

*Email interview by Rui Eduardo Paes (Lisbon)
with Nicolas Collins (Chicago)*

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1 - The central place that text has in your music since "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night" and specially in the new "Sound Without Picture" makes me remember the written scores by Alvin Lucier, your composition teacher, which were more literary than most of the scores in the Fluxus years. Do you think there's any connection - a sort of "literary" ascendancy, a kind of "literature as music/music as literature" quality? Tell me all about your purposes in this domain. Why, now, the use of texts signed by other people?

Although there are other composers whose work I have scrutinized, or with whom I have performed, or whom I have just keenly admired (Christian Wolff, David Tudor, John Zorn, John Cage, Robert Ashley -- to name the most obvious), Lucier was my only real teacher -- I spent a total of six years under his guidance at Wesleyan University, from 1972 though 1979. "I am sitting in a room" was probably the most influential single piece during the early stages of my "finding myself" as a composer. The reasons? Where to start?

I was liberated by the idea that one could make a piece of music not built (overtly, at least) on the foundations of European art music (for which, at the age of 18, I still did not have an instinctive, "gut" feeling) but on something "non-musical" -- in this case architecture, which connected all too neatly with my background and other interests (both my parents were architectural historians, and as a kid I was taken to look at vaulting far more often than to concerts.)

The school of American music of the late 1960's and 70's that came to be called "Minimalism" was a pedagogical goldmine -- those prose scores gave one so much to talk about. And "I am sitting in a room" was the non plus ultra: a piece that explained itself, seemingly completely, whilst still leaving room for mystery and, well, "music." [See my notes for the Lovely CD release of this work for more details.] This "prosaic" role of language was actually more significant to me than any overtly "literary" qualities the text might have -- as with the "non-musical" subject matter, the idea of a distinctly "un-Lieder", non-poetic text for a "song" was radical.

Performing it (which required no "musical" skill) made one feel like an alchemist, not a mere interpreter of a fixed score. The notion of gradual transformation of the mundane into the sublime, with attendant attention to fine details, has remained core to my music.

Under the spell of Cage's "any sound can be a musical sound" adage, I felt myself quite incapable of choosing between any one sound and another. Therefore

“process” -- in vogue in the 1970s and certainly central to “I am sitting in a room” -- was very attractive.

My absorption of “I am sitting in a room” led to an infatuation with feedback (howl-round, as the English call it). I was smitten with a Zen-by-way-of-Cage image of feedback as the infinite amplification of silence, and devoted my student years to creating a series of feedback pieces, culminating in “Pea Soup” (1973-75), a self-stabilizing feedback system that used a simple circuit to create evolving feedback melodies out of the resonant frequencies of the room -- a sort of time-aligned variation on “I am sitting in a room.” Ultimately Lucier’s influence on me was somewhat reciprocated: as he says in his interview with Douglas Simon (in Chambers and Reflections/Reflexionen) my work with feedback influenced his creation of “Bird and Person Dyning”.

My first use of texts dates from the same period, and consisted of pieces incorporating found text material -- written and (later) culled from live radio broadcasts. I wouldn’t link this aspect of my style exclusively to Lucier -- rather it was “in the air” at the time, and my obsession with words and language pre-dated my studies with Lucier. (I come from a very verbal, reasonably literary family, and was from childhood a compulsive reader.) The same Cagean koan that drove me to feedback undoubtedly attracted me to “found” -- rather than self-generated or overtly literary/arty -- texts.

Whereas my interest in semantics and content goes back further, my fascination with the phenomenology of speech -- its sound, melody, rhythm and pathology -- was undoubtedly inspired by Lucier. In my seemingly irrational avoidance of predictable pulse one can hear his stutter: the quirky shifting loops of “Devil’s Music” and the off-kilter swing of the skipping CDs in “Broken Light” and “Still Lives” owe more to Lucier’s unintentional “verbal drumming” than to the three years I spent studying Tabla as an undergraduate.

“It Was A Dark And Stormy Night” (1990) was a pivotal work for me: conceived simultaneously with my first child, the dominance of its text (assembled from some dozen authors) can be seen either as a commentary on the issues of appropriation that had come to characterize my music (and much of that of my peers) during the 1980s, or as a harbinger of the ritual of reading to my children that was to play a central role in my life during the 1990s (and which greatly influenced the composition and performance of the “Sound Without Picture” series.)

Why texts by other authors, rather than myself? Because they write better than I do.

