The interview took place on a Sunday afternoon in Herbert’s studio at the University of Illinois. First we talked about our families, the weather, and other such friendly topics. Once I had perceived that we were sufficiently relaxed, I began the interview.

Herbert paused often to choose his words carefully. I tended to respond to his discourse with an occasional nod or facial expression as we had discussed topics of this kind for almost a year.

Stuart Smith

What is your definition of a composer?

What is a composer? Or could one ask “under what circumstances is a person a composer”? If we don’t assume that composers are born composers, we can assume that everybody is born with the potential of a composer, and it depends on his life, whether he turns to composing. I tend to wish for a general definition—if it is general and a definition, then it usually sounds a little bit unintelligible. However, I think a good way of expressing it is a first answer:

As soon as a person wishes to bring about something which to the best of his knowledge would never happen without him, he embarks on a process of creation. If, in addition to that, his interest lies in putting things together—establishing connections between things—that otherwise would not connect by themselves, and if he then connects them in such a way that they now have a meaning and sense that without these connections they did not have, then he is a composer.

Note that I did not understand you as having asked, “What is a composer of music?”

What is the composer’s function in and responsibility to society? Is he a political being?

I’m not trying to evade the question in beginning this way: First, every living human is in a society a political being. The word “political” has gone through very many mutations and functions in our linguistic universe. Therefore, I will not refer to any of those meanings necessarily. I will simply leave that open to which I do refer. I’d much rather say such sentences as define the word “political”. That is, I will stipulate what the differences are between a political being and a being that is consciously politically active.

I see the membership of that human in a society as an existence that manifests itself by being either a product—an output of the society of which it is a member—or as an input to the society (where the “or” is not exclusive). There is the non-trivial situation where a person is an output of society, but in being this output, changes it to such an extent in himself that when he now feeds it back, it turns into an input. That is what I call the “non-trivial” human being.

The word “responsibility” is the next word we have to tackle. The word “responsibility” is either a member of a vocabulary relating to moral and ethical issues, or it is a member of a vocabulary relating to the interactions of biological systems in a context in which they are their own observers. The human is maybe the only biological system of which we say that it lives and reflects upon itself and can therefore adopt one of the interactions which we call observing interactions, self-observing, self-refering systems. In this moment the word “responsibility” becomes almost synonymous with meaning “aware of a need for self-maintenance as a human”, as that biological system which is called a human. Without being an observer, “responsibility” has no meaning.

So, if we waive for a moment the question of
ethics and morals, and simply go to the point where “responsibility” means “being aware of all the needs of oneself in order to maintain one’s existence”, then I propose that the role of the composer is to retard the decay of the system. The decay of the system is here not meant to be a purely biological fact, like getting older or becoming redundant, but is connected a little bit with the loss of information that prevails whenever one explores a system. The more one knows about it, the less there remains to be known. So that the curiosity for exploration decreases with age. In order to retard that decay of curiosity—this decay of delight in exploration—the composer stipulates certain configurations he calls “new systems”, says about them that for him (and if possible for his society) these are unexplored systems (with other words, in a kind of disorder or chaos) and proceeds to systematically order it by exploring it and documenting the traces left by this exploratory process. These are then compositions, sometimes.

I want to hurry to say that there is no guarantee (actually in my language there’s no hope) that one can stop the decay, but one can retard it; that’s all we can do, being ourselves members of nature; and nature being the history of decay, we fall under that verdict. However, our attitude to this situation is one of protest and rebellion. So the composer is the resisting member of the law of nature. He falls under that law rebelliously, under protest.

The term “responsibility” can now be expanded a little bit to the following extent. If a composer takes a political view of his role in society, he may see that a certain lack of new orders is not only threatening his own system, his ego, his biological existence, but the biological existence of his neighbors and contemporaries. He may say that this society as it sees itself will now not give any more new answers to repeated questions. It needs an input which will change it just that much that the next time a certain set of questions is asked, it will give new answers. Then he may consider himself as being responsible to provide for that input. And that would then connect the term “responsibility” of a composer with the definition of what a composer is.

O.K. Can a composition be interesting and desirable as a personal statement, but undesirable socially? How do you deal with this kind of conflict? Whom are you responsible to first?

You are a composer; and you know exactly what you are talking about; and I’m afraid we will have to go very cautiously about that subject. The desirability of an otherwise flawlessly generated input could be measured (could be measured; I am cautious as I promised) by the degree to which it is affirmative of the state of affairs before the composer generated his input. I tend to say that while you ask these questions of me, this is a particular time in which I tend to say that the responsibility of the composer is to the non-affirmation of the state of affairs to which he thinks he needs to give an input. His input should be directed against the state of affairs and not for it. It must be critical, it must be rebellious, and it must be negative. That does not mean that the content of his message be all the time negations; he can make his negative statements in a very affirmative way. It should not be affirmative of that state of affairs that needed his input in order to change into another one. Otherwise he defeats his own purpose.

