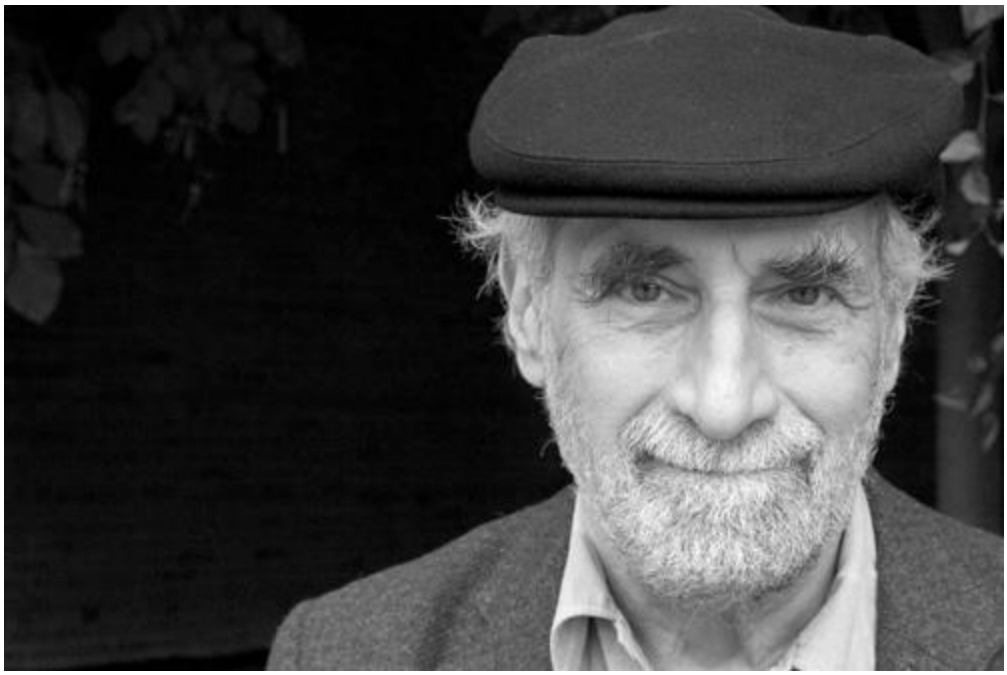
Frederic Rzewski



photographs by Michael Wilson

Interview by Bob Gilmore
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I first heard Frederic Rzewski play his own piano music at the Huddersfield Festival in 1993. I hesitated before buying my ticket as I found the titles of the pieces offputting – Fantasia, Sonata – *and was afraid I'd be letting myself in for an hour of neo-tonal boredom. As a student I'd played his colourful tribute to quasi-anarchic solidarity,* Les Moutons de Panurge*, and his rocking (yet deeply moving) tribute to imprisoned youth,* Coming Together*, and loved them. I'd heard recordings of some of his improvisations with Musica Elettronica Viva, which he co-founded in Rome in the mid-1960s. But Rzewski's piano music turned out to confound my expectations. He is a brilliant pianist yet no show-off. These pieces were musically engaging and full of references to everyday life, popular songs, his own earlier music; I wasn't bored for a second. Rzewski then embarked on a discussion with the audience about the music, inviting interrogation, quite prepared to let things get a little* stirred up.

Rzewski has never been particularly concerned with fame and fortune nor has he pushed for them. He will as happily play in small venues to people who don't know his name as he will at international piano festivals (like Miami – his 2007 performance there of his stunning The People United Will Never be Defeated! *was recently issued on DVD). The vast majority of his scores are available for free download at the Werner Icking Music Archive. He is a brilliant thinker and writer on music (get hold of his book* Nonsequiturs*, published by MusikTexte in Germany in 2007) but, crucially, someone whose views – and indeed his whole musical outlook – cannot be summed up easily or by means of a single slogan. We met on a very hot late September afternoon and sipped iced tea in his apartment in Brussels. – BG*

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I know your parentage and ancestry is Polish, at least on your father's side…

Both sides.

I'm just curious to know what kind of relevance that Polish dimension has to you, because it's not something I would immediately think of from your music.

Do you know the novels of Philip Roth? Many of them are based on his childhood memories of the 30s and 40s and the kind of people living in the suburbs, the Jews in New Jersey. And the *Godfather* films are about Italians. Both of these things remind me very strongly of my own childhood (I'm now 73, I was born in 1938). Polish, Italian, it doesn't really matter, these people were all second and third generation Americans coming from other places.