Around 1993 I gave myself the challenge of trying to compose a piece of music that would give the listener “the feeling of reading” (as opposed to listening) -- a subtle distinction, perhaps, but one which makes my pursuit probably doomed to failure. With the completion (and CD release) of “Sound Without Picture” I feel like getting away from spoken text for a while, but I am experimenting with ways of

presenting texts visually in performance (by projection, for example) and incorporating speech transformed beyond intelligibility.

2 - It's with some reluctance, I know, that you call yourself a "player". So, do you consider yourself a composer that plays, and more than that, that improvises sometimes, or a composer AND a player, an improviser? It's significant that, after 8 years of silence, you return with two CD's, one composed, and the other one improvised...

The formative years of my education were dominated by the emergent idea of the "composer/performer": driven by inadequate performances by unsympathetic ensembles, the pursuit of new musical instruments (such as electronic systems) or sheer megalomania, certain composers turned to performing their own work. LaMonte Young, Philip Glass and Steve Reich formed their own ensembles, the Sonic Arts Union performed the work of its four resident composers; Terry Riley went solo.... Although perhaps a traumatic step for my elders, for my generation the notion of performing one's own music grew naturally out of the pop experience (harking back to the "singer/songwriter" innovation of the "British Invasion" that challenged the supremacy of the Tin Pan Alley tradition in America in the early 1960s).

Lucier was curiously "anti-improvisation", however -- I think that many of the composers who had abandoned traditional scores for prose notation and oral instructions either had problems with interpreters "taking liberties" or simply felt defensive about justifying their being "real" composers without "real" scores, and thus bristled at the use of the term "improvisation." So I fell into an anti-improvisational attitude that was at odds with my interest in pop and jazz, my study of Indian music and -- as Gordon Mumma once pointed out to me -- especially silly at a university like Wesleyan, where the distinction between composition and improvisation simply didn't exist in many of the traditions represented in its world music program.

When I moved back to New York after university (in 1980) the "Downtown scene" was similarly divided into two camps: the minimalist and "experimental music" composers, and the improvisors, each sporting its own practitioners, venues and fans. There was some overlap amongst the fans, but I was, I am sad to say, almost completely oblivious to the improvised music scene until the latter half of the 1980s. My seduction eventually took place on three fronts: I was seeking musicians for some open form pieces, and the improvisors were the most appropriate (and easily available) performers; after developing my "trombone-propelled electronics" (a home-made live sampling and signal processing system controlled by -- and playing back through -- and old trombone) for a specific composition I discovered that it not only lent itself to additional composed pieces, but was a surprisingly versatile instrument for improvisation in conjunction with players of more

conventional instruments; and, perhaps most importantly, the improvisors as a rule were extraordinarily enthusiastic about collaboration and experimentation.

Collaborating with improvisors gives me the freedom to try out material and strategies that later make their way into more composed pieces. Most of my compositions involve a lot of freedom for moment to moment decisions, depend on accidents and chance, and call on well-developed improvisational skills -- admittedly subsumed into an overall-preconceived strategy. The hours spent with improvisors also served as an invaluable, hands-on education in orchestration. But I still cannot regard myself as an all-around instrumentalist -- my instruments, such as the trombone-propelled electronics, the backwards guitars and the hacked CD players, are very limited in range and potential application -- even though I continue to collaborate with a handful of long-standing friends in more-or-less improvised structures (most notably Peter Cusack, Robert Poss and Jim O'Rourke), do the odd "pick-up" improvised gig, and participate in some repertoire projects (most recently a Cage concert in London and a Wolff retrospective in Groningen.)

David Tudor once criticized my compositions as being too tightly constructed and "hurried" -- he always preferred my sound checks, where the same material was given more time to develop, and sometime just sit. Improvisation seems to give me a similar license to slow down, and provides a nice balance to my bad compositional habits.

3 - You said once that you prefer to recycle existing sounds and music than to originate your own. That puts you side by side with musicians/sound artists like John Oswald, Christian Marclay, Carl Stone, Negativland, etc. Differently from them, yet, recycling isn't a purpose for you, but a means to achieve what you want. Can you clarify your position in this matter?

Going back to my answers to your first question, from early on I've had a big problem choosing one sound over another -- I've never been one for synthesizers, in that I have absolutely no ideas for "synthesizing" new sounds. Almost all of my compositions (and improvisations for that matter) have been based on the gradual transformation of found sound. I usually wallow in that fuzzy region between the recognizable, referential, content-laden "sample" and the more abstract, neutral "pure sound" derived from that sample. Is that any different from Oswald, Marclay, Stone, Negativland? Probably not.

