The Wire

Mass Ornaments

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- By: Phil England | About: Alvin Curran

The Wire: What was your upbringing like - were you brought into contact with music at an early age?

Alvin Curran: "I grew up in rather normal American childhood. With the exception that my father was a musician, he was a band leader, he had a dance band which operated mostly in the Jewish community in Providence, Rhode Island where I grew up.

"Before that my earliest memories of music - and these have very profound memories as well as very profound influences - was following my father around in these vaudeville theatres where he played on weekends. He was a trombonist, he was busy as a musician and I was this little kid who touted along litterally in the back stage. So I was sitting in the trombone sections of these big bands for most of my childhood.

"At the same time, at the age of five, I did a very conventional thing, I started to learn the piano. For some reasons the piano was a very important cultural element in the community - everyone had to learn the piano. You weren't a validated citizen unless you knew how to play the piano.

"In retrospect I see this background. If you look at any of my contemporaries, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, almost to the person, they've all had a youthful experience in making popular music and jazz in particular.

"I went on to college where I rejected the normal life. I was heading to be go into medicine and went straight into composition at university and continued into higher degrees of that. And then landed under the wing of Elliott Carter in Berlin [Ford Foundation Grant]. So there I was in Europe, in company of Fred Rzewski, who was also invited by Elliott Carter, Jugi Takahashi (?) who was invited by Xenakis, Louis Andriessen who was invited by Berio. There was this whole core of young composers who were eager to start a life and be essentially bad boys in music.

"The year in Berlin was very exciting, I met Stravinsky and all these other incredible people whose work I didn't even know very well - Xenakis and Berio are people whose work I now revere but at the time there they were sitting opposite me, I was just a kid, I had no idea what they were doing in their music. All I knew was that I wanted to do something like that, but I didn't have a clue.

"Shortly after that, hop in a car, go to Rome and that's where I've been ever since. That's where MEV, with Richard Teitlebaum, Fred Rzewski and myself got off the ground. Basically here we were very academically trained, academically directed, everyone said we were very promising composers, so presumably we would have been very promising composers, then we got to Rome and we figured something really wasn't quite right. And is just at the beginnings of the '68 revolution, about 1966. And for one reason or another there was enough curiosity, discontent and intuition among us to be able to form a group that rejected all forms of hierarchy, all forms of organisation, all forms of leadership. No director, no score, no knowledge of when the music might begin or end.

"It was Tabula Rasa. It was erasing our whole background. Everything we were supposed to be, everything we were supposed to do and basically our whole cultural mission in life."

Where do you think the inspiration from that came from?

"It mostly came from [John] Cage and [David] Tudor. Fred Rzewski had been in Buffalo, New York for one year in a situation where I think he was a performer in a special project and Cage and Tudor were involved in this project. I guess Morton Feldman was there at the same time.

"And Frederic came back with this idea that you could take these contact microphones and amplify all kinds of objects and junk and found things. And Frederic being somewhat of a homegrown revolutionary began to theorise and create these ideas about liberating sound and liberating the music from the page.
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"My meeting Cornelius Cardew in 1965 - I was his copyist, he paid me to copy his scores. He was studying with [Goffredo] Petrassi at the conservatory in Rome. It was an encounter that had profound influence on me, just knowing him and then later, performing with him. Rzewski knew Cardew from earlier times.

"I'm drawing a picture of the beginnings of MEV around two people, Rzewski and Cardew who had already very strong potential for revolutionising their own lives and the lives of people around them.

"We were in the right place at the right time, basically. Three Americans plus other people, Carol Plantamura from California, and John Phetteplace who is no longer alive, who was a musician much closer to Cage, and particularly influenced by a very strong personality, a man named Pietro Grossi (?) from Florence who was one of the first electronic figures in Italy in the middle sixties.

"In any case, all of these influences came together and I began personally to just let my goals to recede and throw myself together with Rzewski and Teitlebaum into this project for making spontaneous music. Once we all saw that we had this source, this incredibly fiery source of music inside of us and that it could be applied to making music collectively and spontaneously, it was an epiphany. And it was an epiphany strong enough to not to last for just 24 hours but for a whole life time.

"Especially in that moment, between 1966 and 1968 and the consequent social uprising that happened among the youth at that period. There was a generic call for liberation and a generic sense of an iminent utopia around the corner. They were great times. You didn't even have to be stoned. And most people were!

"The energy of the idea, of the mission, of the sense of collectivity, of the sense of the social fabric, you could go to London, you could go to Amsterdam, there was this community of people, they were doing crazy things.

"By that time AMM was together, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, all kinds of crazy things. There was von Schippenbach in Berlin, Evan Parker shows up at a club that we were playing at and jumps in. Suddenly this whole generation congealed. But it was already in a way at its height at that moment. Yes, in a kind of way it was at its prime because it was so young and naive and positive. It was an incredible positive energy.

"Before we knew it the MEV project had become a viable way of making a living. Suddenly we were playing long tours all around Europe and the States and making recordings. That lasted a good five years, essentially '67 to '72 and at that time the core group, which by then included Steve Lacy and Garrett List from New York.

"The core group was always Rzweski, myself, Teitlebaum, and then Lacy all the time and lots of people who just played with us from time to time wherever our engagements were. That went on throughout the 70s - not as intensely - and bit by bit the whole thing calmed down, our music focus shifted, our own focuses shifted, we all became settled in other lives, but the MEV has persisted until this very day. We're not exactly the Rolling Stones.
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When was the last time you performed?

