

II. Collage #1 - ("Blue Suede") and Monody (for solo clarinet)

Although these two works are of widely different character and medium, both were written at about the same time, 1959-1961, around Tenney's stay at the U. of Illinois, which he attended, he says, because it was one of the few places where electronic music facilities were available at the time. Perhaps the vast cornbelt had a kind of cultural influence on him, for in these two pieces we can see a departure from the more European style of Seeds and a new embracing of "indigenous" elements: in this case a Rugglesian sense of line, and the music of Elvis Presley.

Collage #1 - ("Blue Suede") 1961, a tape collage of Elvis Presley's Blue Suede Shoes (by the great American guitarist/singer Carl Perkins), has become something of an American electronic music classic, and is one of Tenney's better known works. It is short (three minutes, eighteen seconds) and with respect to techniques available today, uses a very simple set of technological resources. Most of the "classical" tape manipulations are used: speed changes, reversal, tape head echo, multitracking, splicing and some filtering, but the combinations and the techniques are nothing short of virtuosic. Particularly impressive is the editing, which in its rapid, arhythmic but pulsating effect resembles a speeded up version of Tenney's second collage Viet Flakes (1966). There is a sense of time here, in the way that jazz players use the word, that is uncommon in tape music. The edited phrases seem to fall right around the perceived, implied beats, in the same way in which a jazz rhythm section and soloist interact around a steady pulse. The overall effect is that the piece "swings". Tenney is sensitive to the music he is paying homage to; R+B, or rockabilly, in which the concept of the "backbeat" is crucial. Collage #1 never sacrifices the backbeat to its other transformations, and the piece resembles early rock'n'roll in its rhythmic drive. Yet, intentionally, it never quite finds the "groove" (of steady time divisions) - it is continually frustrated by quick silences, aborted beats, and unexpected returns to the beginnings of phrases. It is perhaps Elvis' physical and musical gyrations and expressions taken to their perceptual extreme, an attempt by Tenney to capture some essence of the music.

"I had been deeply moved by Varèse's Déserts and Poème Electronique, and by his vision of the new musical possibilities realizable through electronic technologies. In 1959 I began graduate work at the University of Illinois, attracted there by the fact that courses were being offered in electronic music (perhaps for the first time anywhere). Under the generous tutelage of Lejaren Hiller, I began to work in the new medium, but with absolutely no success at

first. In spite of all my earlier expectations, the synthetic character of the electronically produced sounds seemed to resist my every effort to use them in a way that was musically satisfying to me. Collage #1 - "Blue Suede" arose, initially as an act of desperation in the face of these difficulties, but once begun, it was completed in one feverish week in the studio. I consider it a celebration of Elvis Presley, and I like to think that it would have pleased him."

(from Tenney's In Retrospect, notes to Reich Foundation concerts in N.Y.C., Dec. 1978)

The piece consists essentially of four sections, each short. The first (about 25-30 seconds long) is comprised almost exclusively of slowed-down tape sounds, focusing on the instrumental background on the record, particularly the drums, leaving out the voice. It is not obvious at this point what the sound source is, although the feel more than the content seems to express rock'n'roll. There is a use of tape head echo here, which has the effect of producing a rich, sustained, phase-shifted type of processing on the low, already complex sonorities. The quick splicing, and the texture, which seems to be virtually monaural (that is, one-track, though in Tenney's terms it might be called "compound monophonic") makes the rhythmic movement quite clear and transparent, never becoming muddy. The second section (about 45 seconds) introduces some very beautiful higher-pitched timbres over the low bass. These sounds seem to be the results of various filterings, reversals, editings and speed increases (in various combinations) of the higher pitched sounds on the recording (although it is hard to tell, I think the voice, lead guitar and higher pitched drums are used). They have a grainy quality which might suggest that they are actually lower pitched sounds played at a higher speed, maybe even those of the first section. There is a complex contrapuntal relationship (high/low) developed during this section, and it is developed for about 15 seconds longer than the first. Near the end (the last ten seconds or so), a marked increase in density and tempo occurs, as well as an obvious crescendo, leading into the third section (now about 1:15 through the piece). Suddenly, all that is heard are quick splices of more or less unadulterated voice, but the transition is smoothed by the crescendo into the section and by the fact that the accompanying instrumental sounds are spliced, of course, in conjunction with the voice, and so the resulting sonority is still fairly rich. Many of the quick splices, it seems, are just slightly dovetailed (on separate tracks) and so the effect is one of quick, seamless shifts of attention. From experience in playing this piece for many students, friends, etc., I can say that when this section begins, a smile almost invariably comes to the listener's face, for the recognition