I don't think any of us are interested in the process or technique simply for its own sake -- we're all making objects in the end, there might just be a sliding scale of emphasis between the "political" (in the most general sense of the term) and the sonic aspects of the activity. Maybe this appropriationist technique has to be seen simply as a style or form of music -- like gospel, bluegrass, techno, concerto, sonata, etc. --, and the individuality of the composer must be sought in the character and

intention of a work, rather than as the proprietary domain of any specific artist or politically allied group of artists.

Tangentially, since beginning the "Sound Without Picture" cycle -- whose sometimes overly-poignant texts prompted me to dub my style "the new maudlinism" -- several people have commented that I "do not belong on 'computer music' or 'electronic music' concerts." It is not that I don't employ the requisite technology -- although often hidden, I mix surprisingly "high" technology in with the more obvious pedestrian tools -- but that the content and tone of these works is somehow too "humanist", seemingly anti-technological, to fit in with most of the other music being produced under those rubrics. This observation makes sense, yet nonetheless always comes as a bit of a shock, since I've always seen my music as -- for better or worse -- springing from technology (as in the old Tudor appellation, "composers inside electronics.")

For the last few years I've been thinking that the ultimate significance of "electronic music" might lie more in its pedagogical value than its identifying characteristics (such as its sound palate, for example); that extensive early experience in electronic and computer music could be seen as merely an alternate education in musical form, leading to the composition of works for conventional instruments using electronically inspired forms and structures -- leading eventually, perhaps, to an eradication of the terminological distinction between "electronic music" and "music." This could be merely the self-doubt of mild mid-life crisis, but one could point to Lucier as a perfect example of this evolution: in 1987 I told him that eventually he would be known as America's pre-eminent composer of chamber music (no pun intended) and -- 12 years on -- this does seem to be the direction he is heading (who would call him an "electronic music composer" today?).

4 - Why the need to build your own sound machines? You couldn't obtain the same results with the existing reproduction technologies, samplers and so on (I already know your answer, but not the reader)? It's interesting that you transformed your homemade gadgetry into an "instrument", a sort of trombone, the "trombone-propelled electronics". It's because, for you, the conventional notion of instrument is still important?

Initially my generation of electronic music composers went through the often arduous process of learning basic electronic design because at the time (early 1970s):

- 1) Integrated circuit technology had just advanced to the point where a person of average intelligence actually could learn to design and make some musically useful circuitry without a degree in engineering,
- 2) but commercial synthesizers were still too expensive to be personal instruments for the average person,

3) and conventional synthesizers were often ill-suited to our musical ideas.

For example, David Behrman -- a violist and composer by training, with no technical background -- needed 100 oscillators and a pitch detector, so he built them. Within a few years the cost of commercial synthesizers was no longer a serious factor, but until the end of the 1980s the drive to invent continued to be fueled by the "generic" nature and technical limitations of most of these machines -- many pioneers of home-made electronic instruments merely exchanged the soldering iron for early microcomputers in the late 1970s, and continued to work in parallel with advances in the commercial sector. I continue to do what I do (design, build and hack hardware, program computers, construct electro-acoustic devices) out of habit -- I seem to be reasonably skilled at these things, and get good musical results with them -- and for economic reasons, as well as in pursuit of the still otherwise unobtainable, but at this point in the evolution of technology I might be considered more of a Luddite than a visionary.

I've told the story too many times: my trombone-propelled electronics emerged from a desire to create an electronic controller (for a digital signal processor) that was big enough to be visible to the audience -- like a huge slide pot -- and the \$12- trombone lying in a closet in my loft seemed an obvious armature; mounting a speaker on the mouthpiece for further acoustic transformation of the electronic sounds made the use of the trombone seemed somehow less "arbitrary" (otherwise I should just have used some telescoping tubes) -- it became "almost an instrument." Although this ersatz-instrument has typecast me as some kind of new-age luthier, my motivation has not been to make instruments for their own sake; rather, I seem to be attracted to hybrids -- to musical systems that combine hardware and software, electronic and acoustic elements, sophisticated technology and everyday objects -- and the need to perform on stage, rather than produce recordings in a studio. And I have an inherent dislike of "futuristic" design -- I prefer the aesthetics of an old trombone or Hawaiian guitar to chrome and plexi.