"I think 2000 we played some where in Ferrara with Steve Lacy and George Lewis."

So it's once every five years or so?

"Yeah, something like that. It's always a kind of sense of revival. Pretty soon they'll push us out in wheel chairs on stage."

People's attitudes must have changed to improvisation during that time?

"Let me say this. From the perspective of an American living in Europe and especially as someone living in Italy. A very interesting picture develops from the Italian perspective.

"Without our knowing right away, the wave of the 1968 stuff had a transformative effect on Italian society as it did everywhere. And what it did was - this is not absolute history but is my personal summation of events - it helped to push the already very, very strong left, namely the communist party and the socialist parties to the foreground. They really had to respond to the young people and come up with interesting solutions. And in a way, the one reinforced the other. The '68 stuff reinforced the newly inspired political goals for more real presence in politics, more dignified and potential power sharing with the Christian Democrats.

"In the elections throughout the '70s, the Italian Communist Party essentially began to acquire the Mayorships all the way through Italy from Bari right up to Milano. So all the decisions about local culture and local ideas about monies to be gotten and appropriated, were decided by a lot of young and lively, forward-looking and progressive people. It turned Italy in particular, and you can corroborate this with Evan [Parker] or [Anthony] Braxton - they practically lived there, they were working so much. Italy became this permanent avant-garde music scene, mostly through outside invitations and then gradually through its homegrown people who became quite successful in themselves. Right up until the early '80s this political, cultural and musical situation remained in place. There were several ocassions when we'd all be working together on these Communist Party fayres, they would hold one in Bologna, in Modena (?), and they'd always have a huge section of improvised music. So the improvised music scene was absolutely on the scene and of the moment.

"I say this from my own perspective of having lived in Rome all that time. It provided a kind of false reality. Wherever you looked there were these incredible scenes, concerts, discussions, debates, articles, programmes, you name it. In retrospect it was an attempt by political forces to utilise something that they realised was very lively and very important as a political weapon. And when they went out of favour in the early '80s so did this music. It went right down. To this day there is improvised music but it doesn't have the presence, it doesn't have the response. At any given event you could have had a thousand, two thousand paying people, it was just amazing. Say a Braxton solo concert in the early to middle 70s would have had two or three thousand people.
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What was happening with MEV at this time?

"By then MEV were off in different parts of the world individually, we were still alive and well and still thinking about our project but it wasn't at the forefront of our own individual work by then, as it remained pretty much for AMM who got better and better and refined their music and improvising skills to a remarkable degree just by keeping that core group together and gaining remarkable recognition around the world to this day. That is not the MEV story. We didn't keep together in that way.

But there are some interesting differences between AMM and MEV. One would have been an encouragement of audience participation which AMM didn't really get into...

"The audience participation is probably more attributable to Cornelius Cardew than anyone else, when the idea was to invite anyone, musician or not, to participate some way musically in a collective way. And the models of those Scratch Orchestra compositions and other things that Cardew came up with had the seeds of this audience participation thing. In the case of MEV that came about in 1969, again taking cues from the student revolutions and the mood of the cities and the moods of the audiences and so on, we came up with the idea to do a piece called SoundPool where the instruction was 'bring a sound, cast it in the pool.' Everybody understood what that meant. What it meant effectively was that hundreds of people would show up with their instruments and say 'where do I plug in?' or whatever. I remember once at a concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, someone hawling in the strung metallic part of a piano, hawling through the back-stage door, thinking 'what the hell is that?' and that was their instrument.

"SoundPool for all of its fantastic memories and maybe we did it ten times, was essentially an act of suicide because at a certain point there's no way to control the music, or rather there's no way for the music to control itself. No-one can listen to a mass of people playing. And yet that sound in and of itself is phenomenal. You can only get it by creating a situation like that.

It must be meaningful for the people that are involved as well.

"Yes, it was incredibly meaningful."

Perhaps more meaningful that sitting watching a performance?

"Oh, much more. There was always this myth that music belongs to the people, nobody owns the music, music is everybody, everybody is the music and all these kinds of slogans that were banded about at the time really came true in this. Even if it was just a wall of noise, there was enough hashish running in the blood to be able to hear anything when you put your own sound into that sound (laughs). But again it wasn't a question of drugs it was a question of spontanaeity in space. People were just organising themselves in remarkable ways. You didn't even have to mention the word improvisation, it was just understood instinctively that something was going on and you could be part of it. Whatever you did."

Was it difficult to perform as distinct group after you'd broken that boundary?

"Yeah it was. Well, it was and it wasn't. The pleasure of coming together and just performing spontaneously is just a part of us. It's who we are. The implications both musical and sociological of these mass events, still to this day, call up humour and a memory of, is there somewhere else we could have gone, is there somewhere else we could have taken this, rather than just let these events fall dead after they were done. It's hard to know.

"Just the other night I did a performance at Mills College where I had on stage a chorus of twelve children who I was employing in a big piece of mine. They'd learned the music part beautifully and did that beautifully. And then I wanted them to improvise. They had a difficult time understanding why I wanted them to sing any note, or any melody. But when they started doing it and heard other people doing similar things on stage they were inspired, they understood immediately. Kids have this great understanding and they are natural improvisers, that's what children do, they invent everything right on the spot, whole stories, whole histories, whole adventures. With the music they were a little uncertain because all of their musical experience is under this authoritarian thing where they're told what to do and they have to do it. But when you let them be free suddenly they were stymied. But when they understood that they could really be free they were magnificent (laughs).