The conflict which you mentioned may—let’s for a moment read “conflict”—it may be a conflict; then I would consider he made a mistake. If it is, however, a contradiction he finds himself in, then it was not a mistake, but actually a very good deed because then he demonstrates the presence of a contradiction, and a contradiction is never affirmative of a system in which it is said to be a contradiction, whereas a conflict is always affirmative of that system in which it is considered a mere flaw. So to call something a conflict is a desire of a person who wishes to improve a desired system. To call something a contradiction is a desire of a person who allows for the flawlessness of a not-desired system. When we go one step further, then we really see it very gloriously displayed in the difficulty of dealing with success. Only a successful work can be undesirable.

For example?

If success is noted by consensus and quantity, then the chances are that the success was reached
by having been affirmative to a lot of people. The moment you are affirmative to a lot of people, you probably are affirmative to the state of affairs of which you had said just previously that it needs an input in order to change. There I really detect a contradiction and not a mere conflict. Because you and I, we both think that when we compose a piece of music, that we are attempting to input something which will now be a new answer to the question “What is music?”

However, we both want some success, if only so that it be done and heard and disseminated. Otherwise, it can’t do its function. However, the moment we do have success, we ask ourselves, “Now why did that happen to me?” Underneath the contradiction, of course, also reside certain conflicts, namely—. Yes, the question is how much of the responsibility of this is with the composer. And there we can debate until we are green in our faces.

If, for instance, one has done that piece, or composed that input, that really should take everybody’s breath away, leave them speechless and make them think “Now really, did I deserve that?” and if one had done that and presents it to a large audience and they applauded it enthusiastically, then it was the audience that removed the sting. Then to raise one’s index finger accusingly, and point at the composer—“You again got away with it; you again delivered goodies instead of criticism” may sometimes be very hard. So it is an ongoing weighing process. One has to look very carefully at every single case; where there was a failure or where there was a success. One has to investigate precisely what the failure was due to—a misunderstanding of the composer or what his task was, whether the failure was due to his work being misunderstood by the audience, was his success a mitigating circumstance allowing harmlessness where accusation was meant, or was his success simply such a super-abundance of seductivity in a critical statement that the people got the message without ever knowing what hit them. The last one is the one which I am terribly eager to achieve.

What are your reflections, given what we have already been discussing, on jazz and improvisation in the American culture?

I discern between the urge that led to this development and the implementation of the fulfillment of the desires. The urge, I understand (and understanding here means that I don’t even feel called upon to approve or disapprove of it). I am not judging it, even; I understand how it happened, and it is in keeping and consistency with the growing consciousness among the American people, of their state of affairs, of the threatened freedoms, of the lack of personal interaction between the powers and the overpowered. Unfortunately, I find the implementation led to a decrease of that consciousness which brought it about. My criticism is that the urge was implemented in ways which substituted entertainment for criticism. It is again a success story and that’s one of the negative success stories. If it suddenly becomes entertainment to utter political criticism in words accompanied by very entertaining and not terribly revolutionary music, then the “slogan and poster culture” celebrates a victory. That is the tolerated upheaval of the masses.

In other words, it is like making revolution big business.

Correct; and big business knew it.

And we see the consequences. Unfortunately, all that music—jazz, and rock, and you name it—. Unfortunately, I repeat, I am disappointed. I am not gloating. “Unfortunately” has become affirmative.

Do you think that there are exceptions to that? In other words, are there individual jazz or rock artists who are inputs rather than outputs of the society?

Sometimes it does not depend on individual potentials and talents. I can sometimes say that a whole system can be structured in such a way that any input that uses certain techniques, styles, and idioms is doomed.

No matter what the desire is, the context will destroy the good intentions.

Yes. I do see the social functions, the functions in a society in various ways, and one of the ways, not all, is what I call the “slot distribution”. We have seen several very important professions in our society become slots. If you get into this slot, then it
does not matter any more what your morals, ethics, and intentions are; the slot takes over and you become the slot’s obedient servant. This happened to some of our political leaders. This happens to some of our very important professions like doctors, the legal services, the justice department, all those. It is not possible at all times to point at an individual and say, “He is a crook”, or “He did a bad thing”. Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t; but the slot itself as it now functions in this society—has to function in this society—makes him what he appears, no matter what he does.

