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*The editor’s transcript of a telephone conversation with, and approved by, Herbert Brün.*

**On volume as an element of modern rock and art music:**

It’s one of the features and threats of electronic music, or electronically recorded music, or electronically amplified performed music. There is a trade-off which has to be found between dynamics and the pain limits of the human ear. While technicians and composers are terribly proud that they can generate wonderful sounds that have far more audible partials than [acoustic] instruments allow, if we want to hear them, we have to turn up the volume really high. This brings out some very high partials, and they hurt. The moment we turn it down out of consideration for humanity, the sounds turn into the familiar realm of church organ, where there is a certain richness, but it does not have what I call the beauty of the unnatural: Namely, that the higher partials can be louder than the lower ones, which is not the case in a flute or a bassoon or a trombone, but can be the case in an electronically synthesized sound. I would say that some of the charm of these sounds—and we speak now only of sounds, not yet of music—is that they really are not natural.

**On background music:**

When I’m present at a live performance where a bunch of highly musical people are playing together, I am just as drowned in it as anybody else. But when I come to think of it as coming out of a jukebox, in the background, as a steady accompanist during my lifetime, I can easily become not only sick of it, but pretty hostile. Then I start thinking, “Well, Herbert, what if it were Schoenberg or Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* in the background, what then?” It would still make me sick. Obviously I have a thing against Muzak of any kind.

**On periodic (nonvariable) rhythm:**

I would like to say loudly to everybody who wants to listen: As long as most radical, progressive, and wonderfully musical band musicians keep up the beat, the repetition of forms, the loop-like repeat, then they are doing a disservice to the development of music. And no text [lyrics] can liberate them from that verdict on the musical level. Now, I don’t want rocks thrown at me. However, I would like to hear from reasonable and thinking musicians in the rock scene. How would they dispute this thesis, apart from its just being not comfortable? In a world of automated misery, how could they defend artists who reaffirm the automatism of the periodic beat?

Add to that the many features found on most electronic instruments, which make it rather easy, almost convenient, for less talented musicians to substitute repeat loops and steady states for imagination and know-how. This all accumulates into a big bunch of repetitive round dancing, which is going on all the time with enormous passion. Pseudo-passion, actually, because it has no rising and no falling: it’s always at its peak, trying to imitate this chauvinistic picture of the man who has a steady erection for 24 hours a day. I resent this. I would also like to make it quite clear that I’m in no superior position myself. You put me in a disco or some such place and I’ll nod along like any moron. I can’t resist the steady beat either. I wish it wasn’t there. There are certain temptations, like periodic rhythm, that I do not want to deal with any more, even though I fall victim to them. And this is not a
purist attitude; it is political. Downbeats at the predicted moment have a kind of cheap appeal to my thoughtless pulse and heartbeat, making me simply another vibrating instrument. Rock has sophistication to it that requires sophisticated listeners, while at the same time it also offers the drug of repetitive rhythm which irons out all the nuances.

On the commercial influence on music:

Let’s not be naive: Commerciality has everything to do with it. It is the most motivating power behind music. I don’t think that any of these first-class musicians, of which the United States has hundreds, thousands maybe, are all stupid. They have to make a living. And they are living in a society which in some of their texts they try to attack, while with their music they maintain. This is the contradiction. If I thought they were all idiots, I wouldn’t talk about it. But I don’t think they are; I speak out of deep respect. Most musicians would play new music, would be in chamber ensembles touring the States with new pieces, all kinds of pieces, among them also here and there a rock piece. It would be paradise, but we would have to live in a different society.

On new instruments:

I would like a voice-tracking machine that would go along with the varieties of human utterance, which usually is not downbeat, or periodically, oriented. When I speak prose to you and get into a convoluted sentence, or suddenly get into a rage, or suddenly calm down and try to implore you, I change my phrasings and my rhythms. And every time there is something new happening which defers to its predecessor and prepares for its successor—we have method, structure, and continuity—we do not have that steady predictability. And that could be done by electronic machinery. It would be geared to our possibilities of variety and sudden flexibility, rather than to the steady-state hypnotic drug: the beat. Since 1974 I’ve been working on this with my computer system. It’s modest, and the program is easily learned and surveyed. Instead of working with tones that have duration, pitch, steady state, attack, and a decay time, I’m trying to work with transformations from one tone to another. I call that transformation my unit, and it can take half a second or many seconds. I simply consider a scale of transformations instead of a scale of tones. With these transformations I have been able to do some quite intriguing things. Even people who listen to it are intrigued, because the inner changes of a sound are far more interesting in the long run than the particular brilliance of a series of tones or the sophistication of a steady-state sound. I’m not saying that I’ve found a solution, but I am trying to find it. At the University of Illinois I’ve generated a different kind of musical speech on their computer system than I could before in all my attempts with other instruments. Robert Moog told me that I will have to wait a little while before the synthesizer world will come up with something similar.

On computer composition:

Well, I do use pencil and paper as well as computers for composition. I have a structural idea in my mind that I do not know yet much about, and some continuities that I have not tested. Then I compose a program of that process and do not think much about music yet, but I do think a lot about composition. When I finish the composition and let it sound off for me, then I learn from it aesthetics, its aesthetics, and thus, mine. It is not always so glibly done. Also, it very often is music that I don’t like or haven’t learned to like yet.