of Elvis' voice is rather sudden, and quite wonderful, as we realize we've been listening to it all along! This section is also about 45 seconds long, and at about 1:58 through the piece, the low sounds from the first section, and shortly after, the higher sounds from the second join in. The last minute and a quarter or so of the piece is a three part contrapuntal "jam" of the three textures, and it may well be that the material used in this section is identical to all the "component" material used previously. It is certainly not much different, and this gives the piece a characteristically economical and transparent form (like its source!).

In a larger sense, a few other things about this piece are worth noting. First, like much of Ives' music (as in the Emerson movement of the Concord, with which Tenney is so familiar), the development scheme is "backwards". The source material is not heard until the third section, unrecognizable and highly transmogrified material presented first. This is not specific to the music of Ives and Tenney, but I think that if it is not a peculiarly American fixation, it is at least one with which the music of the U.S. has always concerned itself. It reminds me very much of the way traditional fiddlers will play highly ornamented versions of a simple fiddle tune, and then, somewhere in the middle of a performance, play the tune very simply and straightforwardly, almost as a way of taking a breath, allowing the listener to revel in the simple beauty of the revealed "pure" version. Tenney's use of this relatively subtle aesthetic and compositional trait of Ives is characteristic of some of his later music as well, in which his various tributes and homages are often related to an aspect of a given composer's work which is below the surface and not immediately obvious.

The choice of material, was I think, very unusual for the period. (Malcolm Goldstein has told me that "a lot of people were doing collages at the time, but Jim was the only one who used rock'n'roll"). Whether Tenney was the only one or not is not so important, but it is important that he treated it with a sensitivity and love that is uncommon to this day. He has since used several "indigenous" musics, and I think that they are all used primarily because he simply likes them so much, and in some way wants to contribute to the tradition itself.

Monody, for solo clarinet (1959), is the earlier work of this pair, and is surprisingly similar to Blue Suede in both its rhythmic and compositional feel, and in the fact that it is as obvious a bow towards Ruggles as Blue Suede is to Elvis.

"While at Bennington I began learning to play Ives' Concord Sonata, and this surely had an effect on my musical ideas, but no obvious "influence" seemed to show up in my own work until sometime later,

(perhaps with Collage #1 - "Blue Suede", in 1961). I also had the great good fortune to meet Carl Ruggles, beginning a friendship that lasted until his death in 1971. This early contact with Ruggles inspired in me a desire to develop the melodic aspect of my work, though - with the exception of Monody (1959) - this has remained a lesser concern to me, secondary to timbre, texture, and (more recently) harmony".

(from In Retrospect, notes to N.Y.C. concerts)

Monody is the only work of Tenney's with the possible exception of the rags, and in a different sense, the Chorales, that concerns itself with melody, and it is interesting that after Monody he seemed to lose interest in the idea. The few melodic examples in his work (we must include Hey When I Sing... as well) are quite beautiful, and all evidence a very sophisticated sense of melodic formation very much like Ruggles' own, in which ornamentation is sparse, and the tunes are direct, directed, well-conceived, and very tight. This can even be heard, though not quite as successfully, in the very early work Poem for solo flute (1954).