My father came from Poland in 1920 at the age of 14. His childhood memories seem to have been quite unpleasant. He lived through World War I. I think for many people of his generation it was very similar: they didn't want their children to learn Polish, they wanted us to be Americans. They wanted to forget about the old country. Not entirely, of course - my aunts and uncles had some kind of idea of Polishness, and one of the heroes in our family was Arthur Rubinstein, because he was Polish. And when I told this story to my old friend Steve Ben Israel, in the Living Theatre, he said: "Well, he was a hero in our house too, because he was *Jewish*. *(laughs)*

I never learned Polish. My grandmother taught me some, but basically I was not attracted to this culture. It seemed to me I didn't have anything to do with it except for my name. Now my 15-year-old daughter, who's in high school

here, has decided that with a name like hers she should know this language, and she's studying it on her own. So I guess I'll have to do that myself. I just came back from Warsaw, which was a very interesting experience. I hadn't been there in at least 10 years, and it's changed enormously. There's a distinctly upbeat feeling about it right now. It's a very interesting country.

Were your parents musicians, or musical?

No, they were both pharmacists. There were no musicians in our family except maybe in the distant past. But like many Americans of that period, they had a great respect for culture. And the United States in the 1940s was, you could say, the centre of classical music in the world. All these people went there, there were concerts everywhere, even in small towns. My mother took me twice a month to the high school auditorium. We lived in Westfield, Massachusetts, which was a town of about 20,000, and there I heard mainly two-piano teams, like Luboshutz and Nemenoff, playing reductions of the orchestral repertoire. But, she also took me to hear the Springfield Symphony play, and I heard famous soloists. Music *was* classical music. Of course there was also jazz and folk music and so forth, but "real" music was Toscanini. It's hard to understand that for young people today, because the country has changed enormously.

In that case, if your parents weren't active musicians, when you began to display a talent for piano, how did they deal with your practicing necessities? We're used to the model of musical parents nurturing exceptional piano talent of the sort you went on to develop. Normally that means quite a lot of parental input. Was that true in your case, or not so much?

Not so much. My mother played the piano a little, and my sister took piano lessons. Which is I guess how I got into it. But I didn't practice that much. I remember having to practice two hours a day, and that was a lot. And I wasn't being groomed for some kind of child prodigy status either, which was a good thing. I didn't go to a conservatory, so, I managed to escape the rigours of formal music education, which I think is a good thing.

I'll tell you one story. I guess I must have been 10 years old. I used to take the bus from Westfield to Springfield twice a week for my music lesson, and changed buses in the centre of Springfield to go out to my teacher's house. And there, there was a record store. LPs had just come out, and you could take one into a booth and listen to it, which I did many times. I'd brought my

teacher my compositions, which were nothing particularly exciting, except that I was doing some odd things with harmonies he didn't really approve of. And he said: "well, if you have to do this kind of thing, you should listen to the people who really do it well." Since he was a communist sympathiser himself, not really a member of the party, but a fellow traveller, he said I should listen to Shostakovich. But he told me I should also listen to Schoenberg. So I went to the record store and I got Shostakovich's ninth symphony which had just come out. And I said: "do you have anything by Schoenberg?" And he handed me *A Survivor From Warsaw*. Now, that must have been within a year of its first performance – it was brand new music, and it knocked my socks off. You can't do that anymore in Springfield Mass…the record store's gone.

Did you feel you were already heading for a musical career?

No, not at all, I loved science. I used to collect minerals, and I was pretty good at chemistry, and I was interested in that. Then later on people tried to convince me I should become a classical scholar, like my friend Christian Wolff. And then I was exposed to philosophy. But I always kept coming back to music.

That background, with the interest in science and classical philosophy, seemed to be pointing towards a scholarly career.

Well that's when I went to Harvard. Harvard, as you know, is the ultimate American university, and the American university is like a supermarket. You walk around and take a look at this and a look at that. Which I did. And I'm certainly glad I did. I did the Ivy League thing, went to Harvard, two years at Princeton, and then I went to Europe with a Fulbright to study with Dallapiccola, and after that Elliott Carter took us to Berlin for a year, which was when the Ford Foundation started this programme, 1963. After that I was mostly earning my living as a piano player. I was [flautist Severino] Gazzelloni's pianist for a while. I got quite a lot of mileage out of playing Stockhausen, and stuff like that, but I got tired of that too. I became uncomfortable with just the idea of just being "Stockhausen's piano player", and quit playing Stockhausen because I figured I'd done it enough, and it was time for somebody else to pick it up. But nobody did, for quite some time. It's still not played very much.

Rzewski and Elliott Carter in Berlin, 1965

So that's when we started MEV. We were close to Cage and Tudor, and the Living Theatre was hanging around in Europe and we were pretty close to them too, so they were influences. That's why I suppose we got into live electronics, improvisation and all the rest. Anyway, those were the mid-60s, when it was easy to fall into a pattern like that. Like many people then, we became sensitive to political questions. Sometimes against our will, MEV used to go around these student venues, in 1967, '68, so forth, and sometimes these hard liners would put us up against the wall, and say: "Why are you guys trying to dish out this elitist stuff? We're only interested in people's music." So we had to have some kind of response.

