

Response to questions about *Ensembles of Note*

from Camille Chitwood

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[The following are some written responses to questions asked me by Camille Chitwood, a graduate student in music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I am grateful for her interest, and the opportunity to respond — LP]

Specifically, the proposition of Ensembles of Note is very intriguing to me. I wonder, has this piece been performed with a conductor?

I'm not sure how to answer that, since there have been many performances of this piece, all over the world. I have seen/heard only a fraction. My sense is that no, there have not been "conductors" per se, nor should there be, nor, I think, *can* there be. It's unclear what might be conducted. The ostinato itself is a kind of conductor-part, but only in that it keeps track of the time-span. There is a great degree of variation as to whether or not musicians plan their parts ahead of time, even writing them out, or create them in real-time. At first, I suppose I envisioned the latter only, but I have become equally interested (but not more so) in the former.

I will say that the new piece I am working on, which is essentially "son of Ensembles of Note" (Ensembles of Note With a Vengeance? Ensembles of Note: Return of the Ostinati?), pushes some of these questions further. It's called *signers and accompanists*, and it is for musicians, signers (that is, American Sign Language performers), and percussionists. It is in some ways the same piece as *EON*, but the ostinato is close to a minute long, is intended for two or more percussionists, and there are a number of "auxiliary" percussion parts that can be added. The signers tell a story (or a poem, or a narrative) and the musicians respond to individual signers. They can also drop into the ostinato. But the ostinato is long, and multi-partite, and the signers are presumably Deaf (though they don't have to be), so "following" in this piece is a much more complex proposition than in *EON*. Otherwise, it's the same piece, in some odd way.

It's worth pointing out that *EON* itself had two predecessors. One, called *Killing Time*, was a duet live electronic performance with Douglas Repetto, which we performed at a Cal Arts Festival well over ten years ago. In that piece, I wrote a computer program, which filled in a time span in like fashion, but used a different set of musical materials, that gave me some amount of control. But it had a more specific formal "filling in" procedure than *EON* (using a kind of algorithmic rhythmicana), in which the musicians are free to design their own. I think there's an archival recording of this piece somewhere on my website, it was only done once. Douglas' part was unrelated, used light sensors on a baseball cap if I remember correctly.

The other predecessor, and the genesis of the name, is called *Neighborhoods of Note*, a piece for two Suzuki pianists. It's a kind of wry, yet hopefully helpful, comment on Suzuki instruction. It was functional: I wanted to contribute to the culture of my daughter's and my daughter's friends' piano lesson. Formally, it is also more or less isomorphic to *EON*.

EON itself came as a response to the call from Barbara Benary, the founder and director of Gamelan Son of Lion, for a one page process piece that used Daniel Goode's brilliant *Eine Kleine Gamelan Music (EK)* as a model of effectiveness. The group, and many other groups, had played that piece so many times, and it

always worked. It is a wonderful combination of musicality, improvisation, process, and flexibility. Barbara wanted to know why there weren't other pieces as good. She offered a "bupkes" commission for more of them ("bupkes" is Yiddish for "nothing"). I'd had a long association with *EK*: I'd played it many times (with Dan and without Dan, in gamelans and not) and written a stand-alone computer program, which "knew" the piece. I'd used that program with ensembles as well, as another part of the band. It was a kind of lifelong project (which has recently resulted in two versions of a big recording project using that software, and about 30 musicians), and I wanted to contribute.

I wrote *EON* in response, while living in London. It took a while: though it is one-page it was difficult to phrase, to say neither too much nor too little, to imply rather than direct. I think the language still has problems: when I am at a performance, coaching, I frequently am called on to clarify something. On the other hand, so many performances happen without me (like some recent, very interesting ones in London) that it seems to be ok, if not perfect. Gamelan Son of Lion premiered *EON*, soon after I wrote it, by the way, on New Year's Eve in Hartford, CT, one of the coldest nights I can remember. I was in that performance. Laura Lieben played the ostinato on kendang.

