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## Questions to Dean Rosenthal

### Interview by Knut Remond for 'ohrenhoch, der Geräuschladen' Berlin-Neukölln

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1. When I look at your list of works I discover many things that make me aware that you are a traditional American composer in some way; what do you think of that?

I do think of myself as an American composer, certainly. My influences as a composer are international, although I have almost always been most drawn to the experimental tradition. In American composition, I have found that we make up our own way, and come up with our own approaches. We make it up as we go along. William Billings did this, so did Charles Ives, and of course, John Cage certainly invented his own approach, and yet they each did take stock of music history before doing so. There is a relationship to our history as a country in their music. I see Americans this way, we invented ourselves as a people, and you can find that aspect in our music, and certainly in my own view of myself. When you think of Americans, we're not an ethnic people, and we seem to represent a very beautiful and difficult proposition: What does it mean if you don't have to be anything at all to be American? And can we say that about our composers?

2. Your piece "Menemsha Village" – How did you come up with the idea of perceiving your living and working environment as a sound event, so to speak?

In Menemsha Village, I was on-site, at a very lovely spot in Menemsha, a small village in the town of Chilmark on the island of Martha's Vineyard. My wife was meeting with the owner of a local fish market, to discuss marketing his seafood business. I was waiting outside on a small beach at the edge of a parking lot. Because Menemsha is an active fishing port, and sea vessels go in and out of the area, there is a nicely-sized buoy somewhat at a distance to the shore to allow those on the water, mostly fishermen in fishing boats, know their location. The sound event that occurred was an act of listening. Suddenly the bell that sounded as an act of location became a rhythm, and then many rhythms. The wind and the water became the performers. And the sounds of a dog walking on the sand, the people passing by, and the water coming to the shore became the accompaniments. And so I heard these instruments perform together, in an act of nature. And I was part of that act of nature.

3. It is interesting that you made your recordings for "Menemsha Village" with an iPhone – do you see yourself more as a sound reporter or as an ethnologist?

I agree that it is interesting. Now that you know the story, I can tell you that I was unprepared and the only recording device available was my iPhone! But there is a fairly good application that at least does the best that can be done, and I had that application, so that is what happened. But here is as good a place as any to say

that I also have an interest in simple technologies. Today, with so much that is sophisticated and complex, I can return to something rudimentary.

4. When I was listening for the first time to "Menemsha Village", I first thought I was in Japan in a village with a temple – random?

No, I think you completely heard my piece as yourself, from your own point of reference. The value of my point of view exists in that how you hear the tones, the rhythms, the sound of the buoy is entirely an act of listening and being. I've never been to Japan, so for me, I made no reference to that quality, but I agree with you that if you hear this, for you, that is part of your experience.

5. You call your piece "Menemsha Village" a "found-object recording". Could you refer to the designation "found-object" in more detail for the Ohrenhoch visitors?

Marcel Duchamp made the objet trouvé famous and today it's very common to take objects out of their ordinary contexts and present them as art. So, in this way, I have found this piece, I took this time in nature to make the act of listening exist more permanently. Simply put, a "found object" is a predetermined object – for me an experience or a moment in this example – that has a context and an ordinary utility. Here, I could describe the experience I had in Menemsha as something I discovered, or found, to exist. What I did is something anyone can do, I captured that existing act of listening.

6. In what way does meditation or religion play a role in your music and in your life?

I have to admit that meditation and religion play little role in my life. I think meditation is good for most people, but I don't currently practice meditation. I did in the past, so I have some experience there – and of course the sound of the bell in the meditation hall is a nice memory. In the same way, religion is not directly present in my life and I do not consider myself religious in any real way. This is because religion is something I take seriously, and in my life I do not consider religion with the intensity and commitment that truly religious people do.

7. Your formulation of mathematic formulas (natural observations of properties in mathematics), and found objects as an important term regarding field recordings: How do formulas and objects work or complement each other, what are your perceptions?

Mathematical formulas are found objects. They already exist, and when we discover them what they communicate is something that we can verify and hold up to scrutiny. The connection to a piece like Menemsha Village, which could properly be categorized as a field recording, is similar, although there is not an exact comparison. In a field recording, there is no exact relationship to Pascal's triangle, for example, obviously. The connection is the aspect of the recording as a pre-existing sonic artifact. Because the recording documents experience as it

happens, rather than communicating something predetermined by music notation or mathematical notation, there is something discovered in the moment, something found that has already existed, and the complement is the experience of a thing already existing rather than being willed into creation.

