

bernhard günter: interview for REVUE ET CORRIGÉE #29

Remarks collected by Manu Holterbach, Revue et Corrigée #29, August 1996. Translated and notated by Josh Ronsen (and bg), August-October 1998 (march 1999).

Q: I discovered your work with "Un peu de neige salie" which seems to have been your first record. on the other hand, the precision and singularity of it are such that it is impossible for me to think it's your first production. I imagine that there is a whole trajectory that brought you to this type of work, and i would like to know its stages.

A: Nevertheless, it is indeed my first production, although there is a route, rather short, by the way, that developed over a period of three years, starting at the moment i left my last jazz trio and ending with the formulation of the aesthetics of "Un peu de neige salie". This route i would divide in three stages:

1. a period of simulation shortly after having left this trio, during which i tried, naively, to create an "ideal band" with electronic means, using synthesizers and the computer; i programmed the pieces and played guitar with them. only a short time later, i realized that one, such an approach severely lacks the interaction which makes playing in a jazz band interesting, and two, that the simulation of instrumental sounds is not satisfactory. i told myself that i had to find sounds that would stand for themselves and as such. From this i derived the first principle of my work ever since: "what you hear is what you get," in other words, what comes out of the loudspeakers must be the sound, not the simulation of a sound, (or, even worse, the simulation of a recorded sound, a phenomenon rampant in commercial synthesizers, which are generally stuffed with simulations of recorded instruments). The sound has to be, so to speak, palpable.

2. A period of using synthesized sounds, during which i composed pieces of a very "computer music" like appearance (nowadays, i'm calling this my "Star Wars" period). This period was brought to an end by a remark of Ralf Wehowsky, who, at the presentation of my work, commented: "it seems like comic strip music to me," a remark which initially was deeply offensive to me, considering the time and energy i had put into my musical work, but which finally made me think: "well, comic strip music is a little hard, but the aspect of these sounds, very brilliant, polished, and high-tech, reminds me air brush paintings painting, whereas all my favorite painters use very dense matter, sometimes sand in the painting (like Tapes or Dubuffet)"... from this point, i started a search for sound materials which would have a tactile quality, palpable, concrete, which led me to

3. The current period, which is especially characterized by the use of sampled sounds, or more concretely, by the use of Ensoniq samplers, the timbre of which i particularly like... All pieces on "Un peu de neige salie", except for the first one, which is the only example of my synthetic period, because it was made with Yamaha TX416 synthesizer, are made with only the Ensoniq EPS 16+ sampler.

Q: It's something which I do not find in the same way in "Détails Agrandis", but "Un peu de neige salie" made me see its form as a kind of sound installation which develops in time. And on this point I would tend to locate your work in the world of the sound artist (like Max Neuhaus, for example), rather than of the composer who only investigates sound textures. Do you work in this field?

A: This aspect of my work that you very precisely note rises entirely from the concern described above to make the sound coming from the loud speakers very concrete, to give it a volume, a form (gestalt), a precise location or a precise trajectory in space, a smooth or rough surface, etc. i must admit that i do not even know the work of Max Neuhaus.

Q: What makes me imagine you working in fields other than music comes from is the fact that your work has been released on Selektion, a label whose principal protagonists have often widened their sphere of activities to the fields of music, art and sculpture. There is also "Stone Circles" on "Détails Agrandis" which is dedicated to Richard Long (by friendship or reference?), as well as the particular care you take on the development of your beautiful CD packages which suggests close collaborations with visual artists.

A: Although i unfortunately have not collaborated with visual artists (do not forget i have lived for more than

ten years in Koblenz, a city that, from the cultural point of view, is a true desert), i must say that painting has greatly influenced me, more than the majority of music i listened to... Richard Long, whose work i admire, found himself on "Détails Agrandis" because this piece constantly made the stone circles (by r. long) in my mind all the while i worked on it. This is why i called it "Stone Circles" (the original title was in fact "Détails Agrandis," because it is indeed an enlarged detail from the piece "Deceptive Likeness", which was actually released later in the framework of my collaboration with Ralf Wehowsky, "un ocean de certitude" on V2 Archief) and dedicated it to Richard Long.

Q: do you have a theoretical position regarding the use, in my view particularly relevant, of the CD medium which you utilize to its most extreme possibilities: silences or almost silences, super high frequencies, physical precision of the sound and impressive changes of amplitude? In fact, it seems to me that your work would not have at all the same range on vinyl, because the natural crackings of this medium would add themselves to it. In the same way, the very personal use that you make of a whole universe of crackings and electronic disturbances inherent in the inevitable possibility of the breakdown and defection of the high-tech hardware seems to belong at the same time to a praise and a fundamental criticism of the digital domain.