Perhaps if I were a studio composer the issue of "instrument maker" would never arise -- that activity would simply be subsumed in the general process of building a work from diverse materials, some real (the sound of an oboe or synthesizer), some intangible (the twist of a knob, a digital edit). But on stage all my blemishes are visible.

5 - Electro-acoustics are your exclusive field in music, always in contexts with acoustic instruments (like the duo with Peter Cusack) or with voice, not treated electronically most of the times. Any particular reason for that?

Lucier is, of course, the most acoustic of "electronic music composers" and -- despite immersing myself in electronic technology -- I've been acoustically obsessed from my first compositions. (In his interview in Robert Ashley's "Music With Roots

in the Aether," Lucier states that, "circuits are flat, sound is three-dimensional" -- which greatly irritated a fellow student composer at the time, but is very true.) Acoustic sound has always struck me as being much "realer" than electronic sound coming through a speaker -- less physical, less vivid --, although Peter Cusack recently sobered me by saying that I just hadn't been listening to good enough sound systems lately, and that I should go to dance clubs more often. I stand semi-corrected: a great sound system can make for a very physical experience, but I still perceive a difference, like that between a cinema screen and life itself. So I continue to try to mix up electronic and acoustic resources, to combine the best elements of structure, process, transformation, sound and acoustic projection.

There is a poignancy in an acoustic instrument, seen and heard on stage (Cusack's bouzouki, for example), processed digitally and then emerging "quasi-acoustically" through the bell of a trombone (replete with toilet plunger mute). One's eyes, ears and expectations experience a certain frisson that maybe justifies the awkward technology required for the effect.

In the case of the pieces in "Sound Without Picture" the spoken text is heard intelligibly but simultaneously transformed by various technologies into "music." Computers, signal processors and backwards guitars extract melody and rhythm from the lilt of the words and generate the sound and structure of the piece. The process of "I am sitting in a room" has often been simplistically described as "beginning with meaning and ending up with music" -- in my pieces I wanted the meaning and music to be heard in parallel, to combine in a form of counterpoint.

6 - Your music always seems to me "in-between". It's not "contemporary classical", but it's not, too, a kind of pop music it's not New Music and it's not "improvised music". It has characteristics and elements of those genres and families. We even can't say it's experimental, except if we consider the instruments played, which are really experimental and very personal. That definition of not-being-anything-in-particular and being-everything is intentional, is programmatic, or it only happened that way? And, if you say yes to this last hypothesis, why it did happen, in your opinion?

Well, for a long time I prided myself on "having no style." I felt that I had sublimated personal taste sufficiently that there was no way to identify, on listening, a Nic Collins composition. Hey -- I was young and stupid. After 10 years or so of writing music I listened back and was struck by three observations:

- 1) It all sounds the same
- 2) but the earlier stuff was more radical
- 3) and the recent pieces are the worst.

Every five years or so I do one of these therapy sessions and always have pretty much the same reaction. I do have a style, I suppose, but I may be intentionally trying to avoid one nonetheless, which could account for the “in-between-ness” you describe. Is it possible to be this way without being reduced to the term “eclectic”? I hate that word.

I certainly don't follow any “school” of compositional thought. Lucier never tried to turn out little Luciers, but do I sound like him? I think I try hard not to, but am obviously attracted to many of the same concerns.

It is possible that my “style” is a natural extension of the Cagean “slice of life” aesthetic combined with Lucier's lesson that you can make music about virtually anything. One's music could become nothing more or less than a slightly mediated reflection of one's everyday experience -- ie, nothing special, except in that everybody is (as they say in California) “special.” I do not come from a musical family (although Christian Wolff happens to be a second cousin), but my father did have a lot of inventors and craftsmen in his background. That's an American cliché, I suppose, reinforced by Cage -- the composer as inventor -- but I guess it has an element of truth: if I had to reduce my style to one word it would probably be “invention” -- a relatively pragmatic form of problem solving, drawing on whatever resources are at hand, efficient and economical. In defense of the relative uselessness of what I produce I would point out that the files of the patent office are full of functional but foolish inventions (the proverbial “better mousetrap”.)

7 - You often use easy-listening materials in your music, even if you turn them “uneasy”, and there's an ambient quality in it all, even if it takes you by the neck. Any reason for that?