"So I still bring those kinds of things into my music."

So improvisation is still part of what you do as a composer...

"Absolutely, I can't let it go. It's like the Jekyll of my Hyde or the Hyde of my Jekyll (chuckles). And I don't even think of it as two different things. My composing is a kind of improvisation even though a lot of things are written down."

"[The MEV] experience is really central to everything I do musically but I don't like to dwell on it. Except over a beer. It's like old times. Even when I listen to some of the old recordings it brings back wonderful memories but I find on the one hand there's a whole generation, including people of my own age beginning in the same times who've made a dedicated world of music around this idea, I have not. I'm somewhat of a reformed improviser in that respect. Not that I've abandonded the idea and that practice, far from it, but that I've put it to other uses. I've taken what I find to be the most vital aspects of improv and absolutely put them into several structural places in my composition."

It must have given you a confidence in yourself rather than following any kind of lineage, because in a sense you'd smashed the icons.

"Well yes. I think best said: improvisation alone, for me, is not enough. That's as good as I can put it. That also reflects a lineage to a historical idea of myself as a composer in the European classical sense of the word. I'm not alone. There are many people who use both languages and interchange both languages in their work. Anthony Braxton is a powerful example of that. Steve Lacy is another. Roscoe Mitchell. Whereas other very successful composers of my generation such as Phil Glass, Steve Reich, would never, never dream for a moment of ever leaving any freedom to anybody including themselves including themselves in terms of their rigorous composed music.

"The interesting thing for me is this dialectic between compositon and improvisation and its sometimes interchangeability and its sometimes oppositional denouncement, the one of the other, and its division into two churches is, I think, one of the leading sources of musical idea at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. It's definitely at the core of a lot of the music you see, whether it be electronica, Fennesz or Scanner, or even some of the music coming out of the Bang on a Can school in New York, David Lang, Michael Gordon, Julia Wolf, people like that."

Your approach to composition is very eclectic. You listen to the Lost Marbles CD and each track is completely different. The materials you are using are different every time.

"I'm a musical megalomaniac for one thing."
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It almost seems you approach each piece with a blank sheet of paper. It seems that you're able to come to things completely fresh and think about things in a new way. What do you think connects all your works?

"I'm a collector of ideas, I'm a collector of sounds. Literally since the mid-60s I've been going round with a tape recorder and recording anything interesting I hear and bringing it into my music.

"Two ideas could best describe what I do musically. One is that I'm a modern polyphonist. I put lots of voices together, lots of different things, sometimes simillar, sometimes completely contrasting. But I do believe that I have certain skills and desire to put the most unusual sounds together and sometimes this will manifest itself in a single piece and other times it will take the form of works that are created for special ocassions such as, the 750th anniversary of Berlin where I was asked to do a piece for ship horns. Or actually it was my idea, they knew about and came to me, and hence was born this concert for eleven giant horns that are used on the biggest sea going vessels. I've done different forms. I've done that piece on two or three ocassions and I've done other ship horn pieces where I go into a harbour with the harbour master and a producer such as the Icebreaker in Amsterdam in the early 80s we got together and had an incredible structured jam. Everyone played with a synchronised score.

How do you synchronise?

"Well I write a score for say 50 ships, that's 50 parts, and they can only plaly one horn. They can play short, long or medium notes. We use synchronised stop watches and at the zero zero, everyone starts and read their parts. I write out rhythmic patterns that they play. These come from clumps of ships from one spatial area in one part of the harbour so the sound is moving around.

"Two of the biggest events of that kind were in Amsterdam and in Sydney Harbour in the early 90s.

"There's a lot of chamber music that I write for ensembles and choruses and that's just straight ahead composition that speaks for itself.

"And then there's another area where I've carried my electronics over directly out of the MEV period. And that's been reduced now to the almost exclusive use of an 88 note MIDI keyboard, a sampler and using thousands of samples of music from all over the world and I keep changing it and refreshing it."

That's your solo performance modus operandi.

"It's a solo performance machine exactly. And that is completely unpredictable music. Wherever you put your finger you don't know whether you're going to get a market in Bombay or James Brown or whatever. Anything can come up. That's a concept where I play the world, or have the world under my fingers.

"The opening piece on that CD, Toto Angelica, is representative of a whole series of works I've been doing recently where I've been creating a sound portrait of a particular festival or event. In this case it was the Angelica festival. I took ten years of recorded music and sampled everybody from Fred Frith to Zorn to Mike Patton to Phil Minton, Lol Coxhil, they were all there. And I just played them. I'm going to be doing some of this in the concert on Saturday.

This is an extract?

"The performance is 45 minutes, this is just a fragment."

The notes seem to indicate that a lot of these are just extracts.

"They're all extracts of big works. The orchestral piece is a theatre piece for the Achim Freyer Ensemble and that lasts one hour. The last piece which is called the Alvin Curran Philharmonia with Fred Frith, William Winant, Shelley Hirsch, Domenico Sciajno and Joan Jeanrenaud. And that was the first time that I actually wanted to create a band. It's hard to have your own band with musicians like that because they're their own band, Fred Frith is his own band, Joan Jeanrenaud is her own band, but I wanted to put a supregroup together and there was an ocassion at the Taktlos Festival, so that was how that project was born. And there was a lot of interest in it, except that it was expensive to produce and hard to get any of these musicians in the same place at the same time, it's almost impossible. So that turned out to be a one time thing. It could be revived.

