 'Rite' struck me as a demonic bebop with its fast melody and quirky electric guitar solo. 'In the French countryside' featured lyrical lines in the soprano saxophone, violin and cello behind it, and percussion parts that drifted into wind chimes and other gentle effects. 'I have a Spell' maintained a steady eighth-note texture containing a number of shifting motifs, all neatly scored. 'Just Like This' had a Latin beat and modern jazz chord changes, but its quirky, brainy melody sounded classical.

There are perhaps a few too many 'contradictions' in these compositions by Eggers and Villaseca. Many of the pieces were awkwardly shaped from a traditional formal point of view, and the endings were almost always puzzling. But the group was so tight, and its conviction so clear, that I found most of the evening irresistible, even in some of its most shamelessly romantic moments. And perhaps particularly at those times.

The Static is an experimental rock trio headed by Glenn Branca. I haven't heard them in person, although I expect to see them at the Mudd Club September 20, but was fascinated by 'My Relationship' and 'Don't Let Me Stop You,' which arrived in the mail recently. This 45 is issued by Theoretical Records, and I understand that the group is an offshoot of Theoretical Girls, another SoHo ensemble. Perhaps that categorizes them as 'new wave.' Or would it be 'no wave' ? As I said, I don't keep up terribly well.

'My Relationship' revolves around a curious kind of chord change. The two guitars alternate between a unison tone and a two-note cluster, while the drummer pounds out a beat that is extremely insistent, even for rock. The song isn't all that 'static.' In fact, it changes tempo once and even builds to a climax before its three minutes are over. There is something quite extreme, however, about the way the singer intones 'my relationship' over and over, and these simple lyrics gradually begin to suggest a number of possible interpretations.

'Don't Let Me Stop You' begins with a long list of accusations about stupid things the listener does, and which many of us are guilty of, and thus the title becomes highly sarcastic. The words are not buried in the texture the way they are in most rock, and it's pretty hard to miss the point. The guitars and drums are equally biting as they drive their messages home over and over again, relentlessly, almost mechanically. The music is probably still rock, just as that of the Contradictions is probably ultimately some sort of Latin or Jazz. But both of them turned me on.

January 14, 1980

Robert Rutman, Bruce Fier, and New Instruments

In recent years I have heard mallet instruments made out of wine bottles, horns made out of plumbing equipment, and wind chimes made out of car keys. I have heard new percussion instruments fashioned from junk metal, mailing tubes, kitchen utensils, bones, and other odds and ends. I have seen plastic straws used as reeds, hubcaps used as drums, tin cans used as resonators, and pieces of glass converted into all sorts of bowed, blown, and struck instruments. Even without counting the many electronic devices that have come along, or the many modifications of traditional instruments, an awful lot of new instrumental concepts have been introduced in the last 10 years, and many of them have fascinated me. I like the idea that the musical muse may be found anywhere, even in a Coke bottle, and I like the start-from-scratch attitude of the musicians who work with homemade instruments, and I like many of the novel effects that inevitably result. But as these explorations proliferate, I have begun to ask some tougher questions when I encounter a new instrument. Does it really produce sounds that could not be achieved in a simpler or more traditional way? Has the instrument evolved past the found-object state to a point where it can be considered a well crafted object in its own right? Has the technique for playing the instrument grown past the anybody-can-do-it state to a point where a good performer can find real interpretative possibilities within it? Only a few local artists have made instruments that really hold up against these criteria, and Robert Rutman is one of them.

Rutman's instruments are of two basic types, which he calls steel cellos and bow chimes. The steel cello employs a single string, stretched across a gently curved sheet metal resonator, and is played with a bass bow. The instrument on display at the Opening Gallery on West Broadway stands about eight feet high and carries an extraordinary resonance. A good strong stroke of the bow generates a sound that can ring within the sheet metal for a good eight or 10 seconds after the bow leaves the string, and by playing a series of notes one can build up a rich amalgam of sound. No amplification is necessary.

Bows were on hand for gallery visitors to try the instrument, so I took a shot at it. I had trouble stopping the string in the places I was looking for, and could never make the bow do exactly what I wanted it to do, but I was able to produce the basic sounds satisfactorily and felt a sense of power when the sheet metal responded.

The bow chimes work on the same principles, but here one bows on five rods rather than on a string. Thus glissandos are not possible, but particular sounds can be produced more reliably. The rods are adjustable, though I could not hear that any great pains had been taken to tune the rods to one another or to the sounds of the other instruments in the room. Rutman's background is visual and sculptural, and he seems purposely to avoid coming to grips with tuning principles, rhythmic theories, notation, or other forms of purely musical sophistication. Rutman's attitude used to bother me, but now I find it refreshing. He has abandoned much of the aggressiveness that used to propel his performances in the early '70s, has evolved a good deal of technical control over pitches and dynamics, and has taught quite a few others to play the instruments along with him. Rutman is still basically a primitive, but he is not naive, and his recent recording, 'Bitter Suites,' in which he is assisted by several other players, is quite successful in a loose, improvised sort of way. The group is known as the U.S. Steel Cello Ensemble.

Though the sound show at P.S.1 closed almost two months ago, I should take this opportunity to mention one of the instruments exhibited there, which was built by a California artist, and which absorbed me for some time one Sunday afternoon. Bruce Fier's 'Sound Spiral' has not evolved into a real performing instrument or generated a repertoire of pieces, but I am not sure that is relevant in this case, as the 'Sound Spiral' is basically an audience participation piece, and an excellent one. The instrument consists of 254 light aluminium rods suspended from the ceiling in a spiral pattern. The spiral begins with the shortest rods, only a couple of feet long, and winds outward several times, ending with rods over nine feet in length. One problem with installations of this sort is that when they are exquisite visually you usually feel you should't touch them. But Fier's 'Sound Spiral' somehow has it both ways. The shimmering of the rods and the graceful spiraling formation are quite attractive, and yet you know that this really is a sound object, that it won't break easily, and that it's all right to stroke the rods and listen to them. I began with a rather timid brush, which started some of the rods undulating against one another in appealing wave motions and stimulated a surprisingly rich texture of metallic sounds that rang for a long time. I had to look around to convince myself that there was no amplification equipment in the room. The pitches of the individual rods were not particularly distinct, though there was a big difference between the shimmering of the shorter rods and the deeper resonances of the longer ones, and the more of them that moved at once the better it sounded. I later crawled into the core of the spiral, where I could reach the whole scale easily, and I ended up quite intoxicated. This was due partly to dizziness but mostly to the sheer sumptuousness of the sound.

February 4, 1980

The European Avant-Garde Marches On

Boulez, Stockhausen, Penderecki, Berio, Xenakis. The names sound so familiar, yet many of their works have never been presented here. And when there is a major New York performance, such as the first complete version of Boulez's massive 'Pli selon Pli' last year, it's not as though tens of thousands turn out to buy tickets. Something has changed since the days when Mahler, Sibelius, Rachmaninoff, and even Schoenberg were practically idolized on these shores, even though they were still alive.

One of the changes is that as we Americans have gradually developed greater confidence in our own cultural resources, we have become less intimidated by those across the Atlantic. Even in areas like classical music, which are purely European in origin. It is true that orchestra boards continue to give preference to Europeans when they appoint conductors, but it is also true that critics now speak out against this custom more strongly and more confidently than ever before. Most Americans just don't feel culturally inferior anymore. And a by-product of this feeling is that we now tend, often unconsciously, to regard Europe as an alien culture. We have our European roots, but we also have plenty of African roots, and have assumed a number of Asian traditions as well, and by now none of those continents are as important to us as our own. We may continue to be interested in them and influenced by them, but we don't identify with them, and Europe is one of them. Or one of them.

But people who are trying to let go of apron strings are likely to overdo it for a while, and that explains another by-product of the development, namely our relative lack of interest in recent European musical developments. Of course, we know the names of the famous living European composers. We even know some of their music. But those styles actually stem from the '50s and '60s. European developments of the '70s remain largely unknown here, and even rather difficult to find out about. I had done a little inquiring in this area, and developed a couple of working theories, but it wasn't until Stephen Montague gave a concert-lecture on younger European composers at Brooklyn College this fall that I was able to develop this point of view.

Montague is an American pianist and composer who has been living in England for some years, tours the continent regularly, and keeps in touch with new music activity all over Europe. The taped excerpts and projections he presented that night reflected some personal biases. Jazz-based styles and improvised idioms were neglected, for example. Still, the presentation uncovered a lot of first-rate creative talent.

Roman Berger (Czech, b. 1930). A man who had an influential position in Czech culture in the mid-'60s and paid for it with a 10-year jail term. His recent electronic music is technologically a little behind the times, but it carries an emotional depth that I have never heard in any American music.

Ann Boyd (British, b. 1945). Delicate piano music. Soft, sparse, and mostly on white notes. Morton Feldman without dissonances.

Gary Carpenter (British, b. 1951). Soft orchestral work. Lovely colors and rich sounds. A relatively static texture that seems to reflect gamelan music as well as American minimalism.

Hans Joachim Hespos (West German, b. 1938). Raucous music for four antiphonal orchestras. He assaults the audience on four sides and seems to be very angry about something. A type of brashness that would seem totally unjustified in America, but which is apparently taken quite seriously in Europe.

Zygmunt Krauze (Polish, b. 1938). Music for piano and orchestra with everyone following a basic melodic line. Coloristic invention and special instrumental techniques, but also a concern for simpler folk traditions.

Helmut Lachenmann (West German, b. 1935). Very soft orchestral sounds that studiously avoid using the instruments in traditional ways. Some of the whishes, thumps, and squeaks are quite ingenious and reflect a Cage-like acceptance of all possible sounds. A Warsawaudience is heckling loudly in the background.

Serban Nichifor (Romanian, b. 1954). Music for string quartet that seems to stem from folk music. But rather than directly borrowing specific rhythms and melodies, as Bartok did, the composer works only with the modes and emotions of folk music.

Joseph Anton Riedl (West German, b. 1926). An older composer who continues to create multi-media environments, a medium now generally considered old-hat in Europe, as here. Yet his highly subsidized mazes, giant balloons, and excellent instrumentalists can be quite impressive, and the work is frequently presented.

Jean-Claude Risset (French, b. 1938). Super-clean electronic gurglings produced by computer. So polished technologically as to seem almost sterile, and yet there is some emotional impulse behind the sound.

Krzysztof Zarebski (Polish, b. 1939). Performance art activities with instrumental noises, bizarre theatrical images, and some nudity. Political messages are no doubt imbedded in the material.

Despite the variety in this music, much of it has standard or official quality. In general, it is scored for standard orchestral instruments or produced in official electronic music studios, and it reflects the official money that flows so bounteously through official European channels. Remember that the West German government provides approximately 45 times as much financial assistance to artistic activities as the American government does, and that it subsidizes about 40 festivals of new music every year. Remember that radio organizations throughout Europe produce special programs of contemporary classical music for which composers are quite well paid, and that composers' organizations, particularly in Eastern Europe, dispense stipends to their members with a generosity unheard of here. Remember that there is, and long has been, a kind of cultural competitiveness in Europe, and that this requires each country to try to surpass the others in creative genius. According to Montague, one relatively unknown composer still in his twenties recently received a commission worth some $15,000 to write a nine-minute orchestra piece.

The European composers tend to write for orchestra and other established mediums and to create electronic works in well-equipped, state-supported studios because these facilities are available to them. But Americans like Philip Glass, Robert Rutman, and David Behrman work with their own ensembles, with homemade instruments, and with homemade electronic gear because that's all they have.

The European composers generally write music for others to play, because fine performers are available and the composers are sufficiently paid through commissions and royalties. But Americans like Charlemagne Palestine perform their own music, since they must rely on performance fees to make ends meet.

European audiences tend to assume that talented composers will rise up through the ranks and receive orchestral commissions, and are suspicious of renegades who might want to make music with rubber bands or an ocarina ensemble. American audiences tend to assume that talented composers will find some ingenious way to make music, and are suspicious of those who have the audacity to write for symphony orchestra or to ask for lavish technological support. In a way, it would probably be as hard for a young European to find support for a wine-bottle orchestra as it is for a young American to obtain an orchestral commission. Obviously, it is quite possible to come up with good musical products through either the European system or the American system. But they will be different sorts of products.

It seems to me, though, that the biggest difference between the recent European and American music has less to do with economics than with emotions. A non-emotional, non-self-expressive coolness has swept over classical American music in the last few decades. One can hear it in the works of Milton Babbitt as well as those of John Cage, and one can hear it even more clearly in the formalism or minimalism of Philip Corner or Alvin Lucier or Phill Niblock or other members of the next American generation. This is not to say that there are no feelings in the American repertoire. But the music is not really about feelings, and current European works generally are.

This is not always true of the British. Certainly the British music Montague presented that night was rather cool. In everything else, however, I sensed that the music was coming from strong emotional impulses of one sort or another. I felt a little distant from it, and I felt it was a cultural distance that many other American listeners would share.

I suspect that the new music audience in America would have as much trouble relating to the emotional concerns of Berger, Hespos, or Nichifor, as the local Balanchine and Cunningham audiences had in relating to Bejart. There are strong cultural reasons why American promoters and conductors have not gone out of their way to introduce us to much of the recent European repertoire, and why the composers Montague presented that night are largely unknown here. Still, it's unfortunate we're so ignorant of so much talent.

Economics. Emotions. American ignorance. Those seem to be the main points, at least as far as the classically based, non-improvised idioms are concerned. Yet many questions remain. To what extent has European music really been influenced by American innovations in the past decade? Why have so many European composers continued to concern themselves with personal emotional expression while American composers generally don't? Is it because they are still having a hard time escaping from 19th-century traditions? Or is it because they have been able to retain an essential musical value that Americans have lost sight of? What are the specific advantages and disadvantages inherent in lavish subsidy for new music? Montague's sampling had been most instructive, but I wanted to find out more.

I obtained a recording of the First Symphony of Peter Schat, the 44-year-old Dutch composer who received his first major American exposure last summer when his new opera was premiered at Aspen. The symphony uses a large orchestra in largely traditional ways, but there is something fresh. Schat, who is clearly based in post-Schoenberg, post-Webern atonal techniques, has retreated somewhat from the angst usually associated with this orientation and found a style that once again embodies warm melodies and poignant harmonics, and even makes room for what sounds like a harmonica solo.

I spoke with several American friends who seem to know everything about new music, hoping to obtain a few additional names and insights. But the only younger European composers they seemed to know much about or have much interest in were born in America or had adopted the do-it-yourself methods common here. Like Gilius van Bergeyk, a Dutch composer who punches his music out on rolls of paper to be played on a barrel organ. Or Eliane Radigue, who presents her electronic music in specially controlled situations. Or Tamia, the young French singer who has evolved her own vocabulary of vocal techniques. Trying to find out about Berger or Nichifor from them was as frustrating as trying to gather such information in reference books or record stores.

I thought about Walter Zimmermann, a young West German composer who used to be particularly concerned with new American music, and had even compiled a book of interviews with American experimenters. For some time his own music developed along similar lines, but now he's working on a series called 'Lokale Musik,' in which he transforms German folk songs into concert pieces. The results are refined, classical, and hard to play, though landler rhythms and polka harmonies can still be heard. It is clear that this return to folk traditions in Zimmermann's music, as in that of other European composers, is related to the roots phenomenon so familiar here. But it is also clear that there are special motivations to turn in that direction on a continent where folk cultures are rapidly disappearing, and where artists have taken an interest in such things ever since Wagner and the Grimm brothers.

I thought about some composers I met recently in Cologne. They all seemed to survive as composers relatively easily, with the help of commissions from the radio, research grants, and performance fees. Yet they seemed rather frustrated too. Large fees do not guarantee large audiences, and they seemed to have at least as much trouble actually getting their music across to the public as young composers do here.

I also thought about Krzysztof Knittel, a young Polish composer I met two years ago. I remembered a tape he had played me of a political theatre piece he had written involving a confrontation between a tuba player and a policeman. I remembered how interested he had become in some of the stripped-down minimalist statements he encountered in America and how he had decided to write a long piece based on a single drone tone. I also remembered my astonishment when he sent me a tape of the piece. The music consisted of one sustained sound, all right, but it was not at all like the sustained sounds we have heard in works by La Monte Young or Pauline Oliveros. This sustained sound somehow carried with it a number of implications, tensions, meanings. The sound did not just drone on, tuning into the universe, the way American drones often seem to. It vibrated intensely, as if it might burst out of its tight shell at any moment.

And I remembered a subsequent conversation with the composer. We had been talking about the piece and about some of the differences between European and American music in general, and suddenly I felt I could put it into words. 'It seems to me that we have many ideas in common, but that we don't have too many feelings in common.' He paused for a moment, and then almost agreed. 'Yes, maybe it's something like that.' I guess my remark sounded like one of those American drone tones. Just a little too clear, a little too sparse, a little too homemade to really satisfy him the way it satisfied me.

Note:
Making a living as a composer in Europe is not as easy as I imagined at this time, but much of this article seems to me to be valid even today.

February 4, 1980
Frederic Rzewski's Thirteen Studies

One is easily carried away by the energy and political messages of Frederic Rzewski's work, and perhaps that is what is supposed to happen when one listens to 'Attica' or 'Les Moutons de Panurge' or 'El Pueblo Unido.' As a result, however, listeners tend to overlook the rigorous structures that hold the composer's work together, when it seems to me that Rzewski is actually a formalist above all else. Every piece he writes adheres rigorously to some sort of structural logic. It is never necessary to understand the particular logic in order to appreciate the music, but there is always plenty of intellectual substance to sink your teeth into if you feel like it. I recently found his 'Thirteen Studies for Instruments' particularly rewarding on this level.

The 'Thirteen Studies' were commissioned by the Ensemble Intercontemporaine in Paris and were premiered there in 1977, but the work had never been heard in its completed form in New York until the Orchestra of New York presented it on their series of January concerts. When I heard the presentation at Carnegie Recital Hall, I became particularly fascinated with the 36-note theme on which the studies are based, and with the many neat arithmetical games Rzewski plays on it. Even on first hearing I was able to discern quite a bit of what was going on structurally, and not because I have particularly keen listening abilities, but because the games are so clearly laid out.

The first couple of studies stick rather closely to the theme, which is a long pentatonic melody without any special rhythmic character. Later, individual players are allowed to insert trills around the theme, or to improvise solos on a few notes of it. In one particularly effective study, four players take turns playing segments of the melody for a while and then begin overlapping with one another. Other players also enter one by one, until everyone is playing at different times in a highly energetic texture. Another study involves a multi-voiced canon which comes to a vibrant ending when the whole orchestra eventually plays the final note in unison.

Much of Rzewski's formalistic manipulation has to do with dividing the 36 notes up into groups of four or six or 12. One study breaks the theme up into a rhythmic figure containing seven notes, which might seem to be a problem, since seven does not divide evenly into 36 and there is always a one-note remainder. But of course, this little arithmetical contradiction is easily resolved by simply running through the theme seven times. At this point everything finally comes out just right, and the study, like all the studies, comes to a neat logical ending. But the composer's real intellectual coup is saved for the end when he finally breaks the theme into four phrases of nine notes each. Stated in this way the music becomes beautifully symmetrical, and it becomes clear that the four quadrants of the theme are perfect mirrors of one another. Somehow Rzewski conceals that for the first 45 minutes or so of the piece.

Of course, the 'Thirteen Studies' would be pretty sterile if they were concerned solely with these structural matters, and they're not. The real subject of the piece is improvisation, and the music explores the entire range from total restriction to total freedom. Some of the studies are completely notated, some involve varying degrees of performer freedom, and at several points within the sequence the musicians insert completely free improvisations with no notation or instructions whatever. So for the musicians the piece becomes a framework within which to explore improvisational possibilities, for the listener it becomes a portrait of human beings working together in a variety of ways, and for everyone it poses basic questions about freedom and restriction, and thus about political matters. Even the stage arrangement is related to humanistic issues. The players are not seated by sections in the normal way, but are distributed individually around the stage so that there are no first-chair players and no last-chair players. Everyone has equal say, the solos are evenly distributed, and this basic anarchistic set-up is maintained in the composed sections as well as the improvised ones. The young musicians, under Paul Dunkel, played their democratic roles quite effectively.

February 18, 1980

Carles Santos Invents Passionate Minimalism

'Passionate minimalism' would seem to be a contradiction in terms. Yet the phrase strikes me as an appropriate label for the work of Carles Santos. This 39-year-old composer is clearly a minimalist. He likes to work with a mere handful of notes or sounds, he frequently uses additive techniques that allow a phrase to change only in extremely gradual increments, and he always ends up with relatively repetitive pieces. Yet his attitude has little to do with the cool-headedness that usually goes along with minimalist techniques. His music seems to emerge out of real feelings, and he performs it quite passionately. Sometimes I even sense flamenco influence, which is not all that unlikely, because the composer has spent most of his life in Spain. Perhaps you would prefer to think of his work as 'Spanish minimalism.' Santos is from the Barcelona area, and his native language is Catalan, which explains why he calls himself Carles instead of Carlos. He tours regularly and has been in New York many times, and I had heard fragments of his work before. But it was not until his recent visit here, which included performances at Carnegie Recital Hall and on the Experimental Intermedia series and featured some recent works, that I was able to obtain a broader understanding of his music.

Santos is a formidable pianist, and his own performances of his piano music can be stunning. My favorite Santos piano work is a piece called 'Buchalaroz by Night,' which I heard at an informal gathering one evening. It begins with a short line played over and over, but soon the line begins to grow. New notes are attached to the beginning of the phrase or the end, or inserted in the middle. Gradually the harmony becomes more lush, the range begins to spread over the whole keyboard, the pianistic style begins to reflect Chopin, or perhaps Rachmaninoff, and even accuracy is occasionally sacrificed in favor of the emotional sweep. Eventually the phrase is so long that you can no longer keep track of the additions and changes, and so sensual that you no longer want to.

'Gar y Gos' involves passions of a different sort. This is a theatre piece for flute and piano, which Santos played at Carnegie Recital Hall with flutist Barbara Held, and it's a kind of love story. At this performance, Held sometimes sat on the bench next to the pianist, playing her flute very sweetly while Santos sang to her, and sometimes they were a less blissful couple. At one point they even stomped out angry rhythms at each other with their feet. I sensed that this newly composed work has autobiographical sources. But it captures the essence of such matters in a general way, and it does so in a mere 10 or 15 minutes.

Other Santos pieces could be considered sound poems, and several of these were included on the Experimental Intermedia program on Centre Street. 'La boqueta amplificada' translates as 'the amplified little mouth,' and that is an appropriate description, for the piece consists solely of mouth sounds. Using a microphone, and no voiced sounds at all, Santos inhales, exhales, breathes, whooshes, kisses, lips, tongues, and sputters his way through this remarkably sensual little piece. 'To-ca-ti-co-to-ca-ta' takes a more rhythmic direction, with speedy tongue work and lots of energy.