8. The Fibonacci sequences in nature, for example, are fascinating, as are the relationships between nature (like the alignment of leaves) and architecture or space. Is the focus of your compositional work in this area?

Not specifically in the area of Fibonacci sequences, but essentially you are making the right point. For example, a recent work named *Combinations*, scored for piano four hands or piano and three flutes, catalogs all of the combinations of the binomial coefficient, up to ten. That totals 2036 chords, and the piece lasts about three hours. Here, I took every possibility of a mathematical fact and created a work that reflects the mathematics didactically, for the most part. I took some liberties with the scale I used. The relationship to nature that you point out is this: I have found the music outside of myself, in the natural facts of mathematics.

Numbers are facts in this way. And so the music has a factual element to it. Ultimately, I think first about the music, and there are plenty of experiments and sketches that can go into making a piece that appears so simple. Another example is a short piece that observes a displacement formula, where one note in a six-note melody is displaced once per repetition as the melody cycles around a steady eighth note pulse that is punctuated by a quarter rest to allow the ear to grasp the pattern. However, this observation, like that of the totality of combinations in the other piece I described, only exists in nature in a purely mathematical sense, which is different from observing and addressing patterns found in the natural world that may be chaotic patterns, or logical patterns like the Fibonacci series, which is found in many instances in the natural world.

9. How do you see the specific differences between compositions of instrumental music, for example, in works that include the flute, clarinet, cello, piano etc., and field recordings?

I think what you find is still in some sense related to the act of listening. For a long time, I didn't understand field recordings. They seemed like magic, how can this possibly be a work of art? Whereas it seemed obvious to me that if I went to a concert of chamber music, I was participating in an activity that was, in fact, cultural.

So, the differences between instrumental works and field recordings seem to be a matter of tastes. I listen very differently to field recordings than I do to Bach's *Chaconne*, for example, and I wonder if that is unfortunate. The reason has to do with my musical training, I often hear the structures and scales and devices that are embedded in classical music as the music plays. Listening to a field recording requires a much different focus. I am often listening with a sense of what I learned from Cage and Pauline Oliveros, to be open to sounds anywhere and everywhere.

10. Actually, it really would be about time, purposeful and consequent, that insists

composers concentrate on field recording exclusively – or not?

I have to say I know very little about field recording, it's something I only recently became interested in as an activity. I don't know the obvious practitioners, I don't know whether or not the community is welcoming. I think if you have devoted your work as an artist to field recording, you have to have a fascination for and love of natural experiences. That doesn't necessarily mean being in nature, but that may mean being in places where the experiences are meaningful, because field recordings can privilege settings as well as sounds.

11. I learned with interest from your list of works that you occupied yourself with Emily Dickinson and composed a piece after her poem "This Is My Message to the World" (2003), for guitar and voice. What intrigued you about this poet, was it her radicalness? For example, she spent much of her life in her house and in her town, essentially – or the musicality and the contents of her poems?

Emily Dickinson is a radical poet, certainly. She did something in her time that no one had done – create an intensely profound and rich body of work out of an incredibly circumscribed life. When I wrote my setting of "This Is My Message to the World" I was living in a tiny bedroom that I had rented, in a small apartment, that was a 3rd floor walkup in Manhattan. I had suffered from a very serious drug addiction and was in the process of extricating myself from that dependence. I had also suffered a serious medical hospitalization in a psychiatric ward. I felt isolated and alone, and spent time with no one, I was unhappy. I was unemployed. And so out of this, I read Dickinson: "This is my letter to the world, that never wrote to me" – obviously that resonated deeply, I seemed to be ignored by humanity. Now, looking back, I'm not even sure that piece is a good piece, but this is not the first time I've answered a question about it.

12. The American artist Jasper Johns can be considered somewhere between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. What pop music influenced you, and how strongly?