"At the moment I'm working with William Winant one of the best percussionists in the world, and Carla Kilstdidt (sp?), known from her group the Tin Hat Trio, a great all-round musician. I'm thinking of that as a new possibility, but it's maybe too late for me to do that kind of thing. I like the idea of being able to create my own music for a fixed group of people, it's a great pleasure to work with any of these musicians but it takes a lot of work to go and get the work. Its an agent or a producer's job. I'm very often too busy to focus full time on it."

What's the schedule like at Mill's College is that quite demanding?

"I only teach one semester a year and I have been now for six or seven years. My teaching is from

January to May and the rest of the year is mine. I can also say that the teaching is another form of composition. That is, in the process of communicating your own experience to young people you learn an awful lot. I listen to them. I listen to their music, I listen to their interests, a lot of people coming from rock backgrounds, a lot of people coming from pure electronic backgrounds with no experience in written music, a lot of people coming from improv backgrounds without knowing much about anything just having that bug that somehow spontaneous music making is the centre of the universe. And I find that all these currents, all of these interests, all of these contemporary vital directions, they're all seeking a common language, they're all seeking a form of stability in some way. I find the evidence and the spirit of this much more in my face every day while working with students. I wouldn't be paying that much attention to all of these problems if I was just busy doing my own work. Of course I would but, of course the relationship with young musicians and of trying to give them some raison d'etre. They're all looking for, 'why are we doing this stuff,' 'how are we ever going to make a living from out of this stuff.' This kind of thing puts a great responsibility on me to look for the central reasons of making a musical life in these times and in these ways. They're all marginal ways. Compared to the large music industry this music is totally on the edges and will always be on the edges until, bit by bit it infiltrates into the common language of music making. As it has for example in hip hop. You hear hip hop, OK, it's this steady four-four beat but it seems to be breaking down and there seems to be more noise elements and crazy whacky sampling going on. I don't know where that's coming from but I find it fantastic. These unstable musically sounds are finding their way into a very square music.

"So I think that's where forms of experimental music making reach somehow into the languages of popular music and vice versa. Every avant-gardist worth their salt today is using scratch beats and all kinds of references to the most recent pop culture in their music today. So it works both ways just like it did at the time of Schubert. Schubert was getting melodies from peasants singing in the streets.
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With something like Crystal Psalms, the piece was about something. Do you ever feel a drive to do pieces about contemporary political issues?

"When there are issues that need adressing like that I do. But I'm not, as my colleague Fred Rzewski is, a dedicated political composer. From time to time events happen or something in your life happens and you're inspired to do that. Crystal Psalms was certainly one of those.

"There are other places in my music that reach into politics but much more subtly and indirectly. There's a kind of underlying anarchist idea in my work. One of an almost chameleon like shifting, as if someone is trying to escape definition, even if its easily definable. Maybe you could say, I sometimes think of myself as a closet pop composer. Other times as a closet avant-gardist, whatever. But drawing on all of these experiences and one-liner definitions. I think there's something in my own view that expresses itself in almost all of the works however varied and whatever the nature and ideas behind them and it's fundamentally an idea of pure abstraction but abstraction that has immediacy in some way so that there's something in the music that anyone can relate to. Anyone can relate to a ship horn, or natural sounds, or fragments of environmental sound that they hear. It becomes a form of fast-cutting movie soundtrack.

"But there are other pieces where I've put a tremendous amount of energy, a series of solo piano pieces called Inner Cities - there's one of them on here. It's in eleven parts and it's being played around by a pianist called Daan Vandewalle. He's been giving these concerts of the entire eleven parts which last for six hours. People come in, they usually lie down on comfortable cushions, matresses and he starts playing. We did one recently at Vooruit in Ghent. Before that we did one in France in a huge cultural centre in an old factory. These pieces have an over-riding very, distant spiritual quest built into them. But it's a form of chamber music which I continue to pursue. Again very abstract but very immediate music, that might just be, as the first piece is in fact, all on one note with three or four different harmonies. There's a similar thing going on in a piece of Luciano Berio's which I heard for the first time the other night. Apparently it's one of the last pieces he ever wrote. But a lot of other things happen.

There's also a series of choral works based on the texts of John Cage.

"That's a project that I've started. The texts by Cage are his writings which are almost a last work of his, '88-'89. He gave a series of lectures at Harvard University, he's titled them I-VI and these lectures were composed by taking fragments from over 30 sources from books and newspapers and a lot of his favourite writers and created these fantastic texts. The one fragment here in the Lost Marbles collection is called "Music is not Music" and I'm going to record that piece very soon with a stunning chorus in Stuttgart that works for the radio.

Can you say something about the piece "Romulus and Remus make a Ruckus"?

"That's very recent. That's an installation piece for a phenomenal Renaissance courtyard in Rome. One of the main sounds of the piece is howling wolves which represent Rome in terms of the mythical Romulus and Remus - the two wolves who are considered the founders of the city. I just took off from that idea, and created essentially a ambient radiophonic piece."

Was that piece developed with Melissa Gould?

"No. With Melissa Gould came quite a phenomenal piece called Notes From Underground which we made for Ars Electronica in Linz in 1990. She had created a light design of a floor plan of a former synagogue in Berlin that had been destroyed during the war. The actual floor plan is an illumination set into the ground of this structure and around that, I made a trench one metre wide by 1 metre deep, placed about 80 loudspeakers, then covered over the trench leaving some air holes so that the sound could come. Out of the loudspeakers comes a vast sound of human singing. I recorded thousands of choral and all kinds of vocal music and just mixed and mixed and remixed and remixed and created this gigantic thick human wall of sound. So these voices are coming out realistically and metaphorically from underground. A lot of people came and left in tears. It's like looking at a big grassy field and suddenly the field starts singing. You don't see anything, it's a striking project.