'Avigno 79' and 'Cant energetic' are at least as passionate. In these short pieces, Santos works without a microphone, projecting fast sequences of nonverbal sounds quite loudly, while he swings and sways and sweats profusely. Occasionally, however, he stands silently, shifting to a pure movement vocabulary of rhythmic facial twitches, which are sometimes quite amusing.

Several of Santos's short films were shown that same night. 'Peca per a quatre pianos' begins quite innocently with Santos sitting at a grand piano playing music that is modal, energetic, and repetitive. Soon, however, the pianist gets up and walks away. Of course, we expect the music to stop, but the sound track continues as if the piano were playing itself. The camera shifts slightly and we see Santos begin a second part on a second piano. Eventually he sits down at a third piano and a fourth piano, and the four-track music becomes quite dense. The movie ends, drolly, with the pianist walking off the screen. All four pianos continue. Without him.

'Divertiment' involves four musicians on the stage of a large concert hall. They are dressed in tails and are seated at music stands in a string quartet arrangement. But they have no instruments. Instead, they deliver their music in speaking voices. 'La re sol fa mi' says one. 'Faaaaa sol sol la,' shouts another. Their voices are quite rhythmic, and although they are indifferent to pitch, they seem anxious to make the most sensitive dynamic shadings and tempo nuances they can. Gradually you realize they are reading an actual piece of music, and if you are familiar with the score, which happens to be the Mozart 'Divertimento in D major,' it is not too difficult to remember what the strains sound like in their original orchestration. A third film, which I understand is currently receiving a commercial run in Barcelona, has a long title of musical syllables. These syllables define all 36 pitches of a driving 12-count theme that Santos plays on the piano some 30 or 40 times throughout the film. This music does not change at all, so far as I can tell, but the visual image does. With every new repetition of the musical phrase, the film cuts to show the pianist in yet another costume. Now he is a transvestite, now a Wagnerian character, now a frogman. He sits at the piano the whole time, and the camera angle is as steady as the music. Only the costumes change.

It is not surprising that Santos comes up with different kinds of ideas, depending on whether he is creating instrumental music, sound poetry, or films. Still, I have little trouble finding connections. There is a certain modesty in all of his products, none of which are very long. Everything contains some degree of humor. Regardless of his medium, he limits his materials, repeats a lot, and generally employs minimalist techniques. But most important, most essential, his statements are always passionate in one way or another. If 'passionate minimalism' really is a contradiction in terms, it is only because the terms were coined without taking Carles Santos into account.

March 3, 1980

Harry Bertoia's Metallic Wonderland

Harry Bertoia. Bally, Pennsylvania. It had been on my mind ever since I saw photographs of Bertoia's work in John Grayson's Sound Sculpture. But Bally, Pennsylvania isn't a place a New Yorker is likely to pass by, unless one just happens to be en route to Harrisburg or Lancaster, and I didn't manage to get there until early this month. I was a little late. Bertoia, I learned, had died almost a year and a half earlier.

But all was not lost. Bertoia's studio on Main Street is still maintained by his son Val, who continues to turn out some work in his father's style, while also working on his own projects. A hundred or so of Bertoia's creations still stand in the barn behind his 18th-century house just up the road a ways. And his wife and son were quite happy to show me the remarkable instruments and tell me a little about the man who made them. The evening ended with an informal concert in the barn, which convinced me that Bertoia had left behind him a remarkable musical legacy. This is ironic, because the artist never considered himself a musician, and he remains almost unknown in the music world.

Officially, Bertoia was a sculptor. Born in Italy, he first settled in Detroit where he studied, and later taught, at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. In the '50s he left academe and, for a time, earned a living designing chairs. Gradually he began to support himself as a metal sculptor. With the endorsement of Saarinen and other architects, he received numerous commissions to create work for buildings, such as the Standard Oil building in Chicago, and his work was shown frequently at the Staempfli in New York and in several galleries elsewhere. At some point along the line, however, he began to be less interested in how his work looked and more interested in how it sounded. He referred to all of his later pieces as 'sonambients,' and while they are attractive to look at, they are really about sound. Bertoia never became interested in giving concerts, never tried to write scores for his sonambients, and never attempted to organize an ensemble to play them. Yet he must have spent thousands of hours out there in his barn, just tinkering and listening, and he frequently presented demonstrations there for various school groups and other visitors who wanted to see and hear his work. Fortunately, he also spent quite a few hours making about 10 LPs, which he issued privately. The records are adequate reproductions of Bertoia's metallic sound vocabulary, and the big amorphous textures he liked to create, but they don't entirely capture the atmosphere of the live presentation I heard in the artist's barn that night.

Mrs. Bertoia began by lighting a few candles and turning out the lights, adding a soft glow to the clean wooden space. Then she walked casually over to a row of the smaller sculptures, consisting of clusters of thin rods welded to a base. With light touches she set them in motion, and the flexible rods began rustling against one another, producing thousands of tiny metallic attacks. Curiously, through some phenomenon I can't explain, the objects produced soft low-pitched hums at the same time.

As Mrs. Bertoia moved around the barn, setting dozens of sonambients of all sizes into motion, a rich blend of gorgeous metallic rustling began to accumulate in our ears. In most cases the instruments produce not single pitches but rather a number of prominent and not-so-prominent pitches. One is always more aware of the texture and color of the sound than of any particular pitches or harmonies, but sometimes one notices rhythms as well. This is particularly true in cases where rather heavy cylinders are attached to the ends of the rods, making individual attacks more pronounced. With most of the sonambients, a stroke of the hand will set them in motion for a good 20 seconds, but in some cases the sound fades out quite curiously and sporadically. Just when it seems that the instrument has stopped sounding, the laws of nature are quite likely to bring two of the rods into contact with one another again.

This same principle is true of several pairs of metal pieces that hang from the ceiling of the barn. Perhaps these are not really instruments. They certainly do not represent the careful craftsmanship that can be seen in the clusters of neatly aligned rods. But they make beautiful music. When set into motion these pieces clang pleasantly against one another for a while until they begin swinging in phase and do not come into contact with one another any longer. But later, sometimes much later, they are likely to swing out of sync and produce a few more clangs.

About half way through the performance, which probably didn't last more than 10 minutes but which was more substantial than many two hour concerts I have heard, Mrs. Bertoia took up a soft beater and began rolling on a large circular gong at the back of the room. The gong did not impress me as much as the other instruments, but that was probably because I wanted to hear the rich overtones and long decay time I am accustomed to hearing in symphonic gongs and Asian gongs. Bertoia's gongs, which he hammered out in his own shop, have a deeper and more direct quality and are not intended to do what other gongs do.

As Mrs. Bertoia continued making her way around the barn, stimulating several more rows of sonambients, the sound became increasingly rich. I began to realize that the barn itself was vibrating, and that the cellar underneath was providing some of the resonance. It was as though the barn itself was the real instrument.

As the short concert was coming to an end, it took a long time for the hundred instruments to make their way back to silence. But as they did I found myself making a comment that I have seldom made anywhere. ‘I have the feeling,’ I remarked, ‘that I am in a very sacred place.’ Mrs. Bertoia did not seem surprised. ‘Harry always said that the barn was his church,’ she replied.

The artist is buried there, behind the barn, next to one of his favorite gongs.

March 17, 1980
A New York Gamelan

If

you

take

a

slow

beat

for each

line you

read you

will be

able to

sense how the

music of

Philip Corner's

Gamelan 'P.,

C' has been con-ducted with a

simple system

which accelerates

little by little

breaking the beat up

faster and faster

as it shifts from one and

two to three and four and

five until it starts to

trip along in sixes.

Corner achieves a kind of ultimate simplicity and clarity in this charming and vital piece, and the performers of Gamelan Son of Lion made the rhythmic transitions quite smoothly. But this was by no means the only reward when New York's own gamelan presented two programs at the Kitchen on February 29 and March 1. The 10 players in the ensemble have grown into a tight musical group over the course of the past few years, and they have accumulated a fascinating repertoire that exemplifies many purely Western values but also makes use of many Asian ones.

One of the hardest things for Westerners to understand when they first confront gamelan music is why, since the music involves a number of people playing a number of metallic mallet instruments and gongs, the gamelan is considered a single instrument, rather than a group of instruments. To think of such assemblage this way is to devalue the importance of the individual musician in a way that jars our Western sensibilities. Yet it is most appealing to watch a community of musicians playing together on what really is a single instrument, and the New York group has maintained that attitude, working together much as Indonesian villagers might. Most of the individual parts are relatively easy to play, and the musicians take pride in executing simple figurations precisely, eschewing those ego needs, so common in the West, to emphasize the fast and fancy. They also adhere to the traditional Indonesian scales, pelog and slendro.

On the other hand, only 'Bubaran Robert' by Lou Harrison relied heavily on specific Indonesian modes and techniques. At least a few of the members of Gamelan Son of Lion understand Indonesian practices as well as Harrison does, and could turn to authentic textures if they wanted to. But in general they have avoided working with the specific content of Indonesian gamelan music, which is so intricately intertwined with Indonesian dance, mythology, and religious practices, that it is difficult for non-Indonesians to fully grasp. Instead they have chosen to play their homemade gamelan in their own homemade ways, and their recently composed repertoire reflects heavy doses of Western rationality and a general minimalist orientation.

Barbara Benary, who built the gamelan and began the group several years ago, contributed ‘Hells Bells,’ in which a five-note pattern is shifted into different orderings according to the change-ringing principles devised by the English bell ringers a couple of hundred years ago. Superimposed on this system is another system by which the notes of one scale are gradually interchanged with notes of the other scale. Daniel Goode contributed ‘Random Numbered Clangs,’ in which short motifs are sequenced together according to the table of random numbers. William Hawley contributed an antiphonal piece in which two groups of musicians mirror each other’s music.

Several members of the ensemble have produced pieces they call ‘45s.’ These are all short works, and the basic implication of this generic title is obvious. But 45 is also the sum of all the digits from one through nine, and the ‘45s’ usually play games with numbers as well. I particularly like one ‘45’ devised by Jon Child in which everyone strikes four-mallet chords, ticking away their own sequences of one-through-nine rhythms.

There were several other pieces which I didn’t grasp very well or don’t remember very well, and which were perhaps just not worked out as well as the ones I’ve mentioned. By and large, however, I found the repertoire quite stimulating, and I was glad to see so many musicians contributing to it. Everyone in Gamelan Son of Lion, which also includes Iris Brooks, Michael Byron, Peter Griggs, Cathy Merritt, Evan Schwartsman, Holly Staver, and Rosali Winard, seems to have a creative role, and one senses a special kind of cooperation within the group. Gamelans do that to people.

March 31, 1980

Aimless Major and Other Keys: Pauline Oliveros, Phill Niblock, Julius Eastman, Romulus Franceschini, Harold Budd

Some time ago, I devoted a column to 'The New Tonality' (Voice, October 16, 1978). I discussed Steve Reich, Frederic Rzewski, Brian Eno, David Behrman, Terry Riley, and others, and showed some of the ways in which such composers establish tonal centers in their modal music. Without ever departing from a basic scale, and without relying on traditional chord changes, it is quite possible to set up a tonal center or to shift between several tonal centers, and many composers now work that way. But since then, I have begun to notice a number of other new kinds of tonality and would like to define and label five of them. 'Social tonality' was demonstrated in a recent performance by Pauline Oliveros; 'slip-and-slide tonality' is perhaps unique to the music of Phill Niblock; 'slow-motion tonality' is what I think Julius Eastman is currently using; 'static-motif tonality' cropped up in a piano piece by Romulus Franceschini; and 'aimless major' seems to describe Harold Budd's approach.

Pauline Oliveros provided music for the Elaine Summers Dance Company as part of the series of performances of intermedia works at the Guggenheim this winter. For that evening, Oliveros stationed about a hundred singers all along the ramp that circles up to the top of the museum and provided them with a score which, like many Oliveros scores, is simply a set of instructions. The instructions for this 'tuning meditation' do not require individuals to sing specific pitches at specific times, but merely suggest how they should tune in with one another. During the 30 minutes or so in which massive choral sounds floated down to the floor, where the audience and dancers were, the music went through a fascinating array of tonal shifts. Often, a whole lot of singers would be attracted to one particular pitch, and that pitch would become established as a tonal center. But after a short time, or perhaps after a rather long time, some minority-group pitch would gain momentum, the consensus would shift to that note, and a lovely modulation would take place. Sometimes the music would waver between two or three dominating pitches. Sometimes I would sense that the singers on the top levels were hearing one tonal area while those on the lower levels were hearing another. Sometimes the music would settle quite solidly around one pitch. But everything that happened was purely the result of spontaneous social interaction among the singers.

Phill Niblock works with his own tuning systems. In most of his pieces, prerecorded instrumental pitches hover very close together in a restricted range, usually with live instrumentalists playing along. The volume is loud, the effect is purely sonic, and one is not likely to think much about conventional music-theory-type questions, such as whether the music is tonal or atonal. In fact, I had been hearing Niblock's music work for several years without ever thinking much about such things. But at one of his concerts this winter, I found myself trying to hear tonal centers in his music, and I realized that they are very much present. Within the clusters that make up the sound, one pitch usually seems to dominate and provide a center of gravity, at least for a particular moment in a particular part of the room. But the situation is always changing. After a while the central pitch is likely to rise or fall very slightly, or the focal point may shift to another tone in another part of the room. In one way or another, the tonal center is always slipping and sliding just a little bit, and I now find this one of the most fascinating things about the music.

Julius Eastman's presentation at the Kitchen this season featured a work for two pianos. At first, Eastman and Joe Kubera played only one note. They played it in a fast rhythm, employing all octaves and lots of energy, but it was just one note. After a couple of minutes, a second note entered, sort of as an embellishment to the first one. Eventually, two more notes came in, which seemed to have a great affinity for each other, and which provided a different sort of tonal function. As new notes and new motifs gradually entered, I found it increasingly difficult to keep track of the original tonal center, and by the time we had moved 20 or 30 minutes into this hourlong piece, I had lost my bearings completely. But I was not disappointed. I was fascinated by the slow-motion modulations that were taking place, as well as by the relentless energy provided by the performers.

When Romulus Franceschini played his 'Omaggio a Satie' in a concert of music by Philadelphia composers last year, I found the piece quite attractive and a little puzzling. The materials were all dissonant, and yet they looped around one another in such a way that the music seemed settled and vaguely tonal. When I later acquired a copy of the score and spent a couple of hours dissecting its structure, I found that the piece is structured quite rationally. The 10-minute score is made out of 11 motifs, most of which consist simply of a couple of chords, and its overall structure simply involves restating these motifs in different sequences. The result is not repetitious enough to sound very repetitious and yet, since the motifs are never transposed or varied, there is a kind of predictability in the texture and a settled quality in the music. In a sense, these 11 different motifs are the 11 chords of a newly created tonal system. This is not a completely new technique. Numerous serial composers have sometimes allowed their music to become more stable by anchoring certain pitches to certain octaves, or even, on occasion, allowing exact repetitions. It seems to me, however, that Franceschini has moved much further in this direction, and that his static motifs have led him to a special type of tonality, even though his actual materials are dissonant or 'atonal.' Harold Budd's Preludes are also piano pieces, and they also seem to have quite a bit to do with Satie. Budd played for about an hour at his recent Kitchen concert, improvising on precomposed piano textures

that involved major-seventh chords and other harmonies I usually associate with cocktail lounges. But while cocktail lounge pianists follow prescribed changes and orient their music toward particular keys, Budd seems to forget all about key structure and just lets the music drift. Many of Satie's pieces do that, too, but while I sometimes feel Satie was simply trying to be as perversely un-Germanic as possible, Budd's motivations seem quite different. Despite the pop harmonic language and the super-pretty surface, I would say that this Californian composer is actually a fairly extreme minimalist. Essentially, he offers no mood changes, no color changes, no tempo changes, no virtuoso licks, no climaxes, no lyrics, and no references to familiar tunes, and even the harmonic changes can take a very long time. There is something poignant, even philosophical, about the intentional aimlessness of the music.

But 'aimless major' and my other categories must certainly make up an extremely incomplete picture. I suspect that tonal centers are being handled in quite a few additional ways, that many such techniques will not be well understood until their non-Western origins are tracked down, and that eventually those discussions about tonality and atonality and bitonality and pantonality and everything-else-tonality will have to be picked up and expanded.

May 26, 1980
Giacinto Scelsi at Sunset

Giacinto Scelsi (pronounced Ja-si-to Shell-see) has been called the Charles Ives of Italy. For almost 50 years he has been writing music which, like that of the American iconoclast, has little to do with the usual practices of contemporary music. One could say that the way his dissonant music hammers away at particular pitch centers is reminiscent of Varese, or that the consistent moods maintained by many of his pieces reflect forms found in recent minimalism. One might even say that he has something in common with Morton Feldman in his taste for extreme registers, unusual colors, and quirky changes. But these are only vain attemps to describe a sort of music that isn't like any other.

Over the years, Scelsi's music has received a few major presentations under Monteux and Desormieres and at Tanglewood, but at 75, he remains little known in Europe and almost completely unknown on this side of the Atlantic. Yet the one Scelsi piece I heard a couple of years ago piqued my interest, as had a number of comments from knowledgeable musicians who admire his work. So I was quite pleased when, on a recent visit to Rome, composer Alvin Curran offered to introduce me to the man.

The report of our visit might best begin with the observation that Scelsi is a count, and thus independently wealthy. That helps to explain why his house lies in an exclusive district in Rome, and has a drawing room that looks directly onto the ruins of the ancient Roman Forum. His freedom from material concerns also provided leisure time which he used to visit the Orient, to consider spiritual and philosophical questions, and to produce over 100 carefully notated compositions for all sorts of vocal, instrumental, and orchestral groupings. But then, Scelsi's unique personal circumstances may also help to explain why publishers, performers, and record companies have not provided many outlets for his work, and why he has seldom turned to such people. Noblesse oblige.

As the elderly but still vital man spoke that afternoon, it became clear that his attitude toward his career is a little different today. Not that he feels neglected or frustrated. Scelsi is clearly the sort of man who long ago solved any ego problems he might have had. He did, however, express concern that many of his works have never been performed. When he hears one of his scores for the first time, he usually finds that he wants to make some adjustments, and in the case of many unplayed works, he has not had an opportunity to do this. So now it bothers him that his time might run out while imperfections still lurk in untested scores. He recently turned over his entire catalogue to the G. Schirmer firm, where they are gradually, extremely gradually, becoming available in printed facsimile editions, and he spoke with pleasure about forthcoming performances and recording projects.

In the case of a composer so eccentric, so prolific, and so little discussed, it would be foolhardy to try to draw immediate

conclusions about how his music is made, even if I had access to all of it. And since all I have to go on is one recording, six small scores, and a dim recollection of a live performance of 'Rucke di Guck,' a curious duet for piccolo and oboe, I can hardly offer the final word. I can say with some confidence, however, that the music works, that it works in a completely unique way, that it is far more mystical than rational, and that sooner or later it will have to be reckoned with.

One of the more remarkable things about Scelsi's work is its stylistic consistency. An early work like the Piano Sonata of 1939 rises, falls, changes tempos, and develops itself quite purposefully, while 'Pranam I' of 1972 is more adrift, less predictable, less concerned about going anyplace in particular, and ends unexpectedly. One might say that the early work functions vaguely in the world of expressionism, while the later one transcends such categories. But the basic vocabulary is the same in both pieces, and in everything else of Scelsi's that I have seen or heard. There are always dissonant harmonies, jagged rhythms, radical inconsistencies in motivic organization, crazily asymmetrical forms, and slow underlying melodies that hold everything together.

Those underlying melodies are perhaps the most distinctive thing about Scelsi's compositions. His music generally focuses on one or two pitches at a time. Usually these essential pitches are reiterated strongly and returned to frequently, so that they become tonics in an odd sort of way. Yet these focal points can move. It's hard to tell where the focus will go or whether it will eventually return to the original pitch, but in some way the slow progression of focal points forms a kind of underlying melody, deeply buried below all the details of the music. This process somehow makes Scelsi's seemingly incoherent forms cohere rather neatly. The general procedure is easy to hear on Scelsi's 1978 album (Ananda No.3), which features Michiko Hirayama, a wonderful singer who uses a nonverbal vocal style that she and Scelsi developed together. Another particularly clear example is the Three Pieces for Solo Trombone, which could salvage many trombone recitals.

A number of Scelsi's works have Sanskrit titles, and I had been told of his interest in Oriental thought, so I broached this subject at our late afternoon meeting. The composer did not volunteer to discuss his personal religious views, or to say whether he practices any form of Eastern meditation, but he did speak about one matter that clearly concerned him a great deal.

‘Zen has been so misinterpreted in the West,’ he began, as I recall. ‘People think if they scramble things together by chance, or improvise according to their feelings of the moment, that this has something to do with Zen. But such things are just the opposite of Zen. If you meditate for a long time, and your mind becomes completely calm, then you are free.’ He demonstrated by placing his hands in a meditating position, then setting one arm free in a long wandering gesture.

‘But if you try to avoid that preparation, you are not practicing right action, but merely reaction.’ To demonstrate this process he gripped one wrist tightly and then suddenly let it go so that his arm flew out in an erratic uncontrolled pattern.

Did this demonstration explain how his music is written or how it should be listened to? Well, I can certainly recommend considering the question as you listen to Scelsi’s music. Perhaps you will find, as I did, that there is a certain mystical clarity even in some of the murkiest parts of his pieces.

By the time we left, the sun had set, and the towering ruins of the Forum had become dark shadows against the night sky. These omens of the past, mingled with the sounds of the modern city, sent massive contradictions reverberating through my head, and momentarily I began to question whether I really knew anything about anything, or ever would. It was a little like listening to Giacinto Scelsi’s music.

June 9, 1980
Sound Poetry for Many Reasons

Many people view sound poetry as a true artistic movement. They demonstrate its universality by pointing to onomatopoeia in Aristophanes and to the magic words of many primal cultures. They show how the medium began to develop in the West, first through Rimbaud and Mallarme and then through Joyce and Stein, how it achieved classic statements in the 'Ursonata' of Kurt Schwitters (1921-'32) and the 'Geographical Fugue' of Ernst Toch (1930), how this led in the '50s to the electronic word manipulations of Henri Chopin, the shrieks and cries of Francois Dufrene, the orderly sequences of Brion Gysin, and the tape collages of Bernard Heidsieck, and how the work of these European artists has created a major medium that has attracted artists as diverse and important as Milton Babbitt, John Cage, Glenn Gould, Jackson Mac Low, Meredith Monk and Claes Oldenburg.

It seems to me that sound poetry is largely a coincidence. I just don't see many causal relationships in this historical sequence. Instead, it appears that a whole lot of artists coming from a whole lot of places, driven by a whole lot of motivations, have just happened to end up in more or less the same general area. Some are poets who have grown tired of the printed page and would like their art to be, once again, an aural medium. Some are composers who have grown tired of the song form and seek new ways of working with language. Some are singers who want to expand the vocal vocabulary, just as others have sought new ways of playing the piano or the flute. Some like to work in recording studios and find speech sounds more interesting than other sounds. Some want to mix languages or create new ones. Others want to make certain esoteric literary ideas more rhythmic, more dramatic, or more accessible. Others have mystical inclinations and wish to create incantations of one sort or another. Still others seem driven largely by social ideas. They see no reason why spoken poetry should always be a solo art, and seek ways of writing material that will allow several speakers to participate.

