

Nicolas Collins
Interview with Josef Cseres
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Josef Cseres: At Wesleyan University you studied with Alvin Lucier. How did his experimenting spirit and interest in process and spatial aspects of sounds influence your musical thought and poetics?

Nicolas Collins: When I arrived at Wesleyan in 1972 I was unsure what my area of concentration would be. I was interested in music composition, and electronic music in particular, but chose this university primarily for its program in Indian music. I also considered several non-musical areas of major study (including visual art, geology, and Latin American studies). But Lucier – whose work I did not know prior to meeting him – was the glue that cemented together so many of my disparate interests. With pieces such as “Vespers”, “I am sitting in a room” and “Music for Solo Performer” he showed that music could have references outside itself: in biology, architecture, neurology, and other areas well beyond the limits of the European classical music tradition, within which I – as a child of 1960s Pop music – never felt entirely comfortable. So whereas I studied North Indian classical music quite intensively for four years, along with a host of other subjects that are part and parcel of a typical American liberal arts education, I was for those critical years on the 1970s deeply immersed in the Experimental and Minimal music. Lucier brought in Tudor, Behrman, Oliveros, Ashley, Mumma and host of others for workshops, concerts, and parties. He took his students along to perform their own music in concerts with him around New England. It was a singular education, to say the least. And yes, those concerns central to Lucier’s seminal work of the late 60s and 70s were profoundly influential, and can still be detected in my music – most notably the exploration of acoustical phenomena, task-oriented open-form scores, a Minimalist approach to materials and methods. (On the other hand, Lucier was never very comfortable with circuitry or computers, yet encouraged his students to explore them, which I did; he also has a general dislike of improvisation, in which I became deeply involved when I was based in New York City during the 1980s. Today I think my work embraces more chaos than his, for better or for worse.)

JC: Another guru of experimental music, John Cage, mentioned you in the newer version of his prophetic text “The Future of Music” from 1974. How did you feel his compliment then, as a student, and how would you comment it now, after the 35 years?

NC: Cage had a long association with Wesleyan, and came for several residencies while I was a student. He attended a concert of mine at the time he was researching emerging American music for that essay. I admired his music greatly (especially his egalitarian electronic works such as “Cartridge Music”) and was flattered, of course, by this inclusion, but it was clear that he was trying to represent the broadest possible spectrum of new music – I did not delude myself that I was being singled out for brilliance on my part, rather for being in right place at the right time. Still, we remained on friendly terms until the end of his life, even though in the early 1980s he had a viscerally negative response to my second album on Lovely Music *Let The State Make The Selection*.

JC: What were his objections?

NC: He considered my music “irritating”, which took me completely by surprise. I thought of my work as so mild, so tentative, so middle-of-the-road - especially compared to his. A bit of prodding on my part revealed the culprit: the electric guitar.

The disc included two compositions featuring my “backwards electric guitars,” the rebus-like cover painting incorporated a red guitar, and there was a photo of the musicians on the back cover, guitars in hand. Curiously, on listening the instruments are almost unrecognizable as guitars, but I wonder if Cage ever got that far: red or not, I got the impression that electric guitars were a flag for Cage - especially since his confrontation with Branca at New Music America in Chicago. It was a feet of clay kind of moment. After a lifetime of trying to eradicate personal taste, not only in his composition but in his boosterism of the experimental community at large, the cracks were beginning to show. He had his preferences. He knew what he liked and what he disliked. He wasn't a god. He was human. An old human. We remained on good terms socially nonetheless.

JC: It reminds me the situation described once by Elliott Sharp who studied with Morton Feldman. A propos guitar, in your projects you often use e-guitars, playing them backward, electromagnetically manipulated, etc. What does e-guitar mean to you - in terms of your experiments and poetics but also from sociological point of view as the important symbol of 2 or 3 generations?

NC: The electric guitar is the single most important musical instruments invention of the 20th Century. By resonating the strings of garish pawnshop instruments with sounds of my choice I created physical filters and signal processors were viable on club stages, thanks to their connection to the mainstream pop culture of the 1980s. That said, within 30 seconds of getting on stage at CBGBs with such an instrument in 1982 I was greeted by the catcall “get off the stage!” I wrote about it in more detail in “A Brief History of the ‘Backwards Electric Guitar’”, published at my website (<http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/BackwardsElectricGuitar.pdf>).

JC: And why did you choose trombone as an instrumental tool of your early experiments?

NC: You can find a full account in “The Evolution of Trombone-Propelled Electronics” (<http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/TrombonePropelledElectronics.pdf>) which describes the system and its history in detail. In short: in 1986 I developed a hybrid system for live sampling and signal processing based on a pre-DSP digital reverb by Ursa Major. I had been making pieces for backwards electric guitar, which had great stage presence, so I was looking for a controller for the DSP that would be more visible to the audience than little knobs, faders and buttons of typical circuitry. “What’s the world’s biggest slide pot?” I asked myself; “a trombone!” I had never played the acoustic trombone in my life, but I had an old instrument in my loft that I had picked up years before for manipulating audio feedback. I linked the slide to a rotary shaft encoder (essentially half a mouse), and mounted a keypad on the slide so I could “click and drag” numerous program parameters by pressing switches and moving the slide. The sounds played back through a speaker (PA horn driver) coupled to the mouthpiece, so I could use the movement of the slide and a mute to acoustically transform the electronic sounds, as well as aiming the speaker. As an “acoustic electronic instrument”, it turned out to be well-suited for live improvisation with acoustic players, and was my entrée into the wonderful world of improvised music in NYC, London, Europe and Japan in the 1980s.

