

Introduction

There are several important ideas which seem to pervade and unite Tenney's work, and the understanding of them can aid in the proper appreciation of the music. This "list" is by no means exhaustive. Not only does it necessarily omit certain "spiritual" and perhaps less defineable qualities, it also cannot describe the synergy of his work (again, from Fuller: "The behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately;" Synergetics, page 3) nor the multiplicity of ways in which these ideas relate and interact, like the vertices of a complex polyhedron.

Economy

Economy of idea, musical material, and above all "dramatic embellishment" is extremely important in Tenney's music. "Avoidance of drama" is a concept we will see again and again in the pieces that follow. Tenney is interested in generative studies which are in themselves metaphors, representations, or even invocations of philosophical, physical, or perceptual processes. His music is an attempt to free these processes, to let them "resonate" - and he utilizes all his considerable compositional skill towards this end. David Rosenboom has put it beautifully:

"... Tenney is a formal, conceptual purist, believing that ultimately a greater musical universality may be achieved by sticking to the inspirations of nature and its evolving forms, rather than clouding our perceptions with one man's emotive point of view."

(private communication)

In a sense, many of the pieces (like For Ann (rising), the Chorales, the Harmonia, ...) are monothematic in that they systematically and exhaustively explore the ramifications of a particular sonic idea, using the various musical parameters to directly re-enforce the perception of that idea. Thus, direct, large structures perhaps suggest what is often called (lately) minimalism. Certainly Tenney was part of the musical "scene" from which that school was born, but in his music I believe that it would be a misnomer. In every other way, these pieces present the listener with a maximally complex set of musical events, in many cases achieved by an equally maximal compositional effort (as in the string trio). Tenney is constant in his fealty to the single idea, and all decisions in a given piece seem to be made so that that same idea might be most clearly perceived, as well as most resonantly heard. For example, once the harmonic idea

of the Chorales has been envisioned, the act of writing the beautiful melody is a secondary but extremely important compositional task, and one in which we can even find integral relationships to the harmonic "meta-theme".

Formal Ideas

As a result of his quest for economy, simplicity and clarity, Tenney has sometimes embraced ergodic and canonical forms, and in other cases has drawn the form directly from some pre-existing material. I think that this is his way, in a Cagean sense, of freeing the composer from the act of imposing a formal structure on sonic material, when in fact the composer has no interest in or reason for doing so. In an ergodic structure, any given temporal "slice" is equally likely to have the same parametric or morphological statistical characteristics as any other slice. The listener realizes very early on that certain things will not change, and that no surprises are in store for him along at least one given axis. He is then free to concentrate on his/her perception of the resultants of a single set of ideas. Examples of ergodic forms are the "koans", some of Quintext, For Ann (rising), the Chorales, and several of the computer pieces. Canonical forms, such as the drum quartets, the Harmonia, Quiet Fan, and Spectral CANON also free the listener from certain dramatic and formal surprises, and allow the composer another way in which to realize patterns, processes, and complexities from simpler, limited material. Tenney's mastery of canon is wonderfully evident in everything from Seeds, which uses imitation in more subtle but traditional ways, to the Harmonia, in which contrapuntal and harmonic ideas are integrated in virtuosic ways reminiscent of the "masters". Examples of works in which pre-existing structural or formal information is simply translated into the piece are the Three Indigenous Songs, Saxony (the harmonic series!), Hey When I Sing..., and to some extent Collage #1-("Blue Suede"). In these pieces, Tenney is happily "yielding" to the form of the music or text that he at once pays homage to and transforms. This type of non-imposition of dramatic intent is certainly consistent with both the canonic and ergodic structures, and also with the revolutionary ideas of John Cage which have been of such tremendous importance to Tenney. Several early works, particularly 13 Ways..., Seeds, Monody, and the rags, employ more dramatic forms, as do parts of the later works. Tenney's facility with this aspect of composition is quite evident. This perhaps finds its way into all his music, touches of a different poetic style occurring here and there.

An important aspect of this formal economy is the frequent use of what might be called, borrowing from literary usage, "multiple perspective," in which the same facts are presented in several different narrative personae (as in, for example, Faulkner's As I Lay Dying). This affords

Tenney the opportunity to elicit variant "dramatic" perspectives of a single generative idea. In the Chorales, a single melodic/harmonic idea is stated four times, with only the orchestration changing. The Harmonia are, in a sense, several different personalities of the modulatory-intonational scheme, and the Three Indigenous Songs can be seen as an attempt to alter the meanings of the given musics/texts by placing them in a different "narrative" context. Tenney's intent, I believe, is to allow the listener to extract his own aural "truths" from the sonic "arguments" and in this way it emerges as still another device by which the composer can free himself from imposing his dramatic will upon the audience.