In other words, sound poetry is not a proper artistic movement at all, but rather a hodgepodge of almost contradictory motivations and intentions which have all just happened to coincide in a nebulous area lying somewhere on the fringes of traditional literary and musical forms. Yet despite the disunity, and perhaps partly because of it, this nonmovement is more interesting than most movements, and it has been generating a lot of activity. This spring some 50 artists participated in the International Sound Poetry Festival, an annual event which is usually held in Europe, but which this year took place at the Kitchen and at Washington Square Methodist Church. I attended three of the 10 festival programs and heard several performances which have stuck in my mind, and which demonstrate a few of the many types of work now going on under the general heading of sound poetry.

Armand Schwerner and Charles Stein contributed a lively segment one evening. They alternately played clarinets and spoke nonverbal lines, and they worked together well, largely in an improvisatory way. What particularly interested me was the way their performance shifted from purely musical material to linguistic sections, and sometimes to theatrical moments in which I began to see them as characters having a strange dialogue.

Kenneth King is one of my favorite dancers, and he danced a bit

in his presentation, but the point here was his sound poetry. His tongue twisters can be delightful, and he produced one line that I found myself reciting for several days. 'Sarah and Clara slept on the Sahara.' Try saying it out loud a few times. It demonstrates, I think, the basic appeal of much sound poetry.

Jerome Rothenberg presented some of his 'Horse Songs,' which are translations of works by Navajo musician Frank Mitchell. I find these chants, usually accompanied by a small percussion instrument, appealing not only as ethnological studies, but also in their own right. And Rothenberg sings them well. This kind of cross-cultural work also contributes to the good cause of breaking down Western ethnocentrism.

Courtenay P. Graham-Gazaway improvised odd semiverbal sounds through a microphone to the accompaniment of pretty color slides, mostly of nature. Some listeners apparently found her work naive, but I was touched at several points by the dramatic implications of her vocal inflection and the obvious sincerity of her highly personal sounds.

Mary Ellen Solt is a master of concrete poetry. Her visual poems are graphically impeccable and logically rigorous, and they convey stimulating images as well, but her ear is not as acute as her eye. Her attempts to realize some of her work with voices and instruments came off as pale reflections of the visual versions. Still, I was glad to be able to hear her work as well as see it. I should also mention Sten Hanson, a Swedish artist whose work reflects the high-quality multichannel recorded approach to sound poetry that has evolved in European electronic music studios, and Bob Cobbing, an older British participant whose way of putting together a poem with audience participation was quite appealing, even though the results did not sound very good.

June 23, 1980

Takehisa Kosugi, Pauline Oliveros, and Transcendental Experience

There are good reasons why critics generally avoid the topic of transcendental experience. I think most of us have had experiences with music, or with other art works, in which we felt we had gained access to some higher truth or beauty, but these moments are very private. They occur with different people in different contexts, and they can be very difficult, even embarrassing, to talk about. Neither aestheticians nor psychologists nor religious scholars are able to really define such experiences or explain what makes them happen. Are transcendental musical experiences all essentially the same or are there several basic types? Is there a clear line between those that are transcendental and those that are not, or is it a matter of degree? I am not convinced that there are definitive answers to such questions. Nor am I convinced that the ability of a work to stimulate a transcendental experience has much to do with its craftsmanship or quality. I can recall an evening many years ago when I was carried away by my first hearing of Ravel's 'Bolero,' a piece that I now regard as second-rate. On the other hand, I have often gleaned profound enjoyment from Mozart's 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik,' even though it has never actually carried me off to the Elysian fields, or wherever it is that people go when music carries them away. Despite all this, it seems essential, at least once in a while, to admit that works of art can provoke otherworldly experiences, and that this is probably the main reason why many people listen to music. And since I recently had two musical experiences on two consecutive nights in which I felt transported, this seems like a good time to broach the topic.

First experience: It is May 29 and I have entered Phill Niblock's loft where Takehisa Kosugi is presenting a concert in the Experimental Intermedia series. The performance area is dark except for two spotlights, which are focused tightly on small electric fans that swing back and forth very slowly at two corners of the room. The image is curious, and I engage in some preconcert punning with a friend sitting nearby. 'Look, some new music fans.' 'Maybe they're Japanese fans.' 'Let's hope Kosugi doesn't fan out.' It seems improbable that the artist had any such thoughts in mind. It is a warm night, after all, and he no doubt set up the fans simply to keep the air circulating. But why put spotlights on them if the point is to cool off the room? And isn't it true that objects necessarily take on the connotations of the words that represent them? Or maybe the composer was interested in the extremely faint humming of the little motors. But wait. The fans are placed near loudspeakers. Is it possible that the movement of the air is causing slight acoustical alterations in the signals coming over the sound system? At the moment the loudspeakers are emitting a very soft irregular clicking, and the fans don't seem to have any effect. As I listen, though, I find that the clicking is as difficult to interpret as the fans. Is it ordered or random? Prerecorded or automatic? Does it suggest sounds of wood, mere electronic sputtering, or some bizarre species of insect? Everything tonight seems to mean something, but I find it quite impossible to assign definite meanings, and as the live performance begins the situation grows increasingly paradoxical.

The composer enters very slowly, holding a small object tightly against his ear. He seems to be listening very intently as he inches along, taking perhaps four or five seconds for each step. When he arrives at his electronic equipment at the center of the space, he turns on a cassette and begins mixing in other electronic sounds, but I find that I am not paying much attention. I am disoriented by the darkness, the fans, the contradictions, the questions. Later Kosugi takes out his violin and improvises against the electronic sounds, but his back is to the audience, and he is playing softly, and I can't focus my attention on that very well either. The concert creeps along as the composer mixes the electronics again, walks again, and plays the violin again, and as we move into the second hour it seems clear that there will be no intermission and that the event will continue for some time. Eventually I become completely exhausted from attempting to find meanings and resolve contradictions, and rather bored with the whole thing. About this time I find my attention suddenly riveted on Kosugi. He is walking again and listening to that object he holds in his hand. But it is not him any more, and I am in some other place far away, and for a moment everything seems completely clear. It is as if I have finally pieced through my intellectual and verbal obstacles and understood, at least briefly, the meaning of a difficult musical koan.

Second experience: It is May 30 and Pauline Oliveros has just stepped up to the microphone to begin her concert at the Kitchen. She is wearing tails but has bare feet. She begins with a few jokes about how she is wearing the tails in order to demonstrate that Californians do dress up sometimes, and how the tails had been borrowed from avant-garde oboeist Joseph Celli, who had them left over from his earlier career as a symphony musician. She adds that the coat also allows her to live out her fantasy of wanting to be an animal with a tail, and she continues to receive warm chuckles from the audience. She is playing the emcee, a role I have never seen her play, and I am pleased to see the serious composer so relaxed. Everyone seems to be glad they came. Gradually Oliveros begins to explain that the concert is to consist of 'sonic meditations and other entertainments' and that the first one will be 'MMM (Lullaby for Daisy Pauline, born Sept. 19, 1979).' We are asked to think of our own favorite infants, or recall images from our own infancy if we can, and to sing 'mmm' if we feel like it. As a background she plays the sounds of crickets and cicadas, recorded near Houston, just after a violent storm.

As the gorgeous insect calls begin to fill the room at a soft volume, I find myself wanting to hum along, partly because I know how beautiful Oliveros's group choral music can be and want this performance to work too, and mostly because it seems more interesting to become involved rather than just to observe. I hum softly, so softly that even the people right next to me would barely be able to hear me, and I feel quite content. Perhaps four or five minutes into the piece I begin to realize that a number of others in the audience are humming equally softly. A massive chord is beginning to rise in the room and I am part of it. I try to listen to it as if it were a piece of music, but after a while, all attempts to regard the shimmering chord as music, as something outside myself, as other, begin to fail. I become completely lost in the sound and its immense tenderness, and my humming begins to be automatic, almost unconscious. For a few seconds, or perhaps for a few minutes, I lose all sense of time.

We still have no real definition of transcendental musical experience, no evidence that anyone else in these two audiences was experiencing anything similar, and no proof that either Kosugi or Oliveros were directly responsible for what happened in my own psyche. I would even hesitate to say that my experience means I was hearing beautiful music. In the West beauty is generally determined by criteria more appropriate to philosophical dialogue and language. Still, it seemed worthwhile to attempt a personal testimony. I suspect that many readers will be able to identify with these experiences.

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June 25-July 1, 1980

New Music America Takes Over a Town

Minneapolis was an ideal location for the largest festival of experimental music ever held in the United States. The Walker Art Center is probably the most progressive of the major museums of modern art in the country, the Minnesota Opera and the Guthrie Theatre both went through periods when they were national centers for innovation, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra is certainly the most adventurous full-time orchestra in the country. All this activity has cultivated an artistic environment where new ideas are appreciated by a relatively large segment of the population. It must be the only large American city where the major music critics of the local dailies all take an interest in new music, where local radio stations devote a serious proportion of air time to such things, where airport officials would entrust their PA system to a composer with a new idea about background music, where the local botanical gardens have agreed to submit their plants and visitors to a permanent ambience of soft electronic bleeping, where the local population allows the muzak in their bus stops to be reprogrammed with unfamiliar soundtracks, where a local drum and bugle corps volunteers to premiere an avant-garde work, where 30 or 40 cyclists can be induced to ride in caravans with electronic sound devices attached to their bicycles, and where loud outdoor concerts can be presented at noontime right next to major office buildings. From what I can gather, the composers and visual artists who actually live in the Twin Cities are not very progressive or very numerous, but after being subjected to adventurous art from the outside for some years, the local public has become used to such things. It was a good place to present New Music America.

As in the case of the New Music New York festival sponsored by the Kitchen a year ago, the focal point of New Music America was a concert series. But in this friendly environment the music could extend far beyond the walls of the Walker Art Center, where the nine main concerts were held. According to the official count there were 237 concerts, installations, broadcasts, celebrations, events, and other presentations in the Twin Cities between June 7 and June 15, and it was just about impossible for anyone living in the area to avoid experiencing at least one or two of them. Of course, it would have been equally impossible to take in everything, though the atmosphere was so stimulating, and the general artistic level was so professional, that I found myself trying. After attending eight of the nine concerts and perhaps 20 other sorts of presentations, I decided to concentrate on some of the more effective presentations that cannot be heard elsewhere, and to limit my comments on the formal concert presentations to some of the more impressive works by composers I have not reviewed before.

The Installations

The Greenhouse

Max Neuhaus's new installation in a large domed greenhouse at the Como Park-Conservatory in St. Paul had a particular appeal for me. While I have long sympathized with Neuhaus's sophisticated electronic devices and his relentless attempts to install them in public spaces, I have not always liked the results, and have been particularly disappointed in his low machine-like pitches that get lost in the hubbub as they drone on in the caverns below Time Square. It's been a year or more since I even bothered to walk over and listen to them. But the greenhouse project is another story. Here the sounds are little birdlike bleeps emitted from 64 loudspeakers, and the loudspeakers are neat little black circles that run around the dome overhead. They emit their sounds intermittently, as dictated by their individual-computer-driven oscillators, and together they produce unpredictable melodies on four pitches. The pitches remain precisely in tune, and the general effect is lovely. As I passed from the domed room into one of the adjoining rectangular greenhouse spaces, the bleeping could still be heard, but all from one direction. On returning to the space under the dome, I began to appreciate the differences in the directionality of each individual bleep. Even the most sophisticated stereo or quadraphonic system just doesn't place the sound the way 64 loudspeakers do. The project, which represents over two years of planning and a budget of $43,000, is to be a permanent installation, and is perhaps the composer's most elegant work to date.

The Empty House

For her installation, Maryanne Amacher selected a large house in St. Paul which had recently been vacated by Dennis Russell Davies and family. Even from half a block away the whole house seemed to be screaming, and as I approached I thought twice about subjecting my ears to the source of the sound just inside the front door. I held my hands over my ears as I went in, but as I passed into adjacent rooms on the ground floor, upstairs, and out onto the terrace, the volume became bearable, and the sound became more and more interesting. At first I had perceived little more than an undifferentiated roaring, but gradually I moved deeper into the sound, picking out complex sliding movements, shifting bass tones, and some of the countless other pitches that oscillated all over the spectrum. I also began to discern radical differences as I moved from one room to another. Of course, the setting was an important part of the project. Vacated houses are strange places to begin with, a little like broken machines. They are not functioning the way they are supposed to. They have no raison d'àtre. Yet this particular empty house, filled so passionately with this particular roaring, began to take on so many layers of symbolism that I have still not managed to decide on my favorite interpretation.

The Pool

Liz Phillips's electronic installation stood in a pool located on an attractive downtown plaza. Here the sounds were controlled by a little weather vane. When the wind drifted in from the north we got one sound, from the northeast we got another sound, and so on around the compass. Since the wind tended to shift a lot, the musical sequences often moved quickly between high-pitched beeping, low-pitched drones, and some more complex effects. Additional variables were controlled by wind speed, passing pedestrians, and a screen that responded to the touch of passers-by. The installation aroused much curiosity, and whenever I passed by at least 20 to 30 people would be hanging around, listening to the sound, and waiting to touch the screen. I was bothered by the rickety nature of the structure that held the weather vane, and loose wires that flapped around, and the general visual untidiness of the installation. It seems to me that projects of this sort must to a certain extent be regarded as sculptures, and regardless of budget, it seems that some care should be taken with visual as well as aural matters. But in purely musical terms, the work was quite successful, and again some symbolism was involved. The site, you see, was adjacent to the hall where the Minnesota Orchestra continues to provide a steady diet of standard repertoire and where, until Phillips installed her project, one could have been completely isolated from any radical musical ideas.

The Factory

Another project I liked was the 'Assembly Line,' installed by Megan Roberts and Raymond Ghirado in a large lobby at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. Here conveyor belts, levers, ladders, a large flywheel, and other apparatus one might find in a factory had been assembled as a sort of theatrical set that manufactured music. I could have done without the rather tired machine-oppresses-modern-man theme, which induced the Minnesota artists to send human heads along the conveyor belt, strap a man to the rotating flywheel, and perform the piece like robots, but I was nonetheless enticed by the complex texture of prerecorded sounds that were triggered when the seven performers began setting everything in motion. Afterward, when we were invited to run the factory equipment ourselves, I found that I particularly enjoyed pulling one lever that stimulated a super squeal and allowed me to feel momentarily very powerful.

Sunrise

Charlie Morrow organized a 'Sunrise Celebration,' which drew a couple of hundred spectators, despite the early hour. This time the site was a city park in Minneapolis and the performers were about 25 members of the St. Croix Rivermen, a local drum and bugle corps. Morrow faced east and chanted an introduction from a hilltop, and then, precisely at sunrise, the corps began a slow moving sequence at the other end of the park. As in some other Morrow pieces I like, there is a counting system and rigid formalistic control. In this case the musicians counted out loud to 21, over and over. While the drums kept a steady beat, the brass players entered and exited on particular counts, playing the notes of a major chord. At the end of each 21-count sequence, everyone took a step forward. In a later section the musicians began stepping more often, and eventually, about 40 minutes into the piece, they reached the top of the hill. There they moved into a kind of snake dance that permitted some improvisational liberties. The performing group did not have the kind of musical and marching skills I have seen in some competitions, but they looked splendid in their uniforms, and they enacted this odd musical ritual with commitment. I later learned that if they had played the music much faster, perhaps 200 times faster, it would have been recognizable as a literal rendering of 'Reveille.' Bus Stops

All this time the sound systems on the downtown bus stops were also playing new music. Usually the tapes were soft and pretty and I wouldn't pay much attention, but once this background music came very much into the foreground for me. That day, I could sense that the loudspeakers on the roof of the bus stop were alive but all I could hear was nomal traffic sounds. I listened for a while, puzzling out the situation, when I heard a loud siren approaching. I didn't see any ambulances or police cars, but the siren was so realistic that it took me a minute or two to realize it had come from the speakers overhead. The situation was intriguing, and I stood there for some time listening to the interplay between the real traffic on the street and the recorded traffic overhead. I felt quite disoriented, and I'm not sure I would recommend this approach as a permanent solution to bus-stop background, but I found it provocative as a work of art. I later learned that the tapes that day had been the work of Richard Teitelbaum.

The Concerts

Jerry Hunt, who lives in Dallas, presented his 'Haramand Plane' in a performance that I found profound, skilful, completely original, and utterly baffling. His actions as he paced quietly around the stage were incongruous and I find that I can't remember many of them. Yet I can't get the piece out of my mind. I recall that the light was very dim, that Hunt kept walking downstage to whack a large cardboard box with a curious stick, that he rattled some unidentifiable objects in one hand for a while, that a recording of electronic sounds sometimes accompanied him from the loudspeakers, that there seemed to be no explanation for anything that happened, and that I was simultaneously fascinated and disturbed. I think I must have dozed off during part of the performance, but I'm really not sure. The piece already existed in some strange dream world. Later I asked Hunt how he structured the performance and he explained that the work has a steady beat and that it all has to do with counting and structuring phrase lengths. This surprising answer helped me a little, but it didn't really account for the mysteriousness of the piece. All I can say for sure is

that Hunt was doing something very strong, and very different from anything I have ever heard from New York composers.

William Duckworth, a composer who has been teaching at Bucknell University and is now moving to Syracuse, offered 'The Time Curve Preludes.' Twelve of these 24 short piano pieces were played by Neely Bruce, a man I knew mostly as the adventurous director of choral activity at Wesleyan University, but who is also a composer and who turned out to be a fine pianist as well, playing with a unique combination of precision and warmth. The pieces themselves are unique, too. Each prelude seems to be in a different mode, and while these modes are relatively simple, they are also quite unusual. I had the feeling I had never heard any of these combinations of notes before. The music ripples along in fairly regular beats, though it never confines itself to steady eighth notes. The modal qualities, the rhythmic interest, and the purely pianistic discoveries add up to the rather complex sequences that defied my efforts to find specific patterns in what was going on, and yet there was something very smooth and orderly about the way the music progressed. This is no doubt the result of underlying mathematical structures which, according to the program notes, were derived from the Fibonacci series.

'Blue' Gene Tyranny (also known as Robert Sheff), who is familiar around New York mostly for his collaborations with Robert Ashley, came from San Francisco to present 'Country Boy Country Dog.' As a composer who works with pop sounds he was, after all, being compared with Laurie Anderson, Peter Gordon, and Julia Heyward, all of whom had brought with them whole stagefuls of personnel and equipment. For Tyranny, however, the stage was completely bare except for one little electronic keyboard dwarfed in the middle. But as soon as he walked out, dropped his old sport coat on the chair, sat down, and began playing, I knew everything was okay. The music has harmonic richness, physical intensity, and coloristic brilliance all at once.

Eric Stokes is an older composer who has been teaching at the University of Minnesota for some years. But while most of his counterparts in midwestern universities tend to work very seriously within whatever neoclassic or serial boundaries they started with, Stokes continues to have fun and to probe new areas, even at the risk of being considered naive or unfocused. The first movement of his 'Phonic Paradigm,' was a zany little 'spring song' in which five players made a variety of boing-boing sounds on a collection of metal springs of varying sizes. The second was a little zanier. Here a few assistants provided sound effects by playing bird whistles all around the hall, while two sopranos sang about an outing they were having. The performers swatted flies periodically and finally fled from the imaginary insects altogether. The last movement was perhaps even zanier. This was 'Rock and Roll,' a title Stokes took literally. At first the five players hit rocks together in interesting rhythms from the periphery of the hall, and later they gathered on the stage and rolled their instruments around. One player broke his rock, the audience had a great time, and the whole affair was quite shocking when viewed as the product of a senior professor at a major university. I was delighted.

By official count, that still leaves 227 events that I haven't described, including some of the most spectacular ones. But somehow completeness just doesn't seem to be the point. This was, after all, the largest festival of experimental music ever held in the United States.

July 30-August 5, 1980
The Quest-for-Freedom Theory

Usually I am satisfied with more modest goals, but this week I want to explain the whole history of contemporary music. Of course, I'll have to skip over a lot of details, but one column is sufficient to give the general idea of my quest-for-freedom theory. Basically it goes like this. Musicians in the West have generally sought to free themselves from traditions of the past, but in the 20th century they have been seeking additional kinds of freedom, not only for themselves, but also for the music itself. We can see this already with Schoenberg's 'emancipation' of the dissonance and with the gradual liberation of the musical vocabulary to include clusters, polytonality, chance procedures, chaotic forms, and all sorts of new sounds.

The liberation process continues with the types of performer freedom initiated by John Cage, with schemes for eliminating the conductor/master, with newer and less rigid notation techniques, and with composers like Robert Ashley, who came to feel that the real tyrant was music notation itself and who has avoided putting notes on staff paper for some years. A similar quest for freedom took place in the jazz tradition, which led from the extremely limited performer freedom in Dixieland solos to the freer and freer improvising of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Albert Ayler. Summarized this way, the evolution of contemporary music becomes so ridiculously simple that it is surprising critics and historians have never, so far as I know, chosen to explain it this way. Of course, as with most grand views of history, complications arise when you work out the details. But it has always seemed to me that the most interesting thing about theories is not the pat answers they provide but the questions they raise. The quest-for-freedom theory raises quite a few.

The United States is the first modern democracy and allegedly the 'land of the free.' Our history is cluttered with anarchist movements, liberation movements, protest groups, communes, and rugged individuals, and our lifestyle today emphasizes the kind of individualism that Philip Slater analyzed as 'The Pursuit of Loneliness' and Christopher Lasch more recently dissected in 'The Culture of Narcissism.' Yet mass taste in this country continues to call for singers who perform their repertoire the same way every night and tight groups that seem to have more authoritarian images every decade. Even in jazz, freer forms of improvisation are grossly outsold by the more controlled jazz-derived idioms of Spyro Gyra or Bob James or Chuck Mangione. Yet in Western Europe, where there is much greater respect for tradition and a much neater structure of social classes, 'free music' has developed large followings. Can we fit this into the theory?

Ethnomusicologist Verna Gillis had some interesting things to say about musical freedom when I spoke with her a few weeks ago. Gillis has traveled widely in Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world, and she currently operates Soundscape, where programs of free improvisation are often presented. She told me that despite the plentitude of improvisation in almost all African and Caribbean music, she has never heard anything as loose and unstructured as some of the music presented in New York by American and European improvisers. But she also pointed out that New York audiences generally remain imprisoned in the typical concert format. They are expected to consume free music with the same reverent attitude that has been central to the European notion of Art for several centuries. By contrast, a musical event in Africa, with the performers laughing, others dancing, children fighting, and babies crying, offers many more options for the audience. Is an African situation of this sort thus a greater expression of freedom?