Monody, like the earlier Seeds, shows the very direct influences of Ruggles, Varese, Webern, and is to some extent similar to the work of Stefan Wolpe (though Tenney was not familiar with the latter's work at the time). Monody is almost entirely a study in intervallic relations, and in the creation of a melodic line with very definite rhythmic and pitch goals. Avoidance of pitch class repetition is on the average, 7-8 notes, if immediate repetitions are not taken into account. In addition, several short fragments of the piece are almost serial, in the same way that Ruggles is - not by doctrine, but by a kind of ultimate expansion of the atonal idea (as in Example II.1, the first few measures of the piece). Motivic repetitions are used often, and there are, as in Seeds, just a few fecund germinating ideas. In some cases they are rhythmic (Example II.2), and in some they are intervallic, as in the opening measure and in the use of a split octave motive with equivalent intervallic content (tritones and minor seconds, with minor thirds of secondary importance). In many cases, the "germ" intervals dovetail with each other (Example II.3).

Example II.1



Example II.2



Example II.3



One way to view the motivic technique in this piece is as a continuous evolution of a simple melodic idea. For example, the opening melodic figure, after a reenforcing repetition, is quickly seen in its inversion (Example II.4). A few measures later, the same motive is octave displaced (Example II.5), and this type of transformation continues throughout. Virtually the entire piece's motivic and melodic structure is composed of some variation on this intervallic idea, whether through the means outlined above or by successive concatenations and rhythmic variation (Example II.6).

The piece is in three sections, each having a characteristic type of melodic/rhythmic development, yet each of course, closely related to the others. The first section (from the beginning until the tempo change on the second page, roughly a third of the piece), is split both texturally and motivically, in a very conventional yet effective

Example II.4



Example II.5



Example II.6

way by the pause right before the first clear occurrence of the theme's inversion. This inversion is repeated almost immediately, echoing the very beginning of the piece, and much of the rhythmic and melodic material of this second half is identical to that of the first. Tenney is striving for economy, and one is reminded of the passage of time in Ruggles' Portals, where the main theme (a very simple and striking descending half-step) occurs clearly whenever a new developmental section is begun. The first section ends as well, in almost a quote from Ruggles (or perhaps reminiscent of the high note climax in Varese's Density 21.5) with a flurry of rhythmic activity, increasing in tempo and rising continually in pitch until it rests on a high A#, double forte, but with a decrescendo over the duration of the pitch to double piano.

The second section is more concerned with rhythmic variation, and makes use of the relative ease with which a clarinet can change register quickly and easily. In this section, the intervals are dovetailed continuously as in Example II.7, where minor third, tritone, and minor seconds proliferate in a complex implied polyphony. The form of this section is breath-like: gradually building up in density, then suddenly releasing to its frenzied climax, as in the first section (this time a major second higher - C natural). In a sense, this type of macrodensity structure imitates the microstructure of the melodic ideas themselves, which are continually "climbing over themselves".

The third section is a kind of combination of rhythmic and melodic variation. Beginning lyrically, it moves into a shifting quintuplet pulse-like figure (like a similar passage in the second section), becoming lyrical once again before moving to its unusual climax. Here, the piece ends, on of all things, a low F#.

Example II.7

What is striking about Monody, aside from the obvious skill and beauty of the composition, is its disarming lack of cliché, and above all, the very direct and elegant use of the clarinet (though the piece remains quite difficult to play well). There are no "extended instrumental techniques" (so tempting to use on the instrument), and very little rapid, virtuosic passagework. Complex rhythms are used to ensure a simpler lyrical quality, rather than to create a complex effect. The listener gets the feeling that the rhythmic interest of the score (at least from a visual standpoint) is there because of a desire to make the instrument sing in almost speech/song rhythms, and indeed, a comparison with the rhythms of Three Indigenous Songs might bear this out. This is one of the few pieces of Tenney's where he is unabashedly trying to be lyrical, and one in which this lyricism is the primary context, for even in the rags there is a strong sense of history and parody (in the best sense of the word), which, in an interesting way, focuses our attention to other realms besides the "tune" itself.