A Conversation with David Rosenboom

La Monte Young's Theatre of Eternal Music, the Electric Circus *and Morton Subotnick, Terry Riley's* In C*, and Remembering Cornelius Cardew*

February 27, 1998 in Valencia, California

DEAN ROSENTHAL: I saw this great performance Saturday night of La Monte Young's "Trio for Strings."

DAVID ROSENBOOM: Did you go to that?

ROSENTHAL: Yeah. Awesome. It was like...the guy that played it...

ROSENBOOM: The cellist?

ROSENTHAL: Yeah, he was terrific...I'd never heard a performance of La Monte Young's music live before…but it was a great performance, and the Trio itself was—it was my first time hearing it live—it was, you know, one of those transforming musical experiences. It really was amazing. It was just...very, very inspiring.

It was a version for quartet. The cellist put together a quartet. I believe he's doing a residency at UC San Diego or something, so the musicians may have been from there.

ROSENBOOM: Really?

ROSENTHAL: This version was done in 1982 or something…

ROSENBOOM: Really? Because if it's the one I'm thinking of…

ROSENTHAL: The trio.

ROSENBOOM: The trio. That's from the Fifties. You know, it's a 12-tone piece. It's serial. It was a very simple idea that La Monte had, which was to take, essentially, Webern, and make it very long, instead of very short. [Laughs]

ROSENTHAL: So this is this great performance, and I was reading...anyway I got the idea, between that and the fact that I know that you worked with La Monte Young [*ROSENBOOM*: Yeah] and played in his band. You also played with Terry Riley, on his famous recording [of *In C*] and I thought that you could maybe tell me about this—about maybe some of the performance practices, or experiences you'd had, [*ROSENBOOM*: Sure] in either of those groups, and maybe we could look at some of the rarer scores—La Monte Young's scores are very difficult to track down.

ROSENBOOM: Yeah, I don't have any of La Monte's scores. And he has—well, I never...there aren't very many. The ones...what I played in was the *Dream House*, which was called The Theatre of Eternal Music, an ensemble that would devote performances inside these light environments that Marian Zazeela would make. And there were no scores for that. There were simply instructions, which have been written down. In fact, there was an article that La Monte showed me. In fact, I looked at it as a sort of second reader, that had to do with—I believe the circumstance may not be quite accurate, but I think the circumstance was that he had an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant at one point and part of it was to focus on codifying his harmonic system. And he did write an article about it. And I saw the article, not in its final form—that was partly a result of that project. And there is somewhere a document that outlines at least some form of that harmonic system of his, but the harmonic system that I became familiar with, he simply taught us. He just taught it. He told us what it was. And it consisted mainly—there's an elaborate mathematical formulation of the sets involved, but the way in which the musicians played in the group, learned it, was by learning that when a given chord was being sounded, there was always a certain set of possibilities for a new note that could come in. And then that would change the possibilities for the next note. And then whatever that composite was would

change the possibilities for the next note, and so on. So there were rules about what notes could be added or not added to a chord. So you would just become familiar with that as a result of many, many, many, many hours of long, long rehearsals. And then after getting beyond that, it got into the realm of really beautiful, creative playing, all within a style consistent, working with the process of trying to achieve a perfect tuning, [which led] to all kinds of interesting content. What was always really striking to me was that when the group would get going, really get going, really into it, and really good at it, it would just soar. Then you would start to hear, in playing against electronic sine-wave drones, La Monte would sing, and Marian Zazeela would sing, and sometimes there was another singer...

ROSENTHAL: What year was this?

ROSENBOOM: This was...I started playing with him in the late Sixties, very late Sixties, somewhere in there, into the early Seventies. Then, I guess some of these great performances must have been around ‘71 or ‘72.

ROSENTHAL: And this is in New York City?

ROSENBOOM: Yeah, although some of the highlighted performances I recall being in, were in…one beautiful set was held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there was another wonderful set that was at The Kitchen, another beautiful set was in the south of France, at a festival that took place then in the summertime, near Provence, a medieval town. We did another very nice one in Munich, and so on. So there are a bunch of them.

But when the group really soared, then the other instruments that tended to be there when I was there—although people came and went—it was always sort of a flux...

ROSENTHAL: Who did you play with?

ROSENBOOM: Jon Hassell was a consistent member of the group at that time. There was another singer named Alex Dia, who was there quite a lot. Tony Conrad, who played violin. Lee Konitz played some of the time, the saxophone player. There was a cellist whose name I don't remember who was a member of Sun Ra's band who played sometimes. I played viola most of the time.