When a musician like guitarist Derek Bailey becomes known as a free-form improviser, he becomes financially dependent on that reputation. His fans, his colleagues, and his recording outlets all depend on him to continue doing what he does, and ultimately he becomes locked into his image. He is then not even free to perform Bach or Dixieland, at least not without sacrificing a certain number of fans and gigs. What kind of freedom is that?

Freedom has a lot to do with both the common concept of improvisation, which is jazz-based, and the very different notion of 'music indeterminate of its performance,' which is Cage based. The former process leaves much to the performer's will, while the latter generally limits the performer to a few choices or interpretations within highly prescribed limitations. Curiously though, improvisations can be relatively predictable while performances of indeterminate scores often abound in odd coincidences and unexpected juxtapositions that even the composer can't predict. We might say that improvising is an exercise in free will while indeterminate scores encourage the performers to free themselves from the will. But what are the political and religious implications of these two processes, and how could we evaluate the quantity and quality of the freedom that results from them?

When someone like Keith Jarrett improvises, he is theoretically free to play whatever he likes, while in Phill Niblock's music the performers are restricted to playing long sustained tones with only minor variations in pitch and volume. Yet when I listen to Jarrett, I hear an attractive sort of music that is very much a part of current harmonic and pianistic conventions and seems a little afraid to step very far outside that. And when I listen to Niblock I hear a defiant sort of music that has broken free of current conventions and made its own unique world. Isn't Niblock's music more free than Jarrett's in one important sense?

A month or two ago I wrote about the elderly Italian composer, Giacinto Scelci, who is concerned with freedom but has no interest at all in improvisation. For him spontaneous musical decisions are merely 'reactions' stimulated by the habits and personal idiosyncrasies of the performer, and he strives for another kind of freedom through 'right action' in his carefully notated and slowly written scores. Isn't this another very different attitude toward freedom?

How many kinds of musical freedom are there? And why do so many musicians feel so strongly about their particular quests for freedom? And if we worked it all out could we really explain the course of 20th-century music with this little theory? Perhaps. But then we'd be locked into an intellectual system. And doesn't the intellect want freedom, too?

September 24-30, 1980
John Zorn and Other Improvisors

The Kitchen opened its music season with a new music director and a new point of view. The new music director is George Lewis, a composer and trombonist whose work has become fairly well known around New York. The new point of view, assuming that these opening concerts are symptomatic, is to open the door to new forms of improvising and to provide an outlet for performers to present their own programs. In the past the Kitchen generally adhered to a one-composer format, and since classical avant-gardists rarely had this kind of outlet in the early '70s, it became a valuable forum. In fact, many fine minimalist works, requiring long spans of time and complete composer control, would never have evolved in New York if the Kitchen had not provided a place to present them. The other side of the coin is that this format tended to shut out new music involving improvising groups and works requiring virtuoso performers.

The program organized by John Zorn on September 9 consisted of a full-evening work called 'Jai Alai,' performed by Zorn with Coby Batty, Polly Bradfield, Eugene Chadbourne, Wayne Horvitz, M.E. Miller, C.K. Noyes, and Bob Ostertag. The performers had a great deal of freedom in choosing what to play, and yet the evening seemed extremely controlled and unified, perhaps even static. The violin, the horns, and the vocal and percussion effects were amplified in such a way that they blended closely with the electric guitar and the synthesizers. Everyone concentrated on sliding gestures, pitchless sounds, and coloristic effects, and everything seemed to be coming from one electric place. I can't remember a single point when the music fell into a steady beat, nor was there much concern for specific pitches, tonalities, harmonies, or melodic motifs. Perhaps the main thing that kept this music on such an even keel was the intellectual structure that Zorn overlaid on the improvising. By holding up cards and utilizing sound cues, he controlled the combinations of musicians that could play during particular sections. The instrumentation was always changing, and no particular group ever played together long enough to start cooking the way improvisations often do.

My ear grew a little tired of the sound colors as the evening went on, and I can't say I was enjoying the concert all that much at the time. In retrospect, however, I've been more appreciative of what I heard. These musicians have clearly worked together a lot and developed a very similar concept of playing. I'm impressed that they can put together such unified music within such s free context.

Tom Hamilton, who organized the September 8 concert, works with a sophisticated electronic rig. He didn't seem to have all that much hardware, but he patched it together in such a way that he could spin out a varied repertoire of sounds and textures. The pitches stayed in tune with one another, and they melded into attractive harmonies, embellished by the prerecorded organ-like lines he fed in from time to time. The structure was loose, and it was clear that Hamilton was improvising his way around the combinations he had at his disposal, but his opening solo held together all the same, and held my attention as well.

After a while, J.D. Parran joined in on flute, and later clarinet. Parran's multiphonic effects, his circular breathing, and his occasional lyrical moments were all quite professional, but not outstanding, and they never seemed to have much to do with the tonality, the phrasing, or the energy shifts fed in by Hamilton on the synthesizing equipment. I had the feeling that Parran probably would have made his way through more or less the same technical vocabulary regardless of whom he was playing with. Come to think of it, Hamilton never seemed to go very far out of his way to pick up on what Parran was doing either.

I understand that these two musicians have been playing together for some years, and I expect that they are achieving more or less what they want. Rather than making pieces or coming together to confront specific tasks, they prefer to just play the way they play and make their own individual statements. There's nothing wrong with that, but I prefer the idea that an improvising group, or any musical group for that matter, should strive for something greater than the sum of its parts.

October 22-28, 1980

Getting Looped: Robert Moran and Others

Of all the techniques developed by composers in recent years, the tape loop is perhaps the easiest to understand. I once watched a class of junior-high students in Montana practicing this technique quite competently. Just take a length of recording tape, splice the two ends together, thread it through your tape recorder, and listen back to whatever is on the tape as many times as you want. Simple. In fact, it's so simple that it's generally taken for granted. Yet this activity strikes me as quite significant. Before the advent of the tape recorder there was no way to hear musical phrases repeated exactly for very long. Biological variations always produced sound variations. But just as the invention of the sine wave generator enabled us to experience a completely steady tone for the first time, the tape loop enabled us to hear any sound repeat itself exactly, over and over. As a loop winds around its endless circle, time itself begins to move in circles, and true stasis can be achieved. Unchanging sounds turn out to be as fascinating to human ears as changing sounds, and this interest in musical stasis no doubt lies at the roots of the whole minimalist movement.

Most composers currently involved in the many forms of repetitive or static music have little interest in tape loops. By now we have found many other ways to achieve similar effects, and certainly the more recent sequencing devices and digital delay systems are less awkward to work with than tape loops. Many now seem to regard the tape loop technique as a cliche. But of course, just when you become convinced that some artistic technique has been worn completely into the ground, someone will usually come along with a new approach and make it work all over again.

Robert Moran found an effective approach to tape loops in the latest version of his music for 'Through Cloud and Eclipse,' a theatrical work with shadow puppets that received its first New York presentation at the Kitchen October 9 through 11. The original German-language narration track was maintained, so it was difficult for most of us to become involved in the details of the story, but basically it involved a character searching for the secret of life in a mythological setting. There were not as many puppets in this show as there generally are in the Indonesian shadow puppet shows, on which the style of this work is based, but Donald Case handled his eight or 10 puppets skilfully, and the artists achieved elaborate scenic effects through a creative use of slide projectors. Most of the time, however, I listened to the music.

The loops Moran used were made by conventional instruments without, so far as I could tell, any electronic manipulation. Most of the loops were rather short, consisting of a few vibraphone or marimba notes, a percussive phrase played on prepared piano, or a snatch of some wind or stringed instrument. The repetitive texture provided an overall mood of suspended animation, enhancing the make-believe atmosphere of the drama, but it also suggested rather sharp dramatic contrasts from scene to scene. The texture was never very dense. Generally there were only two or three figures looping around at once. Yet something of interest was always going on.

I recall one section in which a sustained cello figure rocked back and forth between a couple of notes. The figure had such a lovely sound and such precise predictability that it lulled me into not paying very close attention. Only later did I begin to notice that the music had been gradually changing. A trombone, rocking back and forth between the same pitches, had gradually been fading in on another loop. In a later section I was attracted by the reiterations of a particularly vital rhythmic figure. The rhythm was not that complicated, but it took me quite a while to figure out how many beats it had, because accents from another tape loop kept intruding at different points. At other times I found myself listening to some tape loop chase some slightly longer tape loop. Of course, when the shorter loop finally caught up with the longer one, it kept right on chasing until it caught up with the next cycle, and the next, and the next, and the next. After a while I would realize that that process was really just another longer loop.

Meanwhile, loops have become important concepts in some nonmusical areas as well. The principles of computer programming have taught us to view many logical processes as loops. Douglas Hofstadter presents Goedel's incompleteness theorem and other modern philosophical quandaries in terms of recursions and 'endless loops.' Economists and statisticians, not to mention synthesizer players, like to loop their outputs back into their inputs. Sometimes I even think that our Western obsession with Progress is being transformed into an obsession with loops. Everything seems to be moving in circles. Or, as Richard Kostelanetz put it in one of his looping poems, '... of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry of life copies the poetry...'

November 19-25, 1980
Evan Parker's Free Sax

Many people had recommended Evan Parker to me, but I still wasn't prepared for what I would encounter when I actually heard him at Soundscape on October 24. Not only did the British saxophonist totally absorb me for about an hour all by himself, he also cut through several of my strongest prejudices. I was accustomed to thinking of unstructured improvisation as undisciplined and usually self-indulgent. I had grown to really dislike the idea of 'expanding the vocabulary' of various instruments, because I find that the expanded vocabulary is usually not nearly as pleasant to listen to as the sounds the instruments were intended to produce. And I had become particularly prejudiced against double tones or multiphonics on wind instruments, finding them extreme in register, raucous in quality, and badly out of tune. Yet Parker devoted his whole set to free improvisation, expanded the vocabulary of the saxophone as much as he could, played multiphonics more or less constantly, did just about everything I thought I didn't like, and I was so taken by the integrity and the excitement of what was happening that I completely forgot my biases.

How did he do it? Partly it was a matter of pure technique. From the moment Parker began, it was apparent that this was a man who had been playing like this for many years, and who was totally at ease with all the sounds coming out of his saxophones. He was never playing 'special effects.' He was just playing the way he always plays. His circular breathing was so much under control that he didn't even bother with it some of the time. If a phrase needed to go on and on, he would sneak the extra air into the horn to make it go on and on, sometimes for several minutes. But at other moments, when that wasn't the point, he would quickly revert to normal breathing. When he would go for a particular tonal area, he seemed to know exactly what notes would come out, and he knew just how to wiggle his fingers to make his complex sustained textures ripple or flutter or sputter the way he wanted them to. He heard where the tonic was, when there was one, and how to ease back to it, if he desired. He even had control over difference tones, which are odd, low tones that vibrate ominously inside your ear when two high pitches, slightly out of tune, vibrate simultaneously in a certain way. I've often heard the phenomenon with flutes and whistles, and once with vibraphones, but I've never heard even a group of reed players make this happen, and Parker was doing it all by himself. In short, this was not a hit-and-miss affair the way it is with most woodwind players when they turn on their multiphonics. This was a musician who had transformed these new sounds into a vocabulary that was as familiar to him as major scales are to most musicians.

December 3-9, 1980
John Cage's Themes and Variations

John Cage presented his 'Themes and Variations' on November 11 at the School of Visual Arts. Like most of his work during the past few years, it is closer to poetry than to music. The piece follows Cage's mesostic form, in which horizontal lines of text run across the name of particular individuals, spelled vertically. In this case the individuals are 15 people who have influenced him, such as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Merce Cunningham, and Henry David Thoreau, and the horizontal text deals systematically with silence, anarchism, Buddhism, and other musical and non-musical subjects of particular interest to the artist.

The rules of the mesostic form are so restrictive that it is impossible for Cage to say very much very cohesively about any of these topics. But of course, that is the point, or one of the points. The text becomes fragmentary, elusive, disconnected, and poetic, and yet it somehow expresses his point of view more touchingly, more clearly, and more profoundly than many of his prose texts do. As the work drifted through references to musical rehearsals, chance operations, performer freedom, the work ethic, and so much more, I found that it reminded me of many earlier Cage works and seemed like a dense summary of the ideas he has fought for and the things he has accomplished. The effect no doubt had something to do with Cage's own reading voice, which on this occasion was intimate, almost withdrawn. As he read the text, I suspected that he too must have been thinking about the many earlier works reflected in it.

It would be hard to say what the three or four hundred young art school students were thinking about, though I had the feeling their reactions were probably very different from mine. For me, Cage will always be a revolutionary, a highly controversial figure. For them, I think he is already a classic. They listened almost reverently and applauded warmly. I doubt that most of them had any trouble at all accepting the validity of chance methods, the idea that art need not express emotions, or the notion that a performance consisting solely of spoken words can be considered a piece of music.

December 31-January 6, 1981

Stuart Dempster and Stephen Scott: A Progress Report

Perhaps the most gratifying thing about following new music over the years is the opportunity to observe musicians grow and develop. The process is by no means consistent. Some weak artists plod along for a long time and then suddenly begin producing inspired work, while some good artists never seem to stretch very far beyond what they started out with. And some people are just up and down. The most satisfying pattern, the model that I guess everyone would like to be able to follow, is provided by those good artists who seem to just get better and better. Stuart Dempster and Stephen Scott are both examples.

Dempster's work has a special significance for me. When I first heard him in a 1971 recital at NYU, I was quite pleased to find a recitalist presenting new music in such a creative and careful way, but I was quite discouraged to realize that work of this caliber would draw only a minuscule audience and attract no interest whatever from the press. It was, in fact, this concert which induced me to write a letter to the Village Voice offering my services, and which led me into a critical avocation.

Hearing Dempster's latest New York concert, at the Kitchen on December 13, was doubly gratifying, then, because I could observe the immense maturing in the artist's work as well as simply hearing more first-rate music. At 44, the fine trombonist now has much experience to draw on. He spent a year in Australia, where he learned how to play the didjeridu, and continued grappling with this Aboriginal wind instrument for a long time, mastering the circular breathing required, and gradually figuring out how to make his own personal music with it. He worked out computer applications to trombone sound during a residency at Stanford. He came across a remarkable space with a 14-second echo in the Pope's Palace at Avignon, which he made excellent use of when he decided to record his 'Standing Waves' and 'Didjeridervish' on the 1750 Arch Street label. In short he was able to apply everything he'd learned to his own music, which seems deeper and more personal all the time.

Technical problems unfortunately made it impossible to fully understand what Dempster's computer controlled music is all about, but the rest of his recent program went quite smoothly. In 'Standing Waves' he played live trombone sounds along with the lovely, sustained harmonies I was already familiar with on the recording, and added several new dimensions to the piece. 'Didjeridervish' has also developed noticeably since the last time I heard it. Now he varies the deep tone of the didjeridu with a great variety of vowel sounds, tonguing effects, and colorations, and he also somehow preserves the integrity of the instrument. The piece never seemed disrespectful to the Aboriginal people who invented this instrument, or to the religious significance they attach to it.

But Dempster has not abandoned the work of other composers. His interpretation of John Cage's 'Solo for Sliding Trombone' was presented with many mute changes, very long silences, and healthy good humor of a sort that would no doubt have pleased the composer very much. Dempster also played William O. Smith's 'Session,' an effective recent work reflecting the soloist's ongoing concern with developing new trombone techniques in collaboration with other composers. He concluded with the same piece he concluded with the first time I heard him play, Robert Erickson's 'General Speech for Trombone Solo.' Here Dempster costumes in military regalia and presents General Douglas MacArthur's 'Duty, Honor, Country' speech in a semi-comprehensible trombone version. This witty little satire is now a classic, thanks mostly to the countless performances Dempster has presented over the years.

Stephen Scott's music has also interested me for some time. I first heard his work by chance, on a radio broadcast in the early '70s. It was a repetitious piece in steady eighth-note rhythms, a style that many younger composers were using at the time, but it had a harmonic finesse, and an appealing, smooth flow. This piece, however, turned out to be only the beginning of a search that has since gone deeper and deeper.

Scott's recent 'Arcs,' performed by a New England Conservatory group at Carnegie Recital Hall on December 8, has the same rich harmonies as the earlier work, but the composer has now developed a completely new instrumental technique to go with it. He calls it 'bowed piano.' To bow the piano strings, one threads heavily rosined monofiliment line through the strings and pulls the line steadily back and forth. At times the player may also work with a small bow, really just a popsicle stick with an abrasive surface, which can be inserted between strings in order to produce rhythmic articulations. The resulting sounds are quite special. At first they reminded me of organs, though later the somewhat reedy qualities seemed closer to accordions. Ultimately, of course, the bowed piano is not much like either of these instruments, or any others. Certainly its colors have no resemblance to any sound I ever associated with the piano.

Scott's new instrument has a theatrical side as well. Since almost every note has to have its own bow, it takes 10 people to handle all the notes used in 'Arcs,' and it is quite appealing to watch 10 players all huddled around the guts of a grand piano, intently pulling their bows back and forth. I also liked the idea that no one was reading any music. The score is strictly defined, but Scott found ways of working out the individual parts so that they could be memorized in the course of

a few rehearsals. In short, the composer has worked out a very special kind of ensemble playing that is not quite like any other.

I had the feeling that Scott's new musical instrument, and the new kind of ensemble playing that it engenders, had both evolved out of the composer's basic harmonic language and his desire to find the most sensitive context for it. But they have also led him to many formal discoveries. 'Arcs,' and a similar work called 'Music Three,' are quite concise as minimalist works go. In a matter of 10 minutes or so, these pieces can move through three or four completely different sections, a number of modulations, and a variety of rhythmic textures. In one case there is even an old-fashioned melody, which repeats over and over as a coda, and which seems uniquely appropriate to the context. It also seems light years away from the more obvious developmental procedures Scott started out with.

February 25 - March 3, 1981
Maximalism on the Beach: Philip Glass

I had long preferred Philip Glass's 'Music with Changing Parts' and 'Music in Twelve Parts' to the more recent Glass works I have heard. The earlier pieces seemed more disciplined, more careful, more focussed and more closely allied with the principles of minimalism, the later music seemed flabbier, and I was comfortable with that opinion for quite a while. But since I hadn't heard Glass's ensemble live for some time, and had never heard 'Einstein on the Beach' in its complete form, I decided to attend the recent performance at Town Hall. 'Dance #3' and 'Dance #5' still seemed flabby to me, but when we got to 'Einstein on the Beach' I had to revise my opinions quite a bit. It now seems clear that 'Einstein' is much stronger than any of the music he first wrote for his ensemble. The technique is more skilful, the insights are deeper, and the style is more personal. And after rehearing the earlier pieces, I am finally beginning to understand that Glass was probably never really a minimalist in the first place.

What is fascinating about 'Einstein on the Beach' is how much Glass's style broadened as he approached the operatic stage. Traditional techniques that the composer scrupulously avoided in earlier works are rampant here. Many segments are wrapped up in neat A-B-A forms. The unaccompanied violin music sounds a lot like Bach's. The piece moves in and out of its basic tonal center, D minor, very much the way a 19th-century piece might. There are even some organ figures that sound like those Alberti basses Mozart loved so much. Perhaps the most drastic difference between 'Einstein' and 'Music with Changing Parts,' however, is the pacing. Between 10 o'clock and 11:15 I counted 14 completely different sections, including an organ solo, a violin solo, a soprano solo, some a capella choral music, some accompanied choral music, an ensemble section so loud I had to put my fingers in my ears, an organ solo so soft that I almost forgot I was listening to amplified sound, a section of unison scale patterns quite different from anything I had ever heard from Glass, a wide variety of tempos and meters, and a section in which I hardly felt a beat at all. Clearly, any piece that can use up this much contrasting material in a mere hour and a quarter is not even trying to be minimalist, at least not in any very meaningful sense of the term.

But after listening again to 'Music in Similar Motion' and 'Music in Changing Parts,' I'm not convinced that Glass was terribly interested in restricting his materials even then. When these pieces were new I remember thinking of them as very simple, and I remember how a lot of people said they were simple-minded. In a way, however, it didn't make a lot of sense to call Glass a minimalist even in 1971, and I can understand why Glass doesn't like to be associated with the term. His music, even then, had little similarity with the unadorned rhythmic patterns of Steve Reich's 'Clapping Music,' the electronic drones of La Monte Young and Alvin Lucier, or the meditative chants of Pauline Oliveros, not to mention Philip Corner's 'Elementals,' which probably makes the most extreme statement of all, as well as providing a theoretical base for that whole way of musical thinking.

There is a surface simplicity in 'Music with Changing Parts,' and the piece does develop rather consistently, simply by adding and subtracting notes from little repeating figures. Yet as I listened once again to those additions and subtractions I realized that they are actually rather whimsical. Composers like Frederic Rzewski, Robert Moran, Louis Andriessen, and William Hellermann have written such sequences with much greater rigor. By comparison, Glass is not a reductionist at all but a romantic. Nor are Glass's textures as simple as they may seem. Even 'Music with Changing Parts' is covered over with several layers of subjective sensuality. The organ colors change frequently. The saxophones become so mixed up in the amplified texture that it's often difficult to separate one from another. Someone is always singing or playing a sustained high note, producing complicated acoustical interactions with the natural overtones in the music. Sometimes improvised saxophone lines weave whole knots of intricate counterpoint into the texture, while many additional complications are added electronically as the instruments are blended, separated, mixed, rebalanced, reverberated, panned, and filtered.

This may be minimalism in a kind of sociohistoric sense, but it has little to do with the purer minimalism of other composers, or with the spirit of reductivism so widely practiced in the visual arts. Of course, that leaves us with the problem of finding another label for Glass, and I really can't figure out what to call him other than a good composer. But just as I was pondering this question, a press release arrived regarding the bass trombonist David Taylor who, we are informed, 'has worked with such contemporary popular musicians as Duke Ellington, Thad Jones, Steve Reich, Barry Manilow, Frank Sinatra and The Rolling Stones.' So maybe that makes Glass yet another 'contemporary popular musician.' But I expect that Glass might be even more unhappy to be linked with Barry Manilow than with Philip Corner.

March 11-17, 1981

The Real Tambourine Man: Glen Velez

Glen Velez is a free-lance percussionist. Sometimes he performs with Steve Reich and Musicians, or with Parnassus, or on the Group for Contemporary Music series. At other times he plays Middle Eastern repertoire for the storyteller Laura Simms, or becomes a tympanist for a symphony orchestra. I had heard him in most of these contexts and had found him quite competent in all of them. But the other night, listening to him improvise with Charlie Morrow as part of the 'Whitney Counterweight' series, it seemed obvious that Velez is not only competent and versatile but also a musician with a strong vision of his own. And since articles on new music almost always focus on composers, this seemed like a good opportunity to break the pattern and write about one of the more impressive young performers currently working in New York.