A: It is true that it is the digital medium that makes my work possible, because it provides me with the possibilities of using on one hand an extremely wide spectrum of frequencies, and on the other hand very high dynamics, from the most complete silence to real explosions... It would be very difficult, even impossible, to realize this work on vinyl records. However, i also know that until today, the sound quality of the digital technique does not equal that of the analog technique. i wish for a new digital standard, with a sampling rate of at least 100 kHz and dynamics of at least 24 bit, but i believe that will take years... i also like to use the breakdowns and the faults of the apparatus, because they a part of the secondary technical nature with which the humans surround themselves, and in a creation way i put them in because of a concern for truth, but also because i like the crackling, the breath, the noise of the machine, since when one rids oneself of the idea that these products of the machine are not desirable, one discovers that they can be extremely varied and rich sounds.

Q: Although you recommend on "Un peu de neige salie" a listening at low volume, the effects of your music at strong volume on loud speakers are particularly impressive. The series of electronic impacts contained in the first piece "untitled 1/92" make the speaker membranes vibrate in a terrible way, creating an obvious surface effect: it would seem that the sound remains concentrated there, around the membrane, without really managing to emerge starting this reaction of resistance. After this, high frequencies of a frightening finesse which come to invade all of the space (and up to one hundred square meters, I experimented at low volume), and there the sound literally seems to cross us. One also finds these connections of surface and space in "Détails Agrandis", in particular when after relative calm, the sound waves erupt with violence and appear to explode against the walls. Do you take a particular care so that your music is centered on a quasi material aspect of sound?

A: i already mentioned that, as you precisely remarked, the quasi material aspect of the sound is of the highest importance for me. A concern for the space in which one listens to my music also forms a part of my concerns, and the super high frequencies have, among other things, the function to turn our consciousness to this space, giving us a kind of perception like bats. It is interesting to move the head when these frequencies occur, because one can perceive the placement of the walls by the reflected frequencies. For the piece that i am composing for the Cinéma pour l'oreille series on Metamkine, i seek to reinforce this aspect of the placement of the sounds and their quasi material appearance in space.

Q: To tell you the truth, the construction of your pieces intrigues me. It's difficult to conceive how you imagine them. they seem built with such rigor, having a surprising flexibility at the same time. Are you starting from something written, from a precise idea to which you stick or do the you have a certain idea of the global form, that you develop by successive touches in "drawing" on the support sound? besides i think that you work using software?

A: For me, the (musical) form of the parts is not external to the sound materials, but on the contrary entirely results of them. The forms are the result of an almost organic growth process. My way of working resembles Morton Feldman's, the form of the piece takes shape of a work from day to day, constantly is reconsidered, rebalanced. Feldman said: "I paint the canvas of time with colors of sound..." i search to find the tendencies, the potential of the sound by listening to it thousands of times; the form then is created according to a kind of dialogue with the sound material. i do not use serial, random, or algorithmic processes, all compositional decisions are made by me (in agreement with my sound material, if my work is successful), and i take all responsibility for it. The only software that i use to compose is an old version of the Cubase sequencer (for Atari St), working a little like Edgar Varèse, who built enormous scores, in which he changed some part by cutting out and pasting some notes, a process that he liked to compare with a crystallization. Obviously, it's much easier to "cut, copy and paste" with the computer. The idea of the composition that Adorno develops in his essay "Towards an Informal Music" greatly pleases me.

Q: This leads me to ask of the basic materials from which you work. I imagine that all the frequencies, modulations and electronic crackings come from direct manipulation on the computer. But for the rest, (I'm thinking particularly of the magnificent landscape of "Stone Circles" and at the end of "Un peu de neige salie") do you record and manipulate a bank of acoustic sounds that you record outside, and manipulate later? And knowing your music in the continuity of electroacoustic music composed on tape, one can wonder whether you ever worked in this medium, and, if it is so, can you say what are the fundamental differences between these two mediums?

