JAMES TENNEY: SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

"Affirmation of parentage provides the primary substance of rebellion." - Harry Partch

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The music of James Tenney, in the entirety of its evolution to date, is comparable to no one else's. His career now encompasses some thirty years, if we start with his 1956 Seeds for 6 instruments. What is so especially amazing in Tenney's work is that over that span of time, he has maintained a steady growth and development of musical technique and style. The latter is most unusual -- among any artists, not just composers -- as people tend to lock into a given style or way of doing things, by their late 30's. This doesn't reflect any confusion on Tenney's part. Quite the contrary, it represents perhaps the most interestingly realized fruition of a revolution that has occurred in music since the 1950's (i.e. in the period of Tenney's professional career) -- one even more profound than that ushered in during those pivotal years of the 1910's and 1920's. That revolution is this: namely, that if a radical extension of musical grammar (syntax, phonology etc.) was achieved in that earlier period; in the 1950's and on, a radical transformation and questioning of the language of music (or music as language) took place. Everything changed (and everything became possible): we see (hear) that process most clearly in the music of James Tenney.

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"The composer working today has a heritage -- let us not call it a 'tradition' -- and Varèse is central to this heritage, though it should be obvious that the newer music will not sound like his. The changes that will take place in music (in the arts, in the sciences, in life) may never again reflect that

'linearity' we are so accustomed to finding in history. Perhaps when we have really learned to make that 'constant revision of values' Varèse speaks of, we shall find no more need for fixed 'values,' and may finally be able to live our lives with, as well as in, the present."

James Tenney, "Edgard Varèse," first published in The East Side Review, Jan./Feb. 1966.

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Tenney's work, like that of many composers through the late 1960's, took off from the music of serialism, especially as found in the work of Webern. But what a long way it is from the 1956 Seeds to the 1984 Bridge! The interesting thing is that it is perhaps a road that has now come full circle.

Always, though, there was the influence of the 1910-30's American composers -- Ives, Varèse, Ruggles, Partch etc. That influence is essentially melodic, rhapsodic in either melodic or dynamic contour, anti-system, expressive in nature.

In the middle of these two -- the European modernist and American experimentalist traditions -- was the work of John Cage.

So a composer of Tenney's generation had three options open: music as system and structure (inherited from Europe and serialism); music as individualist expression and dynamic intensity (inherited from the American composers); or music as a phenomenon of nature and physics, with a different emotional meaning than that of romanticism -- a kind of physics of probability (chance) and cognition (science) -- inherited from Cage.

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Tenney's early pieces, like Seeds for 6 instruments or Monody for solo clarinet, tend to eschew strict 12-tone practices. Small thematic cells are used in the former, with much of the textural transparency found in Webern (remember,

this is 1956, several years before the complete works of Webern were available on record in the USA). Development is textural, as in Webern, and in the wind ensemble pieces of Varèse -- melody is only a factor in the contracted, motivic, cellular sense; not the extended line of the American tradition.

In Monody we hear that extended line. Density 21.5 and Ruggles are the most apparent precursors here. That melodic line, reaching ever higher...

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But -- may I make a radical suggestion here? The attraction of Webern and later composers like Boulez for America's most radical composers was not their proximity to Schoenberg...but rather to Cage! But doesn't Cage, somewhat, follow in his illustrious teacher's tradition (despite his "problem" with harmony)? Is not Cage's chamber ensemble work, Sixteen Dances (1951), perhaps the most perfectly realized example of klangfarbenmelodie? Not to mention the prepared piano! The influence of Cage spans several periods of his career -- from the noise and bangs of the early percussion music; to the musically atomized work of his chance period; and the theatrical and philosophical implications of other work.

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Another little acknowledged fact about Cage is that he is the real father of American electronic music, even though others have tried to usurp that distinction. Varèse, of course, is the original voice -- but until the 1950's and Deserts, his influence was in words and theory, not action. Except for one crucial point, which provides linkage to Cage and through to Tenney: that the American percussion tradition was the first step on the road (twenty-plus years long) to electronic music. Noise, and the physics of sound (and not the structuralist attitudes prevalent in 1950's European and 1950-60's academic American electronic music) are the

ancestors of some of our best early electronic music. And conceptually the way was paved for that first by the 1930's and 1940's percussion music, followed by the landmark live-electronic pieces of Cage (beginning with the wonderfully titled Imaginary Landscape -- America hasn't been immune to the influence of surrealism!). Tenney's 1960's tape and computer pieces are best understood in this tradition. The wonderful noisy chaos of Fabric for Che, the anarchy of Blue Suede; the auditory "tunnel-vision" of Noise Study....

