

#2: MASTERY OF THE COMMMODITY

R: What were you saying about musical judgement?

E: Musical judgement is your worst enemy.

A: Yeah.

E: I suppose it's that thing of what to me seem like really amazing musicians improvising, or composing or playing to me seems like the most boring way to make music. And again I think it's a conservative tendency to the idea that you need to develop material at a certain pace isn't it?

R: Improv tempo.

A: Well it's very much the temporality that has caused the crisis in improvisation I think we're going through.

R: With no formal rigor either. Improvisation presents more clichéd beginnings and ends than a first year composition student. You been to Berlin recently?

E: Sure.

A: People don't address form and structure on that temporal level as much as it should be thought about. A lot of the discipline has gone into timbral research....

R: When I was in my 20s, there was this kind of deification of the timbre – other musical elements were deemed nowhere near as important. As far as I could tell you could get away with a lot by just making various gradations of white noise on your instrument, and then saying you were influenced by electronic music.

A: Yeah...all of the other aspects of real-time decision making have gone by the wayside. In 99% percent of cases.

E: So then the two alternatives are stasis or this kind of autistic...

A: Yeah this kind of autistic skronkiness, or even the third alternative is the directed improvisation, where you have these kinds of block forms, crashing in over each other, which in themselves are either static or autistic. So you have this very simplistic relationship between stasis and autism.

E: I guess that's always a tough crisis to have if you feel like you've run through the alternatives, and none of them feel like valid musical practice.

R: Yeah and with all of its promise of presenting an alternative, underground music culture has an equally crippling hierarchy as the concert hall. It has the same problems of gender inequality, dodgy ideologies, assumed greatness and lack of technical commitment...

A: But it was what Erkki was saying about Tony Burr yesterday - the lexicon is so broad, and that's ultimately the goal: is to have a broad lexicon within one's own technical ability. A rhythmic lexicon, a timbral lexicon, a pitch-related lexicon and a dynamic lexicon. Those are the four things we should all attempt to master, more or less..

E: Or research and develop...

R: Or attempt to invent for ourselves....

A: Because then, *then*, it is relevant: the argument is on an equal level to composing, I would say.

E: Sure, of course.

A: If you can find players who can deal with those four elements on that level. Otherwise its just a fucking defensive, silly argument.

E: Yeah sure but it's the same with composition: it's pretty rare to find people who have those qualities under their control in composition as well.

R: Most composers are letting Sibelius or Finale make the call. I think we're currently seeing the interface drive musical decision making more than ever. To be any good, the first thing to learn is how to resist technology – like backstage cask wine at a French improv festival.

A; Absolutely! Its already rare that composers are even considering musical elements on any kind of detached, objective level, as much as it is possible to be objective in that sense, of just simply saying: you can do this, or you can do that. I don't think that most people are even there. Most people are thinking: if I do this, this person will like me. If I do this, I'm going to get this prize....

E: Yeah its a goal-oriented practice....

R: Well most new music premieres are like a messy one night stand that both parties want to forget anyway, maybe because new music pamphlets

frequently share their visual aesthetics with singles websites...

A: ...If do this, this person will play it. If I do this, I'm going to get on this label. If I do this I'm going to get into the festival.

E: Yeah, and that's about mastery of the commodity.

A: Yeah ultimately the work just exists to make money or indulge someone's narcissism, rather than actually figuring something out on a sonic level and/or dealing with the acoustic reality of the materials available to you.

R: It has become so much more about the network rather than the work. Artists trade career monologues, not ideas.

E: It's been interesting that *Herzog on Herzog* book, because he talks about how...I mean, he's completely contradictory of course, or self-contradictory, and its obviously a deliberate provocation.

A: Very important, in a way.

E: Well if you're a thinking person its impossible not to be self-contradictory.

R: Well, habit is a great deadener – you have to learn how to enjoy your contradictions and neuroses, otherwise you'll never make it.

A: That's why we're all so fucking depressed.

E: His opinion is that art is over. Obviously one of the questions is that: do you consider yourself an auteur in the tradition of Godard or Eisenstein. In this book at least he says he thinks of himself as a skilled craftsman, like a medieval skilled craftsman, who is working out techniques to create a whole that is satisfactory in some kind of conceptual way.

A: Or the experience of the object offers....

E: His goal is that ecstatic truth thing. So obviously....

A: "That ecstatic truth thing"...(laughs)

E: Well which is why he doesn't really divide his films into fiction and non-fiction, or documentary and narrative, because he's always searching for the same thing, which is the idea of some kind of ecstatic, sublime state of being, that comes from reality.

A: So finding out some kind of core truth, and in the experience of discovering that, you have your own kind of revelation.