It seems odd to me that early MEV would have been considered elitist, because we hear it now as being definitely "the next generation", after Stockhausen, and having a much younger sensibility. In a way I find it much closer to what's going on today, certainly in terms of the improv scene. It's interesting that it wasn't perceived in that way by those student rebels you were just talking about.

Oh, the reception was very varied, depending on the kind of venue we played. You know it's not so important what you play, as where you play. Sometimes we were coupled with rock groups, like Pink Floyd or Kraftwerk, and some of them had never seen a Moog synthesizer. There we were with these Moogs, so we attracted considerable attention for that reason. But of course the music had nothing to do with pop culture. It was more like Mahler *(laughs)*. MEV never really made it as a pop group, but on the other hand it wasn't jazz either, and it certainly wasn't classical music. So what was it? I don't know, it was a singularity!

I remember once we played in Düsseldorf and Stockhausen came with his group to hear us. The first half was a sort of… electronic screaming, and then there was an interval, in which he came up to me and said, "now we had the first part… it was very physical… now you must become spiritual!" I don't think

we did. (*laughs*) But it was somehow a remark that registered. Stockhausen often made very perceptive observations. He was an interesting case because there were very few individuals like him that combined both intelligence and stupidity. That's what was fascinating about him. He was an extremely perceptive, intelligent, shrewd person, but at the same time would have these naïve and reactionary ideas. Few people have been so maligned as Stockhausen, but I know almost no musician who ever worked with him who didn't have great respect for him.

What was MEV's attitude to pop in the late 60s? I'm imagining you couldn't completely sympathise with it or align yourselves with it, but did you subscribe to the idea that it was music of rebellion and radicalism back then?

Rzewski playing amplified glass plate

I never thought about it very much. I suppose there was a considerable amount of rebellion in pop music, but so what? I mean, fascism too was a form of rebellion. Rebellion itself is not necessarily progressive. The 60s are over-rated. When I think back on that period I think my ideas, like those of most of my colleagues, were rather confused. We had impressions, intuitions of what might happen to the world. In 1969 it was easy to imagine that the world was poised to undergo a major change in the way it was organised. One could be excused for some of these infantile fantasies that seemed to plague the youth of that time. We were wrong, totally wrong, but, on the other hand, you can understand why these ideas were very seductive back then. At that time it was easy to form an image of what the world would be like in 50 years, even though this image was totally unlike what actually happened. The difference, though, between then and now is that today it's extremely difficult to imagine what the world will be like in 50 years. Maybe the major difference between society now and 50 years ago is that there's no vision anymore. At that time you had great sweeping theories, both in social sciences and in natural sciences, and in politics etcetera, you had these guiding visions of various kinds, and they've all been swept away and haven't been replaced by anything. It's very difficult to identify any kind of leading idea in culture today. Like socialism, for example – you say the word and young people shrug their shoulders. It's a problem. In a way it's easier to be old in this society than to be young *(laughs)*... but I'm beginning to rant.

Let's talk about the piano and the role it's played in your musical and professional life. There was a period in the 60s when you gave it up altogether, saying it was a bourgeois, reactionary instrument.

I didn't really give up the piano. In fact I played it in the group more and more. There was a time when I was deeply into electronics and stuff like that but it didn't last very long.

Going back to the Polish connection, there's a tradition of Polish pianists, which was one reason why Rubinstein was a hero of ours, and you know one of the prime ministers of Poland was a pianist –

Paderewski!

Yeah. So, being Polish and a piano player has a certain... *panache (laughs)*. I was quite surprised at people coming up to me after my concert in Warsaw recently. I had the feeling I was somebody in Poland, which I don't always have and it occurred to me that maybe my name, or the Pole thing with the piano, has a symbolic significance. I also went to a concert the previous evening of one of the last works of Stockhausen, *Klang*. Both concerts were in converted industrial spaces on the east side of the river, which is sort of like the Bronx or something – these places were hidden away, and I would never have found them on my own. I'd say there were about 1500 at the Stockhausen concert, and the average age was maybe 30. If you went to the same concert in Cologne the average age would be 60. And it was the same thing for my concert – not as many people but it was full and it was the same kind of lively youth. There's something happening in Eastern Europe. In the West, young people don't listen to Stockhausen, they go to rock concerts and stuff like that, but in the East there seems to be something else. They don't entirely swallow Western pop culture without reservations, which is I think very encouraging.

You reckon it's more than just a feeling of catching up?

