

Email Magazine Interview by Matteo Marchisano-Adamo

(questions from Matteo in *italics*, answers below)

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polansky

What is your definition of Experimental Music?

LP: I have no definition for others' terms. That's why they're others' terms. These kinds of labels, I think, are primarily made, used, promulgated, promoted, talked about for economic reasons — like “lite,” “lo-fat,” “classic rock,” or “serialism.” By simple nomenclature we make institutions possible. If we didn't make up something like “parallel 5ths,” we'd have nothing to teach. Or more, we'd have to teach things that we invented ourselves, which is what, I feel, we should be doing.

But I will point out that others *have* written intelligently, using a kind of hypothesis for what the term could possibly mean, about it. Good examples are Christian Wolff, Warren Burt, and Pauline Oliveros. Amy Beal says, “Experimental music is made by composers who answers their own phones” (which is as good a definition as any, although it may not apply to cell-phones). Grappling with it as an idea, not as a label, not as a secret handshake for inclusion in a dubious club, these thoughts can help us formulate new ideas. In that sense, I feel, speculative definitions are probably more interesting: if there were something called “experimental music,” what would it be?

One of Cage's definitions, in fact, for “music” (which may be, for all I know, apocryphal, but I use it) is “work.” Taking that as a starting point, what would “experimental work” be? I like to think that it would be the activity of asking questions interesting and well-formed enough for their answers to be useful to others, and the pursuance of those answers in a way that is not primarily concerned with making money, becoming famous, getting gigs, demonstrating competence, or securing a position. In short: looking for real answers in a way that gives precedence to the answers themselves (and by association, the questions, since the integral pursuit of answers always leads to more interesting questions).

In that sense, I would say that my definition of the most experimental music is that music which interests me most. The more experimental, the more I'm interested (and the converse is true). I am interested in all music, in the very idea of music at every possible level, in every possible way. I suppose that means that to me all music, tautologically, is experimental.

I've also heard a definition of experimental music to be that music which is most like love, doing something for the best, the highest, the most selfless, the most beautiful of human reasons. I think this is as good a definition as any. And since

the word “love” certainly needs no definition, should not in fact, be defined, we might take the hint.

When you are listening to new music (post John Cage), what do you listen for?

LP: I don't know what “post John Cage” means (after Cage's death? After he wrote his first piece? After the *Music of Changes*?). But when I listen to any music (no music is new, no music is old) I listen as deeply and in every way as I can. I try (hardly ever successfully) to engage every aspect of my humanity — intellect, emotion, experience, knowledge (whatever those things are) — and I invite (not always nicely) the music to become parts of all those things. I try to not distinguish in any way between music and non-music, between intellect and emotion, between like and dislike of something like music. That latter activity (music) is such an extraordinary thing that to not “like a piece” would be like “not liking a gift from your daughter.” It's possible that you might not find a way to wear the polka dot tie she gave you, or eat the brownies she made in which she accidentally dumped in a few spoonfuls of cayenne pepper, but you still like the gift, because the idea of gift is so fundamentally good, so important, that to not like it is to deliberately exclude yourself from one of the great privileges of being human.

I don't listen to (post)(pre)(while)-Cage in any different way that I listen to anything — birds, people talking on cell-phones, my daughter's voice, Lydia Mendoza, the Ramones, the sounds of the street in NYC.

How does technology define or redefine your work as a composer?

My work as a composer is defined and redefined by what I do, not just in pieces, but in my life. And technology — pens, tables, windows, warm socks, coffeemakers, computers, bicycles — enters in, of course. I live in the same world as everyone else, and like everyone else, I use some forms of technology, abjure others.

I have been closely committed to and associated with software in my work. So perhaps that's a more specific, less coy answer to your question. I have used software, written it myself, since I began composing at around age 18 or 19. I believe I have done this because it makes the activity of composition more interesting to me, adds a different dimension to the means and the ends, asks a lot of questions to which I don't know the answers. I continue to write software for many of my pieces for that reason. But I also use a great many other technologies (the technologies of history, and of friendships, for examples) as well, to help me ask questions I can't completely ask by myself, and see answers to questions that I hadn't quite asked, but were well worth asking.

Where do you see the future of composition going considering that “amateurs” now have the possibility to compose, record, and master music for very little expense and are able

to produce extremely interesting works? Most of this music is not necessarily available (or meant) to be performed live (as in a pianist performing a Chopin Mazurka or a band performing a cover song) — that is: it does not exist as a score, but only as recorded media, oftentimes sounds that are not possible to re-produce. Do you see a future where the piano (or other instruments developed before the Industrial Age), will be outdated, where an iPod-like instrument will take its place on the concert stage, when everyone is a composer and “consumer” at the same time? Although this is where it seems to be heading, do you think it will be standard, or is it just a trend that will at some point fadeout?

LP: I don't distinguish between amateur and professional. I think that the human race, if it doesn't extinguish itself, will simply keep inventing new and fascinating and boring and inventive and silly and productive and mind-numbing and useful and useless ways to make music (and all other things). We don't have to be in favor of this, not in favor of that, since there's nothing we can do about any of it, except to continue, as composers, in making music and considering music and exploring music in the most interesting ways we can.