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Electronic music, along with the chance-inspired musical universe of Cage, helped precipitate another revolution in twentieth century music: not of technique, but of perception. Which, again, led away from the formalist and structuralist tyranny of serialism and post-serialism. It is worth noting that the early minimalist works of Riley and Reich sprang out of a milieu in San Francisco that had also spawned the San Francisco Tape Music Center. A new way of hearing music! Tenney's work is rich in these implications, and no piece is more so than For Ann: Rising. A piece with no beginning or end, in traditional terms, and which doesn't go anywhere! The concept of infinity in music -- mirroring Cage's dictum that music should embody the processes of Nature. Indeed, For Ann: Rising may be one of the most philosophically radical works since Cage's 4'33". And as music, how downright beautiful it is!

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One significance of Conlon Nancarrow's music, in the wake of a formalist tradition that has reached a point of saturation and exhaustion in the post-serial period, is that it provides a new musical basis for the idea of structure. Structure not

in terms of tonality, but in terms of time. This relates to the idea of a revolution of perception in music, and interfaces with twentieth century psychology and physics. Hence the importance of Nancarrow's music and the rapid acclaim (since its "re-discovery") it has received: it provides a pathbreaking, original basis for the idea of musical structure, and points a way "forward" for music (even if some of us are increasingly skeptical of the idea of "forward"....).

Anway, Tenney is right there with that revolution too. His essay on Nancarrow in 1976 was one of its "manifestos" -- and much of his work in the 1970's can be heard as dealing with these aspects of music-as-time, and the psychological perception of time and sound-in-time. This, combined with the physics of sound itself (attack-decay, density etc.) have produced such 1970's masterpieces as the Three Pieces for Drum Quartet, the Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow (for player piano), and the later Harmonia series.

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All this physics and psychology of course brings into question music as an "expressive" art, as opposed to a "theoretical" process of perception. Two influences on Tenney, Varèse and Cage, can be seen as representing those two poles. One word Tenney detests is "romantic" -- though "sentimental" is the real target of his venom, as I've met few people as "passionate" as Jim Tenney. The idea of romanticism is one heavily burdened with over-inflated literary notions from the nineteenth century. What Tenney wants is music as music, not music as "about something." If one wants that, throw in a text -- and one notices only a handful of works such as with lyrics in Tenney's catalogue, his 1981 Listen...!, whose musical function is essentially socio-political in intent.

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On the other hand, there is no way that one can ignore the fact that Tenney's music (like Nancarrow's and others) is "expressively" rich. To put it in slang: "The music's gotta move, and it's gotta move you." Tenney's 1979 Three Indigenous Songs is an interesting work to examine in this light, as the music has texts and titles "associated" with it. Even if he does not set the words to music in a traditional manner, he does create an association, in a unique way. He tries to embody the phonetic character of language in the instrumental writing. Language in its essence: not as literary meaning, rather language as energy. Not language as "pure sound" either, but rather the rhythm, melodic profile and movement of sound which creates "meaning" (listen to black gospel preachers if you want to know what that means!). The choice of text indeed determines the music, but in a way different from traditional text-setting. Tenney is enough aware of that that he writes the text into the musical score, just like in a song. One doesn't "hear" that, of course -- what one hears is the "character" of each text. The sensual turns and pleadings in the melody of the first movement, from the text of a blues song, full of sexual innuendo; the rhapsodic, breath-phrasing rise and fall of a Whitman poem; and the reiterative (not repetitive) character of an Iroquois healing chant, complete with call and response character.

In that third movement there are two basic phrases that alternate. One is a high flurry of sixteenth note figurations (with the text), the other a lower and slower chant-like response. It is interesting to note that none of the high sections repeat themselves exactly rhythmically, but are instead a constant florid variation of the same idea (which thus mirrors the text beautifully). And meanwhile the response section gradually but steadily ascends in pitch level in the flutes (while the tuba stays at the same pitch). That rise in pitch gives an ecstatic, steady lift to the music. All this, of course, has an "expressive" effect on the listener, but it

is so skillfully and subtly done, that one would be hard pressed, by listening alone, to pin-point exactly how and why. There is much of this kind of thing in Tenney's music; it is perhaps easiest to explain in the Three Indigenous Songs, because of Tenney's overt textual associations.

His work is also often rich in historical implications. The flute choir and the alternation of high and low wind instruments and registers, brings to mind Stravinsky's Symphonies of Wind Instruments -- a work that, interestingly, also hearkens back to an "indigenous" source: Russian folk music.

