**Some Personal Musical History Stories**
by Arnold Dreyblatt, 1989

*New York*

My grandfather Max Dreyblatt played clarinet professionally in 'pit' orchestras for vaudeville and silent films in New York City. About to be drafted into World War One, he enlisted with his buddies from The Bronx as a military band which spent the war playing patriotic music in the trenches in France. Their job was to inspire the young boys in the infantry to jump out of the trenches only to be massacred. His grandparents, immigrants from Galicia operated a family ensemble entitled *La Troupe Maximov* which presented evenings of Gypsy, Russian and Turkish music during the late 19th century in Vienna.

After one and a half years of piano lessons at age 7 my teacher, having taught me with a number system of her own devising, tried to introduce me to the five line staff. This new system, having proved itself unintelligible to me, signaled the end of piano lessons. Forced into Recorder class at age 8 in the local elementary school, I moved my fingers without blowing onto the instrument. After three months I was called upon to perform a solo and I was thereupon expelled. The arrival of the Beatles in 1963 prompted numerous attempts at learning the guitar, but lessons were repeatedly terminated as I was consistently rated tone deaf and unteachable. I was almost 22 when I first met La Monte Young after a concert of his on Wooster Street. I had read his book Selected Writings as a film and video student in Buffalo. He listened patiently as I explained a little about my background, and then he answered some of my technical questions. I began poking for some hidden philosophical meanings but he cut me short. "Talk is cheap", he said.

It was around 1976 and I had spent almost two years as a student of La Monte and now I was searching for another teacher. I saw an advertisement for a workshop with jazz bassist Harold Anderson on the subject of '"Tuning and the Overtone Series'. Soon I was taking lessons at his storefront on East 6th Street. Harold was very kind to me but after a few lessons he could see that other than some indian singing lessons with La Monte I had no traditional musical training at all. I was arrogant in the sense that I knew what I wanted to do but I had no background to aid in its realization. So one time when I showed up for a lesson Harold became fed up when he understood that I couldn't keep a steady beat. He sat me down at the piano with a bottle of cognac and gave me a simple walking bass line to play over and over again. Every hour or so Harold would come back from whatever he was doing to check up on me, sometimes adding a note or changing an accent. After seven hours he sent me home. Having forgotten it all during the following week, I was ashamed to return. Many years later I was invited to Wesleyan University by Alvin Lucier on a graduate fellowship. Bill Lowe, the professor of jazz improvisation there, once came to a performance by my student ensemble. After the concert he came up to me and said, "I have this old friend in New York named Harold Anderson. He's been talking about doing something like this for years but he never seems to get it together. I've gut to give him a call."

It was in 1981 that I thought that I should have been playing more in the clubs. The scene had split in the late seventies and there were those who still played in the lofts, those that used to play in lofts that now played in clubs, those that played in clubs but

still played in lofts, and those that now would only play in clubs. There were new dress codes developing and new infiuences infiltrating from louder and more popular musics. Yet in New York these borderlines are hazier and less predictable than in Europe. So l had the feeling that my ensemble, The Orchestra of Excited Strings, was missing out on another audience. I decided to call an ‘informant’, my friend composer Rhys Chatham, and with his help I soon had a gig at the Mudd Club. I called up Rhys to thank him and to ask for some advice. ‘I wouldn’t play any longer than 20 minutes’, he said. ‘But what would happen if we played for 30 minutesfi’, I asked. ‘The kids get a little restless after a while and you can never tell what’s going to happen, he said. I was getting a little nervous and Rhys could sense it. He asked about my set-up. ‘Look, let me give you some advice: you’re dead without drums’. A few weeks later we performed for 25 minutes at the Mudd Club and everything went well. The next day the club closed and never re-opened.

When I look at a musical instrument I often have a vision of what it might be in another incarnation. In the late seventies I began developing a method of performing on an acoustic double bass adapted with piano wire. Through a combination of brushing and striking open strings with a bow, a complex chord of the overtone series results. My first concert on this instrument was in New York in 1979.1 then became interested in forming an ensemble with two of these adapted double basses (one with an extended neck), a retuned and rebuilt miniature piano and a hurdy gurdy. I purchased a second Kay plywood bass (for this technique I found cheap plywood basses to have the best sound) from an Italian on Long Island who said that he had used it to back Frank Sinatra. The neck separated from the body when I tried to fit it into my father’s car and the man was clearly embarassed. In fact I soon realized my good luck since it would have been difficult to separate the neck (in order to extend it) without destroying the instrument. And of course I would never have been able to fit it into my father’s car. I took the two pieces down to the workshop of a prominent bass repairman on Bleeker Street. I told him that I wanted to extend the neck 12 inches. ‘It will never hold’, he said, ‘I would have to take the whole thing apart and rebuild it, and it would cost five times the worth of the instrument’. ‘Why not just put some screws and bolts infi’, I asked. ‘No way’, he said, ‘you want to rape her!’. And he showed me the way out. I went home and inserted a 12 inch piece of wood into the neck and screwed and bolted it all together. It has held for over ten years now.

Some years later I was looking for more used violin family instruments at a mysterious shop on Broadway. They made their money renting to school kids, so everything was overpriced if you wanted to buy it. Mr. Tolchin, an overweight cynic in his late forties, ran the place with his brother Issac who did the bookkeeping. Tolchin was kind enough to let me hang out in the basement, a veritable burial ground of thousands of decapitated string instruments. When I emerged full of dust, Tolchin opened up his heart to me. ‘What can I dofi’, he said, ‘the instruments go out and come back a week later without necks. The kids probably carry them sideways through narrow doorways. The conventional repairs never hold. Can you fix themfi’. I explained to him about the ‘screw and bolt’ method and for the next six months I was busy repairing instruments and in exchange got a few for myself. One day Tolchin called me on the phone. ‘You’re out of work’, he said, ‘a five-year old just cut herself on one of your screws. The instrument came back with blood all over it and her mother is really angry’.

*Europe*

I was in Ankara, Turkey, with my friend Bob Labaree, an ethnomusicologist. We had made contact with a singer of the Bektasi Sufi sect who worked as a janitor at a local elementary school and he invited us to his house that evening. This man was an Asik, a singer of epic tales with devotional and mystical texts. These singers, still common in Anatolia, are noted for their ability to improvise a rhymed text to a given theme on the spur of the moment. The ceremony began as the family gathered around the master of the household. He played an instrumental piece on the saz and one of his sons danced. It all had the aura of a secret rite since such meetings had been banned in Turkey until recently. Suddenly, he took our tape recorder and placed it before him, looked at me and asked the names of my parents, where they lived and their religious faith. Bob was struggling to translate. Then he turned on the tape recorder and sang in rhymed Turkish couplets with saz accompaniment into the microphone: 'Can you hear me, Jerry and Lucille, in New York, Brooklyn, descendants of Abraham, Issac and Jacob; we are all of the same tree, don't worry about your son, he is very far from home, but he is safe with us'.

I performed with my ensemble in Budapest for the first time in 1985, sharing an evening with local ensemble Group 180. It was the largest audience that has ever heard a live performance of my music, over 800 people. A Hungarian friend of mine, who had traveled widely in the Soviet Union, had three friends visiting her from the Soviet Republic of Georgia during this time, so she brought them to the concert. Afterwards, she asked them how they liked it. The first one said: 'It was very new for me, so l don't know what to say about it'. I he second said: 'It was much too loud for me, I've never heard such loud music before'. And the third one said: 'It was just like Georgian folk music'.

I traveled with two friends in Bukovina near the Soviet border in northeastern Romania. We stopped in a roadside restaurant and sat down at a table with an old Sinti man. He asked us what we did for a living and we told him that we were musicians. 'I'm a musician too', he said. 'What do you playfi', we asked. 'I don't need an instrument I con play anywhere,' he said. 'So you're a singerfi', we wondered. 'No, I'm an orchestra he said and proceeded to demonstrate. He licked his right and his left thumb and began to rub them rhythmically on the formica table. One thumb played the traditional 'contra' backbeat bass and viola line, while the other was the 'prima' violin playing the melody. The pitches were accurate and clearly discernible. Later I was to find an example of this technique on a recording of traditional Romanian folk music. I was startled when the old man addressed me in English. 'I played Romanian restaurant Brooklyn Canarsie', he said, 'Rio, Bangkok Shiraz, ….'. The list went on and on. He continued in Italian and Portuguese. 'Was this before the warfi', we asked. 'No, I'm always traveling'. 'But how did you get outfi'. He pulled from his jacket a handful of passports of different nationalities and under different names. 'No problem', he said in English.

Some years ago I had illegally brought into East Berlin a number of musical instruments so that Alvin Curran, Tibor Szemzo, Paul Panhuysen and myself could play some music for some of my friends there. A friend of mine offered to help me bring out the instruments into the west. We were caught and then detained and interrogated for over 8 hours in an underground cell under the border of East and

West Berlin by East German guards. The instruments were confiscated and after one year of appeals by West and East German lawyers their return was refused. Among the lost instruments which had belonged to me was a copy of a Basque string drum, a Transsylvanian three string viola and an American ‘Gretch’ Hawaiian electric lap steelguitar. I wo years later I was surprised to discover that my steelguitar had been crudely copied and put into massproduction and was now available in most East German musical instrument stores.

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