I regard most musical technology as a “filter” -- both the “instrument” and the source material are only useful to me to the extent that together they can produce an unpredictable output. I got interested in “easy listening” music at the time of “Devil's Music” (1985), in which I performed live sampling and signal processing on radio broadcasts taking place at the time of the performance. The technology was crude, but I found it curious what kind of material produced the most “musical” results. Some was obvious: the spoken word of advertisements, ham radio and eavesdropped cell phone conversations (yes, I was scanning long before Scanner) were semantically chopped and blended; dance music was “re-rhythmitized” with endless variation to yield (in the words of Robert Poss) “an intro that never settles into a groove.” But there were surprises: mainstream rock music came through flattened and dull, but classical and easy listening music mutated into beautiful phase music. I think the presence of “real” acoustic instruments in the recordings of even the most banal easy listening music provided a sonic richness that transcended any musical shortcomings that could be perceived in the brief (one second) samples I was employing.

In "Devil's Music" (and other live sampling work I've done) there always lurks a game of "name that tune" (trying to identify the source music) that is not always desirable -- one's attention snaps rather sharply from "a Nic Collins piece" to "oh, that's Madonna" at the point of recognition, and some kind of associative hysteresis prevents a snap back until the sample has been dropped or rendered completely unintelligible. So it's sometimes convenient to work with relatively characterless, unidentifiable "wallpaper music" -- which is what much easy listening music is.

When I started working with hacked "skipping CD" players I got very involved in baroque and earlier music: "Broken Light", for string quartet and CD, used concerti grossi by Corelli, Torelli and Locatelli; "Still Lives" (for voice, trumpet and CD) and several ensemble pieces use music by Guami and the Gabriellis. I was attracted by the juxtaposition of the lush sonority of the early music ensembles with the harsh clicks and pops of the skipping CD (what I call "digital claves"), and the interruption and suspension of the flowing counterpoint in skipping loops forced one to "re-hear" the modal counterpoint as a jazz-like variation in chord voicings.

Even radically processed easy listening music probably still belies its source material, and the simple tonality of skip-elongated early music minimizes the chance of any radical disruption of musical order, so I suppose these pieces end up with a rather ambient quality, as you say. I think I am a rather conservative composer, not given to dramatic statements, shocking juxtapositions, fast changes, etc. By and large I produce short, relatively ephemeral work, and have little interest in undertaking a "masterpiece." The word "boring" might also be useful.

8 - Besides being a musician, you have a cv as an organizer (artistic director of STEIM, editor in "Leonardo Music Journal") and a thinker (writing essays and teaching). What represents those activities for you? A complement, a necessity?

Having just ruled out any obsession with masterpieces I must modify my statement: I have no desire to compose all the details of such a large-scale work, but I am very interested in working within the community of artists to facilitate larger projects. I have for many years produced concerts and festivals, served on the boards of not-for-profit institutions, and written on a range of musical topics. I was artistic director of STEIM (a Dutch music research foundation) for several years, am editor of the Leonardo Music Journal, and have just -- for the first time since leaving the university in 1979 -- begun teaching full time at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I am genuinely interested in serving my community, but specifically in directing activity into forms that yield something whose value goes beyond the individual recipient of largesse: a festival, a book, a recording.

For me the development of festivals and art events is a form of orchestration, or indeed, of composition: sonic resources from the world at large, selected and arranged so as to convey meaning. The fact that these resources are fully realized

artworks in their own right makes their integration into a new situation all the richer. As in the old roué's quip that "a drink before, and a cigarette after, are the three best things in life", sometimes that which is most important is best glimpsed in the vacant ellipse between things properly arranged. Large-scale projects like "Pfeifen im Walde" (a festival on the phenomenon of whistling that I've produced in Berlin and Luzern) or "Stroomgeest" ("Aetherwave" - a group exhibition of visual and sonic art concerned with spiritualism and ghosts that took place in a derelict country mansion near the Hague) are my "operas."

9 - What comes next? A new silence, or more records and new projects?

Mostly silence, as I work to get my feet under me in a new job and new home (as I write the staircases of my house have been temporarily removed). But, with the understanding and assistance of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I am honoring ongoing concert and installation commitments (mostly in Europe). I've just made contact with an ensemble here in Chicago, in hopes of continuing the instrumental work that has become increasingly important to me. And for a concert at ZKM (Karlsruhe) at the beginning of January I developed a new instrument (a backwards bass guitar, driven and processed by a home-made analog synthesizer) that suggests a new style of solo performance -- more extended, relaxed and contrapuntal than I've achieved with previous systems.

I subscribe to what I call "the anniversary theory of history," which holds that important things happen on mathematically obvious dates. With the odometer having just rolled over in a big way I am hypersensitive to the whiff of "the next new thing" -- whatever that may be.