On improvisation versus composition:

At the time when improvisation was in the foreground [as a compositional tool] and all the musicians around me had little groups and improvised, I was actually very critical of it. In school I was famous for saying, “Please do not call it composition.” But I do agree that there is an analogy between [jazz] charts and the [computer] program. It may be a somewhat loopholeish and leaky analogy, but it is one. Because if, on a sunny afternoon, you invent on a piece of paper a code that depicts limitations, ranges, time factors, densities, and points of convergence and divergence, so that those who want to decipher that code can get some connections with themselves and their instruments with that code, then they know that if they read it from left to right, right to left, or up/down and so on, they will be able to at least follow the structure.

What happens next, however, is not analogous to
how I see computer music. The other half is that one has an instrument in hand and knowledge of it in mind, and this mind and instrument have grown together into an accumulated wisdom of musical terms, gestures, remnants, rudiments, splinters, and old pieces. It is nearly impossible for anyone alive who is truly musically concerned and dedicated to liberate himself or herself from that accumulated treasure. So all the improvised music that I’ve heard from Los Angeles to New York was occasionally structurally highly sophisticated, but the tunes were not. There’s a predilection of musicians to obey the accumulated routines of their instruments—that trumpet lick or trombone lick—so that the improvised music always turns into little licks of a well-known original, even though the licks are never quite finished the way they were in the original. I draw a distinction at this point. The movement to a chart—looking for new notations, notations that do not write the result but rather the prescribed actions to be taken—is progressive, and historically there is a connection between that attempt and later the wish to program structures rather than results.

But then the channels divide, and I become more radical. I say, “Well, for these new structures that I want to explore, I also want new musical behaviors.” So I program some such things for pitches, durations, and sequences in order to get away from my imagination. I’m also very musical, and I can sit for two or three days and improvise for you in any style you wish. The only thing I can’t improvise for you is a style that I do not know yet. That would be the new music. That is what I have to sit down and very carefully compose in order to avoid my own preferences. It’s a fascinating approach, but also very difficult. I’m not saying that musicians should give up their preferences; they shouldn’t give them up. But they shouldn’t use them for composition. I do not think that one has to compose all day. You compose when you want to get rid of yourself and become something else. After all, the idea of creativity means to do something, to make something which is not there, rather than repeat a form that has already been explored. Recreation can be a lovely occupation, but it is not creation. It is also not composition. I wish I could live up to my preaching, but I think it is necessary that I at least take a position; otherwise I become wishy-washy like some people I can’t stand.

On music that accompanies film:

My protest is against music that hinders the non-digital continuity of the visual images. After many years we have achieved at last the ability to generate continuous movement on the screen, which is not just like an old cartoon, but is really almost as continuous as the 24-frames-per-second film. To have that accompanied by music that chops it all up and forgets about it, and gives me an auditory sensation which renders all those continuous movements into little jumps and leaps, is something I resent. I also reproach the visual artists somewhat, in that they don’t notice it. They ought to be much more alert to it and much more protective of their work, and they should work together with composers to make them aware that the music has to share with the visual image the non-pointillism aspect, the non-point behavior. It’s not points; it is movement, continuous motion, and only rarely are there sudden cuts. Then I don’t mind if the music wants to be like Mickey Mouse. It could at that occasional place also have a sudden cut. But in general, I can’t see it.

I argue that the auditory sensation for some reason overpowers the visual process as a rhythmic factor. It imposes its rhythm on the visual realm—very subtly, but it does. There may be a connection in that we cannot close our ears, but we can close our eyes. I assume that was nature’s way to make us aware of approaching danger—in the night we can’t see when we close our eyes and sleep, but the ears stay open. The ears experience a steady state until they’re interrupted by something. The moment they’re interrupted, we first become auditorially seeing, then we open our eyes in alarm and see. Maybe it is for that reason that our auditory system will teach us what we ought to see. It will therefore be more powerful in chopping up units into smaller parts, than the other way around.

Final thoughts:

If people take some well-known composer’s pieces from a record to accompany a visual sequence the composer never thought of, or created...
for that purpose, then I think the visual artist is making a commercial cleverness and an artistic stupidity: not serving the piece, but creating a better poster. It is nice to have Phil Glass on your poster. At the moment it seems to be good policy to have Mr. Boddicker. Well, it will pass, you know, and then the visual will be spoiled, because then the art that went into the technology—the resolution, the attempt to get as finely connected as possible—is all for nothing. That I resent: The spoiling, the exhaustion of the material that should be delicately explored—suddenly it is washed over with some stupid rhythms. That’s not good; that’s not art any more. That’s really just commercial know-how. Films that make their point without any auditory accompaniment would be a marvelous challenge to the computer artists.

And may I touch on a side issue? I wonder whether we cannot arrange, at least among all the thousands of academic people in the world, that in public places we have no smoking, no stinking, no farting, and no Muzak. These are the things we cannot protect ourselves against; our noses and ears are always open. With an elegant gesture, I would immediately stop smoking. Nobody would have to argue with me about my health. It would be a social act in conformity with several things that would improve life tremendously. When I don’t want to see something I just close my eyes—I’m free. But I can’t not hear something, and I can’t not smell something. The anti-smoking people don’t care whether there’s Muzak, but if they would also be against Muzak, I’d join them. And Muzak is the same and should be considered as poisonous as smoke. It is not only the noise level, the decibel, it is also the predictabilities of rhythm. We should not disregard the enormous power of the acoustic rhythmic universe around us. It dulls us. We don’t need dulling any more. If anything, we need more alertness. End of tirade.