

Larry Polansky, interview by Rachel Vandagriff
Perspectives of New Music, 50th Anniversary
2 August 2012

RV: Could you tell me about your relationship to Perspectives? What has the magazine meant to you?

LP: I do not remember what the first thing I did with PNM was, but it must have been in the eighties when we were working on HMSL and real-time music language ideas. I did some guest teaching for a week or so up at the University of Washington at around that time, and got to know John Rahn pretty well. We decided to publish the ‘definition’ article of HMSL in PNM. (See “HMSL (Hierarchical Music Specification Language): A Theoretical Overview,” by Larry Polansky, Phil Burk, David Rosenboom, *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), pp. 136-178). It was really a good experience to work with them on that, and it began my relationship to the journal.

I was from a different musical community. I think those kinds of communities are now less defined than they used to be. There was a real difference between the experimental, DIY, hardware hacker type in the seventies, and the kind of academic, post-serialist, theorist community. It seemed to me that one should be able to converse articulately in both worlds and gain the benefits of lack of distinction between the two. One nice opportunity for us —by us I mean the Mills/San Francisco crowd—one thing that **that we could do** was to engage in really meaningful communication, and benefit from some of the most serious editing power, and the kind of historical stance that PNM had. There were beautiful things about institutions like PNM, and people like John and Ben and others, that were perhaps being somewhat overlooked by people with maybe a more rigid aesthetic definition of their community. I liked that John was interested in much the same thing. But we were coming from different aesthetics, world views, communities, friendships. I stayed in Seattle that first time with my friend David Mahler who probably had almost nothing to do with the university or its culture, but was (and is), to me, one of the most important American composers. There were those kinds of very real separations. There was a real feeling of “uptown/downtown’-ish kind of stuff, which of course, when it comes to real ideas, and not just fashion, makes no sense. I thought it, important, and healthy to obviate those artificial restrictions. So that is why I think we went with PNM, and working with John, for this definitional statement of HMSL.

Then, just a few years later, when [James] Tenney had become quite ill, we decided to do a special issue on him, which I think ended up being quite important. Important for PNM, because a whole community entered into conversation with the journal that had not previously felt comfortable, had not felt invited, that PNM barely knew about! It was a nice way for bridges to be built. It was great working with John on it, a real eye-opener about keeping one’s ears and mind open. I was the editor, David Rosenboom was the co-editor. And it was a major recognition of a theorist (Tenney) who worked independently of the main academic strain of theory. I think that broke issue down some barriers toward later projects like the Gaburo issue and other projects [CITE Gaburo festschrift]

After that, whenever I have had something that I thought was theoretically appropriate, or come across things by friends and students, PNM has been the place I have go to and recommend. I have had several things in there over the years. I don’t write a *lot* of articles, but generally, rather steadily, work on one large idea at a time. But I have also encouraged my students to consider PNM because it does a careful, unusually intelligent job of editing. They take things very, very seriously, and that attitude seems absolutely necessary and healthy for the world of ideas, which, in general, is a world that is ailing more and more, in my opinion. I was involved with the Gaburo issue and some other things... I forget all of the things I have done with them over the years, but

there has always been a sense – especially, I think, through John as the editor, but also the editorial board—that PNM tries to be as eclectic as possible in terms of style and aesthetic, but maintains a serious commitment to editorial quality and integrity. What could be better, and more importantly, what could be more important? I have been on the board myself for a long time, and I still peer-review. I published what to me is a fairly major article, just a little while ago.

It has not been a relationship that has been completely “unfraught.” There are occasionally cultural frictions that happen and personality issues — all of the stuff that by necessity happens in a journal like that when you have a bunch of visionary and interesting artists and scholars arguing with each other. But mostly, and overall, it has been a great experience. I would say that it has been an integral component part of my musical life precisely *because* they take serious ideas seriously. I don’t know that many places that do that, I think it’s rare — a lot rarer than you’d think in the music world. There are, sadly, not many places where you write something that you’ve thought very deeply about, and you get the privilege of having someone like John Rahn scream at you about it! [laughs]. They really *read* things at PNM, and they’re wonderfully hardcore about giving you a hard time about it. It’s like a painful massage: you know it’s good for you but while it’s happening you hate the masseuse (not that I’ve ever had a massage). In my experience there is a lot of academia that doesn’t treat ideas similarly seriously, and I think that is sometimes the daily experience of students, of faculty. A lot of people just don’t care that deeply about words and ideas, and I think we *should* care deeply, about every word and every idea. There are very few places where the argument is a sincere and committed one, and not about anything but musical and intellectual integrity and depth. It is the right way to have an argument: with respect, with passion, and a “let’s just get it right” approach. Even when I want to kill John [laughter], I am really glad that he is being John, because it always makes me better as a thinker and writer. He makes everyone better.