What other outdoor works have you done?

"There's two others - one is described on my website, one isn't. One was for the Donaueschingham festival. It's the oldest new music festival in Europe. It was started in the mid 1920s. It's not far from Stuttgart in Southern Germany. It's the source of much of the large scale post-War new music. Pieces by Xenakis, Berio, Stockhausen, Ligeti - almost all of the memorable pieces like [Gyorgy] Ligeti's Atmospheres, were comissioned by this large scale festival. On two ocassions I worked with them. The first piece was called The 20th Century. In The 20th Century you see a pavillion - a small little house in the middle of a park, you see a piano with no legs placed on a pile of hay. Like a wounded animal in a cage. And this piano is playing all by itself.

"A few years later I was given the chance to create another installation. In this case I did a portrait for the 75th year of the festival. So again I took sound samples from 75 years of their archive and took the music from that. I used an entire city park to broadcast speakers in trees, in bushes, on the sides of buildings. It was really an elaborate spatial work. With computer processing of these sounds with computer processing going 24 hours a day.

You've had quite a lot of comissions from radio as well over the years which is quite an open-ended medium. Good for tape pieces...

"Radio is this undefined world of communication which is coming into much clearer focus now. The so-called 'radio art', 'klangkunst' or 'horspiel' has developed essentially in the departments of radio drama. Where text and sound and music were always put together. As things got brought up into a modern focus, many of these radio drama departments began to specialise in so-called 'experimental sound'. These special structures within radio stations around Europe have now been banded into an organisation called Ars Acoustica, essentially promoting experimental sound art and installation art. The works that

I've done over the years have been almost exclusively produced by WDR in Cologne. Although I've worked with Radio Berlin and Dutch Radio and New Public Radio. The little fragment on this new CD is a sound portrait of John Cage ["Erat Verbum John"]. That was produced by WDR. I wanted to find some essential sound that would really define John Cage and I chose his laughter. Anyone who met John Cage would immediately know this is his laughter.

It also features the sound of Merce Cunningham's cat.

"Right.

How did you get access to that? Is it actually his cat?

"I went into his apartment and recorded myself walking on the floor. All of the sounds of the very noisy ambience. It's an appartment in New York on the corner of sixth avenue and 18th street. It's a huge roar of traffic during the day. A huge commercial street. And so I brought that into the music too because Cage loved that sound, he loved the noise, he loved the windows being open all day saying, 'isn't that beautiful.' That was his way of dealing with that kind of noise."

"The whole radio thing has become a refreshing source of an independent music-making world between music and spoken word. It's kind of an undefined territory and its constantly being redefined all the time. But I find it's a fanatastic forum for my soundworks which normally are difficult to promote any other way. Most people think of this work as 'cinema for the ears' where you just lie back and dream as you here these sounds go by. Somehow the radio does have a magical attraction, I don't know quite what it is, but I'm a radio fan myself."

Have we covered everything on the Lost Marbles CD?

"'For MG' is another radiophonic piece but it happens to be created for the Tricia Brown Dance company. "In Hora Mortis" is a piece of theatre music for orchestra. It's descriptive and non-descriptive at the same time. "Endangered Species" is a purely improvised work where I'm connected to a sampler."

On your website there's a list of current solo performances. That's one of them. "Shofar" is another?

"Right. I just did that two nights ago. Again with a core group of William Winant on percussion, Carla Kirlstadt (?) on electric violin. It could have various forms of presentation. I could do it as a solo piece or with others."

Does that draw on Jewish traditions?

"Only in the use of the shofar. And even that is only a symbolic thing. For me it has more of a collective memory than using insofar as using an instrument that is prototypical music. It's just some primitive animal horn that connects me to the earliest forms of music making."

You've also perform with a percussion quartet?

Oh yeah. Those pieces been released on Tzadik. "Theme Park" has had a lot of play, that's a strong piece. Just pure banging (laughs). There are places in that piece where I get these four snare drums to keep rolling over each other like waves of the sea. They keep going in crescendos and diminuendos. Actually the piece is structured very simply. It starts with four hi-hats, then four bass drums, then four snare drums, there's some improv somewhere in the middle then it ends with four bass drums again."

The last solo performance is called "Land Im Klang"?

"'The sounding landscape' essentially. That was a one-time big event that I created for live elctronics and

four percussion players in a huge square for the opening of a musical structure - a building called the Klangtaum (?) the 'tower of sound' in San Perltum (?) in Austria. I don't know what's become of that since then but at the time in 1996 they thought that this was going to become the new IRCAM or the new Austrian centre of new music. It was part of a new government set of buildings and somehow they were convinced that they were going to put this tower or sound in the middle of it."

What projects do you have lined up?

"I'm starting work immediately on work for a piece for the Marten Altena (sp) Ensemble. He's got a really great band, violin, cello, flutes, clarinet, saxophones, trombone. And I have a commission from ex-Kronos cellist, Joan Jeanrenaud."