E: Exactly..that the ecstasy comes from your view of reality being shaken, so that you have to step outside your usual frame of reference, or your usual viewpoint. That's why he's attracted to certain kinds of documentaries and certain kinds of films, but the ultimate goal is always the same, which to me, and I could be misinterpreting, but the ideal of extraordinary experience of reality. So in a way it's bringing back magic into reality.

A: And he doesn't think that art can achieve that.

R: An extraordinary experience of reality to me is when I don't yawn at a gig.

E: It was kind of a throwaway comment, and I think what he means is that the narrative of art has come to an end. What the average person considers to be art, is over. And I think that's his point, is that sure there are artists, and there is the artworld, and there is art as commodity, and there's art in galleries, and people calling themselves artists....

A: Way too many obviously.

R: Yeah, and if everyone is able to have their own voice, why are distinctive cultures disappearing? It's as if more the options and outlets there are, the less ability people have to focus the courage and discipline it takes to make something good.

E: Sure, and for Herzog, it's not useful to consider himself as part of that world. Which I guess is to do with how you're trying to communicate, and whom you're trying to communicate with.

A: That's probably why his work keeps getting more and more interesting, because he doesn't...~~its~~ it's as in improvisation, that the most interesting improvisation is that kind of combination of technical know-how and structural awareness, and some level of innovation.

R: Or a healthy sense of stylistic suspicion....

E: Yeah - ultimately it's about how you construct acoustical phenomena in time.

A: Yeah, so what Herzog is doing is constructing visual phenomena in time.

E: Yeah and that's why he's so particular about the way things are edited, for

instance. He always talks about having a slightly longer shot that you would expect. It's the same thing as Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*...the first sequence, where it's all tits and arse. For the first 20 seconds, you're just looking at tits and arse...and then, because it goes on longer than...

A: than a standard edit...

E: ...yeah then you start looking at yourself...

A: ...looking at the tits and arse.

E: Yeah so you actually completely recontextualize your experience of it.

A: Just through the treatment of time.

E: Exactly, and I think that's one thing that musicians, funnily enough, don't think about *nearly* enough.

R: Well that would eat into their self-googling time....

A: Because time is simply just a way to get to the end of the bar? That's the whole thing, is that music is always thought about in units of time. And to actually think of think of it on the level you're discussing...

E: It's really about showing the audience how you want them to listen to it. And you do that by subverting the expectation. Xenakis does that just by brutal cutting of form. When I first started listening to him, I loved the fact that I couldn't predict anything.

A: It completely defies analysis.

E: Yeah exactly, and of course after listening to it a lot, you get some kind of gist of the rhythmic approach or the large scale structural approach.

A: Which has a lot to do with orchestration in most cases.

R: He takes the orchestra out of the orchestra, which is the hardest thing to do and often sounds the best.

E: And that's not the case with Stockhausen, or Boulez or people like that. It seems so much more conventional. Varèse is interesting like that too...

A: Well to me he's the beginning of that thinking, the separation of the orchestra into more microscopic and contained elements....the really amazing thing about

those Xenakis orchestral pieces is for example when he just has the winds by themselves for 3 minutes...

R: He knew that great music in this idiom is often achieved when the composer doesn't exactly know exactly how it's supposed to sound – he goes out on a limb with himself and thus the music.

E: And it seems like it's purposeful, but you can't pick the purpose. Which is funnily enough the Kantian idea of beauty: purposefulness without purpose. The other thing that Herzog says is athleticism over aestheticism, or athletics over aesthetics, and he really sees filmmaking as a physical form, rather than as a theoretical aesthetic form. I think that music is similar in that as well....and the attempt to get away from the expected progress of musical material, which usually is bound to an expected aesthetic.

R: Protests against existing trends become trends in themselves and thus emptied of urgency. As Erkki said once, yesterday's rebellion is today's hot property.

A: A certain stylistic expectation, which even now in so-called radical improvisation...it's just completely suffocated by style. It doesn't even transcend its own identity.

E: I reckon that's the crux of what people think is good musicianship, ultimately. Is that a good musician is someone who's wearing an aesthetic straitjacket, or is someone who is wearing a straitjacket called aesthetics, which is the best way *not* to discover any new acoustic phenomena, or new ways to experience sound.

A: And that's the key thing, music is sound in time. You and I probably agree on that, but most people do not.

E: Most people think its an inner expression.

R: Most people have their musical taste predicted by an application and start to believe it. If you like this, you may like this...For most, music is just something to wear, to match with your Ikea couch, but for delusional composers....

A: ..it's an inner expression of some humanistic emotion, and that composers have the right to stand on this pedestal of subjectivity and express themselves in whatever way, however ultimately those are the two things which need to be constantly questioned and radicalised, the sound and the time, and the way the sound is organised within the time.

E: Or how time is organised within sound.

A: (long pause) So...

E: Gin and tonic?

A: Yeah.

R: Fuck yeah.