Oh yes, definitely. I would say catching up is what you do in Western Europe, you catch up with the Americans. New York still has some kind of magic pizzazz in western Europe. Europeans go there hoping that some of the magic will rub off, but the magic's long gone. It disappeared 25 years ago. But it's still a living myth, just as Paris is a living myth for the Americans. Americans still go to Paris, as though Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were still sitting at a table at the Deux Magots.

The two types of performing you've done are at opposite ends of a certain spectrum – collective improvisation with MEV versus solo piano recitals – but I have a feeling you don't really see it in such polarised terms.

No, because I do a lot of improvising also if I'm playing solo, depending on what the situation is. And the business of collective etcetera is only partly true of MEV: I actually think we were always trying to be some kind of electronic symphony orchestra, really. Occasionally I hear something that we did 20 years ago and it seems like Bruckner or something.

But as a performer is there a difference between being part of that electronic symphony orchestra and being a solo pianist? Are the performing experiences different?

Rzewski and Alvin Curran

Well, piano recitals are not what they used to be, especially in this particular area of music. The audience tends to be very selective, so you're playing in specific venues. I often play in American universities for student audiences, or audiences somehow connected to the university, which is obviously very different from the kind of thing that existed in the 60s and 70s like the Venice Festival or the Palermo Festival or the Warsaw Festival, which are gone now. So where do I play? I used to play a lot for the radio but the radio no longer produces concerts, or only rarely, sometimes in Germany. The scene keeps changing. I'd even go so far as to say there are fewer and fewer such concerts in general. It's unfashionable now to just play music, you have to have some kind of gimmick, a video or something. All the new young groups want to be pop stars, and some of them succeed, but it's somewhat troubling because that's where our bread and butter comes from. The disappearance of institutions that have outlived their usefulness doesn't bother me so much in itself, but if my life depended on them then it'd be a different story.

I bought the DVD of you playing *The People United Will Never be Defeated!* –

Did you? I never got a penny for that.

Well, I paid for my copy, so I did my bit to try and help!

I don't get any money for it anyway, so in my opinion you might as well steal it *(laughs)*. That's what I do, I give all my music away now. I don't understand why composers want to be so stingy with their music. Why doesn't everybody put their music on the internet like I do? Do you understand?

Fewer and fewer people make any money at all from this.

Even the publishers don't make any money. A hundred years ago, or even 50 years ago, the publishers served some kind of function. Today it seems they're completely parasitic.

Do you compose at the piano?

Yes, always. People have told me this is not a good thing. But, it's a vice. I play the piano more and more these days, because it's a physically rewarding activity. I enjoy the physical action, jumping around the keys.

In your online archive, piano music seems to have become more and more predominant.

Well, there I take a practical attitude. I tend to write music that I think is going to get played. And I have this guy who plays my music all the time. We have a very good relationship.

You?

Yeah! (*laughs*) Sometimes other pianists play it too. I've written some orchestral music that nobody seems to be interested in, and that takes a lot of time, so I tend not to do it. I've tried theatre also, and that's even worse. Then of course I occasionally write pieces for your typical contemporary music ensemble. You know, seven or eight players. But I'm having doubts about that too, about the future of such groups: it seems to me they were interesting 100 years ago when Schoenberg and Webern wrote for them, but it's hard for me to think of anything written in the last 50 years that really stands out. In a way it seems rather old fashioned, this kind of reduced symphony orchestra, with one of every instrument, you know the groups I mean. For me, the future lies in solo activity. That's something that's always been around, I guess.

Your recent *Brussels Diary* struck me as being, on the one hand, a straightforward work of that type, for five players, but it has some quite subversive aspects to it, like the bit where they suddenly, quite unexpectedly start playing with objects. Or the little joke that one of the players tells in there. "Waiter, do you have Frogs' Legs? Yes. Then hop over the counter and make me a ham sandwich…"

It's a Cornelius Cardew joke, one that he got from his kids.

So even though you find that the ensemble belongs to an earlier period of music history, you're still prepared to work with it in a slightly provocative kind of way.

I don't know if everything I've done is provocative. But I like to put things in that don't make sense, that are of no relation to anything else. I think it's an idea I stole from Stockhausen. In one of his operas, maybe the first one, in the last part, there's a huge orchestra going a mile a minute, and suddenly everything stops and an old lady walks down the aisle with an umbrella, looks around, and goes out, and the orchestra goes back to playing furiously. I like that idea of suddenly something happening that makes no sense and has no connection with anything. Whether it's provocative or not I don't know. It's just a formal element, maybe.

You said earlier that you do a certain amount of improvising in your solo concerts. I was thinking about *War Songs* here: in the recording I have of you playing it, some of the improv sections, the "cadenzas", are extremely short – one of them is only two notes – so we're not necessarily talking about long-drawn-out passages. Why is it that, as a composer writing for yourself to play, you want to introduce these improvisatory elements into a notated piece?