If we had such a discriminating audience that could differentiate between a rock piece or a rock evening that is affirmative, and a rock evening that is non-affirmative, then we would already have a different society.

*All composers use systems when they compose, whether they know it or not.*

I agree.

**What is your attitude toward systems?**

A system is not something that exists objectively in space or time or anywhere. A system is the result of a look at a collection of stipulated elements. *Stipulated* in that I say which elements I will look at. *Collection* because I stipulate that these elements I have decided to look at are not yet ordered and my look will decide on what I put the emphasis and what I regard as not to be regarded entities.

Example: I could say a system is defined if I say its elements are the 88 keys of a piano; every one of these elements can be in one of two states, either on or off, and I will now write a set of instructions telling those elements when to change their state, how many of them are to change their state at what time, in which sequence, and so on. At that moment I am writing a piano composition, I think. I can, however, look at the same instrument and say I see it as a system of one element that can be in 88 states. If I have one element only, I don’t have a system yet; I have only a collection of one, which can be in 88 states; but I never know what I produce when I change its state, since there are no relations. *No contexts, so it is not a system.*

Correct. I would have to then add, for instance, as a second element, duration; as a third element, timbre; and I could simply say I am now not composing pitches, I compose in a system which consists of one pitch that can be in 88 states, each of which can last for such-and-such a time and can also be colored by such-and-such techniques on the strings. That’s a different system. Now the instrument hasn’t changed; it is still the same collection of potentials. My look at it decides which system I am dealing with.

Now one more example. I can state that for a long time the acoustical universe has been looked at by composers through systems that consider discrete events that are put in sequence such that they establish connections between themselves, and retroactively then, look like a coherent whole. I do not plan to give that look up. I will continue to have that look for some time because I do really think that a lot of things can still be done with that look at the acoustical universe.

However, recently I had an idea (many people had ideas, by the way) that mutations between such discrete elements may be another element. That is, I could speak of an element and define it as follows: Given an acoustical event A and an acoustical event B, I will now discern between mutations of one into the other, transformations of one to the other, rather than considering A and B. So I could write a piece in which A and B are continuously present but don’t play a part in the composition. What I do compose are a stipulated number of ways to mutate one into the other. That is a different system. Nothing has been changed. The acoustical universe is still there. If there is one, then it is still there. My look at it is the thing which has changed. Under this look I will write completely different pieces and have completely different musical ideas than I had before. This gives me courage to continue working.

**Who and what influenced you with regard to your attitudes toward systems and as a composer in general?**

There are two things that influenced me and there are probably many, many more. Let me mention first two, and then a few others. I could name them...
in the following order: In 1936 I went to Israel and went to the conservatory there on a scholarship (running away from Nazi Germany) to become a pianist. So I learned how to play Chopin and Brahms and Beethoven and Mozart and enjoyed it very much.

I was quite lucky with my second piano teacher, who had got a very analytic way of teaching how to interpret music; so I got initial encouragement to look at musical pieces analytically. Coming from a very bourgeois background, the famous German-Jewish-Berlin-culture pretenses, going to philharmonic concerts and to the theatre and to the opera and so on, I had an early background of intuitively enjoying music, loving it, could make sense of it, understood some of the emotional and coloristic features of music, so that was not so much of a problem.

The problem for me was at that time to learn suddenly to look at the crafts that went into it and to recognize that a certain piece, which I liked very much, did not exist until it was written, which was quite some news. And I have to tell you that today even, when I tell my students that they should look at a piece as if it really did not exist until it was written (and how could it possibly have been written) they are quite astonished. They understand immediately and think they knew it all their lives, but they also admit that they never thought of it that way.

So this was brought to me first; that was one very important thing, and ever since I have been quite diligent, I think, in keeping both channels very much alive—to be able to explain to myself how something came about and at the same time to very much enjoy what happened to it during its lifetime and when it entered mine. Sometimes there are cross-correspondences between the two, but I can also do very well when sometimes I cannot discover the cross-correspondence. However, I don’t rest until I find it out.

During that time I started to compose, secretly and very modestly, and constructed a compositional system, my first compositional system. It turned out to be what I soon found out was very similar and very much akin to what some great masters had already accomplished some thirty years earlier, namely the so-called dodecaphonic system. Now I am not trying to tell you I did it as well as they did, but I must tell you that I did this without the slightest notion. At that time there was no knowledge of Schoenberg, no knowledge of Webern, and no knowledge of Berg available, and then the war broke out and no further records came; no scores came, everything was closed up. So I really lived in the belief that to the best of my knowledge I had made a breakthrough into the state of the art of music. When I then discovered that I had run into an already thirty-year-old open door, that taught me a great lesson and I was not at all unhappy.

