

Interview with Arnold Dreyblatt
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EST: What are you up to these days, musically? Is your music continuing on the same lines as the previous *Orchestra of Excited Strings* releases? I get the impression when I look at the 3 CDs of yours that I have (*Nodal Excitation*, *Propellers in Love*, *Animal Magnetism*) that they're more a document of one large project-in-progress than stand-alone musical works, and I notice that in the AM inlay you say the music really only exists in performance. Could you expand on that?

AD: My musical activities have been expanding over the last few years. I had basically worked with my own performing ensemble, *The Orchestra of Excited Strings* since 1979. Last year, the Bang On A Can Allstars from New York commissioned a new version of *Escalator* which they have been performing in the States and in Europe since then. Also, I've been working on a number of pieces for individual members of the ensemble. Also last year, I started performing with Jim O'Rourke and some of his friends in Chicago. I've been very much stimulated by interest among the younger generation in my music, and I'm in a process of opening up the frame in which my music is made and performed. Already this year, the reissue of *Nodal Excitation* as well as *The Sound of One String* has come out. And I'm going to be co-producing some of the last recordings of my Berlin ensemble with O'Rourke in Chicago as well as planning some new projects with Table of the Elements.

I'd like to continue working with the musicians of the Orchestra in Europe, but including additional projects with other musicians as well. As you may or may not know, I've created a number of large multi-media and theater projects in Europe over the last 10 years, many of which have included the Orchestra. For my next project, I'm planning to work more with recorded loops of individual instruments which will be interactively played back within a sound environment installation. So I think some new recorded material will come from that. In answer to your question, I think it's right that all my music has proceeded from that first strike on the one string which used to begin my live concerts. It's as if the entire repercussions of that strike are then expressed in all the music I could ever make. I used to be very careful about what would be released, so that one could look at those three recordings as windows into the ongoing development of this one idea. On the other hand, if you listen to the new retrospective CD, *The Sound of One String*, I think you can get a feeling for some of the other musical projects over the years, including many periods which have until now not been documented. Because of the disparity between the possibilities of vinyl in the 80s in comparison to the dynamic range of live PA systems at that time, I felt that listening at home was a poor representation of the live performance in which acoustic events could manifest themselves in an enclosed space. It was this experience that I was aiming at. But I believe that times have changed, recording and CD technology is far superior, and ears have grown accustomed to make the necessary psychological translations of the recorded sound. The kids can imagine the acoustic situation.

EST: These three albums obviously share some common instrumentation and techniques, particularly the use of a very repetitive rhythmic structure as a foundation for the exciting of overtones; do these recordings offer a fair representation of your music, or do you compose in other styles also e.g. the collaboration with Paul

Panhuysen on *Propellers in Love*? Have you made other collaborations similar in intent to the Panhuysen one?

AD: There was a period of collaborations between the first and second European Ensembles, roughly between 1986 and 1990 which included work with Pierre Berthet (who later entered the orchestra), Tibor Szemz from Hungary and others. But I think that the *Sound of One String* adequately presents the diversity of styles, at least until the 90s.

EST: How do you feel your music has developed over this period? I was quite struck when I heard the new Nodal Excitation record how clear and refreshingly simple the sound was; its very easy to hear what's going on, whereas on the more recent *Animal Magnetism* the music seemed denser and I found it less easy to pick out different sounds.

AD: Of course, this reissue of *Nodal Excitation* makes it possible to hear that simple soundscape as it was originally intended. Since the original LP couldn't reproduce the dynamics of the recording, I was pleasantly surprised to finally hear it as it has existed until now only in memory. The initial spark has organically grown in complexity, and the first music was like a microscope shining on a very basic phenomena. As I keep going with these materials, I began to work with the sum of the parts. As I further developed the instrumentation and rhythmic complexity, I became interested in an acoustic situation in which now you hear it now you don't: because of the very rich texture of overtones, you can't always know if you're really hearing a particular sound or instrument, or if it's merely produced as a combinational acoustic effect. It's a kind of set-up. I suppose as the music has developed, what we listen for has to change as well.