That particular piece is based on six songs from over six centuries, each having to do with war. And in many of them there's a place where Jelly Roll Morton would call the break, you know, where you "jazz it up a little", that's all. Places where in the song you might improvise. But there isn't much improvisation in it. What I got interested in in that piece was the idea of polytonality: the six songs appear in six different keys, so it was fun to juggle the notes of the various songs in such a way that it would make some kind of harmonic sense. But what I noticed is that you don't hear six different tonalities, you hear one tonality. I don't know if that's true of polytonality in general. Do you have any ideas about that?

If we're talking strict bitonality, two keys, like some of Milhaud's piano pieces, I can keep them separated in my mind. But with more than two, even just three, I'm struggling, because I find that one always tends to dominate.

That may be true in the writing itself. Because if you just do it mechanically, combine say, six themes in six different keys, you're likely to end up with chaos. There's nothing wrong with chaos, but it's been done already *(laughs).*

Your music has an interesting take on all kinds of different ways of thinking with pitch. Some of it is quite straightforwardly tonal, some of it is serial, or uses some particular version of serialism, and other pieces are polytonal or looser mixtures of tonal music with something else. Do you find all these things equal in terms of their interest, and the kind of inspiration they offer you, or are you essentially a tonal thinker, or essentially a serial thinker, or what?

I wouldn't know how to answer that. I would say that serialism, whatever it is, has sort of been burned into my brain, I can't get rid of it. Even in the tonal pieces you referred to, there's usually some kind of serial superstructure going on. Perhaps I feel guilty if it's not there, but why I don't know. Maybe just a bad habit. Schoenberg must have had the same problem, because his

twelve tone pieces sometimes don't really work the way they're supposed to, like the *Variations for Orchestra*.

Have you ever been interested in looking into other tuning systems, outside of equal temperament?

It's never really attracted me very much. I know it interests you, but I just couldn't get into it, I don't know why. Maybe because I'm a piano player, and when you play a piano you rapidly discover that all pianos are out of tune, at least the good ones are! The idea of some kind of purity or, whatever you might call it, doesn't really exist for pianists.

But with MEV all kinds of harmonic things crop up that go outside of equal tempered tuning. Was that something you were conscious of back then?

I don't think so. None of us was particularly interested in that kind of thing. And to the extent that we were involved with free improvisation, even less so, because one of the things we became involved with was what happens to a sound when it's amplified and transmitted over loudspeakers. There's very often that funny situation when you have no idea who's making the sound. Is it me or is it somebody else? And those were the days of hippie music, when people played on junk, so the idea of playing in tune or out of tune didn't exist. You tried to be in tune with yourself. I don't know, I know you're interested in it, but I have a sort of antipathy to it. I think that quarter tones are the worst idea.

Oh so do I, absolutely hideous! I'm certainly interested in microtonality, but I think in many quarters it has been turned into a new religion, a new dogma, and I don't go for that at all. I have an ensemble that specialises in this type of music, but I'm still fairly cautious about what really is possible in that domain, and what we really can hear.

The French writer on religion and mysticism Léon Bloy wrote somewhere that the supposed tendency of art towards religion is that of a curve towards its asymptote. There are many instances where art seems to imitate religious practice, but never seems to get there. It's a kind of pseudo-religion, a cult or something. I guess that's still very much alive. I was raised as a Catholic, but not really as a Catholic, more as a hypocrite. Most people think I'm Jewish, and maybe my father was and hid it, we don't know, it's possible. But in any case, I lived in Rome for 15 years, and that was the definitive cure for any religious feelings I had, living in the shadow of the Vatican *(laughs)*. I have mixed feelings about such things. I'm not religious myself, and I know very few composers who are. My friend Tom Johnson is. He goes to church every Sunday, and I have great respect for that. He is truly religious. So is Arvo Pärt. But in most cases, I have the feeling that these composers of so-called religious music are blasphemers. There are all these so-called religious composers in Eastern Europe – Penderecki was the first to discover the commercial potential. If you can get good music out of it, fine, but it doesn't seem to happen very often.

Most of your own music since the early 70s has been for acoustic instruments. You haven't done much recently with electronics.

I gradually dissociated myself from electronics when I started to have children.

Why, because it was expensive?

Yes! Children cost money, and so do synthesisers. When the children started to grow up I had to choose between the two. So I gave most of the equipment I had to Alvin Curran. That's not entirely the complete story. I got a DX7 when they first came out, and had a lot of fun with it for about six months, but the thing was so goddamn heavy that it ended up propped up in its case, vertically, as a stand for my shaving brush. Then I sold it to students. As for computers, I've never understood what computer music is. I still don't. The idea of using computers to generate sounds just doesn't grab me at all. Then again, I haven't practiced it, but many people like my old friends David

Behrman and George Lewis have, so I take my hat off to them. I'm not going to do it myself.

