The following interview took place during the afternoon of October 30, 1977, on the campus of the University of California, San Diego, in La Jolla.

Is it Doctor or Mister?

Mister. My first appearance in the academic world was 1963 at the University of Illinois, invited by Lejaren Hiller, who was looking for someone to join him in his research with the computer and music. I had such a project in Munich, but he had the computers and I didn’t have the computers. I wrote a little paper; he read it and called me to “come and see” for a year. I did “come and see” for a year and stayed there. Now I’m a professor on the faculty.

Some of the people who have gotten into this field are musicians who became interested in computers; others are technologists who became interested in music. Which direction are you coming from?

I come from the direction of having had some thoughts about the concept of composition. It started after the Darmstadt experiences and experiences at the electronic music studio in Cologne. Certain things began to become redundant. Even though they were fascinating and intriguing, they began to behave like a mathematical group—that is, no matter how I permuted them or otherwise operated on them, they always recreated some member of the same group. I had to catapult myself out of that loop.

So I was looking for some interaction, be it with people, or with a medium, or even with myself in a hitherto untried way, where I could find a kind of sling-shot situation: where the loop becomes so fast that when I let go I am thrown out of it.

I started writing a score for orchestra in which I used the method of having tables and precompositional material ready on the walls and on the table and on the floor—to an absurd state of completeness. I got, as could be predicted, totally stuck—confused. It was not really an unhappy affair, but it was a puzzling situation. At that point, I decided I had to make an experiment: I had to find out whether I could compose a structure without a look at the system to which I could apply it. So what I needed was a noncommitted system, which would allow me first to program a structure and then to fill the empty system with some stipulated members of various kinds—always applying the same structure to different sets of stipulated members. I wanted first of all just to see what would happen. That was the beginning; it comes from composition. Let’s put it this way: from a middle-class-bourgeois-linguistic environment in which the words composition and music have a strong relationship, I came to a point where I discriminated between the two radically. I said: music is traces left by composition and not identical with composition. I want to back up a bit to see if I’ve got you right. You were trying to hurl yourself from this loop by removing yourself to some degree from the sounds you were creating . . .

That’s correct. I knew by that time that I was a talented musician, also that my heritage—the philharmonic concerts, the record collections, the education at home, in school, and piano lessons—had provided me with a lexicographical knowledge of tunes, harmonic progressions, and timbres. So I always wallowed in a world which took over whenever I wanted to do something. It offered itself to me ingratiatingly, again and again and again. I got tired of that.
So I had to find some way to affectionately liberate myself from myself, nevertheless still distinguishing myself from and in a society which I don’t find yet desirable.

Are the 1970s a particularly bad time for having things within you that you don’t really want within you? I’m not talking only about a mass of music history that we all hear but also a mass of commercial music. Is this a particularly bad time for all this kind of thing?

If I accept your vocabulary I would say, yes, it is a particularly bad time. If I don’t accept your vocabulary I would say, please leave out the word “bad” and ask: “Is it a time for such things?” And then I would say, yes, it is a time for such things, a time when we allow ourselves to be entertained by obsolete treasures and communicative junk, call that “culture”, and are mocked while we applaud it. If you would call “bad” a moment of utter need, as we also say when five thousand or five million people are starving, then we call that “bad times”. We call them “bad” times because there is an urgent need not being satisfied, and we call them bad “times” because we like to pretend that they happen to us instead of admitting that we happen to them. As if it were not we who are needed, but merely better times.

Thus, to be an input to our times, our cultures, I am doing what is needed. I’m not the only one who needs it. I think it is needed, and so, as long as I can do something about it, I am needed. In this, I am in conformity with almost every human being. One of the basic needs of a human being is to be needed. So I found a way to feel needed, to tell myself occasionally, once a week or twice, no matter how freakish it is what I am trying to do, it is based upon some awareness of my being needed very much.

In your talk yesterday you said about the piece you were going to present [Dust], that, while you were composing it, you did not like it yet. Are you on the level with that?

Yes, I’m on the level with that. It is one of those lines that an elderly professor will have rehearsed a few times before. There were a few lines yesterday that were spontaneous and I think they were really not too bad. But some of the lines, I have to admit to you, have been tried out before. That is one which has been tried out before and it is one of the first sentences I like to introduce into the initial conversation with young people when they come to see me. Not when I come to see them, but when they come to see me, under the pretext of being students, or wanting to show me something, believing I might be able to comment in a valuable way. We embark on a conversation, and, more often than not, we come to a point where I have an opportunity to use my little linguistic “toy”. I explain that it would be nice if in the definition of a composer would also be introduced the notion that a composer be a person who is trying very hard to compose at last the music he or she doesn’t like yet.

Do you think a time will come when you will like that piece?

Yes, it will. There are two kinds of decay of any kind of information, the negative decay and the positive decay. The positive decay is when we begin to like ourselves in the presence of something, and the negative decay is when we start to dislike ourselves in the presence of something, due either to understanding or familiarity, or communicativity. These three things: understanding, familiarity, and communicativity, are not to be taken for granted as positive assets of our social interactions. They are dangerous things. I could explain that a little if you ask me. At the moment I would only say that I hope always to compose a composition which teaches me the next aesthetics. I try hard not to let my last aesthetics compose my next piece.

In doing that you have developed very personal systems for the computer, very personal ways of communicating with the computer to do a particular task, as opposed to taking a massive computer system that has been worked on for ten years with different composers working on different sides of it. You take a simple, elegant system of five or six commands and put together your sounds with these. Is this something you have been interested in lately, or have you always tried to get this simple approach rather than the complex approach?