Velez's instrument that night was a bodhran, a one-headed drum about 18 inches in diameter that is held in the hand like a tambourine. This Irish instrument is traditionally played with a hard little beater that produces sharp attacks and deep resonances. But Velez plays with his hands, thereby transforming it into something much softer and more delicate. He moves his individual fingers with fast rhythms and varied touches, as Indian players do, but the result is more sensual than any tabla solos I've heard. Partly because the bodhran is so resonant, but mostly because Velez has worked hard with the instrument, the music comes out with a particularly personal touch. Every single sound seems to leave its own fingerprint.

A few days later I visited Velez in his Upper West Side apartment, and I quickly realized that his unique bodhran technique is only part of a much broader concern. One whole wall was covered with 15 or 20 types of wooden rims with skin heads on them. Some were very unusual indeed.

'This little tambourine is from South India,' Velez explained, as he began taking a few of his prize possessions off the wall. 'The head is lizard skin, and there are only two tiny jingles on it. The big one from Afghanistan has lots of jingles, but they're really rings rather than the little disks you find on most tambourines. This one from North Africa has two little snares under the head, as well as the jingles around the rim.' Soon the topic shifted to the 3500 pictures Velez had gathered that depict tambourines in various times and places, to a discussion about the thumb-over grip versus the palm-under position, to various ways of twirling the instrument, to detailed remarks about Hittite tambourines, minstrel tambourines, medieval tambourines, and Salvation Army tambourines. It became clear that Velez was really a tambourine scholar, as well as a performer.

The 32-year old musician grew up in Dallas and received his formal musical training at the Manhattan School of Music. His primary instructor was Fred Hinger, the tympanist of the Metropolitan Opera orchestra. But a natural curiosity about the music of different cultures led him to additional studies with some of the other outstanding percussionists teaching in New York City. From Ramnad Rhagavan he worked on South Indian techniques, from Erasto Vasconcelos he studied Brazilian styles, and from Hanna Mirhige he learned Arabic instruments, primarily the dumbek. Having arrived at this cross-cultural perspective he began to take a special interest in tambourines, along with the bodhram, which like all frame drums is really just a tambourine without the jingles.

'In the West the tambourine is a pretty simple instrument. You either slap it or shake it. That's about all there is to it, and you can learn all the basic symphonic tambourine techniques in two lessons. But then I started to find out about how they play tambourines in other places and I discovered that it's really a very sophisticated little instrument, and that there are a whole lot of ways of playing it. There's a style from Rio, for example, where you use the heel of your right hand a lot,' he went on, demonstrating as he spoke. 'But if you go up to northeastern Brazil they hold the same instrument much lower and don't use the heel of the hand at all. In Bahia, on the other hand, there's another completely different style that involves more jingling than drumming and that requires the left hand to do most of the work. All three techniques are highly developed, difficult to learn, and completely different. And that's just Brazil.' But perhaps the most important thing that Velez learned from his study of other cultures was how to go beyond his western classical training and feel comfortable improvising. For it is as an improviser that he began working with Steve Gorn, Charlie Morrow, and others, and putting together his extraordinary hand drum techniques.

'I know a lot of tambourine styles, and when I improvise I use them unconsciously. So my oriental playing started to take on Brazilian characteristics, and I was a little worried about that. But when I went back to the man who had taught me the Arabic style, my Brazilian accent sounded fresh and interesting to him. He wasn't offended at all.' Gradually, then, Velez has become a kind of melting pot all by himself, and perhaps that is the key to the magic that happens when he begins to play an Irish bodhran or a Brazilian pandeiro or a Sumerian meze or a Spanish pandereta or an Afghan doira or an Arabic duff or a North African bendir or a South Indian kanjira or even a plain old gospel tambourine. And there are practical advantages as well.

'Tambourines are easy to carry. I can put eight or 10 different types all in one suitcase.'

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March 26-31, 1981
Charlie Morrow vs. Carles Santos

The Heavyweight Sound Fight last week was a collaboration between the Swedish composer Sten Hanson, who has been residing temporarily in New York, Charlie Morrow, who is well known to local avant-garde audiences, and Carles Santos, the Catalan pianist and composer, whose work has been reviewed here by both Gregory Sandow and myself. All are experienced composers, all are about 40 years old, and all are interested in experimental vocal techniques. The three had never collaborated with one another before, but a few months ago, perhaps influenced somewhat by a now-legendary Fluxus boxing event organized by Dick Higgins in the mid-'60s, they got together, raised some money, set the date for March 14 at Bobby Gleason's Gym on West 30th Street, and worked out a game plan. Morrow was billed as 'Passaic Pig Iron,' in recognition of his home town, Santos became the 'Barcelona Bull,' Hanson took the role of referee, and posters went out following the form always used in advertising events at Bobby Gleason's Gym. It was already a little unclear as to whether this was going to be music or sport, and the ambiguity increased as the cast was enlarged to include a soprano to sing the national anthem, a ringside band to play the Gillette theme song and provide accompaniments and between-rounds interludes, a dancer, a timekeeper, five judges, a boxing commission controller, a doctor, two trainers, and two bucket boys.

The event was scheduled to begin at 8, though it didn't actually start until 8:30. Normally, audiences become very impatient in such situations, but in this case I didn't hear one complaint. It helped that Giordano Capilano was playing incidental music on his 'fabulous polyphonic synthesizer,' but what really engaged me was the setting itself. Bobby Gleason's Gym is a wonderfully tacky place, just like the ones you've seen in boxing movies. Paint flaking all over. A hundred or so chairs huddled around the ring. A little balcony marked 'Press and Visitors.' Lighting that makes the air feel like it's full of smoke even when it isn't.

The performance soon got under way with the grand entrances of the singers/fighters. The Barcelona Bull and Passaic Pig Iron had both written theme songs to accompany their entrances, though it was a little difficult to focus on the music, what with all the parading, the trainers, the bucket boys, the boxing trunks, and the cheering. But then, music becomes incidental music in most theatrical contexts. Not at all incidental was the national anthem, as recomposed by Hanson, for which we all stood reverently. Here the melody was not just 'The Star Spangled Banner,' but a cross between that tune, the Swedish national anthem, and the Catalan patriotic song. Hanson had managed to knit the three tunes together quite smoothly, using nonsense syllables for lyrics, and soprano Janet Steele sang the little collage with a nice theatrical flair, her vocal sound richer than ever. There were also some cleverly satirical remarks by the announcer, Armand Schwerner, and an explanation of the rules, perhaps in Swedish, by the referee. Finally, Simone Forti marched around the ring carrying a little sign announcing 'round one' and provided the first of a number of very short dances that would introduce each round.

When the match finally started, it turned out that the collaborators had worked out specific procedures for each round. In some rounds the two contestants delivered the types of vocal pieces they are known for, but in others their vocal performances went off into religious-sounding chants or poems. One round consisted largely of insults thrown back and forth by El Morrow and El Toro, as I found myself calling the contestants. In another round they began singing love songs to one another, becoming such friends that the referee, with some help from the audience, began pleading for the two to continue boxing. In one round they both pretended to be KOed. In another they played toy piano and trumpet while the referee blew his whistle. In another round the two fighters danced with each other, and with the referee. The trainers and waterboys joined in, and a couple of them happened to be trained ballet dancers, and the whole round was a total delight.

But the delight ended, as it so often does, when it was time to make a judgment. I was one of the five judges myself, but it seemed to me that the event shouldn't be viewed as a contest between Morrow and Santos, and that composers and performers can't really be compared quite the way boxers can anyway. And since no one had asked me to do otherwise, I decided that the evening was really a struggle between Innovation and Banality. As the match went on, I became rather fond of this little allegory. The round with all the pratfalls clearly had to go to Banality, but some of the chanting, and a number of the referee's contributions, were clear cases of Innovation, and it seemed to me that Innovation won the bout hands down. A couple of the other judges decided to rate El Morrow and El Toro, however, and the announcer decided to proclaim that Passaic Pig Iron had won the match. This triggered off a series of reactions that I am sure no one had planned:

The Barcelona Bull was understandably miffed and claimed that they had agreed in rehearsals that there would be no winner.

Passaic Pig Iron was understandably disturbed and spent a good deal of time after the match going around trying to explain to everyone that he wasn't supposed to have won and that he had nothing to do with what had happened.

Several innocent bystanders pointed out that the announcer is an old friend of Passaic Pig Iron, and that all five judges had been invited that evening either by Hanson or Morrow, rather than by Santos, and that the sound fight had clearly been fixed.

Geoff Hendricks, who had been keeping score and making careful aesthetic judgments round by round, ardently argued that Santos had outperformed Morrow all the way, exhibiting far more control and subtlety than his opponent.

A few people felt that everyone should write letters of protest to the New Wilderness Foundation or the Soho Baroque Opera Company, the Sponsors of the event, or to the Voice, or to somebody, while others felt that Santos should demand a rematch, and still others were hoping that Meredith Monk would take up soundfighting and challenge both of them.

It became abundantly clear that this little event had, in a way, backfired. The idea was to go through the motions of a real boxing match situation, but to determine the details of the competition with a script. But not all of the reality had been transformed into artifice. A lot of what was left was very real, including the anger, the controversy, and the hurt feelings.

It became equally obvious that this element, this lack of total control, this spontaneity was exactly what had made the event so extraordinary. A sound fight like this may never happen again. But those of us who were there will probably be talking about the one at Bobby Gleason's for a long time.

Note:
Indeed, I still hear references to this event from people who happened to be there. No rematches were ever scheduled, however, and so far as I know, Morrow and Santos have neven spoken to one another since.

Now there is a gap of one year in our collection. I wrote 23 articles during this period, but about half of these were written in Paris on rather routine subjects, and many others were about folk and ethnic music, and the few that had to do with American minimalism were written without enthusiasm or insight. Maybe the SoHo new music scene just seemed too dull after that night in Bobby Gleason's gym. But probably I was just burned out after writing so many times about the same things. A year later, however, as I begin to understand some European types of minimalism, I found a new energy and wrote some things which you may want to read...

March 23, 1982
Hungarian Minimalism: Zoltan Jeney

One thing you notice when you view new music from Paris instead of New York is that Paris offers a more international perspective. From a vantage point halfway between Washington and Moscow, global tensions have two sides, and aesthetic ideas seem to drift in from all directions. This is partly history. Gamelan ensembles and Indian singers began coming to Paris long before it ever occurred to producers to try such presentations in New York. People and ideas from Algeria and other Arab countries still pass this way often as a result of France's colonial history. American art is readily available, too, as in the current Jackson Pollock show at the Centre Pompidou. You also become more aware of the Eastern bloc. In fact, about the only kinds of music I haven't heard since leaving the United States are country-and-western and salsa.

Sociologically things seem pretty mixed too. I have met composers from Eastern and Western Europe and North and South America who are fully accepted in Parisian experimental music circles, and that too feels different from New York. I can think of only a few composers active in SoHo who were not born in the U.S. or Canada, and they tend to work in fringe areas. It now seems a little odd to remember how rarely discussions about New York styles versus California styles ever verged into international questions.

One special benefit of my time in Paris is that I met a young Hungarian musicologist, Marta Grabocs, who was able to tell me a lot about new music activity in her country. It would be relatively difficult for her to obtain the money and permission to visit the U.S., but she can come to Paris rather easily for periods of study and research, and has been here this winter, attending the lectures of Daniel Charles, who is probably the best Cage scholar in the world, and going to many concerts. She talked particularly about the New Music Studio in Budapest, which was formed in 1969 by three Hungarian composers, Zoltan Jeney, Laszlo Sary, and Laszlo Vidovsky, and a group of eight or 10 instrumentalists. She also lent me several records issued by the state Hungaroton label, one of which is worth describing in detail.

Zoltan Jeney, a man in his mid-forties, is a dedicated minimalist who was clearly influenced by American innovations when they first reached Hungary in the very early '70s, but who has taken the music in some highly personal symbolic and conceptual directions over the last 10 years. The Jeney album I heard includes four pieces, three of which I found completely compelling.

'Impho 102/6' is a piece for six tuned antique cymbals. It has a wonderful tinkling quality, so high that at first I thought I was hearing the same sound over

and over. Only a little later did I realize that the pitches were changing. The piece is of course restricted to the six pitches of the instruments, played by six players, and it maintains a steady, moderately fast beat throughout its nine minutes. But within these restrictions, there is a consistent stream of interesting details. Sometimes every other beat is a repeated pitch, which becomes a sort of droning tonic. Sometimes the center of gravity shifts to another note. Sometimes a cymbal you haven't heard for a while comes back at an unexpected moment, creating a level of surprise that would practically require rifle shots in the context of a traditional symphony. Sometimes you think you are hearing pitches that aren't really there, because of the complex overtones of little cymbals. Sometimes you can discern low mysterious difference tones. Always, the music tinkles on with what I would like to call a sumptuous delicacy, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

'Orpheus' Garden' mixes a lovely combination of two winds, two strings, and four keyboards, and again the musical vocabulary is rigorously restricted. This time we listen for 15 minutes to short phrases of three or four sustained chords. The pitches remain more or less in the same mode for long periods of time, but they change a little from phrase to phrase, and the orchestration shifts continually. There is clearly a rationale behind the changes, and at some points I can even predict what will happen next, but I can't exactly tell what is going on. My favorite theory is that the notes and orchestration are somehow working their way through a set of permutations, though I'm not sure. It is not the kind of system one can figure out easily. Nor is that necessary, of course. The rich colors of the flute, clarinet, viola, cello, piano, harpsichord, electric organ, and accordion, along with the inevitable phrase structure are quite captivating all by themselves.

'End Game' is one of the most unusual piano pieces I have ever heard. The whole history of the piano has been oriented toward virtuoso textures and unusual colors, and even the simplest piano music generally requires all 10 fingers. 'End Game' begins with a dissonant chord that is sustained for a long time, but from here on the seven-minute piece could all be played with one finger. It is just a simple melody, moving in a rather slow steady beat, and it doesn't even use the extreme registers. For a while I couldn't believe it, and thought the composer must be a little naive. Didn't he ever take an orchestration class? Didn't he understand that a piece like this would be much more appropriate for clarinet or cello? But after a while I began to realize that the decision to go with piano was actually very knowing. A wind or stringed instrument would have added too much color, too much inflection, and what the melody really needed was a drier, more consistent color. The piano was actually a perfect solution. Nor is the piece demeaning to the instrument or the performer. It is always hard to play really well, regardless of how 'easy' a piece may be, or how many fingers are required. And as I listened to this pianist, Zoltan Kocsis, I could admire the unusual consistency of his touch as much as if he had been playing Liszt. Perhaps more.

The melody of 'End Game,' like the variations in 'Orpheus' Garden,' is sort of a puzzle, and I had the feeling it could be decoded if I only had the key. And since I couldn't read the Hungarian liner notes, I figured I had better check back with the woman who had given me the record. I was glad I did. She explained that, while no specifics are given on the record jacket, and the composer refuses to write program notes, it is common knowledge that 'End Game' is a literal translation of a particular chess game. 'Orpheus' Garden' is probably derived from a painting of the same name by Paul Klee, though she didn't know exactly how, and 'Impho 102/6' apparently remains a mystery to everyone but the composer. I'm not sure I even want someone to tell me more than that. I prefer to keep listening, and to try to work these lovely puzzles by myself. They are as fascinating as the Rubik cube which, come to think of it, is another Hungarian invention.

Note:
Here the anthology departs from its theme from new music in New York. It seemed important to include a few of the articles I wrote about composers in other places, not only to show the change in my own perspective around this time, but also because we wanted to lead the reader into a more international understanding of the subject. Finally, minimal music never was strictly American. People in Budapest and Warsaw and Paris and many other places were working in this direction at the same time, sometimes having almost no contact with their American counterparts. It might be added that this anthology would not exist without Paul Panhuysen, whose Maciunas Ensemble has long been the chief proponent of minimal music in Holland.

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May 4, 1982

On the Fringe of Paris: Pierre Marietan, Eliane Radigue, Horacio Vaggione

After six months in Paris, it was time to return to New York, and I thought I should try to put together a general column summarizing the new music I'd been hearing in Europe. I soon realized, however, that what was really necessary was an article devoted to a few of the extraordinary independent composers I found there, but have not yet written about. Like most critics, I often find myself reporting on the more prominent public events, and forgetting about what I hear in more modest circumstances. So I want to conclude this series of European reports by telling you about Pierre Marietan, Eliane Radigue, and Horacio Vaggione.

They have much in common. All are mature and highly experienced musicians. All work more or less on the fringes of Parisian musical life and are more or less ignored by the French press. All are strong individuals with highly personal styles. I've become friendly with all three, and I've gained much by hearing their music, listening to their ideas, and observing the richness of their musical lives. Perhaps you will find their stories rewarding as well.

Pierre Marietan is one of the few composers who has studied with both Boulez and Stockhausen. Of Swiss origin, he spent two years as a young horn player with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, but he then settled in Paris, which offered a more stimulating new music environment. His current life sometimes leads me to describe him as the Phill Niblock of Paris, because he spends so much time presenting the work of other composers and working for the cause of experimental music in general. He is particularly concerned with making people more sensitive to environmental sounds and often organizes programs that encourage school children to listen to the rain, the insects, the sounds of their neighborhoods. Once a week he teaches a course in sound addressed to city planning students. Once a month for the past seven years his organization GERM has presented informal concerts of experimental music which consistently seem to offer some of the most original and professional work around.

Marietan continues to write some music for conventional instrumental ensembles. I heard a recording of a piece for 24 instruments, for example, which consists of 42 sections, written on 14 consecutive days. It's a sort of diary, pleasant and whimsical. The composer's heart, however, is outdoors. One of my most pleasant days in Paris was the time Marietan drove me out to the suburb of Evry, where he has been collaborating with an architect, contributing sound elements to an attractive new public housing project. One area had been acoustically shielded so as to permit quiet conversation right in the middle of the busy garden. At several points, curious looking pipes rise up to the surface allowing children, or other people, to send sounds to one another through underground interconnections. As you walk along the sidewalk, your footsteps produce intermittent clapping rhythms because Marietan had the fine idea of interrupting the concrete sidewalks with sections of resonant planks. I like the way Marietan has dealt with acoustics, and his work seems somehow more integrated with the space than the installations of artists like Max Neuhaus or Liz Phillips, who make their effects solely with electronic equipment. But Marietan has not eliminated electronics. For example, he also played for me a gorgeous tape of sustained overtones, which he made by playing the natural harmonics of the Alpine horn. He wants to realize a computer version of this music, to be triggered off automatically at sunrise and sunset as part of one of his outdoor installations.

Eliane Radigue's music has been familiar to me, and to other New Yorkers, since the early '70s. She worked for a year at the electronic music center at NYU, where she came to know Morton Subotnick, Rhys Chatham, Laurie Spiegel, and others, and she has returned to the States periodically to present programs of her own electronic works at the Kitchen and other places. In 1975, however, she became a Tibetan Buddhist, went into retreat, and dropped her composing career completely. Curiously, when she returned to music four years later, her work went on very much as before. The aesthetic was still minimalist, one might even say ascetic. The sounds were still long and sustained. The source was still her 1970 Arp synthesizer. The medium was still recording tape. The result was still a technically impeccable sequence of carefully tuned tones, which emerge from unexpected places, coalesce into unique modes, and change very slowly. The music still challenged the listener to slow down, be patient, and observe subtle changes. Listening in this way can be considered a form of meditation, and I would say that Radigue's music is clearly religious in nature, though perhaps no more religious than before her own conversion.

Recently Radigue embarked on a long-term project based on the 100,000 songs of the Tibetan master Milarepa. Privileged one night in early March to hear a private playing of the first segment of the new work, which lasts about 75 minutes, I was particularly impressed by the distinct personality of every tone in the new piece. This one has a breathy quality. This one has an odd oboe-like edge. Another vibrates in a quirky way. Another is somehow very distant and rather loud at the same time. Another is so soft that you sometimes can't be sure whether it is there or not. There is a rhythmic motif in the second of the four sections of the piece, and for a while Radigue's music seems to be moving, dancing, making gestures in a way that it normally never does. Her style develops over the years with the same kind of subtle progress that can be heard in one of her individual pieces. Only the time scale is different.

Horacio Vaggione grew up in Argentina and received his early training in South America. As a young composer, however, he came to Europe, where he has been based ever since. He lived for several years in Spain, where he sometimes worked with the members of the innovative Spanish group Zaj, and often toured with Luis de Pablo in the group Alea. In the early '70s, he gravitated to Paris, began working more and more by himself, and gradually developed the unique electronic music that he now presents live in solo concerts, generally out of town.

You could say that Vaggione is basically a synthesizer player, and you could say that his music is a little like the solo presentations of Richard Teitelbaum or Alvin Curran, but this is perhaps misleading. For one thing, Vaggione's repertoire is segmented into specific one-movement pieces, generally about 20 minutes long. Each involves a specific mode, a specific kind of texture, and a specific category of electronic sound. Generally the material is prerecorded on several different tapes, which the composer mixes together with one hand while overlaying improvised lines on an electric keyboard with his other hand. Vaggione has exceptional keyboard technique, and it is impressive to watch the speed and control with which he puts everything together in a performance, standing all the time, and sometimes almost dancing with the music. What really impressed me in the solo concert I heard, however, was the cleanness, both of the ideas and of the sound. Each piece is carefully defined, and neither the prerecorded material nor the improvised lines go ever beyond the vocabulary of the specific piece. And the sounds are about as high in fidelity and low in noise as in any electronic music I have ever heard. This is remarkable for a composer who works mostly in a modest home studio, and I asked Vaggione what his secret was.

'Oh, it's not so hard,' he said. 'Just get a couple of Revoxes and some good quality tape. Don't bother to work at 15 inches per second. Seven and a half is good enough.' He neglected to add that you must also have a lot of experience, a sensitive ear, and enough patience to do things over and over until each element attains the same superb sound quality.

As I left Paris, Marietan was completing a program for the French radio that involved recording and mixing the bells of some 30 Parisian churches. Radigue was preparing to present her new work in some concerts in the United States. Vaggione had just mixed a new composition made with computer-generated sound and was collecting tapes of other composers in preparation for presentations of electronic music he will be making in Argentina. All were doing their customary high-quality work, and none of them seemed particularly bothered by the idea that it would not be taking center stage in Parisian musical life. In fact, I think they feel rather comfortable working on the fringes. It's quieter there, there are fewer hassles, and one can make wonderful music strictly for its own sake, as they do.

June 29, 1982
The Filter-Up Theory

A lot of people subscribe to a musical version of the Trickle-Down Theory. The idea is that as listeners confront more accessible forms of new music they get turned on to all new music, and their enthusiasm trickles down to the lofts and alternative spaces and to some of the newer or less accessible types of music. Here are a few examples.

