Interview with Arnold Dreyblatt
Christoph Cox, 1998

CC: You mentioned that you feel a close kinship with Tony Conrad and that you were initially most influenced by his film/video work. Did you study with Conrad at Buffalo? If so, was it in a music or a film/video context.

AD: I first met Tony while a graduate student at the Center for Media Studies in Buffalo around '74- he was still teaching in Ohio and was just visiting. Tony didn't come to Buffalo until some years later. At first all I knew about him was the soundtrack for *Flaming Creatures* which I had seen at the Whitney Museum around '72. I was very interested in periodic visual perceptual phenomena- I was making "flicker" videotapes when I was shown his early experiments and that of filmaker Paul Sharits (who also taught at Buffalo). But ironically, it was a concert by the Creative Associates of a work by Alvin Lucier (1974) which involved a display of sine waves in space that opened up the world of sound for me. As a student of the Vasulkas, (video artists who were teaching at Buffalo after founding the Kitchen in New York) I had been made keenly aware of the relationship between "slow" frequencies of sound waves and those really high bandwiths of the electromagnetic spectrum. What was important for me was that it was all about waves. So when I entered that concert of Alvin Lucier, I suddenly realized that these were waves that one could percieve and experience and touch, that that musicians where really just comparing frequencies in their heads and that instrument builders had preserved this knowledge which was no longer concious for musicians. So I was hooked, and dived into sound and eventually "music" for the next ten year.

A few weeks after this concert I was at a party at the filmaker Hollis Frampton's house, and I found a copy of La Monte Young's *Selected Writings*" in his bookcase. I saw that his *Drift Studies* was basically about the same acoustic effect as Lucier's piece, and then I read further, and saw that Tony's name came up. In this book, what impressed me most was that La Monte was applying the acoustic language of music description (frequency and amplitude) to what is commonly called "Music". A few months later I was back in New York City studying with him. It was only later, as La Monte's tape archivist, a job I did for two years, that I discovered Tony's contribution to the conceptual development of the *Theater of Eternal Music.*

CC: In your response to my first set of questions, you mentioned that you are "starting to work on some longer pieces, which should come out on the next CD." Can you say more about this: i.e., is this CD already in the works? if so, who will put it out and when are these Orchestra pieces from the *Memory Institute* project or recordings with Jim O'Rourke and other Chicago folks.

AD: These are the most recent pieces of the Orchestra in Berlin, recorded in 1997. I'm producing this material this summer. Included is a 30 minute version of my piece *Escalator.*

CC: Perhaps you could let me know where you are as you write this.

AD: I'm at the house of Luca Ruzza, an Italian architect and stage designer, and we are working together on the *Memory Project* for Amsterdam in November. I'm a house that he designed, in a beautiful spot north of Rome in an Etruscan valley.

CC: How do you situate your own work in relation to that of fellow “minimalists” such as La Monte Young, Tony Conrad, Phill Niblock, Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros. That is, do you see it as motivated by the same, similar, or different concerns as motivate these other folks?

AD: I’ve already spoken about La Monte, Tony and Alvin. I met Phill Niblock around ‘75, and got to know him in the period that I left La Monte’s enclave. We both had come from a visual or media background into music- Phill was an accomplished photographer and filmaker. I think that we both approach working with sound in a visual sense as textural blocks. But in answer to your question, I think that there are approaches and attitudes in the air in any particular period, and that each generation passes on some knowledge. So that what I’ve made relects its own synthesis and way of doing things. I gave myself quite a few years in the 70’s to allow all these influences to incubate before I came out with “my thing”. After all, this was an incredibly active time, there were often concerts every night, not to mention the total environment in dance, theater, etc. But in the music scene itself, I always felt strangely an outsider, in the sense of not coming from a musical “old boys network”. I hadn’t gone through the normative intiation process: that incredible time investment in years of practice and handiwork. So I was free on one hand but with hands tied. Other than in the case of Phill Niblock and a few others, there would always be a gulf with between myself and both the older generation “masters” as well as my contemporaries. I was also very conscious about looking to non-western (both folk and court) musics, as well as the early stages in the development of western classical music for my “influences” and “confirmations”.