First of all, I want to thank you for all the kind
adjectives you have put in. Second, I'd like not to evade the question but qualify it a little. The word “always” is certainly uncalled for. I don’t do anything always, as far as I know. There are certainly things I do always and I hope I don’t know them; they are very unpleasant. But I agree with you; I could concede that I have a strong preference for the indispensable and sufficient in contradistinction to the abundant and sufficient. So if I can find out what at a given time I am able to understand as being indispensable and sufficient, I will of course immediately prefer that. I do not always hit on it; often I also commit errors. They are usually not disasters. The attitude is more important to me than whether I’m successful in it.

Then there is one other thing. I don’t boast—
I don’t join your friendly insinuation—that other composers who work with computers are less personal interpreters of the installation. The difference between some of them and me could be that I’m aware of that and they are not. There are people who really think they could not be personal. That’s where the word and its misuse come from. It is a pointer to a liberty we do not have. We are always personal, no matter what we choose to say. Therefore we do not really have this liberty; just like an “own” opinion, “personal” is one of those “fakes” of common communicative language. It is a question of how conscious you are of having made a decision. This is the point. A composition, and even the first approach to what you want to do now, must be the result of a decision. This is not a law I lay down, but if you ask me about how I’m doing it, this is what I say. I consult my criteria and ask them what to do next. At that point I begin to ask for the indispensable and sufficient answer. Both are important: the answer must not leave out what is needed, and I should not, for alleged safety, add the superabundant; but it should be sufficient. So between those two poles I play my games. I think everybody is doing it, but with different degrees of awareness. Due to age and a very lucky situation in the teaching field—I’ve been kept alive an unduly long time—this particular awareness is still as good as new.

It’s an interesting thing you brought up, because earlier you said you were trying to, in a sense, remove your person from what you were doing and now you’re saying that’s sort of impossible to do even with a computer, which is perhaps the most likely way to remove yourself from your person.

Yes. I was taking your terms more literally than you understood yourself. I replied that way not so much with regard to my person, but rather with regard to the inherited musical universe that harbors me instead of me harboring it, and which I like to make nonfunctional, at least as a decision criterion. I cannot wipe it out, nor do I want to. But I can appoint criteria for decision-making and I can also fire them. You can too. As a simple but understandable figure of the imagination, we each have in our minds a committee of “experts” which are the criteria we will consult when making decisions. These criteria are of various kinds: some are inherited, some are needs, but there are also appointed criteria, and there is a time in which they can and will be in this appointed position. If, however, you find repeatedly that this committee doesn’t come to a conclusion you actually approve of, you fire it. But then you have to find other criteria. Composition is a wonderful method for discovering not-yet-appointed criteria.

It would seem to me that it would be hard to recognize those things occurring. Wouldn’t it be easy to have your committee existing in a subconscious realm that you’re not even aware of?

If there is a subconscious realm, I say simply: “Yes, it is possible” and so I prefer to say there’s no such thing: that’s talk. The subconscious, if it exists, is part of my profile—my “I” which is to make the decisions—and it is not a criterion.

Well, then that’s probably not the proper word. How about awareness versus nonawareness? You could be aware of these things or not aware of them.

Here I discern between people who think what they say and those who say what they think. The majority are the people who think what they say because they have learned the saying for twenty-five years. They then obey, due to these sayings we call communicative language, a package of thinking pat-
terns which they cannot change anymore because they don’t know the grammar and the syntax. The moment we stop learning how to speak, we have stopped thinking. Following the sentence structures that are called communicative language or “the language common to us all”, we accusingly admonish one another: “Why don’t you express yourself more simply?”—which is just another way of suppressing one another.

There’s no hope for us to compose, to add something, to be an input to this society, unless we master the language more than the language masters us. There has to be this awareness of: “My god, what did language make me say right now?” and “Why did I not succeed in making it say what I think?” These questions are continuously in the forefront. Composition is the way out of it. When I compose, I actually make a language say something that it would not have made me say. That’s why I say I must not like it yet. It must not yet—I emphasize yet—have this communicative, cuddly appearance of “Oh, yeah, I see what you mean”. I simply don’t want to see what I mean.

I must say that despite what you’re saying about your own piece, I found it very likeable. Is there something wrong with me?

Yes there may be something wrong with you, if we can’t iron out the word “wrong”.

I mean I found the sounds very appealing. Perhaps it was because I’ve heard so many pretty, easy-to-listen-to sounds generated by computer.

I am aware of the danger of coquettishness when a composer says about his own piece “totally unlikable” and things like that. What I meant is that there are prevalent aesthetics which would lead us to say: “It’s pretty shocking” or “It doesn’t sound very good” or just “Very interesting”. Doubting the relevance of those aesthetics, however, enough people attending such meeting as we have today [the International Computer Music Conference] will just enjoy being in the presence of something which grates, not with them, but at least with the environment which they perceive. So we often sit in a concert and listen to a piece to which we do not yet have a “liking” relationship, but of which we know already that it annoys the people in the row behind us—and then we are very much for that piece. I would suggest that my piece is just on the level where it invites you to a conspiracy with me, and you like that. Yes, it annoys a few people in your imagination or your presence that you would like annoyed, and I’m doing you this little favor. I provide you with one moment where that happens and then you like having been in that presence. It does not yet mean that the piece is one that you would voluntarily take home and put on in the evening to enjoy with a cigarette and a glass of wine. But in a social context you may have liked the fact that it happened rather than what it is. So it is an invitation to this conspiracy.