In universities and museums and local arts centers I've often heard a line of reasoning that goes something like this. 'We don't really have an audience for new music here, and people aren't ready for a whole evening of John Cage reading Writing through Finnegan's Wake, or David Tudor's Rainforest, or Alvin Lucier's work, or some of the unusual things that composers around here are doing. So we're starting out our first new music series with people like Steve Reich, Phil Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Cecil Taylor. That way we know that the ticket sales will be pretty good, and we won't have such a huge deficit, and we'll be able to develop an audience at the same time. Once we get people in the habit of coming, we'll be able to invite some of the other composers we'd really like to invite but just can't take on right now.'

Or consider the conversation I had some months ago with one of the younger composers doing loud electric-guitar minimalism. After I had congratulated him on the critical acclaim and large audiences he had begun to attract, he responded with an explanation that went something like this. 'Well, I really hope I can be a big success. Not just for myself, but for new music in general. When people start responding to my stuff they'll be able to understand some of the new music that doesn't have a lot of public appeal yet. I figure I'm doing a service for all composers.'

Another example of the Trickle-Down Theory arrived in a letter not long ago. The writer comments that his city 'seems quite star-conscious of a sudden. Phil Glass, Meredith Monk, and Laurie Anderson have all been welcomed with major crowds in the past year - but, strangely enough, been welcomed as a sort of establishment avant-garde, as safe - a sure bet for an unusual evening... I think the hope is that some of the living composer sensibility will rub off on the masses, and they will find their way to supporting locals and lesser knowns.' All of these people are subscribing to the Trickle-Down Theory, and it seems to me that they are all spinning illusions. The arts administrator is using the theory to justify his safe programming policies. The composer is using it because he wants to pass of his aggressiveness as altruism. The letter writer is invoking it to bolster his hopes that better days are around the corner for 'locals and lesser knowns.'

It seems increasingly clear to me that the Trickle-Down Theory is just not valid, regardless of how good an alibi it may sometimes be. If the audiences at a few well-attended concerts do trickle down to the more modest circumstances where truly radical or truly sophisticated or just newer forms of music are being made, they do so in very insignificant numbers indeed. What really happens is that, of the many forms of music that are constantly being tried out, a few manage to make their way through a big sieve to some of the larger halls, larger record companies, and larger audiences. In other words, the Trickle-Down Theory really ought to be replaced by a more realistic Filter-Up Theory.

America still puts a premium on innovation and individuality, and there are always a lot of us exploring new methods and developing unique approaches in music, as in just about everything else. Quite a few are particularly talented and particularly persistent, and they develop styles that are truly unique and insightful, and make valuable contributions to our understanding of what music is and can be. But the way things are now, there is not very much room for these achievements in orchestra programs and record stores and radio broadcasts, so a selection process has to take place.

This selection process really begins among the artists themselves, I think. They usually know each other and each other's work, and as they plan concerts, form groups, stage events in Central Park, or whatever, they end up supporting some of their colleagues and not supporting some of their other colleagues. Their activities may have small audiences, but they do attract critics who want to be able to report the latest developments to their readers, auditors who make reports to funding agencies, and people who may be preparing lectures or books or anthologies, along with a few friends and curiosity seekers. So the information gathered by these people is picked up by those alternative spaces, small record companies, new music ensembles, festival organizers, and radio stations who take a special interst in new music. As soon as these people present such things to their audiences, however, the music begins to confront resistance, and only a very small selection of this work ever filters up beyond this level and out to the general public.

What I am saying seems particularly clear from the vantage point on New York where, after 10 or 15 years of lively new music activity, and even the creation of a few stars, the audiences at places like the Experimental Intermedia series remain much what they always were. One finds critics who want to be able to report the latest developments to their readers, auditors who make reports to funding agencies, and people who may be preparing lectures or books or anthologies, along with a few friends and curiosity seekers, and that's about it. It's really not such a bad system, and the information continues to circulate, and all of the really strong music continues to filter up, at least to the point where the

general audience begins making the decisions, and the process is all rather clear and simple. Things only get confusing when people try to turn reality upside down with the Trickle-Down Theory.

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October 5, 1982

A Jackson Mac Low High Point

I find it hard to believe that Jackson Mac Low is 60. I still think of him as the enfant terrible, the wild chance poet, the intermedia experimenter, the indefatigable avant-gardist, the man who embarrasses the literature departments. His youthful spirit just doesn't seem 60 years old. It is appropriate, however, that Mac Low's associates seized on this opportunity to get together and present an all-day retrospective of readings, musical performances, and other sorts of Mac Low events at Washington Square Church on September 11. Presenting so many interpretations of so many aspects of Mac Low all in one day clarified the considerable range and depth of the man's artistic contribution, and made a good case for his remarkable body of work. I can't think of any contemporary poets, and only a few composers and choreographers, who have contributed as many insights and worked them out as thoroughly as Jackson Mac Low has.

Poetry is normally a solitary art, and perhaps the most unusual thing about Mac Low's poetry is that it almost never is. Practically everything is intended to be interpreted vocally, or read by ensembles, or played by musicians, or realized by dancers, or painted, or recorded, or something besides being printed on pieces of paper. His work, in other words, is mostly collaborations with other people, and thus it takes on a kind of richness that the work of solitary poets can never have.

Some of my favorite Mac Low works are the 'Pronouns.' Each of these 40 texts, derived by chance manipulations, uses one particular pronoun, including 'somebody' and 'whoever' as well as 'it' and 'we,' and each is to be interpreted as a dance. Lanny Harrison's version of one of these 'dances' might be described as a skilfully acted comedy routine. Specific lines were interpreted with expressive vocal innuendos, unsuspected props, sudden changes, and lots of response from the audience, which was with her all the way. Geoffrey Hendricks and Darrell Wilson, on the other hand, acted out one of the dances without giving us the text at all, achieving a much stranger, more symbolic effect. If you didn't know the poem they were working from, you would have had no way of knowing that their entrance, dropping down from the organ loft, was their interpretation of the line 'Being in flight,' and that putting dirt on their faces later was their version of 'It darkens.' Elaine Summers and four other dancers counterpointed a similar text with blankets and rather continous group movements that seemed to have only tenuous connections with the specific lines being delivered from the side. The three performances could hardly have been more different, yet each was satisfying in its own way, and in each case it was really the texts that held things together.

A similar range was apparent with the musical performances. In Mac Low's instrumental works, specific notes are generally derived from specific letters within verbal texts, so that the music is essentially a sort of coded version of the words. But here too, the performance results can be very different. Mac Low's 'First Milarepa Gatha' and his 'Piece for Sari Deines,' for example, were interpreted by groups of speakers, instrumentalists, and people who both spoke and played instruments, and in cases like this, what one experiences is a lot of highly individual approaches. Some performers dominate, others stay in the background, this one is doing some sort of religious intoning, that one is playing the notes very precisely, another is obsessed with words that make hissing sounds, the one over there is showing off his instrument a bit, and the one on the end, who is doing everything so moderately and tastefully, probably thinks he is the only one who is performing the piece correctly. Of course, many such inconsistencies could be smoothed out by more rehearsal and firmer direction, but Mac Low doesn't seem to want that. He prefers the anarchy of a lot of individuals with a lot of individual approaches, even if it may look a little amateurish on the surface. He finds all of this very interesting, and the funny thing is that he is right. That anarchy can be enticingly theatrical is one of many important points Mac Low has made in his work.

Professional musicians can't help looking professional, though, and the goals are different when they organize Mac Low performances, especially in solo versions. Recorder player Pete Rose, violinist Malcolm Goldstein, and guitarist William Hellermann all did solo interpretations, and a quartet of flutists played the brand new all-white-note 'Milarepa Quartet.' Here the words were sometimes completely dropped, the emphasis shifted to pitch control and exact phrasing, everything was highly polished, and the pieces took on lovely formal shapes. It is quite clear that, regardless of how little musical training Mac Low may have, his work can make very good musical sense, at least in the hands of performers like these.

Even readings of Mac Low's poetry somehow offer room for collaboration and interpretation, and here too the range is vast. John Cage intoned one of Mac Low's poems in his now aging voice in a way that conveyed the poet's spiritual side quite powerfully. The lyricism of Spencer Holst's reading style brought much warmth and fantasy to some texts written in 1945, one of which is a strangely prophetic discussion of 'silent music.' Armand Schwerner was more matter-of-fact, yet riveting, as he read from the 'Light Poems.' And some of the group readings were simply delightful, especially in the case of the 'Bluebird Asymmetries,' where the word 'bluebird' was likely to fly out at any unpredictable moment.

Mac Low's work is not without conventional values. I was especially struck by one of the lyrics from the 'Stanzas for Iris Lezak,' from 1960, for example, which must be one of the most touching love poems of any century. But as Mac Low's 60th birthday passes by, we should be particularly grateful for the unconventional values in his work, for the things that no one else ever did. For his artistic anarchy. For showing us that a collection of words or phrases can be meaningful and expressive without syntactical collections. For showing us that poetry can be collaborative. For contributing so much to the cross-fertilization of the arts. And for doing it all so long and so well.

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October 26, 1982
John Cage at 36

Most of the special performances in celebration of John Cage's 70th birthday have been oriented toward the composer's more recent work, but for many of us, it is the compositions Cage wrote before turning to chance procedures around 1950 that remain the least familiar and the most curious. So when I learned that Rip Keller was presenting the 'Sonatas and Interludes' at Symphony Space on October 13, I looked forward to my first opportunity to hear this work complete and live.

This hour-long set of 20 pieces, written in the late '40s, was one of Cage's earliest major works, and was to become the most important single composition anyone has written for the prepared piano. It was also crucial in establishing Cage's reputation. The piece was championed by Maro Ajemian, who performed it countless times over the course of many years, and these performances brought the composer's music into many European and American concert halls where it had never been heard before.

Ajemian is now dead, and a few other pianists have taken the demanding work into their repertoires. But Keller, performing from memory, seemed perfectly at home with the odd colors produced by the bolts and clothespins and other objects wedged into the piano's strings, and was able to shape these colors into satisfying phrases. It was clear that he has been living with the music for a long time.

The thing that interests me most as I reconsider this early Cage work is the extent to which the composer controlled traditional skills here. The 'Sonatas and Interludes' is not exactly a youthful work, and certainly not a student work. Cage was already 36 when the music was finished, and he had been listening and learning for a long time. He had mastered a lot of compositional techniques, more than many conservative composers of his generation did.

Particularly striking, for example, is Cage's understanding of two-part sonata form. Most of the 16 sonatas included here follow the AABB structure used by Domenico Scarlatti, and Cage often handles the form as cleverly as the Italian master. The sections usually sound very different the second time around. In fact, it is often extremely difficult to tell when the repeats actually begin. The trick here, or rather the family of tricks, has to do with writing the last bars of a section in such a way that when the music leads back to the beginning those opening bars will have a completely different feeling. Similarly, the beginning of the B section can be constructed so that it sounds quite different when approached from the end of the A section than when arrived at later from the end of the B section.

Writing endings is a constant problem for any composer, especially one who works without the aid of a system, and it seems to me that Cage's endings here are unusually effective. The 'Sonatas and Interludes' never stop in an obvious way. They never say 'The End.' But they are never left dangling either. Somehow, Cage always seemed to find ways of bringing his materials to a satisfying close without relying on cliches or pat procedures, and without resorting to the same solution twice. That's hard to do in any style, especially 20 times in a row.

The control of harmony and tonality here is also more knowing than Cage's reputation might lead one to expect. Cage has often related how Schoenberg once told him he could never be a composer without a better sense of harmony, and how he decided to go ahead and be a composer anyway. Maybe he really doesn't have much 'sense of harmony' in Schoenberg's sense. Certainly he has never taken much interest in chords and chord changes. In the 'Sonatas and Interludes,' the majority of the prepared piano sounds have out-of-tune pitches, vague pitches, or no pitches, and I get the feeling at times that Cage really doesn't care much about harmony. Yet at other times he makes gestures in this direction with real finesse. He clearly hears harmonies, and knows what they mean, when he wants to. Particularly effective for me is the ending of the Second Interlude when, after a variety of pointillistic roulades, some atonal chords, a few rhythmic ostinatos, and some other contrasting materials, the diffuse little piece somehow ties itself together very neatly by arriving at a major chord in the first inversion. The final Sonata XVI, which reminds me a lot of Ives, spends much of its time moving around a major scale and belies a strong understanding of harmonic materials, both traditional and contemporary. If it is true that harmony rarely matters in this music, it is also true that, when it does come into play, it matters in some very attractive and effective ways.

A compositional tool that has interested many contemporary composers, as well as countless Classic and Romantic ones, is the shift between sections that have a clear beat and sections that don't. It can be very disturbing when music that is tripping along in a nice solid tempo suddenly drifts off into some sort of pulseless cadenzalike passage. The bottom seems to fall out. And then, if it goes back to a pulse again, it can seem as though some lovely floating music has suddenly klunked into an annoying motoric motion. Verdi in the last century and Elliott Carter in our own are sometimes cited for the sensitivity with which the heartbeat can leave their music and return again, but when I listened to the 'Sonatas and Interludes' I found myself thinking that Cage might be just as good an example. Sometimes dampened notes predominate, for example, thumping out clear rhythms almost like little bongos, and then the music drifts into fanciful lines, more like wind chimes or cadenzas, so subtly that you hardly notice the

disappearance of the drumming. Some of the pieces move into and out of their meters many times, treading a thin line between two personalities, and changing hats quite skilfully.

'Sonatas and Interludes' also started me wondering again whether Cage's work has anything to do with minimalism. The composer's name is sometimes associated with minimalism, since much of his support, especially in the United States, has come from the same performers and institutions that also support the music of Alvin Lucier or Pauline Oliveros or Terry Riley. I have always maintained that Cage's aesthetic is actually opposed to minimalist values, that he was never content to limit his compositional approach to one mode, one sound color, one rhythm, or one anything. Indeed, he has often suggested that performers present several of his compositions simultaneously, an attitude that might be better described as 'maximalism.' The 'Sonatas and Interludes' too are not nearly restricted enough to qualify as truly minimalist in spirit. Each sonata, each interlude, introduces at least three contrasting themes or textures, and often little sections are inserted that have only vague connections with the rest of the piece. By the time we had come to the end of the complete collection, however, I found that I felt a little the way I do after hearing Meredith Monk's 'Songs from the Hill' or Robert Ashley's 'Perfect Lives (Private Parts)' or Philip Glass's 'Music with Changing Parts.' I had, after all, spent about an hour listening to a rather small collection of percussive timbres. There had been no climaxes and no large dramatic contrasts. The whole hour had remained more or less on one dynamic plane, rather than continually rising and falling, as in traditional piano music. There had been no overt displays of virtuosity. It is a curious piece that makes you think of Domenico Scarlatti on the one hand and Robert Ashley on the other. And I think you would have to admit that the 'Sonatas and Interludes' are masterfully composed, from either point of view.

November 16, 1982

The Canon Master: Conlon Nancarrow at 70

There have been many celebrations of John Cage's 70th birthday this year, but not so many have remembered that there is another important American composer, Conlon Nancarrow, who was also born in the autumn of 1912. Nancarrow's contribution is admittedly more modest. His entire mature output consists of 40-odd studies for player piano, or two player pianos. Nor has his music been readily available. Only one long out-of-print Columbia recording ever attempted to convey his work to the general audience, and almost none of his scores have been published. Spending the last 40 years in relative isolation in Mexico City, he has made few efforts to send his music out, and others have made few efforts to find it. Yet his patient devotion to a largely forgotten instrument has resulted in a body of work that deserves careful attention. Thanks to 1750 Arch Records, three LPs, comprising 25 of his studies, are now available, so it is now possible to obtain a fairly clear impression of Nancarrow's contribution, and the composer is finally attaining recognition. The MacArthur Foundation awarded him one of its $300,000 grants this year, the Cabrillo Festival featured his music this summer, and Newsweek recently devoted a full page to his work.

For a time, Nancarrow, who was born in Texarkana, Arkansas, led the sort of life one might expect a talented young composer with experimental tendencies to lead. He studied in Cincinnatti, went to Boston to work with Walter Piston, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Roger Sessions, and had a few performances of his early compositions. But then, in 1937, he joined the Lincoln Brigade and went to fight in the Spanish revolution. Narrowly escaping the Fascist forces there, he returned to his country in 1939, lived in New York, and wrote a few reviews in the magazine Modern Music. But the next year, at least partly as a result of passport problems and harassment for his political activities, he moved to Mexico. For many years now he has led a quiet life in a comfortable villa outside Mexico City, where most of his composing time is spent perforating holes in player-piano rolls. He is almost completely isolated from other composers, but he keeps in close touch with new music activities here and in Europe through a variety of periodicals. His two upright player pianos are of very good quality, and it is said that when you hear Nancarrow's music in his studio, the sound is extremely loud and energetic.

This is even apparent on the 1750 Arch records, which were recorded in the composer's studio, and which produce a lively sound. This is especially true in the most spectacular segments of Nancarrow's music, where one sometimes hears many different lines moving up and down the keyboard simultaneously at velocities as great as 111 notes per second. The speeds are sometimes so fast, and the textures so dense, that the music becomes quite dizzying. It also becomes quite unpianistic. It is not that the instruments or the recordings have been tampered with, although the composer does use especially hard hammers. The main point is just that the texture goes so far beyond what human pianists could do. Even six or seven pianists, or six or seven pianos, could never equal the sheer density that Nancarrow sometimes gets with his two player pianos, and thus the sounds of his pianos become the sounds of fantasy pianos. Of course, computers and synthesizers can spit out huge numbers of notes too, but they do it so easily that the effect is not at all that impressive. With the player piano, one is still in a world of acoustical sounds, piano keys, and mechanical limitations, and frenetic activity still sounds very frenetic.

In pure compositional terms, perhaps Nancarrow's greatest contribution has been not his invention of new materials, though, so much as his development of a form which has been known ever since 'Sumer is icumen in' in the 13th century, the canon. Nancarrow's canons are often as strict as any by Bach or Schubert or Webern. Every voice states exactly the same notes, though at different times. Working with player-piano rolls, however, one can juxtapose voices with far greater rhythmic exactitude than when working with live performers, sometimes achieving degrees of precision that could not even be notated very clearly. Thus in Study #14, for example, one voice moves at 88 beats a minute, while another voice moves at 110 beats a minute. The faster line starts a little later and ends a little earlier, and presumably it is exactly synchronized with its couterpart at some point in the middle, though the cross-rhythms are so intricate that I never could hear the exact point. In #37, 12 different voices all proceed in independent tempos. In #40b the composer works with tempos whose ratios are e:pi or 2.718:3.142 or.856. In #21 one voice begins very slow and gradually accelerates, while the other does just the reverse, beginning fast, synchronizing briefly with its companion, and ending slow. In #20 there is a canon in which each voice plays only one note, but the intricate cross-rhythms become intricate melodies. Etc. Etc. Nancarrow tried just about every kind of canon imaginable, and the results are a whole catalogue of fascinating new possibilities.

These brief observations only scratch the surface. There is much more about Nancarrow's counterpoint, his polyrhythms, his facility with both tonality and atonality, and his sense of harmony that would have to be said in order to do any justice to the depth of his musical style, and to the 40 years he has spent developing it. Yet for all the composer's depth, his thoughtfulness, and his intellectual discoveries, it is important to add that his work never loses touch with the pure delight of making music. There always seems to be a touch of jazz, a walking bass line, or a vague Gershwin reference somewhere in the background. The music is never stuffy. And when it flexes its intellectual muscles, the goal is never just to show how smart it is, but rather, to create

mathematically perfect ritards, dense 10-voice textures, or some kind of quirky rhythmic dance that is appealing on a purely sensual level.

Because of Nancarrow's self-imposed isolation, the difficulty of finding well-maintained player pianos or transporting those of the composer, the lack of any mature chamber or orchestral scores, and the fact that he has received little support from musicians and critics in his own generation, Nancarrow's music has taken a long time to attain recognition. But now, thanks to younger people such as Charles Amirkhanian, who produced these recordings, James Tenney, who provided detailed liner notes, and Peter Garland, who devoted a whole issue of Soundings to Nancarrow in 1977, his work is becoming better known, and it is getting its message across. If you haven't done so, make a little room on your record shelf for the player-piano man, the individualistic expatriate, the brilliant musician, the indefatigable experimenter, the canon master Conlon Nancarrow.

Note:
At this point I was still able to write with energy and enthusiasm about Jackson Mac Low or Conlon Nancarrow, but I was generally growing weary of New York, and of my job with the Voice. I turned in one more column devoted to the Minnesota Composers Forum, and then left for Europe once more, this time for an extended period. I sent back a column on Hans Otte, another on Luc Ferrari, and a more general article on European music, and then took a six month leave of absence, during which time I had a DAAD grant in Berlin, did concerts in many other cities, and spent most of my time learning German. In May I resigned from the Voice definitively, as I explain in the 'Farewell Article' which ended my journalistic career.

December 14, 1982
Piano Man: Hans Otte

The memory of the Mauricio Kagel program and the premiere of the John Cage work for five orchestras, which I heard at the Metz Festival last fall, are still vivid in my mind, so I returned to the small French city, hoping to find similar rewards in the 11th 'Rencontres internationales de musique contemporaine' this year. Again about 10 concerts were packed into four days, again the halls were full of new music professionals and fans from all around France and West Germany, and again I missed about half the activity. But again I came away with an experience that I know will be with me for a long time. This time it was a solo piano recital by the West German composer Hans Otte.

Otte, a man in his mid-fifties, was a student of Hindemith and Gieseking. He gained recognition early in his career, both as a composer and as a pianist, but in 1959 he took on the job as head of the music department of Radio Bremen, and today he seems better known for his executive position than for his artistic work. If that is partly because he simply has not had time to concentrate on his composing career, it is no doubt also because his creative work has ranged widely from more conventional atonal pieces to semi-minimal pieces to sound/light environments and video productions, making it difficult for listeners to label him. People who have been around for a while have a way of becoming pigeonholed and ignored, and that seems to be even more true in Europe than in America. Thus I noticed that some of the people who had been enthusiastically attending other festival concerts didn't bother to show up for Otte's recital. Not knowing what I was supposed to think, and having an aversion to pigeonholes anyway, I was able to hear what was probably the most thoughtful, best performed, and most inspiring concert of the festival.

'Das Buch der Klange (The Book of Sounds)' is a set of 12 pieces lasting, in this performance, about an hour and 20 minutes. The work could be considered minimalist in style, as each piece is written in a rather simple consistent texture, without climaxes or development in the traditional sense. There is little exact repetition, however, and much concentration on harmony. There is also a healthy respect for tradition. As the textures shift gradually from one set of notes to another, the music sometimes sounds closer to Chopin than to Steve Reich. While American minimalists have seen themselves as innovators and have tried to avoid references to the past, Otte is a synthesist, bringing together old ideas and new ones, and doing so most intelligently and sensitively.

Otte began 'The Book of Sounds' in 1979, and didn't complete it until this year, and it's obvious that he mulled it over for a long time. Playing largely from memory, the composer was always serene, consistent, assured. It sounded as though he had been playing these pieces for years, and of course, he had. The music too seemed serene, sure of itself, sure of what it was saying. I had the feeling in all the details, in the slight contrasts in dynamics, in the little shifts of harmony, in the placement of contrasting elements, that the composer had tried many alternatives before making final choices.