"I also have a fellowship from the prestigous Guggenheim Foundation in the US. Which will enable me to set on a very long-term project called the Alvin Curran Fakebook. That's going to be a series of books of chamber music essentially, for small ensembles of unusual instruments. So I'll be writing trios for contra-bass clarinet, picolos and Wagner tubas - otherwise known as the euphonium. All kinds of odd instruments that have been forgotten or very seldom used. I imagine this project as giving life again to things like wash boards, jaws harps or nose flutes including really junk instruments amidst other instruments such as oboe d'amore or viola da gamba, all these kooky forgotten instruments that are used only on special ocassions. It's a project with a bit of humour in it but I'm also very seriously looking forward to regiving life to the idea of classical chamber music as it were. There's a body of literature that goes up to the time of Bartok and not much beyond that. It's a forgotten area. People just resort to the great classics. My aim is to enhance that literature in some way. And of course there'll be plenty of improvisation in these pieces as well. It wouldn't be unusual for example to find a quartet for jugs or for harmonicas. Or pieces for banjo. These are instruments I really love and I want to focus on creating a whole bunch of music for them."

"There's a beautiful project coming up in July. It's a radio commission from the Sudwestfunk Radio in Baden Baden. It came about because I was in the Zurich train station and I heard this amazing person singing and there was little garden dwarf of a guy with a long white beard and pushing this luggage cart. And he was yodelling all alone in this huge hall and letting these reverberant sounds feedback into his own yodells. I just stood there and said 'oh my god, I don't have a tape recorder, this is the thing of a lifetime, this guy's amazing'. I was so inspired by it that I got my and agent at the time to find out who this guy was. He's currently living in a mental institution, he apparently gets a little violent sometimes, but otherwise he's an extraordinary person, speaks five languages, has travelled around the world, very intellectual, very cultured person. He was known to everybody in Zurich. So we set up this recording with him and he came down from his clinic and he brought an alphorn and I made these recordings with him and that's going to go together with some of this John Cage music - Music is not Music - for chorus and other sounds which will be the beginnings of a new radio piece. That's another huge project in the making.
[page break]
There seems to be so much of your work that hasn't been recorded.

"Lots."

Almost any of these pieces could be a whole CD.

"The reason for Lost Marbles is just that. There's so much out there that's been unpublished and I wanted to create a little sampler as it were."

It almost acts as a little calling card.

"Exactly. A lot of people know me, they know about me and they don't have a clue to half of the things I really do. It's all over the map."

It's hard to pin down. What do you respond to? Most of the time you must get a commission from a particular group, so the instrumentation is defined. Then how do you proceed from there? Where do you get your inspiration from?

"Well. That's a hard question. Most of my instrumental music has been written since 1990, since I was teaching at Mill's College, much of it inspired by the musicians who were there."

"For example, Pittura Fresca, a violin concerto for the Paul Drescher Ensemble, is a piece where anything and everything can happen. There's fog horns, there's a piece of the Mozart Requiem, you name it. Again I'm not flailing around for stuff because the writing can be in an almost Howard Skemptonesque pure tonal simplicity at times and the suddenly turn its back on that and walk into a wall of noise or total chaos including train wrecks and car crashes."

"You're really asking me how I compose and I can't do it (laughs). It's bigger than me."

There's a text on your website which talks about opposites and the all-encompassing nature of your work. Do you think in terms of polar opposites and trying to reconcile them?

"I do. It is a form of trying literally to make the whole kitchen sink function. Not all the time. Some of the piano pieces, are very simple and very pretty. But a lot of my work is almost, in some respects, close to [John] Zorn's in that idea that he's taking from the whole world of sound, literally, whether quoting or rewriting or inspired by and trying to make some order of this gigantic, chaotic, voluminous world in which we live every day. You see no culture's had to live with so much music as we do. There's never been music 24 hours a day from all over the world available at any moment. These are new conditions, new problems that we have to face. It's part of our modern condition and I do try to reflect that, like a lot of composers do in different ways. But I'm always finding new solutions to the oldest problem in music, how to get from A to B, or not. Because you could just stay at A and never get to B. That's the route of the mystics, they figured that out a long time ago. In the dictum, 'if you don't know what to do, don't do anything.' But that's also the first rule of improvisation. If you don't feel it don't play it."

I would be interested to figure out how you got back into composition again after improvisation.

"I never left composition, that's the truth. As I was in MEV, I have chamber music and written pieces. And the same with Rzewski. For both of us we don't ditinguish between improvisation and composition. For me anything I might write down is an improvisation, I just fix it. It's all improvised. It either comes litterally off my fingers at the piano, or out of my head, conceptually, so I really don't see that as a problem now.

"It doesn't matter how you approach your music making as long as you approach it. It doesn't matter whether you have a theory, a system, a technique, a rule book or not. I've seen what we would call musical illiterates make extraordinary music. So who says you have to do study music? I've seen situations in collective music making where a mass of people can make sounds that Xenakis or Stockhausen could never have dreamt of. In fact when they became aware of some of these events, then they came up with their theories of chaos or numerical probabilities or stochastic science. Well yes, of course. If you need to put reason to what you do then you can always find one. I've never had any reason to do that. I'm just a primitive.

Although you studied with people like Elliott Carter, do you think the connection to a particular lineage was broken with MEV?

"Very much so and very much so not. In the years when the MEV project was blossoming, it was close to my youth and of course, Elliott Carter was a mentor, he was a person who I looked up to and he had already started to achieve a measure of success. Later through other circumstances and connections, I

maintained a life-long friendship with Elliott and Helen his wife. And every time I would go and visit them I would go both in hommage and friendship but also to get a taste of what my life might have been like if I'd have followed the life of a cultivated, internationalist composer, and I may even be that deep down somewhere but I just don't manifest it in my work in that way (laughs).