RV: Did you have a relationship to Perspectives... before you published the HMSL article?

LP: I can’t remember. I may have written a short thing for a series called “Being a Composer in America” (see Vol 26/no.1) but I honestly cannot remember. I worked with Jim Tenney pretty closely, and much earlier than that he had published what I think of as his ‘classic’ article on Ruggles in PNM [CITE]. The HMSL article though, was a major project for us, and that may have been my first direct experience... I was only 26 or something when I did that, so I couldn’t have done much before then. When I was much younger I had been offered a graduate fellowship at Princeton, which I didn’t accept, but through that I met Milton Babbitt and developed a great amount of respect for and lifelong friendship with him, and the same with Paul Lansky. I always felt like my own musical community wrote some of these folks off, not realizing how many deep ideas there were to be had, confusing cultural and aesthetics distinctions with, well, common and fundamental musical questions. Actually, I felt, and still feel to some extent that every community (there are many) tends to write off other communities a bit cavalierly. I’ve always felt that this was bad for everybody — it’s tribalism, good for finding a safe cave to live in but bad for figuring out different ways of mathematically describing musical similarity functions! Maybe I was a kind natural, possible bridge, and if so, I consider myself lucky to have made some contribution in that way. I am, I’m sure, one of a number of people who the editors at PNM saw as a possible bridge to broaden out to other viewpoints, to other communities. That’s to their credit, not mine — they’re very wide-ranging thinkers themselves. But with my position at Mills, through Frog Peak, and at Leonardo as well, I was kind of at the center of certain things, so I was in a good position to connect PNM to a lot of other people who maybe ... who might have been a little suspicious or a little trepidations about PNM. I was happy, and as I said, just plain lucky to be someone who could do that.

RV: I think that is great. I was just speaking to someone about that, actually: the factions, fractions, and frictions amongst groups/camps and how well that did or did not work, and why.

LP: I think, in the PNM community, it works pretty well, although it still is what it is. That's not a bad thing, it's good to have lots of small distinctions and sub-groups, as long as we remember that the most important distinction is that of choosing to be an artist. After that, in a larger perspective, it's the blue hat/green hat parable. But PNM is a place where one can go, I can go, if I really want to get an idea *right*. I have published, like all of us, in lots of places, but I have rarely, sadly, had the kind of editorial brutality, I mean care, that one receives at PNM. Like the kind that I imagine a writer gets at the New Yorker, you know? It must be really nice, and really painful, to write for the New Yorker, but the great thing is you're not alone, and you're working with people at least as smart, more importantly, as committed, as you are (if not smarter and more committed).

RV: Yes, even a poet and a poem gets fact checked.

LP: Right (laughter). You know, John will argue with me, and I guess pretty much all the authors, about the craziest shit. And it is great. I am just glad that he and some of the rest of the editors are sitting around, thinking, "well, what if you thought about it this way, or say it this way...?" Then I *will* think about it, and then I might say, "Ok, great idea, but in the next lifetime," or, "No, that's wrong," or "You're right! I will figure that out." I think that kind of conversation is both crucial and **depauperate** in the world, what naturalists might call a keystone species. I think that is what music should be about: not rhetoric, but idea. A lot, the vast majority of publications in music, especially, are pretty surface-level. There is a lot of rhetoric, a lot of self-proclamation, a lot of bad journalism, a lot of, well, bullshit. You can't do that very easily in PNM. That is where I want to test the mettle of my ideas. I don't want to convince anybody. I want most of all to get it as right as I can. I don't care if anyone is convinced, or even understands it at first, but if I know that the ideas are as right as I can make them, and if they end up in PNM, then at least a few smart people have read them carefully, and given me some kind of thumbs-up, and there's less of a chance that I am just making the stuff up (laughter). That's not to say that PNM, in my opinion, doesn't sometimes publish some very erudite, very well-written bullshit, but I often think that's a kind of unavoidable by-product of music and tenure and careerism being so intertwined at a very deep level, so deep that it's Quixotic to try and keep them straight. As director of Frog Peak, I am very sensitive to the faintest odor of someone using the collective for academic advancement, tenure, or sort of crass careerism, but I admit that I get fooled pretty frequently.

RV: To sort of flip the question, you have talked about some of the things you have published in PNM and some of the things you have helped them do... The James Tenney issue was very important and people I have interviewed have spoken of the importance of those articles to them. Conversely, are there any articles or debates that ran in PNM that had a particular impact on you? Or that you still go back to?