In my new string quartet, a 6th movement piece, the fourth movement is a version of *EON*. It's not done yet, but in this quartet there will be two versions of that idea: one that will look a bit like the score for *EON* (but with varying time-spans), and a computer "realization" (in score form) of that. It's complicated, and I'm excited about working it out.

If not, who determines when people ought to drop out? Who determines how many times equals "a few times" before the piece actually ends? Are you hoping for an abrupt ending (perhaps similar to Piano Phase or Clapping Music)?

No, no relation to *Piano Phase* or *Clapping Music*, but that is something that the group has to work out. The group makes all those decisions (and more). I wouldn't call the ending "abrupt," I'd call it "unison." But yes, everyone ends together. That only seemed fair.

How many times have you heard this piece performed? How many times have you personally performed it?

Many, and not many. That is, I've heard a great many performances live, have heard a number of recordings where I wasn't there, and heard about many others. But I've hardly ever performed it. I'm not sure why that is the case, since I perform a lot. For some reason, I think of this piece as a piece for others to do. Maybe because if I were in the group, especially with younger musicians, I'd have more (and unwarranted) authority, by virtue of being the composer, than I should. I did perform it once, in NYC, with my friends the Wet Ink Ensemble (and they were great). In that performance, Dan Goode and Christian Wolff also joined me in the group (we were all on their concert). I was more comfortable in that context, for some reason, having older colleagues, also good friends, who diffused some of my non-justified veracity. That is to say, I have no better idea of how this piece can or should sound than any other musician who cares about it. Many performances surprise me; do things that I would never have imagined. Sometimes, in rehearsal, I'm confused at first, or not happy, and then am convinced, seduced by the ideas of other creative musicians. That's a very nice feeling.

Are you partial to any particular recording [or performance]?

Well, sure. I am partial to all of them, because they're all different. And, I suppose, as with any such piece, partial. The version done at Moorhead State University, by Ross Feller's group, an early performance, surprised, delighted and thrilled me. It was virtuosic, uninhibited, precise, and kick-ass. These kids were all undergrad metal-heads from Fargo, but great musicians. The bass player did the ostinato, and when the performance started, he hopped up on his bass amp and played it non-stop and full throttle and dead-accurate for 10 minutes. That recording is on my website. The UCSC performances are also wonderful to me, because of the way it's been integrated into other pieces, the use and non-use of the gamelan, and the way the ostinato (which is kind of, uh, tricky) has become a sort of school fight song! I love that the piece has entered the culture there in such a gentle, community way. The Wet Ink performance was wonderful, because those musicians are such super players in so many ways (improvisation, new music, they can do anything). I loved the recent, almost balladic performance that was done at *the wulf* in l.a. It was full of young composers, many of whom I admire greatly for their own works, and it felt like a kind of after-hours composers-only session, which is the kind of thing I love. And the new performance, recorded for a CD of my guitar music on New World, by Toon Callier and his group Zwerm, plus a bunch of other European musicians, is, well, mind-bogglingly good. Fun, precise, whacky, inventive. I think these musicians benefited from the history of the piece. They got to really know what could be possible, had a long time to work on it, think about it, create with it. And they're extraordinary players. That will be out soon commercially.

But ask me on a different day and I might have different answers. There are so many performances that I haven't even heard. It's hard to single out just a few.

Do you feel this piece (or even this process of group improvisation) is best for the performer, the composer, or the audience? In other words, did you have one of those groups in mind when composing it?

Whenever I compose anything, or do anything, I think about whether or not it's best for everyone, including me, or nobody, including me. I don't mean to sound evasive, but nothing is that simple. A piece of music has so many criteria for "best," and in some ideal impossible world, you want it to satisfy all of them. You want your 2 flute piece to engender world peace, end hunger, bring back the dodo, get rid of reality t.v, make all burritos taste like they were made at Rosita's Bus Stop Café in Salinas (is that still there?) and reincarnate Lydia Mendoza for a private performance! But no such luck. So you settle. You take what you can get. And you try hard. But I don't distinguish the performer, the composer, the audience in the following way (that is, this is the way I don't distinguish them): we're all in this together.

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