Did you have a problem with synthesizers, being a piano player?

Yes, of course, there's a huge difference. There was a time in the 70s when even I thought that the piano was going to disappear and be replaced by some kind of electronic keyboard, but it didn't take long to realise that the two things really have very little to do with each other. The piano is, in its way, a perfect instrument – like the bicycle, it achieved its basic design a hundred years ago. Why should you change something that's perfect?

Maybe I'm just getting old, but now I'm trying to learn from Schumann how to write good counterpoint. If I can write a few lines of good counterpoint, that's enough. At some point you stop fiddling with language, and try to work with it, the way it is. There was a concert I went to maybe about 20 years ago in New York, of Elliott Carter's music. And there were questions afterwards, from the audience, and somebody asked him why he didn't do any electronic music. He explained that electronic music seemed to be mainly concerned with sound, whereas he was interested in *writing*, and seen from this viewpoint, electronics was not progress at all, but a regression to the stage of hieroglyphics. There has been some pretty good electronic music, but most of it is 50 years old… the early stuff.

There are so many things that seem potentially to be the basis of a new kind of form, but then they fizzle out. Improvisation at one point seemed as

though it might become the basis for some kind of new musical language, one that would bring people together from different traditions, etcetera, etcetera.. That was the theoretical idea, but I haven't seen any convincing realisations of it.

In your book, you quote something Stravinsky said about composing as being improvising with a pencil.

I've never been able to find the source of that quotation. It may be false, I don't know.

But is that how you feel about composing? Is that what you feel you're sometimes doing?

I try to. Actually it's very hard, because it takes time to write things down. You can't really write things in real time. You can with the help of a machine, but that's not what writing is: writing is something that goes on inside the brain. It's transferring information from short-term to longer term memory. Like delaying the expression until the idea, whatever it is, can be expressed in some kind of symbolic form: it takes time. In a way it's impossible, like living in the present. It's an idea which cannot exist in reality. If you could live in the present you'd go mad.

Anyway, I got interested in that about 25 years ago, and I started to think about it. Western music is all based on logic, some kind of syllogistic structure, ABA, it's like taking two stones and putting the third one on top of them. John Cage used to say classical music had one message, which is that the best place is home. Well, I started to think – life is not like that. Life is a muddle. Wouldn't it be possible to write music in a way that expresses that? Of course, it does exist in some form – maybe Mahler was interested in that, and early Schoenberg. And Morton Feldman with his technique he called "turning the page." Then of course there's improvisation. But in general, written music, even now, steers away from the unconscious.

There's no surrealism in music. There's music which sort of flirts with it – Satie, you could say – but there are no surrealist composers. There was one, in fact, André Souris, but his music was rather conventional. Music has been sheltered from these notions that have been so important to the 20th century, psychoanalysis and all that stuff. In my opinion it's because of the ancient relation between music and theology: there's a rationalist prejudice underlying classical music. It has to make sense. If it doesn't make sense, it

isn't good. So, for the last 20 years or so, I've been trying to find ways of improvising with the pen. Maybe it's impossible, but it's intriguing.

Do you revise your pieces much?

All the time, that's the best part.

But if the idea is to get the music onto the paper – in some ways bypassing the logical faculty, making it more like improvisation – doesn't revising contradict that impulse?

Not necessarily. You know the painter Francis Bacon? He would paint a dog, and then another dog on top of the first one, and so on, until he got something that doesn't really look like a dog – it looks like the *essence* of dog... If you work in layers like that, you can sometimes come up with something that you couldn't possibly have imagined before you started fooling around with it. Then there's this other thing, working with details: sometimes the difference between a good piece and a very good piece is in little tiny details. Which you don't get unless you fuss with it. Beethoven fussed with it. As we know sometimes his original ideas were not always terribly interesting. He couldn't really write a tune (*laughs*). It was something that Berio used to say all the time: "it can always be better". That stuck in my mind. So I like to fiddle and fuss with things. Sometimes it's not a good idea: if you have a terrible idea in the first place, the more you fuss with it, the worse it gets. I think that's a problem with a lot of Xenakis' music. And a lot of complex, so called complex contemporary music.

When you're revising your pieces, what are you trying to correct, or improve? What kind of details do you mean?

Well, very often it's practical details. If you're writing a line for flute, say, you don't write the same way as if you're writing for baritone saxophone. There's still a lot of old fashioned craft involved. And that you can only acquire by studying the old masters. No amount of jerking off with computers is going to take the place of that.