EST: Could you tell me something about the influence of your various teachers (the Vasulkas, Pauline Oliveros, La Monte Young, Alvin Lucier etc)? Although a shared interest in unusual acoustic effects is very evident, your work seems otherwise very different to any of them.

AD: I believe that the teaching or apprenticeship situation can only provide an example for us: of a artistic life so lived, of a consistency and a commitment. Of course, there are particular techniques and knowledges which are imparted, but this may very unsystematic at times. I could say that the period I spent with La Monte both confirmed my musical leanings and interests and showed me very clearly the repercussions of following that line, both in terms of content as well as sociologically. I came to him as a young artist interested in particular acoustical phenomena, I left as a very confused young composer groping in the dark. I met participated in a workshop with Pauline while a young video student at the Media Studies center in Buffalo where I was studying with the Vasulkas. I've never denied myself by the medium, I've always followed my interests where they've taken me. On the other hand, my approach has been to go very deeply into a small slice of content, in whatever medium that happens to be.

EST: Could you tell me something about your non-musical artwork? As you can imagine, it's not easy to get information about your text and photographic work here in the UK!

EST: Why did you move away from acoustic installations towards more conventional music-making in the 70s?

AD: Yes, as I said, I began with an interest in displaying an acoustic situation in space. On the other hand, I of course grew up in the sixties where music played a pivotal role. So parallel to posing formalistic statements, I, along with my entire generation, had another very specific experience with amplified rhythmic music, whether as a performer or as a consumer. In the mid seventies, I got a job working with ghetto kids in East Harlem in New York, and I was hired to replace John Driscoll, who was student of David Tudor and very much involved in the home made electronics aesthetic. I was faced with new groups of kids every day, and I quickly realized that imposing this aesthetic was paternalistic, and that I had to work with what they could give. So I found myself founding Bands from these groups, sometimes many times a day, scanning for various abilities which could be tapped on the spot. So when my incubation stage was completed after the time with La Monte, what then came out was no longer a scientific exploration, but rather a form utilizing a model which was then ripening- that of composer with band playing music. This model had been developed first by La Monte with his group in the early sixties (where he probably applied it from his connections with the Ornette Coleman scene) and was then utilized by Reich and Glass. I remember being at parties of composition students at the University in Buffalo in the mid 70s (these were students of Feldman and Cage)- at the parties it was non-stop James Brown, during the day chance methods of indeterminacy! Somewhere along the line, I had realized that what musicians were doing unconsciously was comparing frequencies in their heads. What had begun as a focus on a language of music description based on the physics of sound as expressed by striking amplified strings gradually developed into a consciousness of ourselves as playing music within this band model.

EST: What motivated your move to Europe? Your musical style obviously relates very directly to a very American minimalist tradition; do you feel that the cultural and social environment is different in Europe, and has it had any effect on your work?

AD: It's always been clear to me that the formative years in creating this music could only have developed in the American and specifically New York context. Yet, I was born in New York, and as they say, an artist always has to leave his home town. New York has become claustrophobic to me, and I needed to free myself from the creative womb. Arriving in Europe in 1983, with a fresh personal history, I was free to open up some aspects of the music. I was particularly interested in performing in Eastern Europe during the eighties, where the audiences reminded me of the open ears in the 70s in New York. Especially in Budapest, I found a group of young musicians and composers (Group 180 for instance) who related to the American minimal scene from a quite different context. I found myself in quite a similar situation today, looking towards a younger generation, particularly in the States and in England, for a new impulse.

EST: Do you regard the process of making and adapting your instruments to be as important a part of your work as writing the music?

AD: From the beginning I felt that one must take into consideration the entire model of music making, from the acoustic properties of the sound generating instrument, to the techniques of performance, to the tuning system, to the display and amplification

of the sounds in a space and the resulting acoustic situation. Instrument development is only a part of that. In the last years, I have focused more on the use of traditional instruments, taking into consideration their acoustic properties in the creation of sound, as well as methods of working with non-tempered tunings. Writing music for me is only a code leading to creating a situation in which something can take place. But it is only a crude code where one can perhaps specify the pitch and rhythmic system, there has to be an oral tradition as well.