LP: Yes, there are. There are a lot of them. I read it, especially with regard to ideas that I am interested in pursuing or that I can pass on to students. The things that have caught my eye over the years have sort of led to... It is funny, you read something and no one else has really read it or heard of it, but you think "Wow that is one of the smartest ideas that I know of." I think, for example, of PNM supporting the work of Charles Ames, in the early years, who I think is one of the most brilliant computer music theorists of the last forty years, but nobody really knows who he is, nobody really cares. But he found, as well, that he had a home. He was able to write about deep, complex ideas in the way he wanted to. I think those things will last for a long time. I was just at a European festival for a few weeks and we brought Charles, sort of out of exclusion. And

we, or I, didn't necessarily doesn't have to explain his work "cold" to others because one can say, "Look, there are five articles by him in Perspectives..." He was allowed to have his say and it is going to be there forever — something to be thankful for.

I think some of the work that culminated in the recent tessellation canon issue — I think there are some larger ideas in that, in a strain of work that I have always been interested in, and mainly seen in PNM, for a long time. Admittedly, I don't read a lot of music journals anymore, so I may be talking through my hat here — but I'm referring to work that deals with notions of how to calculate and predict changes of time-variant processes, where time is the variable. Those kinds of processes are tricky, and it is something that we haven't explored enough of in music, but we should. It's like music has always dealt with algebra but we're discovering calculus! It's a next evolutionary stage perhaps of our ability to make and perceive musical form. There have been a few articles over the years... Paul Nauert's early work, Mike Frengel's (not in PNM), some of my own, and another mathematician-theorist (whose name seems to escape me for the moment) that have concerned themselves with how to predict the coordination of time-variant temporal processes, and ideas like that. Sort of working out the theoretical structure of Nancarrow, in a funny sense, where what Nancarrow is doing by hand, well, one should be able to formalize, generalize, and predict. A lot of my compositional and software work, since the early 1970s, has dealt with these tempo issues. It was wonderful to see a whole issue devoted to these tiling canons, which is a special case of these ideas, but a very important special case. I was teaching at UC Santa Cruz last year, and within about a week of getting the issue, showing it to one of my students (a very interesting young composer named Joe Davances), Joe had written his own tiling canon. That seemed like a good example (one of many), and a sort of "proof of concept" of where PNM takes the lead on identifying an important new idea, and starts a bunch of people working on it.

I have also liked the very beautiful "meta" articles like John's article on aspects of musical explanation [CITE]. I've used that essay many times with my students. Sometimes they hate it, but at least they say, "Look, this guy is trying to figure out how we articulate, how we talk about music." One may disagree with parts of it but it is an example of a courageous and cogent attempt, and we need to talk about the attempt itself. So when PNM has done that kind of thing, I think it can be impactful, necessary, especially at the high level at which these articles are written. But there haven't been any controversies that I have been aware of or part of, as far as I know. [Laughter]

RV: Oh, no, by "debates" I was thinking of the Lewin-Cone debate that ran in earlier days, for example.

LP: I have to apologize, I didn't follow that.

RV: You don't have to apologize! You have got to be kidding me! I was just trying to indicate that that is the sort of "debate" I was referring to.

LP: Well, that is one brilliant pair of thinkers, so I'm glad they had a forum for hashing something out, whatever it was! [Laughs]. David was another one of those theorists who dug in so deep it was both scary and wonderful at the same time. A long time ago, when I was working on the contour and morphology ideas, I used to sometimes think there are only three real theorists in the U.S: David, Jim Tenney and Robert Morris. I am not familiar with exactly what you're talking about in this particular instance, though.

RV: You said earlier that you come from a more “experimental” side of things. Could you say more about that, or about your background?

LP: Well, first let me say that that is a very dumb word to use, and I apologize for using it. It’s a bad habit. We should get rid of it as soon as possible. One of my favorite definitions was jokingly made by Amy Beal: experimental composers are the ones who answer their own phones! It really amounts to who your friends are. You know, if one tries to tease out what we are now talking about, it becomes, thank goodness, more and more foolish to say something like “experimental music” or “maverick” or blah blah blah. I’d love to get rid of these marketing labels, fraternities, secret handshakes, slogans, winks and knowing nods, self-branding, t-shirts and bumper stickers.

But on the other hand, sometimes there are, of course, very real differences between communities. In the early period of computer music experimentation, there were fundamental methodological and cultural dissimilarities between big institutions and less centralized communities that were committed to not being dependent on mainframe computers, technical staff, physical and monetary resources, etc. Rather, they (we) were committed to cheap technology, DIY aesthetics, and a pluralistic approach, which included improvisation, quirky intelligences, collaboration, and lo-fi audio. It had to a lot to do with technology, budget, resources, and that manifested itself in musical aesthetics and divergent activities. HMSL emerged from some of those considerations, which are, nicely and sometimes less interestingly, no longer relevant. It is ancient history. We didn’t have laptops, we were writing our own little operating systems for our own little computers, but a few miles away people at Stanford were working on giant mainframes. For a short period of time that was a fundamental aesthetic difference, and one that engendered progress in both communities, but it was clear that it didn’t need to be that way. Technology made the distinctions irrelevant, but those distinctions did establish friendship communities, cultural, musical styles... We were improvising on homebrew computers in the seventies and eighties and composers at Stanford and other large universities were often making tape pieces. Two different things. There was also a lot of coordination, hybridization, and communication between those worlds, too, but on a theoretical level, not everybody was talking to everybody all of the time.