The *Nano Sonatas* give the impression of being very spontaneous pieces. In general do you compose quite quickly, or is it slow and painstaking?

It varies. Sometimes quickly, sometimes very slow. I didn't intend to do so many of those *Nano Sonatas*. I started by writing one. There was a guy, a fan,

a Japanese scientist from Okinawa involved with nanotechnology. He came to visit once and brought his computer and showed me what he was working on: the smallest motor in nature, one single molecule of a single enzyme. And it turns, it has torque, it's a motor. You could see this thing turning around, rather slowly. He sent me an article he published in the *American Journal of Applied Physics* in which he thanked me for our valuable conversations on nano-molecular engines *(laughs)*, and a letter with it saying: "now your name will live forever in the annals of science". I thought I'd send him something in return. He's an amateur pianist, so I sent him this piece with this thing that goes around and around, not too difficult to play, and I kind of liked it, and thought, "maybe I'll write more of these". I ended up doing 56 of them. They're not all interesting, but a few of them worked out. They're sonatas not in the sense of the 19th century, they're more like Scarlatti. The idea was to do something where themes appear but don't go anywhere. There's no development. They just hang in the air for a second, and then something else happens.

I started learning Russian some years ago, and I've now read a lot of Russian literature. Russian writers are specialists at this kind of thing, Tolstoy in particular. There are many episodes in Tolstoy where a character suddenly appears, and it's clear that, if he wanted to, Tolstoy could write a whole novel about this character. But he doesn't, he just disappears, and you don't hear anything more from him. I really sympathise with Elliott Carter's notion of music being basically a form, a written form, in which certain things are *only* possible because they're written down. Music notation is probably the most important technology that has affected the art of music. I'd say that electronics and computers are somewhat trivial in comparison.

Have you ever taught improvisation?

No. I don't know anything about it.

Do you think it can be taught, in principle? I mean, if I want to get into improvisation, what should I do, how should get myself started?

MEV at Tanglewood

Well, don't go to school. Find a situation where you can play with other people who are better than you, if possible. That's how the great jazz musicians acquired their technique, by sitting on the sidelines until they were called up onstage. But I'm not an expert on improvisation. I've thought a lot about it, but I never learned jazz improvisation. I just couldn't count to 12. I would get lost on the sixth or seventh bar.

I ask because the article in your book "Towards a Nihilist Theory of Improvisation" is the most interesting thing I've read about improvisation, and seems to me to be the result of some very deep thinking about what it is and how it differs from playing pre-determined music. Obviously at one point you were reflecting a lot on improvisation, and the nature of it.

True, but I still don't understand it. It seems to me that it's very mysterious. And it probably will be centuries before it's really understood what's going in the brain, maybe never. For an artist, this is not the important thing: the important thing is not to understand what you're doing, but to do it. Maybe others will understand if it's any good. Of course I went to school, and some of my teachers, like Milton Babbitt, took quite an opposite view, that the important thing was to have a rational method of proceeding, like he did. I think perhaps in his case it wasn't such a good idea for his artistic work: he did produce some very good music, but he seems to have voluntarily walled himself up in a cage, and I never quite understood that. There was a recent film made about him, did you see it? It's quite good, I recommend it. When I saw it I regretted that I didn't keep up contact.

It was certainly true of serial music that there was this notion that music should mimic science in some way. And it still persists a great deal, even though serialism isn't such a hot issue any more. There's still this very prevalent idea that music is somehow equated with technology, that, if music

has a future, it's in technology. But I don't buy this. I just wrote a paper on the subject, which I read in Warsaw. I'm rather pessimistic about it. It was possible to be optimistic about technology a hundred years ago, when you could imagine that great things could be done in the future with these new machines. But now we're in another century, and it doesn't seem that it's really produced that much.

I'm curious to know your attitude to America these days, because obviously you've spent most of your adult life in Europe. Are you very aware of your American roots? Does it bother you what's going on in America, do you still feel it's your country?

I go back to America all the time. It's a totally different country to the one I grew up in. At the end of World War II, more than 50% of the population lived on small farms. Today it's more like less than 2%. Folk music was very big in the 50s, but that's disappeared. It's a different country in many ways. On the other hand there are certain constants that don't change. One of them of course is militarism. That certainly hasn't changed. So, yes, I would say like many Americans I'm not at all happy with what's going on, but what can we do about it? I don't know of anyone who has any bright ideas. Most Americans seem to agree now that the system is not working, but it's hard to see where any kind of alternative is. The future is murky.

I meant artistically speaking, musically speaking.

