

bernhard günter: interview for WIRE, uk

Q: Your musical predecessors appear to be people like Morton Feldman, John Cage, Robert Ashley, David Tudor. . . How did you discover Minimal music, and what was its initial attraction?

A: well, i have kind of a problem with musical categories/labels like “minimalism”... i would not be able to tell you what minimalism is... the way i look at it is that it’s a question of SCALE. this applies, in my opinion to the number of elements/parameters used in a composition, as well as the type of dynamics one may use. to me, this scale defines what one will perceive as an EVENT in a composition - like in feldman’s first string quartet, when after about one hour, there’s a first pizzicato note, it’s an event... the same pizzicato in, say, a ferneyhough string quartet would mean less than a fly-shit, because it would be buried in tons of other pizzicati or special playing techniques... same goes for dynamics: in my own music, the dynamics range goes from events at -60 dBs or less to 0 dB events (which by the way is much more dynamic range than any popular music i know, where it’s generally 0dB almost all of the time, & with the low volume parts maybe at -5 dB), plus total silence used as an active part of the structure.... so when you hear a tiny crackle after a silence of 20 seconds, you will tend to notice it. i use this to make things audible which otherwise would just be ignored.... even the sounds of your environment, of which one generally doesn’t know they even exist, become very present in those silences. it was actually morton feldmans music which made me aware of the fact that the conscious use of scale can be used as means to focus the listener’s attention on what the composer thinks is important in his music; i’m very familiar with feldman’s work, and consider him a much more important composer than cage, whereas i’m not at all familiar with ashley’s work, & know terribly little about tudor’s...

Q: I have very little information about your own musical history. Can you give me a brief description of how you started making music, and how it has developed over the years?

A: being born in 1957, i’m not such a young guy anymore, & my musical history thus is pretty long by the time being... i will try to make it very short: i started my activities in music at the age of 12 by joining a group organized by a music teacher from a koblenz school, which was trying to use statistical / graphical notation for collective improvisations (this teacher was very influenced by cage, incidently) & at the same time started to play the drums with varying rock & jazz groups... at around 18, i picked up electric guitar... i learned to play the instrument pretty easily & it became my main musical activity. i played in lots of short lived bands & taught guitar. moving to paris, france in 1980, my interest in contemporary music, which had always continued along my rock & (free) jazz listening & playing, was revived... i went to the IRCAM very often & also followed pierre boulez’ lectures, the analysis classes & computer-aided composition workshops, & tried to complete my musical knowledge in the libraries of IRCAM & the CENTRE POMPIDOU... i started to write chamber music & did some ballet music for the ensemble choregraphique de vitry sur Seine... moving back to germany about 6 1/2 years later, i started to tour with a rock/reggae band until it debanded... after a couple of trials with various rather abstract jazz project i quit playing in bands, frustrated with the situation, got a computer & some electronic sound generators... after about 4 years, i had come up with the music found on my first cd “un peu de neige salie”... funnily enough, i was never influenced by electronic music, which generally i didn’t like, but was trying to do my own version of the music of people like boulez, feldman, xenakis, etc. ... i was very surprised to find there were actually people working with similar materials when the cd was out, & other artists got in touch with me, sending their cds & such... still, i think my way of using those materials is pretty different from the way most people use them...

Q: On records like Un Peu De Neige Salie, and the Table Of The Elements CD, and Home, Unspeakable, what kind of sources do the sounds come from? Is digital editing a large part of the process? How much is it composition, and how much is it performance?

A: most of the materials i use on whatever i do are sampled sounds from around my house, rarely outside, because of the ambience one gets with the sounds when outdoors, & maybe a couple of computer-synthesized things, but very few... these are treated in various ways (though more in my ensoniq asr 10 sampler than in the computer) to make the original sources unrecognizable & to emphasize those characteristics in a sound i find most interesting... i consider all my work composition, although the categories kind of get blurred: i use this aforementioned sampler & an old atari computer running a commercial software sequencer (cubase by steinberg) to work on my music, playing the sampler keyboard as an input device for the “notes” (thank god i don’t know

how to play the piano! for me, it's kind of a 76-key computer mouse...), which you might call the "performance part", & then arrange/modify, etc., those parts into the final composition - i like to use edgar varese's expression "crystallization" for the process... it's all done by ear, not by any preconceived concepts, methods, or theories... thus, my music is neither serial, aleatoric, or algorithmic...