CC: From the beginning, what has interested you rythmically in the steady “beating drone” of the bow on bass viol strings. Was (and is) this just an acoustic necessity, i.e., the necessity to sustain vibration on string instruments? Or was/is there something about the rhythm itself that interests you.

AD: It’s one of those chicken and the egg questions! In whatever medium or material, I’ve always proceeded from a moment of “finding” and then proceeded organically from there. During that “incubation” period I just mentioned, I spent a few years not only involved in theoretical investigations, but also practically taking apart and putting back together various musical instruments. And in the course of this, I discovered the *Excited Strings Bass*. Of course I was led to the bass for it’s huge resonating capacity and the long speaking length of its strings. And I had already decided on strings as the only instruments which enabled the “basic acoustic model” to be seen, heard and touched. Unwound wire can produce more of the higher overtones because of its greater flexibility. So it was already a set up. Then, in order to keep those high overtones flying, one had to keep hitting, sort of like juggling to keep the balls up. And it was fun!

CC: When you moved to Berlin in 1984 and organized a new *Orchestra for Excited Strings*, you began to incorporate percussion for the first time. Of course, from the beginning, your music had been percussive, with the steady striking of strings. But, in the post-1985 music, you seem to have become interested in percussion in its own right. Can you tell me a little about this change and how you see percussion functioning in your ensemble in relation to the “excited strings”?

AD: I have to admit that I was a bit hesitant to use drums. It had become almost a cliche in the late seventies, and I was often not happy with the way those rock drummers in many of my contemporaries' overtone guitar music often obscured the overtones and textures of the electric guitars. And in opening the rhythmic complexity up, perhaps I was so absorbed in this very minimal and static thing based on hitting and striking with resultant resonances that I didnt want to muddy up the picture. Already before leaving for Europe I had been considering adding percussion, and being out of one's culture can be very liberating at first. I could do whatever I wanted, I had no history. So I started with one snare drum, being very careful to tune it very tight and wooden so as not to interfere in overtone content. All those years of rock rhythms in my soul probably took care of the rest- I found myself for years involved in variations of a kind of Bo Didley beat. It came completely intuitively, and of course I've had to learn how rhythm works from the ground up just like I did with tuning and acoustics. So this process is also apparent in the development of the music itself. I see the rhythmic aspect as already being in the music, so the percussion just accents it and propells it all along. It's like the basement or fundament of a building, which supports the whole structure.

CC: *The Sound of One String* seems to present two broad categories of music: on the one hand, Orchestra music that develops from *Nodal Excitation*; on the other hand, the one-man-band "digital dynamic processing system" music that uses triggering effects, midi-controlled devices, etc. Do you see these two musical categories as intimately related to one another, or do they simply represent two different directions that your music has gone.

AD: Don't forget a piece like *Music for Small String Orchestra* which fits into neither of those two categories. I see this compilation as representing a number of different directions that I've persued. The editing often relects which of the non-orchestra experiments I found most successful or unusual for various reasons. But of course, I've always come back to that "band" model. Even the "one-man band" refers to that model. And for instance, when I worked with that small string orchestra, I also tried to give the feeling to be part of a "band".

CC: Is there a conceptual (even political) interest, on your part, in the idea that the One (the fundamental) contains many (the overtones).

AD: No. It's just one of many structures which exist in the world. Of course this structure has metaphysical "overtones", but I think what's interesting about it is that we are talking about a structure (which exists both mathematically and is found in nature) which can be heard and experienced. And it's pleasurable for the sense organs to do so. When we make music which refers to this structure, we are repeating these sensations over and over again with different reference points which all lead to a unity.

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