I was in very good company at the time, studying with Stefan Wolpe, and he helped me very much not to be disappointed at all. He actually was very congratulatory when I showed him the stuff. He said, “That’s marvelous, because that shows an enormous insight into what is music now, if one can find that as lying in the air somehow.” He was very nice to me. He made it very good for me and that’s why he was influential. It was not so much the intellectual feat, but that there was somebody who holleringly and loudly and enthusiastically greeted this fact no matter how obsolete it was to invent it.

It showed me that to invent systems is one way of developing one’s sensitivity to the state of the art. When you try to invent the system, or as I say to invent “the new look”, you are, almost by osmosis, wide open to the little things that are going on around—wider open to them than at times when you only receive systems to look at.

I can give you a little private sidelight in that I am now 65 years old and with a skill in concentration and also a little bit of age, I sometimes don’t hear the telephone even though it is just one room away. When I sit at my desk and write or when I am just in a little conversation of no particular importance, I sometimes don’t hear the telephone even though it is just one room away. When I sit at my desk and write or when I am just in a little conversation of no particular importance, I perfectly willingly can’t hear anything; I am almost deaf to the world. As soon as I sit at the piano and play, I suddenly am as young in my hearing as I was when I was fifteen. I hear the telephone two houses away, I hear the slightest noise outside, I hear all the birds, I hear the wind blowing, I hear frequencies that in the electronic studio I sometimes do not hear anymore. There is this sensitivity. That is, there
are certain activities in which one’s sensory system opens up and then once one finishes this activity, it closes down again to a comfortable disregard.

The same thing happens for a moment when I am in the process of developing and searching for a new look at things. Suddenly I become terribly observant and perceptive of goings on around me, which for the past six days I knew were going on but didn’t pay any attention to them.

This was the first great influence; and today’s talk of mine, all the talking I do, is probably derived (and not very tenuously, almost rigorously) from those times.

The second great influence was Stefan Wolpe himself. And there I want to give you a little bit of local coloring. Jerusalem—you have to imagine a very old city where the highest houses were two to three floors, and the streets went up and down, slightly hilly, and the sun is shining and it is rather quiet. This was in those years around 1940 when it was still fairly sparsely populated. So I went to my lesson with Stefan Wolpe through some of these streets, in the sun, slowly, nobody moved fast; it was much too hot and there was this wide look you had between the houses. And then you approached the street in which Wolpe lived, in one of those little houses, and the street was called A_____ Street, and you were still quite far away and you heard his voice. So while walking to your lesson you heard already his voice loudly proclaiming something, singing, hollering, screaming, all the time making enormous noises. Everything was significant; everything was of the greatest importance right now, and what you heard already while you came, and when you then entered and walked up the stairs, you entered a situation of full concern with a terrific warmth and enthusiasm and eagerness and it didn’t make any difference whether you were in or out, you just came into it and it immediately continued, the last sentence he was just saying, he turned his eyes on you and continued it as if you had been there all day. That, also, I think, can count to the main influences.

I never developed later on this frustration of “Well, nobody’s talking to me” and “I’m all alone” and “I don’t know what it all means” and “Things are not interesting”. I learned from Wolpe, although he was not a philosopher—he demonstrated, he did not philosophize, he demonstrated unmistakably that things are not interesting; you take interest in them. You look at a thing and it becomes.

It’s the looking.

Yes, it’s the looking. And up to this day I am very leery of people speaking about “Oh, that’s an interesting piece”. I know what I mean, but I think that here again language is trying to falsify our best intentions. The feat was that a person looked with interest at something for some reason which may be in the piece, and suddenly that the piece made him take interest in the piece is now falsified into the sentence “It’s an interesting piece”, “It is interesting” is not a property of an object. It is a property of the onlooker.

And that is what I learned. I learned from Wolpe not to get married to any structure and system. He did not enjoy teaching the dodecaphonic system. He wrote in it and he enjoyed very much when other people wrote in it, but you could never have with him a long row dispute about which row where and when and why, unless this was of the greatest significance in order to explain something else. And so he was a very free musician.

Was he politically active?

He conducted the workers’ choir in Vienna. He conducted workers’ choirs in Germany. He left Germany even earlier than I had, and he had to leave it earlier than I. He was already older. He studied with Webern, and he belonged to the same group of politically oriented people at that time. In Jerusalem he was received with great honors by the conservatory and kicked out within half a year.