JC: In some of your pieces you engaged the consumer CD-players together with the traditional musical instruments. What are your experiences with the grouping together live instrumental music with manipulated players?

NC: The manipulation of a CD in performance offered me a practical compromise between a backing tape (technically simple, but always the same) and truly interactive computer music (more flexible, but challenging to produce on stage without the composer's presence): the performers know the tonal content of each track, but can never be sure exactly which fragment of the recording will emerge with each press of the >> footswitch; as a result performances have the tension and sense of uncertainty associated with improvised music, but are set against the harmonic roadmap of a more "composed" form.

I created a number of compositions based on the technique of pairing manipulated CD playback with live acoustic instruments that I first used in *Broken Light*. In *Still Lives* (1992) a single trumpet anticipates and suspends pitch material from a canzone by Giuseppe Guami over the looping disc. For *Shotgun* (1995) I transformed a tiny speaker into a substitute end-cork for Lesley Olson's bass flute, and connected it to a hacked boom box skipping through a CD of shakuhachi music; Olson's flute notes mix acoustically with the CD sounds inside the bore of the instrument, producing unusual beating patterns and cross modulations. In *Die Schatten* (1996) two modified Discmen draw out a few measures of Schubert's *Eine Kleine Trauermusik*, accompanied by 18 musicians; I prepared a pair of source CDRs, each with the same recording repeated 22 times to fill the whole disc: one CD player steps through the vision in track 1, while the other uses track 22, so that the two discs loop at different tempos, creating a rich, shifting polyrhythm against which the ensemble plays. In *Broken Choir* (1997) CDs of two different 16th Century Venetian canzoni loop at different tempos, producing a texture that is both polyrhythmic and polytonal; *English Music* (2002) uses two tracks of Elizabethan consort music in a similar way. *Still (After) Lives* (1997) is essentially a re-orchestration of the earlier *Still Lives*, with a chamber ensemble imitating all the CD artifacts – from looping to glitching – purely acoustically (as a composer I have periodically attempted to derive forms for acoustic instruments from other technologically-driven pieces).

JC: Another important part of your interest is the relationship between music and spoken text. Do you more interested in the narrativity or in the sound qualities of human voice?

NC: Three aspects of spoken word attract me:

- 1) I find the sound spectrum gorgeous, ranging from filtered noise to formant sine wave clusters, thanks to the world's most malleable filter.
- 2) I like stories, audiences like stories, and a narrative provides a great linear armature for structuring a piece of music.
- 3) From the first days of parenting I learned how powerful the inflection of speech could be, in terms of soothing a listener.

JC: Roland Barthes once said that there is no human society that wouldn't tell the stories. On the other hand he was extremely interested in the physicality of the voice; his essay *Grain of the Voice* is the best example. Do you see any correspondences between your conception of spoken/sang text and that of Barthes?

NC: Well, I've read that essay but don't have much faith in folding critical theory back into the art making process. I recently told someone that I compose with my "reptilian brain." My work is simple: stories, inflectional melody, sounds I like.

JC: So was that of Barthes. He loved stories, Schuman and he emphasized the side and ephemeral aspects of communication. Although he started as a rigid structuralist, he soon realized that the human cultural phenomena are heterogeneous and variable and cannot be grasped in the artificial schemes, frames and grids that our brains produce. Anyway, your attitude to technology and new media is not technocratic. For years you were a close collaborator with STEIM, more currently you are involved with the DIY aesthetics. How do you see the relation between "hi-tech" and "lo-tech" in current postmodern condition after the informational revolution was completed or at least tends to its end?

NC: On the one hand, technology is merely a facilitator of artistic expression -- the way a football dropped onto an urban plaza brings a bunch of kids together. At the same time, post-Tudor, I believe that in a society as technologically mediated as ours these devices carry implicit meaning that should not be ignored. Whether I work with traditional acoustic instruments, retro circuitry, or "cutting edge" software I try to balance my message with that of the instrument. I also believe that all technology is in a constant state of flux: a circuit built in 2009 with 1970s chips is not the same as the one built in 1974.

JC: What do you think about so-called "sound art" that became very fashionable recently? Do we need this label after the sound experiments of Cage, Tudor, or Lucier were accepted by theory as music?