"What I'm saying is the MEV experience made it clear once and for all that making music for an elite society was impossible. Elitist music was not for me. On the other hand, that mythic search for the People's Music as Cornelius Cardew had wanted and as Fred Rzewski has been seeking all his life - that's elusive also. Coming from this avant-gardist homestead as it were. That's a tough call. So we're searching. Our music is about searching and fundamentally it's in this tradition of experimentalist music. I know it's a bad word - but that's where my real roots are.

Your website says that [Giancinti] Scelsi was a mentor.

"There are several people who deserve mention in that category. Scelsi above all. We were both in Rome from the mid-60s and I developed a really warm friendship with him. I never got to the bottom of his life, or who he was, his crazy story of writing music that was performed by other people, but it was always his music, there was no question about that. But he was someone who recognised immediately that there was something in what I did musically that attracted him. And that attracted me to him. In so far as he was openly a spiritual seeking person through his music, that had a certain effect on me as well. There were a lot of things he would be openly critical of as well. He would say, 'That concert of yours yesterday was so beautiful, so beautiful - but those dogs barking I can't stand it!' But he was a dear friend and a very individual composer in the midst of this avant-garde Italian world. He was feared and hated, primarily, but secretly respected by everyone. He wasn't just the average kook and nut who'd been to India and Central Asia. He wrote deep shit, as they say! (laughs)

"Morton Feldman and John Cage were often friends in that house. John I got to know each other very well both in Italy and later in New York and in a few collaborations we'd done with the WDR in Cologne. He had collaborated on even one of my pieces called Maritime Rites which his voice appears against some of my fog horns.

"Maritime Rites. That's a ten part series of pieces and it's coming out in the Fall on New World Music. A two album set. I did a systematic recording of all of the maritime sounds of East coast America so mostly.

Sounds labour intensive...

"It was. I got a grant to do this from the National Public Radio way back in the early '80s. I decided to make ten programmes each featuring a different improvising soloist. So there's Leo Smith, George Lewis, Malcolm Goldstein, Joseph Celli, Jon Gibson, Pauline Oliveros, Cage, myself and so on. I created these soundscapes and against each soundscape one of these musicians were featured. Cage was featured with one of most powerful foghorns known to man. It was on the Nantucket Lightship. It's in a museum now in the Boston Harbour. They took it a few miles offshore for me. Then I got in a row boat and got away from the ship and they started playing it. Devastating. Devastating. On board when they played this thing, the whole ship is shaking and any conversation comes to a stop. It plays every 30 seconds during fog. (Sings). Two tones, G and E flat. Really profound. Man, this is a horn! But it's a living piece of music. The whole ship is like an eternal symphony. I could just listen to this thing all day long.

"I don't dwell on that because it sounds too romantic, but anyone that goes out in the world and does recording, when you go out there and find certain drips, certain rivulets, certain booms, they become bigger than they are in reality. They become these extraordinary phenomenon.

"I can't explain why people are so obsessed with sound today. It's unbelievable, such variety. Otomo

Yoshihide, Merzbow, it's crazy stuff, Zbigniew Karkowski. We never had such a rich time in the time imagination as we have right now. It's extraordinary and maddening at the same time because there's no focus to any of it. It all exists together in these little schools. But to me they all relate. They're all part of one massive, obsessive, neurotic research.

You have new releases in the pipeline?

"There are several recordings in the works right now. Canti Illuminati from 1977 is a total vocal piece where I sing against myself with feedback with recording and one of the early analogue sythesisers, the VCS3.

Was that a performance piece?

"Yes it was."

You used to teach vocal improvisation.

"That's right, I did."
[page break]
It wasn't something you ever did with MEV?

"No, but it was a continuation of the MEV thing. A little vignette on that. The 'phone rings one day, I'm in Rome in my studio and some kids all hysterical say, 'you've gotta come over here - we're at the National Academy of Theatre Arts - we've occupied the school, you've gotta come over.' So I say alright. On the way over there I thought, what am I going to do. So created this kind of spontaneous vocal improv with them. And they were all in a state of agitation anyway. And the next thing you know the director of the school calls me up and offers me a job! (hysterical laughs). Chill them out with improvisation. That's a form of co-option. We'll use those revolutionaries. We'll give them exactly what they want.

"I did go there and through that experience I came up with this whole thing of doing improvised choruses. One of their year end theatre pieces was to bring in the theatrical idea and my own dreams about bringing sound back into space, into its real place, like harbours and ports and caves and train stations and so on. One of the first big pieces I did with my students there was to create a floating concert in row boats on a lake and that became a kind of hallmark for later years and fit right into the Maritime Rights project too. So I had little groups of choruses in row boats floating randomly and singing these sustained chords passing each other in different directions and random choreography. That whole experience set off a wonderful series of pieces for me.

"But again coming directly from the MEV experience. Just the simple principle that you can work with anybody and get them to make music.

Are there other outdoor works that are worth talking about? You've talked about writing pieces for caves and quarries and so on?

"Right. There are pieces for these locations which haven't been realised yet. A simpler piece to realise is called 'Everyone Dreams their own Music.' It's a roomful of beds. Under each bed is some sound device or a loudspeaker which periodically emits sound. It's more an artistic environment than a sound one but it's definitley a very compelling sound environment. This I've done several times. It's very sparse. You move through the space and there's sound coming from there and suddenly behind you. It's all very specific sounds. It could be a lion roaring, a car crash, someone making love, or a piece of glass breaking, it could be anything, Mongolian high female voice singing in that beautiful style, all these disconnected fragments of sound could be appearing, as if everyone in those beds, there's no-one in the beds, it's as if these dreams are becoming manifest sonically from these points in space.