Q: Do you play your music live? Is this very different from the music that appears on CD?

A: i do concerts playing my music, but as you can guess from the above, those are classic tape concerts (only that i use the master cds of my pieces)... i use the same system for my concerts that i use monitor the music in my home studio. that way, people get a first hand experience of how the music is supposed to sound & of what i hear when i work on it. this, combined with the atmosphere of collective attention, makes those concerts worthwhile for me... sometimes, they turn into almost magical moments, with everybody listening in silence & experiencing sound in way they had not thought of before... i love those moments!

Q: Is there an ideal environment in which to listen to your music? Should it add to the atmosphere that already exists, or should it be heard in isolation from the outside world? What exactly do you mean by 'structural and phenomenal listening approaches'?

A: i think a quiet environment is perfect for the music, although it is made in a way that easily accepts some environmental sound (unless it is so loud & insistent that it destroys the music...)... it should be listened on speakers whenever good quality speakers are available - the coming & going of sound in space is important to me & headphones do not create that impression. i'd define the structural listening approach as the one of a listener who tries to understand how a piece is structured, how all the parts & sounds work to together to create a unity, whereas the phenomenal approach would be listening to each sound (or combination of sounds) in it's "being-like-this"... a good combination of both constitutes the perfect listening for me, but requires a bit of experience, i guess....

Q: I am listening to Un Peu De Neige Salie at this moment as I type, but I don't seem to be hearing anything. But I know this may not be true: does the record include frequencies not immediately audible to the ear? Are you interested in the subliminal effects of sound on the human brain or body, and have you ever tried to create such effects with sound?

A: there's no experimenting with subliminal effects & things like that... this is something i'd like to leave to experimental psychologists. the fact of the matter is that there are actually long passages of silence, which i try to make active parts of the piece, not just some sort of absence of sound... very often they are intended to function as a kind of projection surface for the listener's recollections of what he has heard so far, & his extrapolations as to what he will hear as the piece goes on, or a quiet time for him to calm & focus his concentration... i believe that silence is an integral part of music, just as shadow is necessary to perceive the quality of light...

Q: You say you try to discourage associational listening. In the history of music, it is possible to observe two strands of development: abstract, celestial music such as Gregorian chant, JS Bach, Xenakis, etc; or romantic, programme music represented by a piece like Prokofiev's Peter And The Wolf. Naturally I believe your music is in the first category, but what function do you intend it to perform? Is it a meditation? A celebration of the editing process? A chance operation? Something else?

A: the reason i try to discourage associational listening is that i wish to get away from the paradigm of music being language-like, the esthetics that believe music (or art in general) is a form of communication... my favourite metaphor for explaining what i'm after is a tree on a meadow; the tree is just standing there, it's not a message for you, but looking at it, you may think about a lot of things, feel a lot of things... so in way, i'm trying to do music that exists like a tree. now when you associate things with what you hear, visualizing this or that, language gets back into the game & destroys the possibility of perceiving the EXISTENCE of sound, it's "being-like-this", it's always like something else... i do not want to communicate a message, but let you

experience the sounds own life, it's living & dying, in it's own environment... i do not wish to hide the fact that music, just like any art, is man-made second nature - that is part of it's nature - so it's important to me to present the sounds in a musical form, a composition, apt for human perception (this refers to gestalt psychology which basically says that human perception works with the recognition of forms...).

Q: Do you think it's possible to draw distinctions between different types of Minimalism? For instance, can there be a 'superficial' Minimalism as well as a kind that has substance?