I grew up in the 1980s and was lucky enough to get the best pop music of any era. We heard Madonna and Prince everywhere, The Cars, Aha, Tears for Fears, R.E.M., The Simple Minds, INXS, U2, The Talking Heads, Nena - classic 80s music. If you mean simply music outside of the classical-art music world, I would have to take out my music library and send you the playlists! Everything from Johnny Cash to The Clash to Robert Johnson to Arcade Fire – there are just too many artists to think of, from so many genres, folk, indie rock, punk, grunge, new wave, shoegaze, alternative, house, techno, and so on. I try to listen to as many artists as possible – good ones. I would say in some sense many of these genres could possibly be considered "pop", in that this music is part of the popular culture, rather than the culture of the art world. I would say there is not much influence in my own music, but the music is often ear candy to me, or stimulates something else, but not creatively. But if there is a sense of humor in some of my less intense pieces, that

is in many ways due to the silliness of the pop music of the 1980s. In one instance, I wrote a short pastiche that included music by John Lennon and Fleetwood Mac. But the same could be said of pop music that is more thoughtful.

13. I found a house on a road on Martha's Vineyard, with an eye-catching red flag with a lobster on it...do you know this house, and is there delicious seafood on Martha's Vineyard?

I don't know that particular flag at that particular house on that particular road, but there is a lot of delicious seafood to be eaten on Martha's Vineyard. Unfortunately, I can't eat lobster because I am allergic to it. I can, however, eat an amazing bluefish paté that is made locally, which I love. And, of course, we have clam chowder and lots of clams, bay scallops, yellowtail, codfish, hake, fluke and other things that come from the sea that taste great.

14. How do you deal as an artist with the present political and social situation: Are you somebody who clearly and consciously distances himself from the politics of the day, and therefore concentrate on completely different things that could induce a possible social change for you and your art?

I am very, very interested in both national and international politics in my day-to-day life, following the news, but I have tried in most cases to keep politics out of my music. I believe strongly in the potential of humanity and I believe in progress; I am a cautious optimist. I volunteered for the Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012, for example, and that experience impacted my life very much. But I don't relate that to music. Again, there is nothing to be "found" in politics in the sense that I look for this in mathematics or field recording, and so on. One can find historical or modern texts, and one can find names, dates, places, and events, but that is not what interests me as an artist. But take "Unconfirmed Report" a graphic score I composed several years ago, based on an electrocardiogram that was taken of my cardiac health. This is an example of something that is found, right? But I dedicated that piece to the people of the DPRK, North Korea. Why? I believe in their freedom and hope that it comes someday, maybe my heartbeat can somehow reach theirs.

15. You are co-editor of The Open Space Web Magazine. What do you want to effect with this platform?

The Open Space Web Magazine is not so much a platform as we hope it to be a location or a situation where a work that crosses the boundaries of interactivity, ontology, and original vision can be placed. Most of the works that exist in the web magazine at this time could conceivably exist in other ways, they are musical scores and short films, for example, but we are hoping to create an online space that is hospitable to something truly new.

16. What books, films, pictures, architecture, sports, furniture, sculptures and seafood dishes would you absolutely recommend to the Ohrenhoch visitors?

I very much worry that I'll infect others with my taste when I'm asked this sort of question. Of course, I think people often lead much richer lives when they are familiar with their culture and other cultures. But since you have asked: I don't take a passionate interest in sports, but I recommend ice hockey and boxing. In terms of historical figures, I can say that Charles and Ray Eames made great furniture. Often Woody Allen's films are entertaining, I love *Midnight in Paris*, among his recent films. His older films from the 70s, *Manhattan*, *Annie Hall*, *Stardust Memories*, those are classics, strong films, but his early, silly films are also strong, in a different way. I also appreciate the Seth MacFarlane cartoons and find that there is very rarely a smartness to the humor that comes with the stupidity of his productions. I have to admire that and I find myself holding out for those rare moments of smartness.

Art, sculpture, books, those are much more difficult to speak of – you don't want to leave anything out or put the wrong thing in, and I simply try to be open to what I encounter, and hope that it's good. The important thing is to be able to discern what is actually valuable and what is not, at first, and later develop a kind of acuity and fluency. Then, it becomes a matter of opinion. Someone will always dislike what you like, and vice-versa.

About seafood – I'm often fond of salmon, I prepare it with dill and a sauce of Dijon mustard, mayonnaise, and lemon, it's very simple and effective. I enjoy mussels and clams, anytime. Clam chowder is such a staple here, we even have a Chowder Festival. This year I tasted 11 different varieties. One was determined the winner, and I had chosen the winning chowder. So, I felt pleased, even if the winner of the contest was determined by everyone tasting, and not simply food critics.

17. What message would you give to the Ohrenhoch visitors on their way, after your piece "Menemsha Village"?

I think the experience is in the act of listening. After John Cage, we thought that everything could be music, and here I am saying that not everything is music, but how you listen is indeed musical.