Anyway, then when this band would really get going, the tuning got really, really good. But of course, tuning, as La Monte's famous for playing out, is really a function of time. The degree to which something is in tune just depends on how long you listen to it. [*ROSENTHAL*: Mmmm] Any two wave forms are unlikely to be [in tune], unless they're digitally locked. What tends to happen when you get the chords so perfectly in tune is that the action of the sound starts to take place in the extreme high harmonics because the shorter and shorter the wave forms are, the more frequently they'll go in and out of phase, with very small changes in tuning. But normally we don't hear that very much because the lower overtones aren't doing anything. So once you get the lower overtones really locked in, then what happens is that this upper region starts to unfold as more and more of the upper overtones get locked in, and then the extreme upper ones start. The jitter that's in there, that results from the inaccuracies causing things to go in and out of phase, produces these reinforcements and cancellations that are just gorgeous. It's like melodies flying around on top of the texture, and you'd believe that you could get control, or at least have some influence on, in the texture, in terms of just the tiny variations of tuning that do happen that are performable. And so that gets to be really quite thrilling.

So anyway, it's really quite a whirl. The fact that he did it with such great intensity—these long, long, long things sometimes lasting several days allowed for exploration of that. So, it was very powerful.

ROSENTHAL: That makes me want to run out and get a score of his to perform for an ensemble.

ROSENBOOM: In recent years he has done a number of ensemble pieces. I know there's one for multiple trumpets and [one for] brass instruments, and some others. I don't know those pieces. I've heard of some of the recordings, but I don't know how they're notated. The string trio is written in standard notation.

ROSENTHAL: Mmm, I saw a copy of the manuscript recently. How did you come to record with Terry Riley?

ROSENBOOM: That was the direct result of a wonderful trombonist named Stuart Dempster. Stuart was a one of the, if not *the* trombone player, in contemporary music. He commissioned piece after piece after piece from many people: Berio, Oliveros, Stockhausen. Stuart was connected pretty closely to the San Francisco Tape Music Center scene in some ways—I don't know officially exactly how. At the time, Pauline Oliveros and Terry Riley and Ramon Sender were heavily involved.

ROSENTHAL: Was Mort [Subotnick] involved then?

ROSENBOOM: Mort had been involved earlier and I think was gone by this time—gone meaning that he had moved to New York.

ROSENTHAL: He was involved with the *Electric Circus* or something?

ROSENBOOM: This was just a little bit before the *Electric Circus*, but…I was heavily involved in the *Electric Circus*, too.

[…]

ROSENTHAL: Did you take part in an *Electric Christmas* by any chance?

ROSENBOOM: Not in *Electric Christmas* but I know the origin of it. So I wasn't in it...did you see it…or something?

ROSENTHAL: [Laughter] No, that was years before I was born of course...but I came across a citation […] in the historian H. Wiley Hitchcock's book on the

history of American music [*Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 1969], and it sounded like the most far-out event—it was really an incredible description.

ROSENBOOM: I know the catalyst of that. There was also an *Electric Easter*. [Laughter] There's a composer who is by trade a professional experimental psychologist in New York—his name is Ted Coons. Ted is the unseen catalyst behind so many things that happened in the experimental world that it's really quite amazing, an incredible history. He sort of spent a lot time imagining what it would be like to put various people together […] such as the New York Pro Musica and the Chambers Brothers.

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ROSENTHAL: That's really funny. He really did that?

ROSENBOOM: Yeah. He didn't actually do the putting together, but he had a lot to do with suggesting the combinations, imagining what they would be, and getting the people to help support it.

ROSENTHAL: He did this with musical ensembles and people from the art-world that he was familiar with?

ROSENBOOM: All kinds of unusual and interesting collaborations had a lot to do with Ted Coons being behind the scenes. Never taking any credit for anything, because he's really quite an amazing guy. He's a real good friend of mine. [Laughter] Anyway, he should come out in history someday. It's about time for him. But he's really quite an amazing person.

ROSENTHAL: Was he a poet by any chance, or did he write literature, or?

ROSENBOOM: No, he was a researcher, but he also had studied music and composed.

ROSENTHAL: How did you meet him?

ROSENBOOM: Well, I met him through and around the *Electric Circus* experiences, actually, because he had a lot to do with getting new music and

multimedia into the *Electric Circus*. He describes the day that he walked by the place and looked and saw what was going on and found out who was running it, and thought, “Gee, wouldn’t it be great to get all sorts of things into this place,” and then things went on. I mean, he wasn’t the only person involved, but he had a lot to do with it. I think connecting the Chambers Brothers with the New York Pro Musica was directly his [idea], contributable to him.

ROSENTHAL: So you’re working with Stuart Dempster at some point...

ROSENBOOM: Yeah, Stuart was...oh I forgot, Tony Martin was a light artist, and Tony did the original light shows for Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco. Tony was responsible for innovating a lot of the light-show techniques of that mid-Sixties time period. And he did it at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco. But then, he moved, about the same time that Mort moved to New York, he also moved. And they both ended up getting involved with NYU [New York University]. And Tony got involved with the *Electric Circus*. And of course there was the Fillmore East that Phil Gramm opened in New York. So Tony got involved with the *Electric Circus*.