Myself and a group of colleagues (some of whom I still count among my best friends) also took some stances and always with Stefan Wolpe in contact. There was an attempt in the early days to establish what was called the World Center of Jewish Music. While this was maybe a natural idea in those times and nobody made fun of it to begin with, it then turned out that it was mainly generated by dentists and genealogists who were music lovers and could not understand that the culture they were so
affirmative of was part and parcel of that development which happened in Germany, and could not understand that one cannot now make a nationalistic move without being terribly affirmative of exactly that which persecuted them. They didn’t understand that, so we made an opera and performed it in the sacred halls of the Jerusalem Conservatory and called it W.C. for World Center and were all kicked out of the conservatory in consequence. That became the school of Stefan Wolpe; it was a completely kicked out school!

There’s another interesting thing that you’ve said to me a couple of times and I want to pursue it. You find the American student unique. “I have never fallen out of love with the American student.” Not being a world traveller myself, would you explain?

It was simply so dramatic I won’t forget it! I had been in the States once before in 1948. I had a scholarship for Tanglewood due to some compositions, and Leonard Bernstein was my sponsor. He had a love for Israel and traveled and saw pieces, discovered some of my pieces, gave me a commission to write something (and some others, too), and there was a competition and I got the scholarship. The scholarship consisted of a visit to Tanglewood. In Tanglewood itself I made further a little input, being the only person who could hold forth on Schoenberg. And so there was that scene, whereupon I got a further scholarship for Columbia University—one year as a non-degree student which I took and enjoyed very much. I was then offered a second year but for many reasons that don’t belong here I preferred to go back home at that time. So I did go back home and it was not a bad decision.

The stay in New York developed into a tea party show around the Israel composer, and at that time I was young enough to know that I won’t have any of it. Nevertheless, it was a positive experience and I still remember at least the trees of Tanglewood fondly, if not many other things really; but I had a good time. But it did not put me in contact at all with what is called the young American person. It was a stay in circles in surroundings where somehow everybody had already arrived. It was a highly dramatized, commercial, contact-making situation, and I had to play along a little bit and I wasn’t very good at it either, so I was a disappointment to my sponsor sometimes, at least socially, if not musically. It was not the right look I got. I got one specific look which I think one should have, but it made it easy for me to leave.

Many years later, in 1962 to be precise, we decided in Munich (at that time we were in Munich and I had married in the meantime) that we would like to make a lecture-tour of the United States. That came because I wanted a computer and we couldn’t get a computer in Germany and we heard about computers at the University of Illinois and other places. So we wrote 250 letters offering five lectures on various subjects. My English was just good enough and with my wife, whose native language is English, we could work it up and I was quite capable of reading my lectures properly. We got 32 positive answers from 32 universities of the United States from the East to the West, and we were embarking with both children who were babies. All of us traveled through the States for three glorious months. This was an uninterrupted chain of delight.

This is where my remark comes from. Neither in Israel nor in Germany had I met such young people being loosely behaved but eagerly concerned with anyone who did not condescend. Since my English didn’t allow me to take on the condescending attitude, nor was my subject matter historical matter, they were all acute now-problems, I thought. Therefore, I had no level from which to condescend. All the time I had the idea that everybody is terribly excited that we’ll talk about that which we all want to talk about. I behaved that way and my lectures were written this way. As a matter of fact, when I came to New York to friends of mine and showed them my lectures at the beginning of the lecture-tour, they advised me to put in a few jokes here and there and to loosen it up a little bit in order to learn it by heart, and not to read the manuscript because this is not well received. It seemed they had no idea what was going on in the rest of the country. I didn’t change anything; I didn’t put in any jokes and I didn’t put in any legends and anecdotes. I kept everything just the way I had it, which I found entertaining enough, and was very successful with it. Now “very suc-
cessful with it” means that I fell in love with my audiences. How else was I to read “success”? It is impossible if I don’t like them; I don’t have any success to talk about. So I do put this, what I call “success” in this case, to a great surprise for which nobody had prepared me. I could have known better, but nobody had told me that here is an enormous amount of people with whom to talk; here’s something to be desired. I have not lost that desire ever since.

I have accumulated like everybody else my little gripes and griefs, and my little frustrations and disappointments, and here something didn’t work and there something went all wrong, and so on, and I have not found a decrease in that phenomenon.

So I am more and more inclined to consider the idea one year later in 1963, to come here and even plan to stay. I am inclined to consider that a marvelous decision up to this day.

This is where it comes from; this experience generated it. I was in Boulder, Colorado, in Laramie, Wyoming, and spent nights through—gave my lecture formally and then a discussion started and I had lots of new tapes with me of all kinds of things, and they were hungry and they enjoyed it. I never felt that I was imposing on somebody or wasting somebody’s time. All the time I was well received. This is lovely.