A: to answer this, i'd like to quote arnold schoenberg, who answered to some people telling him other composers, too, were composing 12-tone music something like: "oh yeah? but what is it that they are composing?"... in other words, it does not really matter whether somebody is using minimalist materials/techniques; the question is: does the piece work? so definitely, if we believe there is something called minimalism, we'll have to assume there can be good & bad minimalism, but that this is not specifically because of it being minimalism.

Q: Do Eastern philosophies such as Zen or the I Ching influence your work? If so, how? There's often the sense that the music is hardly 'there' in the conventional sense: is this the effect you want to create? Or, perhaps, the sense that the music is somehow slipping off to another dimension?

A: i guess one may say that there is a zen influence in my work, because the thing that struck me about zen was the idea that reality, or whatever exists, does so regardless of what we call it & how we see it through our conceptual glasses. i came to think that satori, the experience of enlightenment that zen speaks about, actually means seeing the world without connecting any concepts to what one sees, perceiving without naming, & that listening to music without trying to find the "message" or comparing it to other things constantly would turn into a similar experience... (& just like zen, i'm not interested in "other dimensions" - that is just another concept....) so i think that listening to my work the "right" way is not unlike meditation, indeed.

Q: Would you prefer it if people did not try to analyse, talk about, or find meanings in your music, but just experienced its audible effects?

A: well, analysing, talking about it, & trying to find meanings is the way the human mind works, i guess... analysing can be seen two ways: it can be something that you do while listening, or it can be something that is done later when talking to others about it; same thing about trying to find meanings in music. now what happens when you listen to my music is that you are thrown back onto your self, it is music that kind of makes you a single individual (i'd like to remind you of theodor w. adorno, the german philosopher, who said that good music makes people realize themselves as individuals, whereas bad music makes them lose their individuality in a mindless collective...) trying to get to grips with what you perceive... the part of talking about it is more the social part, exchanging/comparing one's experience with that of other individuals (interestingly, most people who talk about music, are actually only talking about themselves, their experience of the music, their associations, feelings, etc., never realizing this - it is actually very hard to talk about the music itself....)...

Q: Can you describe your working relationship with John Duncan? What were the sessions for Home, Unspeakable like? What qualities did each of you bring to the project? What is the idea behind the album, in your view?

A: i liked john duncan's musical work from the first time i heard it, although i could never really point out, why... a discussion with a friend (who shall go unnamed here) who said: "i don't know how you can like this - it's not even really composed!", put me on the right track: i found that the amazing thing about john is that he actually composes in quite a different way from how western music is generally done. the classic compositional method is mainly based on speech-like figures, & works by repetitions & similarities, whereas john uses almost exclusively differences for the connections in his pieces, with a great intuitive feeling for choosing those differences in a way that they actually CONNECT the different parts as well as separating them. so it was great to bring john's intuition about sound & it's development together with my ideas of constructing larger forms, which actually work using similarity & repetition, even more so because we found that using quite

different methods, we were looking for more or less the same things in our works. we set out using the last line of samuel beckett's libretto for feldman's chamber opera "neither", "unspeakable home", as a point of reference to set the overall tone for the composition, deciding that it would have the overall form of a series of musical landscapes that might describe the topography of such an "unspeakable home"... the piece has less the form of a story (language), but of a walk in a landscape (perceiving its existence, it's "being-like-this")... of course the quote from beckett worked more as a kind of landmark, a lighthouse, if you will, than a rigid rule, since we didn't want to slip into a weird kind of programmatic music.... we worked in my home studio on several occasions, using sounds made by both john & myself - what we came up with, i think neither of us would have been able to do alone by himself, which makes it the experience especially precious for me, plus it sounds quite like nothing else i know...

Q: Is there a humorous dimension to your work?

A: quite frankly, no... it's not that i do not have a sense of humour - i especially appreciate the kind of dry, nonsensical, absurd, & nihilist kind of stuff the british folks like to supply the rest of the world with - but i find my work is not the right place for it... which is quite logical when you look at it: trying to come to an existence-like kind of music, i cannot really use humour, it being more of a social comment on existence ... ain't that funny?