Historical Sense

A third important facet of Tenney's work is its strong sense of history. He often uses and investigates the act of homage as a kind of aesthetic motif. Not only the titles of many of the pieces, but the particular forms and questions asked in them point to his tremendous sense of musical continuity, both with his contemporaries and with the past. These references are not simply dedications - Tenney makes the things he loves into essential, integral parts of his own works. Often his pieces take the form of a kind of public and artistic communication with another artist. This respect is also shown in his pervasive sense of American cultural and musical heritage. Tenney has made it his business to promote American music in all of his several capacities. This is not, of course, blind chauvinism, nor is it a reaction to a perceived oppression by European culture - rather, it is an affirmation of his own background and knowledge, a sense that one can perhaps make the deepest contribution if one is transforming what he knows best. Implicit in this is the frequent use of quotation, which is again embedded in the very fabric of the musical idea (like the drum quartets, or Quiet Fan). When quotations do appear, they are usually the seed of the particular process at hand, although in several instances they are juxtaposed with another, related idea (examples of both occur in Quiet Fan).

Koan

The koan, a traditional zen question in which the answer is less important than the processes stimulated by contemplation of an apparent paradox, is also important in most of the pieces since 1964. Tenney likes to set a process in motion and let its aural manifestations be a kind of meditative fabric, as in the music of Pauline Oliveros, LaMonte Young and others. His processes/questions are often rather complex in their formulation - usually outgrowths of the tireless investigation of deeper, perhaps "simpler"

musical and perceptual problems. I have tried to illustrate in many of the pieces not only how the immediacies of the music are beautiful and powerful, but that the theoretical formulations that lie beneath are of tremendous interest and intricacy. In this sense, they are not unlike the wonderful complement of intellectuality and sensuality one finds in the music of Schoenberg, Webern, Ives, Ruggles, and a few others.

"Clang" and "Swell"

Two unique and important formal ideas are common in Tenney's music, perceptible both as simple sonic events and as formal/philosophical "generators". The first is the clang, a term and idea which has several shades of meaning in Tenney's music. Its "formal" ramifications are explored in theoretical detail in META / HODOS, but Tenney uses it frequently in a much simpler way, in what might be called "aggregates" of indivisible sound combinations. In this idea, we can see the powerful influence of the sonorities and techniques of both Cage and Varèse. A frequent "Tenneyism" along these lines is a percussive attack followed immediately by a sustained pitch and/or sound which seems to arise out of that attack. This sonority, or some minor variation of it, is found in nearly every work. It is at once a kind of philosophical integrity and simply a sound that Tenney likes. It is a consistent compositional choice which contributes to the individuality of his music.

The second related formal idea is the swell (pun intended, I'm sure), found in so many pieces. The "swell" is one of the simplest geometric forms: an arch with no plateau, the two sides of an isosceles triangle, the movement from nothingness to existence and then back again. Often it is the entire work, as in several of the postcard pieces (which can be considered either a single clang, swell, or both). Tenney's awareness of his own interest in these sonic ideas is reflected in the fact that several works draw their titles from them. On a more mundane level, they are identifiable musical signatures.

Orchestration

Something that has often been overlooked in Tenney's style is the importance of his instrumental technique. Tenney's mastery of instrumental nuance is essential to the clarity and uncompromised quality of his work. Pieces like Seeds are more obvious examples of this, but the subtle use of orchestration is even more important in Clang, Three Indigenous Songs, the Harmonia, Quiet Fan, and several other works in which the orchestrational virtuosity is not quite so much in the foreground. Yet the instrumental choices are of paramount importance to the final clarity of these pieces, and to their particular emotive effects.

Musical "Personality"

One final aspect of Tenney's work that should not be overlooked but is not so easily demonstrated is the fundamental good-natured quality of it. He is genuinely glad to be composing and making music, and this joy is as present in the music as the complex musical and intellectual ideas. His music is a kind of exultation of musical truths and the joy of experiment, and he is not above even poking fun at himself (punning shamelessly and often). This childlike quality of Jim's music most absorbs my own interest, and is perhaps what makes it so attractive to many others as well.