The composition is dedicated to 'all those who want to draw close to sound, so that, in the search for the sound of sound, for the secret of life, one's own resonance is discovered.' My English translation is admittedly awkward, but the sentiment is appropriate. The piece does explore sound possibilities on a relatively deep level, and in listening I felt I was making contact with sound in a way I never quite had before.

It was not that the composer was exploring new piano colors. Almost all the music takes place in the upper-middle part of the keyboard, and the textures too are relatively conventional. Four of the pieces (3, 4, 8, 12) are really just sequences of chords, three (2, 7, 9) follow simple arpeggio patterns, four (1, 5, 10, 11) rock back and forth between two sonorities, and one (6) is merely a melody that could be played with one finger. Yet there is something fresh about all the music. This has something to do with unusual harmonic and formal activity in individual pieces, but also with interrelationships between movements. Often, as the composer began a new section, I had the feeling I was reentering the tempo, the register, or the harmonic world of one of the earlier pieces. I dont think 'The Book of Sounds' is very rigidly structured, but there are enough connections between the movements that each one seems to inform the others.

Particular events within individual pieces are sometimes quite unusual and effective. The rather brisk tempo of the first movement is strangely interrupted by sections that are suddenly slow, for example. The second piece interrupts itself toward the end with a little cadenza such as one sometimes finds in Bach preludes, but would never expect in this context. In the fifth piece occasional accents are superimposed on an otherwise soft texture. The white-note harmonies of the eighth piece turn strangely chromatic from time to time. The rippling of the 10th piece is broken abruptly at one point with the insertion of six slow chords. The 12th piece takes place in the upper register except that four soft bass notes intrude, as if from another world.

I could not help remembering how, in the early '70s, it sometimes seemed that the old-fashioned acoustic piano was pretty well finished. After years of playing the poor instrument with mallets and bottles, amplifying it with all sorts of microphones, and tearing it apart in destroy-the-instrument pieces, it was difficult to take that old Chopin sound seriously anymore. I think that was true in

popular music too, where electric keyboards almost completely took over the role of the concert grand. Now, however, one again hears acoustic pianos with some regularity, even on AM radio, and in the experimental fields, it seems to me that the solo piano has fared quite well. Two of my very favorite pieces of recent years are Frederic Rzewski's 'The People United' and William Duckworth's 'Time Curve Preludes,' both major works for piano solo, and now I am adding Otte's 'Book of Sounds' to this little list. There are many other lively categories today, such as computer music, orchestral works, opera, string quartets, sound sculpture, and solo voice, but I can't think of three recent major works in one of those mediums that have appealed to me as much as these three for solo piano. Chopin's instrument is alive and well, and as fresh and creative as ever, and so is Hans Otte.

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December 28, 1982

Ruffling Feathers: Luc Ferrari

Luc Ferrari is a name I have been hearing for a long time, but I had no very clear idea of the man and the music that go with it until I got to spend some time in Paris. The congenial 53-year-old composer is perhaps best known as an innovator, and his works have ruffled quite a few feathers over the years. What impresses me most, however, is that he has worked well in so many different genres. There is some consistency in his style. He is always concerned with social questions, likes to get along without a lot of musical traditions and theories, and is constantly moving on to some new challenge. Yet the pieces themselves can end up sounding extremely different, depending on the forms and mediums that happen to interest him at the moment.

One area that has attracted Ferrari off and on throughout his career, and to which he has made a considerable contribution, is musique concrete. The term dates back to the '50s, when Pierre Schaeffer, Ferrari, and other members of the Groupe de Recherche Musicale first advocated making tape music by manipulating recordings of natural sounds, rather than using electronically generated sounds. The genre is sometimes considered dated today, now that the composers offer so many more sophisticated ways of putting sounds on recording tape. At the same time, however, the principle of musique concrete is so vast that I suspect people will continue finding fresh ways of making it for a long time, at least if they're as creative as Luc Ferrari.

Ferrari's approach to musique concrete, as to other genres, is particularly open and unencumbered by ideology. In 1959 he wrote (my translation): 'It is important to understand that sound objects don't always produce what you expect them to produce, and that the microphone can pick up the most unexpected things. Sometimes you get confused and just keep starting over until you get something interesting, later excusing yourself with the explanation that what you ended up with must have been just what you unconsciously wanted in the first place.' This flexibility says much about Ferrari's basic artistic temperament and may help to explain his 'Promenade symphonique a travers un paysage musical,' which he made 20 years later and which I heard on a G.R.M. disc. Here the material was recorded in Algeria, and there was no actual distortion of the sounds. It's almost as if the piece was the soundtrack for a scene in a small desert town. At first it didn't seem to me as if much was happening compositionally, but gradually I realized I was actually hearing a whole lot of scene and cast changes. It was just that the composer had blended separate takes so seamlessly that everything flowed together. It is an extraordinary mixing job, and I found the piece fascinating. The composer told me, however, that it had offended a number of people for whom the term musique concrete was not supposed to include tape pieces of this sort.

Ferrari is perhaps most widely known for some of the radical pieces he did in the late '60s. One of these, 'Tautologos III,' is among the most open-ended scores I know. The instructions state that the piece may be done by seven or more players, that it may be performed in a concert hall, another kind of hall, or in a public space; that the performers may be either separated from the spectators or intermingled with them; that the words or gestures may be used in place of musical themes; and that the performance may go on as long as the players wish. About the only restriction is that each performer is supposed to repeat more or less the same thing at intervals during the performance. The piece has been done most often in workshop situations, where it enables performers to explore some improvisational techniques. But it has also been presented in public concerts, sometimes with remarkable results.

'There was a performance in Stockholm around 1973 or '74,' Ferrari recalled, 'where the audience got more and more involved as the piece went on. At the end, and quite spontaneously, some spectators were actually taping the musicians into their chairs with scotch tape.' 'Were you offended?' I asked him.

'Not really. The people were involved in the piece, and they were enjoying it. I saw it as an offering of joy.' Apparently others saw it as a scandal.

In another departure, Ferrari worked for a time with a jazz quartet, creating a piece that was later released on an album called 'Folklore Imaginari.' Here the sax, guitar, piano, and drums all improvise in a fairly conventional way, and on the surface the piece sounds like real jazz. But beneath that, a classically trained composer can also be heard. This is not only due to the prerecorded tape, which introduces interludes of nature sounds, but also to the way Ferrari controlled the harmonies and textures. It seems that the piece was quite successful with the public when it was premiered at one of the more prestigious festivals of contemporary classical music. That may help to explain why it was upsetting to many of the intellectuals, who expected something more post-Webern in style.

Curious about where Ferrari would go next, I asked him about his current projects, and, sure enough, he's changing again. He explained that he had been working on relatively abstract pieces most of the time during recent years and that he wanted to do some more theatrical things, with text. He proceeded to describe two current projects, each of which is conceived as a full-evening work. One, to be premiered in Paris in March, is his 'Journal Intime,' scored for two actors and piano and utilizing a personal text about the composer's daily life.

Ferrari suggested that the piece had to do with sex roles and that it might be offensive to some.

‘You mean feminists?’ I guessed.

‘Certainly them, but probably male chauvinists too,’ he replied quizzically.

The other work in progress calls for 15 musicians, featuring Ferrari himself as narrator, and the subject matter is largely erotic. ‘It’s for adults only,’ commented the composer with a twinkle in his eye.

I forgot to ask him who might be offended this time, but there will no doubt be somebody. At the same time, there will no doubt be others who perceive that the composer is making a point and making it well.

August 23, 1983
A Farewell Article

When I turned in my resignation to the Voice in May, my editor, Bob Christgau, was typically understanding and supportive. But he did make one final request. He asked that I write a farewell article, sort of explaining my experience with the Voice, and the events leading up to this decision. Partly he didn't want anyone to think that I had been eased out of the paper, and partly he just figured that such an article would be of interest to many readers of the Voice music page, where I had been contributing for 11 years. It seemed like a reasonable request, and I said sure, fine. But four weeks and five starts later, the assignment seemed like the hardest I've ever taken. Somehow it's a lot easier to write about other people than to write about yourself.

The problem, as with most autobiographical articles, is that everything is so close to home, and it's easy to get carried away. Everything I wrote seemed to come out as regrets or boasts or fond farewells or thank-you notes or confessions - the kind of personal drivel that you don't like to ask someone else to read, no matter how sincere the feelings may be. I was really struck until it occurred to me that I should just do what I always tried to do in the Voice. Write honestly in the first person. But emphasize the description of what happened. Keep the interpretations secondary. And try to leave the evaluations up to the reader. Before I knew it, I had an introduction explaining how hard it was to get started on the article, and was launching into a little personal history in a tone that seemed appropriate.

I first got involved with the Voice late in 1971. I'd run across a most engaging concert by a young unknown composer named Phil Glass, and an extremely stimulating one by Stuart Dempster, an experimental trombonist no one seemed to know about, and I'd noticed that no paper in town was reporting on any of this kind of new music. I'd had some journalistic experience with Musical America back in 1962-63, and I needed money. The logical thing was to approach the Voice. I simply complimented the editor on what a fine job the paper was doing with experimental dance and film and theater, and pointed out that they needed someone like me to fill in the musical side of the picture. They wanted a sample article, and after they read it, the woman who was to become my editor, Diane Fisher, said okay. But she also suggested politely that I get the cobwebs out of my head and try to write more clearly, sort of the way Deborah Jowitt does. The suggestion helped me a lot, and I think it is still good advice for anyone who wants to be a critic.

Before long I was turning in articles Monday afternoon, and they were appearing, always improved slightly, but never really cut or changed, every Wednesday morning. As I started exploring the musical scene more carefully, I found that an interesting little series was going on at a new place called the Kitchen, and that lots of unknown musicians around lower Manhattan were doing some very strange music, but often doing it very intelligently. My articles began to stimulate response from the musical community, and general readers seemed to appreciate knowing what was going on too. No one realized at the time that one of the most significant genres of serious music of the century was developing, a genre that was to become known as American minimalism, and which would find imitators all over the world in the course of the next few years. But it was already obvious that downtown musicians were going through some kind of unusually creative period, and somehow The Village Voice and I were an important part of what was happening. Nicolas Slonimsky, in the Baker's Biographical Dictionary, later accused me of being a crusader, and I guess I did turn in an awful lot of rave reviews during that period. It was hard to remember to look for flaws when the general thrust of what was going on was so new and so positive.

My editor, along with a lot of other good people, was a victim of the changes that took place when New York magazine bought the paper in 1974, but fortunately, I was not. In fact, I benefited from the change in several ways. My salary went up to something like $90 an article. My columns began to appear on single readable pages, sometimes even carrying photographs. And most important, I was now assigned to work with Robert Christgau. At first I didn't like having to go in for editorial meetings every week, and the work itself became more demanding too. Standards of stylistic smoothess went up a lot, and since my editor had both a keen eye for specious reasoning and had a deep love for rock and roll, I now had to justify my opinions much more intelligently. But the advantages of the new situation were obvious, and the aesthetic arguments Bob and I would get into were among the most stimulating I found anywhere. I soon began looking forward to those weekly sessions. We continued a most fruitful working relationship, one which I'll now miss a lot.

By the mid-'70s I found that I'd already written three or four articles each about people like Phill Niblock, Charlemagne Palestine, Steve Reich, Philip Corner, Meredith Monk, Frederic Rzewski, and La Monte Young. It was getting hard to find new things to say about these composers, and boring to write articles that just repeated the same impressions I'd described before. Besides, the Times, thanks to John Rockwell, was now covering the weekly experimental scene more thoroughly than we could, and journalistically it seemed to make more sense to give space to a more truly neglected genre, non-Western music. This was not my specialty, and I'm sure I made a lot of ethnomusicological errors when I wrote about bansuri flutists, kotoists, vina players, oud players, mbira players, American Indian singers, griot singers, Chinatown ensembles, and so on. But at

least these people, some of whom are superb musicians, were obtaining some recognition from the white majority press. And I got a lot of satisfaction from the thought that my articles could help listeners to find this music, and the musicians to find more outlets.

I had been active as a composer all this time too, and in general I found the two professions compatible. There were times when people wouldn't even consider performing my music, because they felt it was more important to have me come and write an article about their concerts, and that used to really irk me sometimes. But there were also occasions when people would get interested in my music because they liked my critical perspective. The situation was neither particularly advantageous nor disadvantageous careerwise, but hearing concerts and meeting musicians was of interest for me in both respects, and by carefully avoiding even the most subtle sorts of tit-for-tat agreements, conflict-of-interest questions never arose.

An important shift took place in my composing career, however, when I made my first European tour late in 1979. These 10 concerts led to some new contacts and some invitations to return to Europe later, and the trip also changed my perspective as a critic. Before that I had more or less thought, as did most of my colleagues in New York, that the only good experimental music was American experimental music. But after getting to know the scene in Europe a little bit firsthand, I knew that this just wasn't true.

It took me a while to digest this information. It was not until some months later that I wrote the first of several articles decrying our obsession with American music and arguing that a more international perspective would be more sensible. Working in New York, however, it was a little hard to develop this new critical concern, as there were really no performances of experimental European music to write about.

I thought I had a solution in 1981. Several opportunities had come together for me in Europe as a composer, and I wanted to go there for a period of six months, so I suggested to Bob that I send in my articles - which had become bi-weekly in 1980 to allow me more time to compose - from Paris. I was delighted when he said yes. Once again I felt I had a sort of mission as a critic. Six months and a dozen articles later, though, I was not so enthusiastic. I don't think there was one letter of reader response during that whole period, and when I got back, I found that even a few of my friends, who were always interested when I wrote about New York, seemed to have hardly read what I wrote about Europe.

A year later, when I wanted to go to Europe for another long stint, I was not very excited about taking up space in the paper with articles that didn't seem to have much reader appeal, and my editor was not very excited about depending on the foreign mails, and making do without editorial conferences, so we agreed that this time I should just take a leave of absence.

At the end of these past six months, several things seemed clear. (1) It was going to take a long time to develop my listen-to-Europe theme with any noticeable effect, and I wasn't sure I had either a good method for delivering this message or the patience to hammer away as long as it might take. (2) Sooner or later Americans were bound to find out about Zoltan Jeney, Arvo Part, Wolfgang Rihm, Louis Andriessen, and others anyway. (3) I was kind of burned out on most of the subjects that had seemed important earlier. (4) I had watched what can happen to people when they keep regular jobs mostly just for the sake of keeping regular jobs, and I didn't want that, money or not. (5) Eleven years had been long enough.

Or we could give a simple geographical explanation: (1) I was finding it more useful professionally, more stimulating musically, and more pleasant personally to spend most of my time in Europe. (2) The Voice is basically a New York paper and can't really justify having a regular European music correspondent. (3) Ergo, it was better for us to part ways.

That doesn't mean I'll be in Europe the rest of my life, and I'll be making regular trips to the States anyway, for all sorts of personal and professional reasons. I may even write an occasional article for The Village Voice, if I run across a good story and find that I can't completely break my old habit. But I'm off the masthead.

So far I've been pretty good about just describing what happened. But as in many of my columns, I'm finding it hard to stop without a little evaluation, and there's one value judgment I especially want to make, because I think both readers and staff sometimes tend to forget it.

The Voice is a great paper.

I still don't know of any other newspaper or magazine where writers like me, who have trouble toeing the line and keep going off into special styles and offbeat concerns, can not only survive, but can even find support and encouragement. The Voice is one place where the freedom of the press is not just a corporate freedom, but a freedom that extends all the way down to individual writers. The paper has been wonderful to me, often supporting me emotionally as well as financially. We've been together for a long time, and it's hard to part with her. But she has a strong personality, which seems to have survived quite well

through all sorts of editors and mergers and policy changes, and I have faith that, with just a little understanding and care from us, she will outlive us all.

With that, my space is running out, and it's time to say good-bye to the paper, and to some others. So long Bob. So long Leighton and Greg. So long Rob and Marilyn and M. and Jon and Fred. And so long faithful reader.

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Music Columns in the Voice

1971
Nov. 25 AMM Music: Cornelius Cardew's Improvising Quartet

Dec. 9 Steve Reich's 'Drumming' at Museum of Modern Art

Dec. 16 Critics Choice Artists at Carnegie Recital Hall

Dec. 23 Group for Contemporary Music Presents Peter Maxwell Davies and Others

1972
Jan. 13 Christian Wolff's 'Burdocks'

Jan. 20 Organ Concert by William Albright; Piano Concert by Carles Santos and Philip Corner

Jan. 27 William Komaiko and Bruce Hobson on the Composer Forum

Feb. 3 Meredith Monk

Feb. 10 Lou Harrison's 'Young Caesar'

Feb. 17 Improvisation Concert with Frederic Rzewski, Jeffrey Levine, Garrett List, and Gordon Mumma; Oregon Concert

March 2 Stefan Wolpe Retrospective; Sonic Arts Union

March 9 Graphic Music at the Kitchen, Jim Fulkerson, Rhys Chatham, Brian Fennelly

March 16 Lukas Foss's 'Geod' and Other Works on an 'American Marathon'

March 23 Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, New and Newer Music, and Speculum Musicae

March 30 Alvin and Mary Lucier, and Stuart Marshall; William Hellermann

April 6 Philip Glass's 'Changing Parts', 'Music in 12 Parts'

April 13 Frederic Rzewski's 'Coming Together' ; Petr Kotik's 'There Is Singularly Nothing'

April 20 George Crumb, Joel Thome, Gavin Bryars, George Brecht April 27 Ronald Roxbury and Marc Antonio Consoli on the Composers Forum

May 4 Quog Music Theatre Group; Jim Burton

May 11 Composers Theatre May Festival 'Electronic Gala'

May 18 New Works by Carman Moore, Philip Corner, Michael Sahl, Kirk Nurock

May 25 Steel Cellos by Central Maine Power, and a 'Gallery of Music in Our Time'

June 1 Charlie Morrow's 'Spirit Voices' ; Gregory Reeve

June 8 Phill Niblock's Tape Music

June 15 Pierre Ruiz; SEM Ensemble

June 22 Sonic Arts Union; Jim Burton

June 29 A Sonic Arts Union LP

July 6 Lucia Dlugoszewski; Charlotte Moorman

July 13 All-Cage Concert at the New School

July 27 An Imaginary Concert

Aug. 10 Bach and Mozart at Philharmonic Hall

Aug. 17 One-Note Music: Rhys Chatham

Aug. 24 Richard Peaslee's 'Of Love and War' at the Lenox Arts Center

Sep. 7 Static Music: The New York Hypnotic School

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Sep. 14 Sam Rivers and 30 Others in Central Park

Sep. 21 Calvin Hampton Organ Recital

Sep. 28 Yeh Yu Chinese Opera Association Presents 'The Beautiful Bait in Three Kingdoms'

Oct. 5 Pandit Pran Nath; Marilyn Wood with Jon Gibson and Philip Corner

Oct. 12 After Dinner Opera: Five Operas with Gertrude Stein Texts

Oct. 19 Group Concert Opens the Season at the Kitchen; Al Carmines' 'Life of a Man'

Oct. 26 Jim Burton's 'Six Solos'

Nov. 2 Frederic Rzewski Recital

Nov. 9 The Western Wind Premieres Works by William Bolcom and Charlie Morrow

Nov. 16 Speculum Musicae and the Harlem Philharmonic Orcestra

Nov. 23 Philip Glass Concert; Thorn Music Fund Benefit Concert; Gil Trythall and Judith Scott at the Kitchen

Nov. 30 Joel Chadabe; Garrett List

Dec. 7 Christopher Tree; Michael Snow

Dec. 14 Victor Grauer

Dec. 21 Charles Dodge, Robert Helps, and Others

Dec. 28 'Elektrokaleidoscope' by the Aeolian Chamber Players; Charlie Morrow and Richard Schechner at the Kitchen

1973
Jan. 4 Toward a Music For the Planet Earth

Jan. 11 David Borden; Sergio Cervetti

Jan. 18 Meredith Monk; Natural Sound Workshop; Alvin Curran; Brecht Operas and Songs at Brooklyn Academy

Jan. 25 The John Cage Retrospective; Composers Theatre Concert; Laura Greenberg

Feb. 1 David Behrman and Katherine Morton; Charles Ives and Charles Morrow

Feb. 8 The Participation Project

Feb. 15 Roger Sessions Retrospective

Feb. 22 Morton Feldman and Others

March 1 Light Fantastic Players Perform Chou Wen-Chung and Others; Preston Trombly and David Saperstein on the Composers Forum

March 8 Phill Niblock's 'Ten 100-Inch Radii'

March 15 Alvin Lucier; Charlemagne Palestine

March 22 Da Capo Players; Jan Coward; Zaj; Pauline Oliveros

March 29 Eliane Radigue's 'Psi 847'

April 5 Post-Webern Trios; Roger Hannay's Multi-Media

April 12 Terry Riley; Richard Trythall and Eric Richards on the Composers Forum

April 19 Edgard Varese Retrospective; Gregory Reeve

April 26 'Classics of Computer Music' at the Kitchen

May 3 The Ensemble at Alice Tully Hall; Terry Riley's 'In C' at Washington Square Methodist Church
May 10 Lukas Foss's 'Map'

May 17 Expressionistic String Quartets; Columbia/Princeton Electronic Studio Works; Composers Theatre May Festival

May 24 Steve Reich; Emmanuel Ghent and Sergio Cervetti

May 31 Asian Music at the New and Newer Music Series; Brass Music at the Composers Theatre

June 7 Three Days of the Sonic Arts Union; Rhys Chatham's 'Two Gongs'

June 14 Jerome Rothenberg and Charlie Morrow; Jesse Miller

June 21 Field Recordings From New Guinea; Meredith Monk; Yoshi Wada

June 28 Max Neuhaus's 'Sound Discoverable'

July 5 Roger Nelson; Philip Glass; Garrett List

July 12 Ilhan Mimaroglu's Music for Dubuffet's 'Coucou Bazar'

July 26 A La Monte Young Diary: 1968-73; David Tudor's Music for Merce Cunningham's 'Rainforest'

Aug. 16 Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music

Aug. 23 Street Musicians: Lloyd McNeill and Alan Gittler

Aug. 30 American Vocal Music Sung by The Singing Master's Assistants; Soundings, a Music Magazine

Sep. 6 Music in Wall Street Churches

Sep. 13 Do-It-Yourself Records, Part One; Stephen Sondheim's 'A Little Night Music'

Sep. 20 Do-It-Yourself Records, Part Two; Open Letter to an Anonymous Young Singer

Sep. 27 Philip Corner and Carman Moore in the Summergarden of MOMA
Oct. 11 All-Night Indonesian Wayang at Wesleyan University

Oct. 18 Lighting 'The Damnation of Faust' ; Suzuki Violin Students

Oct. 25 Buddhist Chanting; Persian Folk Music; Peter Maxwell- Davies' 'Eight Songs for a Mad King'