Anyway, I first met Stuart Dempster when I was still at Illinois—University of Illinois. And we brought him up on one of the festivals there, which were fantastic festivals at this time, and they had one every other year. We brought Tony Martin and Pauline Oliveros and Stuart Dempster to that festival. They did a concert which was really fantastic. That was the first time I met Stuart. The very next year, I had been offered a job by Lukas Foss to be part of another one of the major centers of new music in the United States, which was Buffalo. And it turned out, the year that I was there in that group, Terry Riley, Stuart Dempster, Jon Hassell, David Behrman, [and] La Monte were there for a little bit, and a whole bunch of other people of different styles were all there. David was there for part of the year, La Monte was there as a guest artist, Terry was there for the full

year, I was there for the full year, the percussionists and other instrumentalists [were also there for a full year].

Just before I'd gotten there, Jon Bergamo was there. He left the year before I came. Anyway, Stuart Dempster happened to be hired, also that year. So Stuart, being always an incredible champion of new directions, got a group, and we were all part of a group that put on concerts in New York, at Carnegie recital hall—and [in] Buffalo he got the group to program *In C*. So all of us were part of that group. Katrina Krimsky, who's a great pianist [was also in the group]—she's premiering the piano piece at Merkin Hall next year.

It was directly due to Stuart Dempster that he interested Lukas Foss in the piece and played it, and it was so successful that the group, which had an arrangement with Columbia Records at the time, suggested that this be one of the recordings. David got signed to produce the record. He was an extremely important producer for Columbia and Odyssey Records. He worked under John McClure, a major producer for them. So, that's how *In C* got recorded.

ROSENTHAL: Was it a fairly standard recording session?

ROSENBOOM: Oh yeah, although I don't remember how many hours it was—but we did overdubs. There were several sessions, but not too many. It was done in a studio they had downtown at that time, in Midtown (the 34th Street studio) in a church, a huge recording room, where they had done many famous recordings; it was almost like a cathedral. It was gorgeous. And the mixing board still had big rotary pots on it. So I remember the recording session very vividly. And I remember we were listening in the control booth to the recording, and when we were finished, David Behrman turned to the group and said, "I think this is going to change music."

ROSENTHAL: Really? Fantastic. And it did.

ROSENBOOM: Terry and I became real close friends. So I ended up playing with Terry a lot, too.

ROSENTHAL: How did you come to meet Cornelius Cardew?

ROSENBOOM: Also at Buffalo. It was that very same year.

ROSENTHAL: I researched the fact that Cardew had spent a year as a creative associate in Buffalo.

ROSENBOOM: Yeah, that would have been a year or so before I was there, but I guess he came back for a visit during that year and there were some performances of *Treatise* and I think it probably had to do with that score that I showed you, that was published by an art gallery in Buffalo.

ROSENTHAL: Right, the Upstairs Gallery Press.

ROSENBOOM: Maybe it had to do with that gallery publishing that score as much as an art object as a score. It could have been that's why he came back. Or he already knew David Behrman there and met some others while working there.

ROSENTHAL: Do you have correspondence from that time?

ROSENBOOM: I have a drawer full of letters that I've saved like that at home, but I don't recall anything from Cardew so much. And then later on, when I was in Toronto I brought him there as a guest artist and we did *The Great Learning*.

ROSENTHAL: Was that when you were at York?

ROSENBOOM: Yeah. And then he came back again when he was into his political songs.

ROSENTHAL: Did you interact with him when he was doing the Scratch Orchestra at that time?

ROSENBOOM: Not directly around the Scratch Orchestra, but of course I did know that it was going on.

ROSENTHAL: How was *The Great Learning* received at York?

ROSENBOOM: Quite well. It was done at York, so it didn't have [a] wide city audience. It was more of an in-house performance. So there are lots of connections.

ROSENTHAL: Do you by chance have any of Terry Riley's scores?

ROSENBOOM: I don't think so. I have notes. I learned a lot of pieces of his that are based on patterns that he showed me that I think I wrote down for my own learning purposes. I don't think I have much. Many of these pieces by the way, you know were really done on scrap paper, you know sketches of patterns, and from the patterns comes a huge piece.

ROSENTHAL: I had no idea.

ROSENBOOM: Oh yeah, a lot of it is. I don't have too much of it, but I have some scores of my own that look like that. [Reaches for scores]

ROSENTHAL: [Notices inscription at end of score—Stony Point, Toronto, London] You lived at Stony Point?

ROSENBOOM: Mmm-hmm.

...*In C* as you know is a very basic score.

ROSENTHAL: Right, it's just the 53 modules, it's just a page. I wonder if it's fair to say that what emerges in a certain type of experimental composition is a type of an oral tradition that's passed on from composer to musician.

ROSENBOOM: Yes, it's something we've got to keep. It is an oral tradition. In La Monte's ensembles, for example, […] La Monte was very concerned [about how it was passed on] and made sure about the copyright issue. [Laughs] You know, in the contracts that he would ask us [to sign] to be in these pieces, which basically would say that you never could tell anybody else, you know, what you learned [laughter]...think about that... but he softened up over the years. He used to cause quite a scene, like with his price list for pieces, but why not, you know, it was a good statement. Not that he got the prices, but just asking. [Laughter] His

catalogue...so actually there isn't [very much] in the way of scores. Other people, like Steve Reich have gone to great lengths to produce beautiful, full-length scores that Boosey & Hawkes will publish, but not so much otherwise.