"Other pieces... I've got some rather grandiose ideas. One is in development now together with a group of internet and video artists under the direction of an American visual artist named Jack Ox. Jack is quite well known for her translation of pieces of music into visual display. Now she's taking a set of some of my most precious sound samples and using this as a basis for her video work which when it comes to fruition will become a kind of a world wide web interactive, musical, audio-visual environment. What she's aiming for is to use these phenomenal multi-projection spaces where they do demonstrations for celestial astronomy, to have these 360 degree spaces that are completely filled with image and moving sound which I'm creating. So this is something which is in the making for the very near future.

"This covers the area of one of my big dreams of creating a global concert that is of using the entire planet as a concert stage. It's theoretical. It could be done in this case but I'm much more interested in something quite a bit simpler which unfortunately the internet can't do right now. It could do but it can't do it well enough. That is to create a concert of improvised music with people playing from anywhere on the planet at given times. You'd have to co-ordinate it through time zones and so on. I haven't figured out what the total output is or where one could hear it. In other words if you were in your own living room and just playing into your own computer, and transmitting this, how do you know what you're playing with. This is the problem to resolve. To get some sort of free-flowing mix that you could be hearing. Or you could perform as an act of blind faith putting your output into this massive input system with millions of people hopefully playing.

Isn't it going to end up as white noise?

"Ha! Ha! (laughs). Well you never know. You never know. In this regard we haven't really talked about experimental or theoretical things. This is one area where I believe the future of music making could lead.

"There are all kinds of attempts to use the internet as a concert hall. I think most of them are unsuccessful because they are too grounded in old ideas because they want to synchronise things. And with the internet you can't synchronise things. It's a total platform of anarchy and it's a place for non-synchrony. It's the kind of space that John Cage would have embraced immediately if he'd have lived long enough to do anything about it. But I recognise now, not just as an aesthetical cute idea, I really believe that we're living now in a very, very powerful musical developments and electronics is one of the prime movers, the prime forces behind that. It's only in its infancy now. Everyone thinks now that we have all these powerful computers and these multi-track studios in our hip pockets, we can walk around with all this hardware and everything is easy. But everyone is just playing the same old music over and over again. It's the same four-four time. There's nothing wrong with four-four time, it really coagulates people and brings people into a beautiful space, but there's other kinds of spaces. And when society's ready for those other kinds of spaces they'll have the electronic means to be able to realise beautiful things with them I think.

"So I think what I'm saying is that autocratic music is coming to an end. (Laughs!)

"Well listen, the improvisation movement is a good sign of that. This stuff couldn't have survived fourty or fifty years that it's had this great life. Who'd have tolerated this stuff?

It seems to be in quite rude health. It doesn't seem to be on the way out.

"Not at all. There are growing numbers of young people. They are completely ahistorical. They don't know where any of this stuff came from, they don't know who's who. They just know that (clicks fingers) that energy, those rough edges, those unpredictable spaces are what they're looking for. You see I'm now longer talking as a composer.

No, you slipped back there for a second.

"Well, there's excitement on both sides of the page, man.

So are you looking forward to tomorrow [recording with AMM] and Saturday [perforoming at the Freedom of the City festival on the same bill as AMM]?

"Absolutely. I never would have dreamt of a historical moment like this and I'm not going to put too much weight on that, on the word history, but AMM in its current formation are one of the groups that I go out of my way to hear whenever they're around, I think they're among the top music makers of our time. As for my own MEV brethren, well we're not so bad either. We don't exist as a group anymore, not in the way that AMM does but we're ready for the occasion.

Who makes up the group MEV?

"I think we feel a little bit badly because Steve [Lacy] can't be here because of his health. It's hard to know who the MEV group really is. Essentially the three living founding members happens to be myself, Rzewski and Richard. This was actually the three that were simultaneously in touch with the original AMM when Cardew was here as well. Who knows the music may turn out to be shit. But I doubt that (laughs). I really doubt that.

Chris [Bohn] at The Wire lent me an MEV album that had an entirely different line up on called Leave the City. You know that one?

"Oh my god, that's a false MEV. Those are some French kids who robbed the name. They were once with us, they were a bunch of hippies from Paris, they took the name and turned this thing out. It was horrible. It's a bunch of hippies playing flutes. Sorry about that.

"Allen Bryant was a founding member, he lives in Detroit and he puts out things called the original MEV which is mostly him. He's put some old recordings of his out which he recorded with some very primitive equipment at practice sessions. They're horrible recordings but some of the music is really good. For early MEV the best thing is the Alga Marghen release "Spacecraft". They want us to put out all of our old stuff, we have a lot of tapes. I do personally. There's a wealth of material and we just haven't got round to making it public and the producer at Alga Marghen is determined to bring it out as a body of work, maybe as a multiple CD set.

Do you have any connection with people like the Taj Mahal Travellers and the Sonic Arts Union?

"[Takehisa] Kosugi has always been a very close and dear friend. Likewise with David Behrman, [Robert] Ashley, Gordon Mumma and Alvin Lucier. We were very close. Actually some of the very first concerts we gave together in Rome were together with Sonic Arts Union in 1966, believe it or not.

"The Sonic Arts Union is a very different world. It's more like the Republicans versus the Democrats. They're more organised and together and MEV is just pure chaos, pure anarchy. We have no sense of being part of the world, but now that seems to be changing somehow."

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