A: Almost all the materials i use are samples, with rare exceptions being synthesized sounds. These samples are treated either inside my Ensoniq ASR 10 sampler, or (but much less frequently) using various software in my Apple Macintosh. i have just bought software for recording to hard disk: Digidesign ProTools 3.2, which will give me 4 tracks with real time equalization (plus a number of virtual tracks limited only by the memory of the computer) on an Apple PPC 7100/80 with a Digidesign Audiomedia II card, which i will try to use the first time by composing for the series Cinéma pour l'oreille... Before, it was always my sampler directly to DAT. i have never worked on tape, and i have neither tape recorder, nor mixing board. It is possible that my music is in the continuity of electroacoustic music, you will know that better than me, but to me, i am certainly not finding myself there. i know but only very, very poorly the history of electroacoustic music; two CDs of Parmegiani, a piece or two of Ferrari, and a tape with electroacoustic works of Xenakis, some examples of the musics known as "industrial" or "post-industrial" (it is in this category that one classifies my music in the US or in Japan, for want of anything better...) sent by composers, this is all of my discotheque "electronic"... i generally rather listen to instrumental music of Feldman, Boulez, Spahlinger, Lachenmann, Nunes, Etv's, etc.

Q: You appear on each album of RLW. How do you work together? in their form, and in their minimal aspect, your works resemble each other sometimes, though it would seem that RLW would be located more in a physical approach of sound handling, and in the disorder of his acoustic, instrumental and electronic, sound is handled in a more obvious way than yours, with sometimes a temptation towards a kind of melodic rupture, where your work (without making qualitative comparison, I am also fan of RLW) seems to me much more rigorous and radical and also perhaps more disconcerting and insidious in your break with tradition. However your "duets" on the last RLW "When Freezing Air..." appear as the ideal meeting of your respective grounds of investigation.

A: Since it's quite a while that ralf and i have not worked together, it has already become a little vague in my memory, but in general, we exchanged sound materials and sequences (he also uses the Cubase sequencer), and manipulated them, changed to achieve structures and atmospheres satisfying the both of us... For me as well, i find it most successful in the two pieces on Freezing Air... and our common mini-CD on 'un ocean de certitude'. During a certain time, our interests were rather similar; later they drifted apart. i recognize that it is a little difficult collaborating with me because i work very, very slowly, in an almost obsessive way, from which precisely result the rigor and the "radical" character of my work. i generally hesitate before collaborating with others... All the same, i have begun a collaborative work with the American composer John Duncan, which in my opinion presents itself very well for the moment... we hope to make it public next year [home, unspeakable].

Q: Is the note "the music on this CD is intended to be listened to at very low volume!" that appears on 'Un peu de neige salie' a joke aiming the almost theological era of "noise" in current music and its recurring epigraph "play at maximum volume?" Or do you think that listening at low volume, requiring an increased attention would become more insidious and penetrating, thus accepting that certain sound details may not be perceived (at least consciously, because I think that the mind records information even at the limits of perceptibility)?

A: This note is less a commentary on the belief of some (that what is loud is inevitably good), than the wish to say exactly what is written. My music is really conceived at very low volume, and i listen to it like that when i work. i like to hear the sounds appear from silence and then disappear in it again. there surely is a reaction to our "acoustic environment" of today implied: everywhere there is "music" that i do not want to hear, used to attract attention to products (which can very well be the music itself), and of which it be very difficult to escape, plus the inevitable noise of "modern life." i thus permanently find myself in a situation of trying to escape from sounds that i do not want to hear, and which are, in a way, aggressing me. i constantly feel the urge to move away from these sounds/noises. With my music, i aim to establish a feeling of non aggressiveness, the low volume inviting me to approach the sound, to enter it, and to pay attention only if i want. The attitude that i want to bring the listener to take is an attitude of relaxed attention, to create a situation in which one can become aware of the functioning of one's perception, and of the pleasure to use this perception to follow each detail of the music. You've certainly noticed that during the course of my pieces, they have tendency to constantly slow down and lower in volume, which creates, in my opinion, a tendency to be absorbed into the music - it is not a "gadget," a trick, but rather this tendency reflects what happens to me when i work on my music: i get closer and closer to the sound material, until enter it completely, and i think that the music creates a time completely different from chronometrical and empty time, a time filled and alive.

Q: On 'Un peu de neige salie' you encourage structural as well as phenomenological listening. On the other hand, you seem to move away from the idea that one can associate images (of the mind) with your music (this is at least what I understood from this English note). Do you not think that this is inevitable as it is one of the characteristics of sound to evoke images? Not necessarily the equivalence of images with sound, but rather sound starting from a certain level of abstraction on which your work finds itself, which obliges to active perception, inevitably brings forth a state of vision, more near hallucinations than associations of ideas.