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Despite Tenney's scientific bent, he has also maintained an intuitive affinity with American popular music -- just as Conlon Nancarrow has, and Charles Ives did earlier. It is not central to his music, but traces of popular music reappear in his work throughout his career, from the 1961 Blue Suede to the 1969 Rags, and up through the previously-discussed Three Indigenous Songs. I would distinguish here between "popular" and "pop" music (and suggest that what later becomes pop music can originally start out as legitimate popular expression -- as in the case of Elvis Presley). Tenney is no fan of "pop" music, as he is a staunch enemy of easy formulas and the manipulative nature of commercialism. But he is certainly aware of the raw energy and vigor, the rough-edged lyricism of street culture. The United States has made a unique contribution to world popular musics in this century; in fact, has constantly been at the forefront. And here once again, we find James Tenney.

I would distinguish two modes of treating folk material: that of Charles Ives, and that of another composer who's had a great influence on Tenney, Scott Joplin. People are well aware of Ives' dynamic use of popular hymns etc. in the texture of his pieces -- essentially in a quotational and collage style.

With allusions to memory, time and place, extra-musical associations. Or in a manner that disrupts form, breaks up the rhythm of perception -- such collage methods are found in Ives' Concord Sonata (which Tenney used to perform, by memory), or in Tenney's Blue Suede tape collage. As in the latter piece and in Ives, these germ-motives from popular music can themselves become one of the generating sources of the composition.

The case of Joplin -- the relation of his "art" expression to his "popular" sources -- is even more subtle and intriguing. I'd suggest that its influence on Tenney and others has been to break down the concept of historicism, of linear avant-gardism: that the continuity of tradition, in both "art" and "folk" musics, can be as legitimate as the modern art tradition of constant innovation. Tenney certainly leans towards the latter, but perhaps this broader understanding, coupled with compelling personal reasons at the time, explains his sudden and surprising switch away from electronic music back to traditional instruments at the end of the 1960's. The growing knowledge of world musics that began then, while not a direct influence on Tenney, may have also contributed to the feeling of the times (at the height of the "back-to-the-land" movement of the hippie era).

Joplin was most certainly an art composer.

One who stayed true to his sources: who used European techniques and instruments, not to write (like some) "white-washed" music, but rather a music with complete personal integrity, that moreover took a rightful place in the European-inherited classical tradition. This tradition was extended, or virtually re-invented, later by the likes of Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington. But Joplin's synthesis of popular American and classical European elements was unique and seamless. Was it not a natural point to return to, and start off from again for Tenney, after two decades of pathbreaking experimental work? In 1969, he had personally and musically reached the

end of a certain road, and was not sure of the way ahead. Not one to merely repeat himself, he instead began again at a new point zero, with the enduring values ("if it works, don't fix it!") of popular music. A kind of musical and personal intuition, which the style and music of Joplin gave the go-ahead to (remember that Joplin's work was only "re-discovered" in the 1960's -- like Nancarrow's music, having that much more impact on people for having been "unknown" for so long...). The result, a unique transitional work unlike any that I know in other composers' musics, was the elegant and eloquent Three Rags for Piano. In my rather biased view, these are the most beautiful rags since Joplin and Morton. There is likewise no sense of a white composer copying black music -- the stylization and personal integrity are as perfect as that found in Joplin's work.

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The influence of Satie, and the growing awareness of his work in the 1960's, also helped Tenney in the process of cleaning his musical slate, towards a radical simplification and starting anew. Of the three great French composers of the first two decades of the twentieth century -- Debussy, Ravel and Satie -- it is definitely Satie whose work sounds most modern and radical today. Again, a simplification implied by the nature of popular song. A clarity of texture that pointed to a radical starting-again point for Tenney. This is worked out in the latter's Quiet Fan for Erik Satie -- a work that is thus related to the Rags. John Cage also has acknowledged the influence of Satie on his own musical universe -- it is not an unlikely assumption that from Cage's direction, this influence was passed on to Tenney.

This simplifying,and rebuilding anew from there, are inherent in Tenney's postcard pieces. Their significance is that the process has reached a final point, and the postcards are like the new sproutings of ideas. In these one page pieces,

dedicated as always to other musicians and friends who influence him (and Tenney, unlike others, has always been open and unafraid of such acknowledgements), one sees new directions, a new momentum starting up in Tenney's work, which lead to the great works of the mid and late 1970's, such as Quintext, the various Canons (including the Drum Quartets), the Harmonia series, and beyond.

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With the exhaustion of tonality as an organizing principle of pitch relationships and musical structure, how does one proceed with pitch? Tenney's response was a return to the harmonic series, beginning in the mid-seventies with pieces like Quintext for string quartet and bass. In addition to his musical output, Tenney began an investigation of the world of pitch, and of the pitch/sound relationships which are inevitable -- if just by association in time -- even in so-called "atonal" or "noise" music. What basis could there be for a new set of definitions? Moving beyond tonality puts one into the world of vibrating frequencies,ratios -- and in so doing Tenney confronted the work of one of his earliest mentors, Harry Partch.