Nov. 1 Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod; Marie-Françoise Bucquet

Nov. 8 Light Fantastic Players; Da Capo Chamber Players

Nov. 15 Annea Lockwood; Musica Elettronica Viva Improvisations

Nov. 22 An All-Lou Harrison Percussion Concert

Nov. 29 Contemporary Music Orchestra of Paris; Judith Alstadter Plays Faure

Dec. 6 A Cancelled Avant-Garde Festival; William Schimmel and Kirk Nurock

Dec. 13 The First Musical Event in the Kitchen's New Broome Street Space: 'Speech,' 'Bird-Cage,' and Other Works by John Cage

Dec. 20 Jon Gibson's 'Visitations' ; Charles Wuorinen's 'Grand Bamboula'

Dec. 27 Gunther Schuller

1974
Jan. 3 Happy New Year Article on the Increase in New Music Activity in New York

Jan. 10 Bach Cantata at Holy Trinity Church; Garrett List at St. John the Divine

Jan. 17 'Collage' at the Composers Showcase; 'Biome' at the WBAI Free Music Store

Jan. 24 'Tibetan Jam' at Washington Square Methodist; Yoshi Wada's Pipe Horns at the Kitchen

Jan. 31 Charlemagne Palestine

Feb. 7 Dorian Quintet; Frederic Rzewski's 'Struggle' ; Sahan Arzruni Plays Contemporary Chinese Music

Feb. 14 Ben Franklin's String Quartet; Paul Demarinis's 'Pygmy Gamelan' ; David Cope and Christopher Johnson Yavelow on the Composers Forum

Feb. 28 Quog Presents 'Lazarus' ; Ronald Roxbury's Graphic Music

March 7 Aaron Copland Retrospective; Charles Ives Program; Joe Celli

March 14 Eliane Radigue; Philip Glass

March 21 Carla Bley; Carole Weber; New England Contemporary Ensemble

March 28 Composers Theatre; 'Notes From Underground' ; Jon Deak

April 4 Annea Lockwood's 'River Archives' ; Alan Sondheim and Kathy Acker

April 11 Robert Ashley's 'Your Move I Think'

April 18 Light Fantastic Players; Center of Creative and Performing Arts at Buffalo Presents Morton Feldman's 'For Frank O'Hara' and Other Works

April 25 Liz Phillips; Suzanne Ciani; a Satie Retrospective; Pierre Ruiz; Phill Niblock's String Quartet

May 2 Lukas Foss Presents Penderecki and Other Polish Composers

May 9 Jon Hassel's 'Solid State' ; David Cope's 'Arena'

May 16 All-Schoenberg Concert

May 23 Max Neuhaus's 'Water Whistle' ; Iain Hamilton's 'Voyage'

May 30 Philip Corner and Others at the Kitchen; New Wilderness Preservation Band
June 6 Christian Wolff's 'Exercises'

June 13 The Final Four-Hour Version of Philip Glass's Music in 12 Parts

June 20 Emmanuel Ghent and Electronic Caricatures
July 11 On Prepared Concerts and Unprepared Concerts

July 25 A La Monte Young Diary: July 1973-April 1974

Aug. 1 A La Monte Young Diary: April 1974; Music at the American Dance Festival

Aug. 8 Anthony Newman

Aug. 15 Ideas vs. Sounds

Aug. 22 Brass Music in Washington Square Park

Aug. 29 Karl Richter; Johannes Somary

Sep. 5 Two Park Concerts

Sep. 12 Douglas Moore's 'Ballad of Baby Doe'

Sep. 19 Comic Operas by Bill Russo

Sep. 26 Scratch Music and Nature Study Notes

Oct. 10 John Watts

Oct. 17 Burton Beerman and John Selleck on the Composers Forum; Annea Lockwood's 'Tripping'

Oct. 24 Mauricio Kagel Performs Theatre Pieces in Carnegie Recital Hall

Oct. 31 Male Soprano with Wings

Nov. 7 Ross Lee Finney and Others

Nov. 14 Richard Landry

Nov. 21 Avant-Garde Festival at Shea Stadium

Dec. 2 New York Premieres of Olivier Messiaen's 'La Fauvette des Jardins' and 'From the Canyons to the Stars'

Dec. 9 Philip Corner's Bell

Dec. 16 Jay Clayton; Da Capo Chamber Players

Dec. 23 Jim Burton

Dec. 30 David Behrman

1975
Jan. 6 Alvin Curran

Jan. 13 Decentralization of the American Avant-Garde

Jan. 20 'Buxom Joan,' a 1778 American Opera by Raynor Taylor

Jan. 27 Joan La Barbara

Feb. 3 John Cage's 'Atlas Australis'

Feb. 10 WBAI Free Music Store: Works by Kurt Schwitters, Lukas Foss, Harley Gaber, Pauline Oliveros

Feb. 17 Cornelius Cardew

Feb. 24 Robert Ashley Accompanies the Cunningham Company

March 3 Performers' Committee Presents Ruth Crawford Seeger Retrospective

March 10 The Art of The Short Piece: Jon Gibson, Dickie Landry, Meredith Monk, Philip Glass, Charlemagne Palestine, Steve Reich

March 24 SEM Ensemble Performs Morton Feldman's 'Instruments'

March 31 Charlie Morrow's 'The Number Six'

April 7 Toru Takemitsu

April 14 Spanish RTV Symphony Orchestra; Japanese Contemporary Music on the Meet the Moderns Series

April 21 Political Music: The Musician's Action Collective
April 28 Jackson Mac Low

May 5 Laurie Spiegel; Suzanne Ciani

May 12 Dorothy Carter

May 19 Tangerine Dream; Soft Machine; Philip Glass

May 26 Jon Gibson

June 2 Richard Teitelbaum's 'Threshold'

June 9 Steve Reich's 'Music for 18 Musicians'

June 16 Stuart Dempster Plays Didjeridu

June 23 Sun Ra

June 30 Cecil Taylor

July 21 'A Slick Scheme' for Concert Promotion

Aug. 4 Michael Nyman's Book: Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond

Aug. 18 Music for Cello and Piano

Aug. 25 Sound Poetry by A.F.C. and Henry Rasof

Sep. 8 Strange Bedfellows: Musicians and Dancers

Sep. 22 Marga Richter

Oct. 6 Gregg Smith Singers at Alice Tully Hall

Oct. 13 Five New York Old-Music Groups

Oct. 20 John Cage's 'Empty Words'

Oct. 27 Andrew Frank; Charles Amirkhanian; Charles Madden

Nov. 3 Religious Music: Donald Swann, Allaudin Mathieu
Nov. 10 Ursula Oppens; Frank Zappa's Mothers Lack Invention

Nov. 17 Japanese Music: Ryohei Hirose, Ichiro Higo, Hikaru Hayashi, Michio Kitazume

Nov. 24 William Hellermann

Dec. 1 Moscow State Symphony

Dec. 8 Meyer Kupferman

Dec. 15 Maryanne Amacher

Dec. 22 The Center of the Creative and Performing Arts Presents Nora Post, Peter Joseph Salemi, Garrett List, Luc Ferrari

Dec. 29 Connie Beckley

1976
Jan. 5 The Years of Innovation Pass On: Part One

Jan. 12 The Years of Innovation Pass On: Part Two

Jan. 19 Arthur Weisberg and the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble

Jan. 26 A Rehearsal of 'Einstein on the Beach' ; The 'Improvising' of Annea Lockwood and Others

Feb. 2 J. Lesley Varner and Other Tubists

Feb. 9 How to Perform John Cage: Dennis Russell Davies and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra

Feb. 16 Tashi Plays Messiaen

Feb. 23 Kirk Nurock

March 1 Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, and Walter Piston

March 8 Ivan Tcherepnin

March 15 Charles Ives's 'Unanswered Question'

March 22 Phill Niblock and Others

March 29 American Indian Music

April 5 Lukas Foss

April 12 Milton Babbitt

April 19 Black Earth Percussion Ensemble; Music for Homemade Instruments

April 26 Flawed Presentations

May 3 Meredith Monk

May 10 Steve Reich's 'Music for 18 Musicians'

May 17 Son of Lion Gamelan Ensemble

May 24 Philip Corner and Pauline Oliveros

May 31 Antonio Zepada; Jon Deak

June 7 Four Interpretations of Christian Wolff's 'Burdocks'

June 21 About 'Serious' Music

July 5 An 'American Sampler' Disc for the Bicentennial

July 19 Christian Wolff's 'Wobbly Music'

Aug. 2 Gavin Bryars's 'Jesus' Blood' and 'The Sinking of the Titanic'

Aug. 16 Traditional Polkas

Sep. 6 The Small Town Band

Sep. 13 Sound Sculpture

Sep. 20 The Paul Winter Consort Plays Charles Ives
Sep. 27 William Walton is 75

Oct. 4 William Hellermann, Harley Gaber, Richard Kostelanetz

Oct. 11 John Cage's 'Renga with Apartment House 1776' in Boston

Oct. 18 Judging Musical Quality

Oct. 25 Julius Eastman; Daniel Goode

Nov. 1 Pierre Boulez Conducts Mahler's Seventh Symphony

Nov. 8 New Wilderness Concert: A Cross-Cultural Improvisation

Nov. 15 Meredith Monk; Waverly Consort; Peter Lewis; The Fires of London

Nov. 22 Frederic Rzewski's 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated'

Nov. 29 Techniques of Film Scoring

Dec. 6 Max Neuhaus

Dec. 13 About 'Great' Music

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Dec. 20 A Balkan Arts Center Concert

Dec. 27 Michael Galasso; Guy Klucevsek

1977

Jan. 3 Summary of New Music in 1976

Jan. 10 Virgil Thomson

Jan. 17 Peter Schickele

Jan. 24 David Tudor's 'Pulsers'

Jan. 31 Da Capo Chamber Players and Judith Raskin Present Miriam Gideon and Robert Helps

Feb. 7 Yoko Ono's 'Grapefruit'

Feb. 14 Georgy Ligeti

Feb. 21 Dennis Russell Davies Conducts the American Composers Orchestra: Yehudi Wyner, Lou Harrison, Wallingford Riegger, and Charles Dodge; New Music For Everyone: Scores for Amateur Musicians

Feb. 28 Laurie Anderson's Jukebox

March 7 Alvin Curran; Ingram Marshall; David Mahler; Warren Burt

March 21 Arthur Weisberg Makes New Music Accessible

March 28 Takehisa Kosugi's 'Anima 7' Performed by Yasunao Tone

April 4 Pierre Ruiz; Beth Anderson

April 11 Chopin Staged by Robert Guralnik; Chamber Music Staged by Martin Fried

April 18 Charlemagne Palestine

April 25 Robert Ashley's 'Music with Roots in the Aether'

May 2 David Reck's Book Music of the Whole Earth; The Tudor Consort

May 9 Phill Niblock's Loft: Malcolm Goldstein

May 16 Lukas Foss; Kirk Nurock; Philip Glass; Brazilian Carnaval Music; Miles Anderson

May 23 Gordon Mumma and Alvin Lucier

May 30 Joel Chadabe's 'Settings for Spirituals'
June 6 Talking Music: David Antin, Lucio Pozzi, Robert Ashley

June 13 What is Minimalism?

June 20 Maryanne Amacher; Skip La Plante and Carole Weber; Ed Friedman; Bob Sheff

June 27 Balkan Arts Center Folk Music Event

July 4 Dennis Russell Davies Conducts Colin McPhee, Samuel Barber, Alberto Ginastera, and Haydn

July 11 Bach in an 'Open Sing'

July 25 Ralph Samuelson Plays Shakuhachi

Aug. 8 Recordings: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Henry Cowell, Jon Gibson, Reese Williams, Ilhan Mimaroglu, Yehudi Wyner, Christian Wolff, Jeanne Lee

Aug. 22 Another 'Slick Scheme' for Promoting New Music

Sep. 5 A Drum and Bugle Corps Contest

Sep. 19 The Grand Kabuki of Japan

Sep. 26 Tihuantinsuyo: Music from the Andes

Oct. 3 A Dragon Dance in Chinatown

Oct. 10 Pauline Oliveros

Oct. 17 Thea Musgrave's 'The Voice of Ariadne'

Oct. 24 Peter Gordon, Rhys Chatham, Alan Lloyd

Oct. 31 Martial Arts: Kendo as Music

Nov. 7 Theodor W. Adorno in English Translation

Nov. 14 Irish Folk Music: 'The Lark in the Morning'

Nov. 21 Center of the Creative and Perfroming Arts Presents Robert Dick, Christian Wolff, Howard Skempton, John Cage, Jacob Druckman, John Newell, Giacinto Scelsi

Nov. 28 Jill Kroesen

Dec. 5 Seven Kinds of Minimalism

Dec. 12 Larry Miller; Ann-Sargent Wooster; Janet Sternberg; Bill Hogeland

Dec. 19 Away from Avant-Gardism

Dec. 26 Fusako Yoshida: The Koto in New York

1978
Jan. 2 Footnotes to 1977

Jan. 9 John Cage's 'Atlas Australis,' 'Branches,' 'Cheap Imitation,' and 'Inlets'

Jan. 16 Alison Knowles

Jan. 23 R. Murray Schafer's Book The Tuning of the World

Jan. 30 Thunderbird American Indian dancers

Feb. 6 New Forums for New Music: Axis in Soho, Musical Elements, The Brook

Feb. 13 Performers of New Music: Neva Pilgrim, Paul Dunkel, Henry Schuman, Ted Hoyle

Feb. 20 The Plastic People from Prague; Talib Rasul Hakim (formerly Stephen Chambers)

Feb. 27 Zenska Pesna: Balkan Singers

March 6 Garrett List

March 13 William Hellermann's 'Tremble'

March 20 Alternative Center for International Art Presents Eastern and Middle-Eastern Music

March 27 Are You Suffering from NYCP? (New York City Provincialism)

April 3 A New CETA Orchestra

April 10 Jim Theobald
April 17 Patriotic Music: John Philip Sousa

April 24 George Mgrdichian Plays the Oud

May 1 John Cage, David Tudor, Roger Johnson, Jonathan D. Kramer, and Others

May 8 Chinese Music Ensemble of New York

May 15 Daniel Goode

May 22 Ustad Villayat Khan Plays Sitar

May 29 Ondeko-za: Japanese Ensemble

June 5 The Kitchen is Seven Years Old

June 12 Phill Niblock, Yoshi Wada, Jim Burton, and Others

June 19 Jo Kondo

June 26 Qamar Plays Mbira

July 3 Bob Becker Plays Percussion

July 10 The Perils of Neo-Primitivism

July 17 Conlon Nancarrow, David Behrman, and Others

July 24 Zoo Music I

July 31 Zoo Music II

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Aug. 7 Zoo Music III

Aug. 14 Zoo Music IV

Sep. 4 New Forms for New Music

Sep. 11 Barbara Benary: A Modern American Wayang

Sep. 18 On Learning to Love All Music
Sep. 25 Nigel Rollings

Oct. 2 The Yale Russian Chorus

Oct. 9 A La Monte Young Diary: Oct. 1974-Sept. 1978

Oct. 16 Tonality in Reich, Rzewski, Eno, and Others

Oct. 23 Larry Austin

Oct. 30 Fresh Bread: On Amateur Music

Nov. 6 Guitarists Julian Bream and Jon Williams

Nov. 13 The Modern Traditional Nihon Ongaku Shudan

Nov. 20 Seven Choruses in Carnegie Hall

Nov. 27 Documentary Music: Gavin Bryars and Philip Corner

Dec. 4 Symphony Space: A New Concert Hall

Dec. 11 American Premier of Morton Feldman's Opera 'Neither'

Dec. 18 Paul Berliner

Dec. 25 American Composers Orchestra Plays Barney Childs, Charles Wuorinen, John Cage, Elliott Carter

1979
Jan. 1 James Tenney

Jan. 8 Gregory Sandow and Phill Niblock

Jan. 15 The Increasing Scarcity of Avant-Garde Music

Jan. 22 Music of a Pinball Machine

Jan. 29 Ivan Tcherepnin's 'Santur Opera'

Feb. 5 John Adams, Michael Nyman, Paul Dresher, and Others
Feb. 12 Lukas Foss's 'Orpheus' and David Hykes's 'Hearing Solar Winds'

Feb. 19 The Heavenly Chimes Gamelan Ensemble

Feb. 26 Will Parsons and the Citizens Band

March 5 Nasser Rastegar-Nejad Plays Santur

March 12 The Other Superstars: Ravi, Fela, Om Kalsoum, Jali-Jali Music, and the Hui Brothers from Hong Kong; Six Seconds of Japanese Music

March 19 Richard Teitelbaum; George Lewis; William Hawley

March 26 Sang-Won Park Plays Kayagum

April 2 Andranik Aroustamian Plays Kamancheh

April 9 A Fluxus Retrospective Concert

April 16 A WKCR Fund-Raising Concert

April 23 Akio Suzuki and Takehisa Kosugi

April 30 Purna Das Sings the Baul Style from Bengal

May 7 A Balkan Arts Center Program

May 14 Jon Deak, Ben Johnston, Yoshi Wada, Philip Corner, Laurie Spiegel, Emmanuel Ghent

May 21 Tamia

May 28 Pericles Halkias Plays Greek Clarinet

June 4 Petr Kotik's 'Many Many Women'

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June 11 Preview of the First New Music America Festival

June 18 Klezmer Clarinet: Dave Tarras and Andy Statman

July 2 New Music America Festival
July 9 Griot Singers

July 23 The Decline of Western Music: Toward Internationalism

Aug. 6 Great Music as 'Tragic Exuberance'

Aug. 20 John Cage and Other Modern Dance Accompanists

Sep. 3 Frederic Rzewski

Sep. 17 Native American Powwows

Sep. 24 The Contradictions and The Static

Oct. 1 Pandit Pran Nath

Oct. 8 Rationality in Art

Oct. 15 New LPs: Stuart Dempster, Gordon Mumma, and Others

Nov. 5 A Visit to IRCAM

Nov. 19 Guitar Meets Sitar: Jody Stecher and Krishna Bhatt

Dec. 3 Three Exhibitions of Graphic Music

Dec. 17 Meredith Monk; Maryanne Amacher; Phil Glass; The American Composers Orchestra

1980
Jan. 14 Robert Rutman

Jan. 21 A New Zealand Recording: 'From Scratch'

Feb. 4 Young European Composers; Frederic Rzewski's 'Thirteen Studies'

Feb. 18 Carles Santos

March 3 Harry Bertoia

March 17 Son of Lion Gamelan
March 31 'Aimless Major' and Other Keys in works by Harold Budd, Phill Niblock, Julius Eastman, and Romulus Franceschini

April 14 Exoticism: About Imported Techniques

April 28 Classical Japanese Chamber Music

May 12 The Many Forums for New Music in New York

May 26 Giacinto Scelsi

June 9 International Sound Poetry Festival

June 23 Takehisa Kosugi; Pauline Oliveros

June 25-July 1 New Music America Festival in Minneapolis

July 16-22 Plastic People's 'Passion Play'

July 30-Aug. 5 On Freedom in Music

Aug. 13-19 Dorothy Carter: Folk Music Without Make Believe

Sep. 10-16 Recordings: Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Virgil Thomson, Lubomyr Melnyk, and Others

Sep. 24-30 John Zorn; Tom Hamilton and J.D. Parran

Oct. 8-14 Sacred Music in Tibet, New Guinea, and Ecuador

Oct. 22-28 Getting Looped: Robert Moran and Others

Oct. 29-Nov. 4 Irish Folk Music in New York

Nov. 5-11 Irish Folk Group De Danann

Nov. 19-25 Evan Parker's Free Sax

Dec. 3-9 John Cage; Dick Higgins; Jackson MacLow; Tamia

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Dec. 17-23 Balkan Arts Center Event

1981

Dec. 31-Jan. 6 Stuart Dempster; Stephen Scott

Jan. 14-20 New York Ensemble for Early Music Presents 'The Play of St. Nicholas'

Feb. 18-24 Arts Councils in Houston and Florida

Feb. 25-March 3 Philip Glass: Maximalism on the Beach

March 11-17 Glen Velez

March 25-31 Charlie Morrow, Carles Santos, and Sten Hanson in a Boxing Ring

April 22-28 Michiko Hirayama Interprets Giacinto Scelsi

May 6-12 Urban Sax in Paris

May 20-26 Latin Musicians at Soundscape: Andy Gonzalez and Others

June 3-9 New Vocal Music: Mikki Shiff, Charles Dodge, and Others

June 17-23 Half-Heard Music

July 1-7 Exhibition of Japanese Music Notation

July 15-21 Recordings: Loren Rush, Larry Austin, John Cage

July 22-28 A Critical Anthology: 'Breaking the Sound Barrier'

July 29-Aug. 4 Australian Aborigines in Central Park

Aug. 5-11 Carillon Recital at Riverside Church

Aug. 12-18 World Music at Bear Mountain

Sep. 9-15 An Amateur Talent Night

Oct. 7-13 Meditation Music/Spiritual Music

Oct. 28-Nov. 3 Young French Musicians: 'Diese 440'

Nov. 18-24 Twenty Paris Composers Produce a Collaborative Christmas Disc

Nov. 25-Dec. 1 Groupe de Recherches Musicales

Dec. 9-15 Metz Festival

Dec. 23-29 Iannis Xenakis and CEMAMU

1982

Jan. 6-12 Claude Ballif's 'Un Coup de des'

Jan. 20-26 Zygmunt Krauze and Thomas Sikorski

Feb. 3-9 Mesias Maiguashca

Feb. 23 Xavier Rodet's CHANT Program

March 9 Steve Lacy

March 23 Zoltan Jeney and Other Hungarian Composers

April 6 Itineraire Presents Peter Eotvos and Hughes Dufourt

April 27 Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carriere's 'Carmen'

May 4 Pierre Marietan, Eliane Radigue, Horacio Vaggione

May 18 Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981)

June 1 Collaboration: Barbara Benary, Philip Corner, Daniel Goode, and Peter Griggs

June 15 European Orchestration vs. American

June 29 The Trickle-Down Theory and the Filter-Up Theory

July 13 An Upstate Story: Carleton Clay and Classical Music in the Catskills

July 27 The Original Minimalists: La Monte Young and 30 Others

Aug. 10 Recordings: Dary John Mizelle, Phil Minton, Joel Chadabe, and David Tudor

Aug. 24 World Music at Bear Mountain

Sep. 7 Rah Rah America: Nationalism in Music

Sep. 21 More on American Music

Oct. 5 Jackson Mac Low is 60

Oct. 19 Northeast Dulcimer Symposium in Woodstock

Oct. 26 Rip Keller Performs John Cage's 'Sonatas and Interludes'

Nov. 16 Conlon Nancarrow is 70

Nov. 30 The Minnesota Composers Forum

Dec. 14 Hans Otte's 'Das Buch der Klange'

Dec. 28 Luc Ferrari

1983
Jan. 11 European Points of View

Aug. 20 A Farewell Article