It was nice to have something like PNM to support, cohere and connect different musical worlds. I think in the case of PNM’s involvement with computer music, that was largely to John’s credit. He is curious. He knew what he was doing, but he didn’t know what we were doing. He was fascinated to see, in detail, what one had to do if you were doing intelligent musical systems on an Amiga!

There are real aesthetic varieties, too. To me, as a young composer, Cage and Ives and Partch and Crawford Seeger were touchstones, my “classics.” Lou and Jim were my friends and mentors. They had very, very different aesthetics than the communities of Princeton and Columbia. And they, and others, didn’t feel at all noticed by those communities. It is very, very recently that academia has started listening to Feldman, Cage, Corner, Goode, Wolff, Tenney, and others of that generation, not to mention Michael Byron, David Mahler, Peter Garland, or others of my generation. That is a pretty new thing. PNM was different. They were interested in these musics if they could find people who were articulate to talk about them.

RV: That is great. Is there anything else you would like to share about PNM that I didn’t ask you about or that comes to mind on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary? Any relationships that have grown through or around the magazine? Conversations you have had because of PNM?

LP: It has been an important part of my own life of ideas, since I was in my twenties. I have appreciated having it, and I think I will keep coming back to it as long as it is out there. For example, when I wrote the article on “Optimal Well-Temperaments” (with Dan Rockmore, Douglas Repetto, and Kimo Johnson) that was, for me, a very important, five-year idea. When we finished the first version, we had two choices: *Science* and PNM. The *Science* article was about two pages (and was very nearly published, to our surprise). But for the PNM version we were able to really explain the ideas in detail, and explore the musical-historical motivations and possibilities. But those were really the only two places that I would have been happy having the article. What really mattered to me was the *idea* and the *careful statement* of the idea. I don’t need anything beyond that anymore. I am fortunate enough to be old enough that that is all I have to care about. It just felt right for it to appear in PNM. I knew that I would be screaming back at John in my sleep for a while, but it was worth it.

RV: It is interesting that you talk about having a place where you could share and talk about your ideas in an intense, meaningful way. That is not always ... One of the interesting things about Perspectives, historically thinking and speaking, is that it is a place for composers, theorists, composer-theorists, performers, intellectuals. That is not necessarily true of other journals. As the realm of music theory and the realm of composition have shifted in their disciplinarily defined and/or actually felt relationship to each other there is not necessarily a place for, or value for the world of ideas.

LP: I agree with you. I will be more dogmatic. I believe that articulation is essential, and I don’t... you know, the wonderfully clever, but possibly dangerous and **certainly specious canard** that “talking about music is like dancing about architecture?” I think, even for all its effectiveness of that kind of thing as a sound-bite, as a slogan, there is nothing more wrong. These kinds of quips immediately become a standard-bearers for ignorance, intellectual sloppiness, and not-caring. It is a very short distance away from a kind of anti-intellectualism that is so dangerous to humanity, and it scares me. When someone says “if you have to talk about it, it can’t be interesting,” I say the opposite, and to to my students: “if you can’t talk about it, it probably *isn’t* interesting.” One may have trouble talking about something, and one may create almost any way of talking about something, but if you really have *nothing to say* about it, then you probably aren’t *doing* anything. I am open to any way, style, any mode of that articulation. But I am adamantly opposed to what Herbert Brün called “self-proclaimed ignorance” (or what he called “self-appointed morons”). It is not an option. I think that, as you say... the general mood of our culture is anti-articulation, anti-intellectualism, and that this is particularly true in music. Horribly true in music. Just look at “music criticism” in respected places. I want to challenge that, and PNM is one of the few places where we can do the opposite, by showing that one can, actually, talk about music, and, by implication, in fact, if one can’t, then that’s suspect. The claim is often made that it music can’t be talked about because it is too... ineffable, we’ll tarnish that mystery. I agree that there is everything ineffable about music, but humans have always talked about the ineffable in beautiful ways. And in every conceivable way. The singular thing about music is that it is meaningless and meaningful at the same time, just about the only art form that can be purely meaningless, and paradoxically communicate so much. In fact, that’s our only choice. We just aren’t good enough at talking about it.

RV: Thank you for saying that and articulating those thoughts.