If one looks at the upper left corner of the cover photo on Partch's first CRI record of Selected Works, there is Jim Tenney. He and Partch had a stormy parting of the ways, one which Partch recalled to me vividly in 1971. It seems, Tenney was interested in Webern and Cage -- unforgiveable heresies in the Partch canon!

Which brings up an interesting point, when discussing current activity in micro-tonal and just intonation music. The most influential pioneers in this have been Partch and Lou Harrison -- significantly, both from the West coast. There, bordering the Pacific, one was more exposed to the art musics of Asia -- be it China, India or Indonesia. Implying to me that these composers came to investigate intonational practices

due to the inspiration of a cultural example as much as from a scientific rationale (although both Partch and Harrison had read their Helmholtz, early on). And both Partch and Harrison, in turn, created a new sort of cultural model in their own work -- which has been one of their unique influences in twentieth century music. This, in turn, implies a radical re-evaluation of music in terms of social, political and cultural concepts, and of anthropology even. Music as a resultant phenomenon of these factors, as a human product; not music as a manifestation of physical science and principles. The expanded awareness of world music has led to further explorations in these areas --

But this is not Tenney's revolution; he meets this tradition head-on when his work in probability, physics and philosophy leads him to investigate the nature of the overtone series.

Tenney is thorough: he cannot separate pitch relationships from other aspects such as timbre, attack-decay sound envelopes, and relationships in-time. He's back to the theoretical world of Schoenberg, Cage, Xenakis -- and he's tied it all together with the work and theories of Harry Partch! It is a scholarly and creative coup-de-grace, not without a touch of perverse brilliance for uniting two such seemingly irreconcilable views of music and acoustics.

Like Partch and Harrison, Tenney went back into the history of music theory, starting from the Greeks, going through the Renaissance and continuing up to this century. His 150-page treatise on A History of Consonance and Dissonance explores the evolution of musical perception of these two concepts, as a basis for the suggestion of a new model. These researches were further extended with an essay, John Cage and the Theory of Harmony, an ironic title in reference to the student of Schoenberg's who once told his teacher that he (Cage) had no feeling for harmony!

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Schoenberg's most prominent and influential students in Europe were Berg, Webern and Eisler. In the USA his most important students were two unlikely candidates: John Cage and Lou Harrison! Now, figure out that historical connection! Of course, there is one, through Henry Cowell.... James Tenney continues, and extends, that tradition.

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Much of Tenney's creative work since the late 1970's seems to be exploring this expanded pitch region, and the new "meaning" of harmonic relationships. There are big pieces from the 1980's I have yet to hear, like Glissade (1982) for viola, cello and bass with tape-delay system. Or the monumental Bridge, for two pianos/4 pianists -- a kind of 1980's Music of Changes. For not only has the world of tonality, harmony and rhythm been completely atomized as in that earlier piece by Cage -- so now has the realm of pitch been likewise microscopically expanded. Like its predecessor, or the Boulez Second Piano Sonata, Bridge is a big, sprawling, uncompromising and difficult piece of music -- but big also in its musical and philosophical vision.

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Ultimately, though, the truth in Tenney's music is not to be found in what the music "is about," nor in the context of historical reference. The truth, to put it simply, is in the hearing. What makes a music strong and full-of-life -- and not just "smart"? Tenney suggested it in a casual conversation once, and the words have stuck with me. "It's a question," he said, "of feeling things more deeply."

Of course, such a comment is utterly vague, but it suggests both deeper layers of emotional resonance and intellectual capacity. At a creative point where these two impulses cease to be distinct from one another, and merge in the creative work, in whatever medium. This can't be taught, except perhaps by

example, which may be Tenney's greatest legacy to his students, myself included. That the personal corollary of this creative mode is a passionate commitment to life and to being a human being. That's why there's music after all, not for "music's sake" (whatever that is!). And there is no real experience of history for us except the present, which is moving ever forward. James Tenney the composer has lived in that present as intensely as any musician I know.

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"...What is required now, it seems to me, is a sort of radical eclecticism -- like that eclecticism that Ives described as 'every composer's duty.' My own ideas are changing constantly, but at this moment I would say: ...more power (and most of all) to those of us who are not so sure what the answer is, but keep searching for something like an answer -- which is to say, keep asking questions."

James Tenney, "Letter to John Cage", Oct. 1967, unpublished.

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August-September 1986
Santa Fe, New Mexico