NC: I like to say, "it's not that there's so much more sound art today than 20 years ago, rather than more art has sound." Thanks largely to the ubiquity of the camcorder as the new sketchbook, and the laptop as the universal editor (ctrl-X/ctrl-V cuts and pastes anything), artists are always recording audio as they record visual material; while they are observing and shooting they may not listen as carefully as they look, but when they go to edit -- unless they intentionally mute the speakers -- they are forced to listen to sync sound. An editing room is a great place to learn about sound whether you like it or not -- all that back and forth repeated listening. So in the art school where I teach, for example, all the students seem to be using sound in some way (just the way all art students used to draw), and most of them take a least one class in my department. Some of them shift so far into "pure sound" as to become composers, for all intents and purposes. They draw on a very different background (visual arts), and most have no traditional music skills, but they're using the same tools as pop musicians and conservatory students (ProTools, Max, Logic, SuperCollider, etc.). Sometimes these days it's hard to separate "sound" by artists from "music" by composers.

But I still think of what I do as "music", and don't think there's any reason to re-classify Cage or Lucier -- especially given their obvious roots in the long stream of musical history. If anything, post-serialist European mainstream "classical" music should be pitied as a withering branch off of a thriving, evolving musical culture; "sound art", by contrast, shows vitality and growth.

JC: But on the other hand it shows also our deep dependence on technology and new communication media. I got a feeling that the natural qualities of sound and the capacity of creative listening are losing their human aspects and expressive passionate and immediacy in the repeated simulacra, produced by infallible digital devices that are no more alienated but became the extensions of our sensual bodies. In other words, thanks to the accessible technologies, many sound artists of today are "solving" the poetical problems that were already solved by Cage, Tudor, Lucier and others many years ago in fundamentally different technological conditions. Same like with the mobile phones --

we use them every minute because we have them, but the value of information they convey is mostly trivial. The result is that the most of the current sound art performances and installations seem to be just boring manifestations of possibilities of medium, the empty gestures for the effect itself. What do you think about it?

NC: History is a spiral, as Jacob Burkhardt (1818-1897) once said – cyclical with small variations. At the age of 55 I hear a lot of “reinvention of the wheel.” Many of my students, for example, are deeply into Minimalist drone music, and are in essence recreating the work of LaMonte Young, Terry Riley, Pauline Oliveros, Eliane Radigue, etc. It’s all part of the learning process, imitation – but it’s important to know when you’ve broken out enough to make a personal contribution.

History is also a great filter. I’m sure there was a lot of crap music in the 18th Century but what we remember (and listen to) is Bach. In the present we’re forced to sort the good from the bad every day. But rest assured, there is work as good as Bach being made at this very moment, maybe even with mobile phones.

JC: Of course that the history is selective. The music we know from the past we know because it was written down by the literate elites. We can only imagine all the musics that were for sure played but remained unknown for next generations, at least in their authentic forms. But culture and the symbolic forms created by human societies have dialogical feature. We always live in between past and future although we use to emphasize the present condition. Every era has its own Bach, canonized later institutionally. But while the current visual artists, who create ready-mades or installations, are aware of the importance of Duchamp’s legacy, it seems to me that many sound-artists never listened to Cage or never heard Lucier, for example. For them, it is enough to know the technical parameters of their computer and software they are using. They are simply slaves of the medium and technology without any relationship and respect to the musical tradition and without any knowledge and concept of philosophy of sounds. It is a prevalent attitude today. What do you think about it, is it a temporary phenomenon of our technocratic age or is it a sign that the western institutional art world comes to its end and we are just waiting for new non-elitist form of symbolic expression?

NC: Again, I think there’s always a mix of good and bad art, good and bad artists, at any time. The good artists usually have a better sense of context, they’re the ones who know their Cage & Lucier, as well as Bach and Mahler and Ives, etc., are no more “slaves” of the technology than earlier artists were of the piano or orchestra. And most of them have a better understanding of technology than that early generation of composers who relied upon engineers to mediate the studio (Stockhausen, Boulez.) That said, since the ambient movement of the 1990s there’s been a lot more crossover of younger artists moving from a pop background into so-called “serious” music; a lot of them have a very selective view of music history. But that is not always a bad thing: even studying under Lucier I was always aware of the weight of the historical context of all the music I heard, the network of connections to other pieces and artists, the “album liner notes”, if you would; whereas the iPod generation of my students thinks in terms of playlists – “if it sounds good I’ll keep it, maybe use it in my own work” – treat all music for its phenomenological value as SOUND, don’t have or read liner notes. I think it’s very liberating for them as music consumers (their “record collections” are hugely more eclectic than mine every was at that age – and I was a very adventurous listener) and maybe even as creators, to throw off the weight of history. The downside, of course, is a lot of derivative music, but as I say, the task of every listener is to separate the good from the bad (as subjective as that may be), to be an editor. I don’t have the time or

energy to worry about all the bad art in the world unless I see it crowding out something better, and only sometimes then. Long ago I resigned myself to working in a niche market – call it elitist if you will, but I feel that as long as there is one more person in the audience as on the stage then the show must go on. When I do a solo show that just means the producer has to bring a date.

JC: Can you tell our readers what will you play at your upcoming concert at the Exposition of New Music in Brno?

NC: A combination of work for circuits, computers and players. This will include: "Salvage", in which seven performers make sound by re-animating dead circuit boards; "Pea Soup", which creates "architectural ragas" from room resonance with computer-controlled feedback; "The Talking Cure", in which a computer generates piano music from the inflection of spontaneous speech.