Musically speaking, I'd say not much is going on. I lived in New York for five years in the 70s. It was still possible then for young artists and musicians to find a loft space. There was a lot of activity. But, since the mid-80s, let's say, I can't detect very much that's new. It seems to me that the last major innovation was what John Zorn and his friends were doing back around then. Since then there's been relatively little evolution. Perhaps there's some significant cultural activity outside the major centres, outside New York, in places like Ohio, you know, here and there, and of course it depends what form you're talking about. For instance there was this movement of black poets some years ago which seemed to be quite lively. Now it seems to have died down. But America is a place where things can happen very fast, so I'm not pessimistic.

Europe isn't very different. I don't know if there is any place where some kind of new movement might appear. It seems that we're more or less in a kind of culture of stagnation, and have been for the last 20 years or so. Who is it that

calls the period that started with Thatcher and Reagan, from 1980 up to the present, who calls it the Great Regression? In culture the term certainly applies, but not to all fields. In literature it isn't so bad, there are some pretty good writers around, and in cinema, some good movies occasionally come out. But I think the term definitely applies to the visual arts, which are a disaster. Music is not much better, largely because of the *néfaste* influence of monopoly capitalism on the music industry, which has led to a kind of uniformity and conformism, which is very different from the 60s. But there are hopeful signs as well. You have younger players playing new music who are *much better* than 30 years ago. The level is astonishing with regard to certain instruments, in particular the piano. Now you have these young Chinese pianists who are incredible! Why that is I don't know.

Many people are talking in terms of a crisis in composition in the past 10 to 15 years.

Who says that?

Mostly younger composers of my acquaintance, in England, Germany and Holland. What I guess they mean by crisis is a loss of belief or certainty in what composition should be any more, even in principle. As you were saying earlier on, there's a feeling that performing ensembles seem to be slightly anachronistic, the symphony orchestra being the biggest example, but also the sort of *Pierrot Lunaire*-style ensembles beginning to seem past their sell-by date. But it's not clear what's going to replace them.

As I say, my own particular feeling is that solo activity, "soloism" – somebody who can really play the daylights out of an instrument – will not disappear.

What about collective music making though? For a long time people were assuming we would be talking about some kind of electroacoustic ensemble as the new norm.

Well, I'd be glad to see it. One thing that appeared, about 25 years ago, which has become quite popular all over the world, is Butch Morris's technique of guided improvisation, which he calls conduction. In London you have the London Improvisers Orchestra, which is very interesting, depending on who is playing. They're very good musicians. I was in London for eight months last year, so I hung around the scene quite a bit. I even played with them at one point, at Café Oto. Terrible piano. Various people get up and conduct, and they all understand the language. It occurred to me that it *is* a language,

and there are now further elaborations of the idea, largely inspired by Anthony Braxton, but they're too complicated. Butch Morris's basic language seems accessible enough to pick up without too much trouble. You could imagine some composer coming along and actually writing a score, a kind of *Rite of Spring* of this kind in which the orchestra would speak this language. But as far as I know it hasn't been done. Perhaps because there's a certain prejudice among improvisers against paper, thanks to Derek Bailey, his kind of "church" of improvisation. Also of course the people in this orchestra tend to be rather older, the Evan Parker generation. There are some younger players, and I can imagine exciting things happening, but I just don't see them happening right now.

You could say that the world is ripe for revolution of one form or another, but so-called revolutions in music are overrated. Starting with Wagner, maybe. I think Brahms was the real revolutionary. Like serious revolutionaries, he wore the mask of tradition. There's that passage in Marx where he talks about Louis Bonaparte, the famous passage in which he says that great events in history happen twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The English Revolution took on the Biblical mask, and the French Revolution wore the toga of the Roman Republic. It's very difficult to find an example something really revolutionary happening in music.

Does it depress you that you're still best known for pieces written back in the 70s, like *Les Moutons de Panurge* and *Coming Together*?

Sometimes, but then I think of Schubert, who didn't even hear most of his music. Or other great masters of the 19th century, Schumann, Brahms – nobody plays the Brahms piano sonatas, and if they play Schumann, they play the same old things all the time and pay no attention to pieces that are even better. Why is that? I don't know.

Anyway, composing or any kind of artistic activity is a self-rewarding activity: the rewards are in the act itself. If any positive things come as a result of it, it's gravy! Some composers are rich, others are poor, it's just the name of the game. I don't let it depress me too much. And if I do get depressed, I find that the best cure for it is music! So in a way it's a self-reinforcing feedback loop. You write music, it goes nowhere, then you get depressed, and you write more music.
Let me tell you a joke, maybe you know it. The composition teacher is trying to discourage the student: "What do you want to get into this for? It's just one frustration after another. They never play your music, you never make any

money. And it just goes on and on like that until you're 50". And the student perks up and says: "Then what happens?" And the teacher says: "Then you get used to it".