A: Most of all, i seek to incite the listener to realize what he is really hearing, without trying to give names to the sounds, to compare them with such or such "known," "classified" sound or to represent them by images (and thus to replace the ear by vision). i like to compare the situation of listening to my music with meditation: it is almost inevitable, unless one is very experienced, that thoughts arise not having a relationship with the subject of the meditation. In this situation, it is not wise to seek to suppress them violently, but rather to drop them, telling oneself: "this is not related." i think in listening to my music, it is good to do the same with associations... so if on the other hand the state of vision of which you speak, consists of living the present moment and the identity of sound (with itself), all the while realizing the structural world in which the sound evolves and the moments follow each other, i would be really delighted, because for me, this is exactly the ideal way of listening, although i have a tendency to think that it is not a question of a hallucination, but precisely of a revelation of reality.

Q: Do you think that one can currently define a fundamental difference between art and music, knowing that the manufacture of a form, whether starting from materials or vibrations, can proceed from the same conceptual decision?

A: Although i am not specialist enough in other arts to try to resolve that question, i tell you that personally, i do not see differences between the arts, other than those which result from the various materials employed and the technical aspects which arise from using them.

Q: Do you give concerts? If so, in what from are they done?

A: Yes, i do concerts, during which i generally install my personal equipment, i.e. what i use to compose my music, and i play the master tapes of my pieces - although it is only a concert of digital tapes, it provides the possibility of hearing my music exactly in the way in which it was conceived. The fact that it is hardware of good quality helping, the atmosphere of collective attention of the public can bring about magic moments ... when the concert is successful.

Q: i heard you have also played the guitar and drums in free improvisation. Currently, is your work restricted to electroacoustic or do you still work with these other instruments?

A: i practice nothing but electroacoustic composition any more, since the other musical means do not allow me (any more?) to close in on what i am aiming to realize.

Q: You have just founded your own label: Trente Oiseaux [Thirty Birds]. Why and what are your projects on this side?

A: i founded Trente Oiseaux because i wanted to create a platform publish works of artists that i think are interesting and significant. this is done without taking into account possible commercial success - i do not hesitate to release very radical works, like for example the first Trente Oiseaux CD by Francisco López, which raised quite a few difficulties to various people, or CD's of unknown artists, like the young American Brad Taylor, of whom i plan to release the first CD by the end of 1996. other than that, there will be a second CD by Francisco López, containing a new piece i find fantastic, "Belle Confusion 996," a CD by the Dutch composer Roel Meelkop, and the collaboration CD of John Duncan and myself, 'home, unspeakable'. Further, the Japanese composer Akifumi Nakajima, working under the name of AUBE, is composing a work especially for Trente Oiseaux, based on the sound of a bell in a Zen temple in Kyoto. The relationship between Trente Oiseaux and the artists is generally very friendly, and i greatly appreciate this state of things.

Q: And what are your personal projects?

A: After having done a remix of the music of Alan Lamb, for the Australian Dorobo label, and another remix of Merzbow, for the English label Blast First, which soon will come out, i am working at the moment, as i already mentioned, on a piece for the 'Cinéma pour l'oreille' series. In September, there will be a new period of work with John Duncan. If i find time, i am invited to do something for a compilation on Digital Narcis in Japan. In November, i must travel to the United States, to the Table of Elements (American label who rereleased Un peu de neige salie) festival in Chicago, after which I am going to record with Gastr del Sol... maybe concerts in Austin and Seattle, and a sound installation in a gallery in Atlanta... The next year, i want to devote myself to a piece to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Morton Feldman's death and to pay homage to him, a project which is really close to my heart. After that, a vacation, i hope!

Q: Where does this interest you have for the french language come from?

A: As you know, i have lived in Paris for more than 6 years at the beginning of the Eighties. i had come to Paris without knowing a damn word, but i quickly learned French, which was very interesting for me: i speak English fluently, but as it is of the same language group as German, the concepts are rather similar, while French, belonging to the group of the Roman languages, sometimes transports different concepts. French is the language which i would prefer to speak all the time -- unfortunately i have only few occasions to do so... For my international contacts, English is the lingua franca, and around me, nobody speaks French. i hope that the situation will improve with a project which i did not mention earlier: i was invited to compose the music for a ballet for the Van Maerrem company, established in Vitry-sur-Seine, in the Parisian suburbs, which is planned to be premiered in April 1997... for the time being, i hope that you will forgive me for my lack of training!

THINKING WITHOUT WORDS IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL