

# Imperfect Forms: The Music of Kenneth Kirschner

| Edited by Tobias Fischer

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## Forget You Ever Read This: An Introduction to Imperfect Forms

| Tobias Fischer

There's a couple of great quotes in every Kenneth Kirschner interview, but there's one I'm particularly fond of:

The best thing would be to somehow perceive music in its pure, pre-personal state. It may travel in interesting ways through particular people, but it ultimately isn't a game of authorship or ownership – it's more impersonal than that.

To me, this outwardly unspectacular statement congenially encapsulates Kirschner's entire approach. On the one hand, it is a view that intriguingly contradicts the romantic notion of music as an expression of the tortured individual and instead leans towards the idea of a collective process as part of which ideas are transmitted through the generations and continually reworked, rather than 'created' or 'invented'. On the other, it feels almost like an anachronistic reference to a time when composers wanted to disappear behind their work instead of using it as the complementary background for an inflated ego. Kirschner's ideal of impersonality should never be confused with

modesty. More accurately, it is born from the conviction that sound, as a natural carrier of information, should not require biographies, press sheets and musicological analyses as a crutch: many people regard kennethkirschner.com, with its absence of a CV and its aesthetic of typographical purity, as a “minimal” website. In truth, it is both a platform for displaying his work and the work itself, a sonic sum and summary of his ideas, developments and stylistic turnarounds – and as such, a radical case of maximalism under the guise of a clean surface. To Kirschner, who once revealed to me that he would have loved to publish at least parts of his work anonymously, it would probably have been easier to take elements away from it than add more. Absolutely everything that matters is there.

With a stance so diametrically opposed to conventional wisdom, it’s hard not to get noticed: Kirschner has been portrayed on Swedish national radio, been awarded a video feature for the prestigious NewMusicBox site, and found a passionate supporter of his work in 12k label boss Taylor Deupree, also responsible for the majority of his physical output in recent years. What’s more, his releases have made it to several end-of-year lists and triggered invitations to various performances across the USA and Europe. Sometime in the mid-00’s, he was generously showered with media attention thanks to his at-the-time technologically advanced and Zeitgeist-affine ‘shuffle’ pieces and his role as one of the key pioneers of the netlabel scene, which would soon turn the entire music industry upside down. Collaboration was the keyword of these times, and Kirschner readily made use of the possibilities of file sharing. The diversity of the work created between 2003 and 2009 was mind-boggling, from the dreamy ambient visions on *post\_piano 1 & 2* (with Taylor Deupree) to the cool sound sculptures of *Resonant Objects* (with André Gonçalves), from the multidirectional interpretations of *May 6, 2001* (featuring a cast of field recording and sound artists) to his complex *Fusion Opera* with vidnaObmana. Since then, his work has continued to cover new ground – as demonstrated by his “sequencer tracks” ‘January 24, 2014’ and ‘April 16, 2013’ or his recent study for hiss, noise and acoustic guitar (with Gil Sanson) ‘February 26, 2014’ – while simultaneously becoming more focused and stripped-down. Certainly, his vision at the cusp between contemporary composition and sound art has never sounded clearer than right now. On the strengths of these accolades, it would have been easy for Kirschner to solidify his style and image and build a career around these concepts. For him, meanwhile, the

interest was a side effect – a temporary tangent between his own interests and those of the world around him. And one could never help but feel he wasn't entirely dissatisfied if it eventually disappeared again.

This is not to say that Kirschner isn't interested in his audience or the reception of his work. But for someone so invested in a pre-personal presentation, the conventional model of a composer releasing his music into the world and receiving applause in return simply doesn't apply. Of course, he is well aware that this concentration on his work and the reflective tone of his music can cause others to think of him as a “miserable, brooding person, wearing all black, making anguished existential speeches to skulls.” And of course, there is inherently a struggle contained within the process of creation if it is taking place outside of popular media and without the institutional support granted to more conventionally operating colleagues. Still, the glove of the misunderstood, under-appreciated artist certainly doesn't fit Kirschner. In fact, I'm pretty sure that many listeners would arrive at entirely different estimations of his character if his CD and vinyl releases, still the most popular form of contact with his oeuvre despite its free availability on the web, had focused more on the playful tone of a piece like ‘January 4, 2011’ – recorded making use of xylophone samples at a local kindergarten – rather than the epic piano resonances of the tracks contained on his 2006 full-length *Three Compositions*. Or if his ‘toy’ project with Canadian visualist and sound sculptor Herman Kolgen, a three-hour long wonderland of found sounds and fantastical inventions, had finally been published instead of lingering in the archives for years. And yet, on closer inspection, there is plenty of breathtaking beauty even within the 127 minutes of ghostly string microphonics captured on ‘October 13, 2012’, which always feel hopeful rather than dark, pensive rather than depressed. If Kirschner sees himself as a “ridiculously silly” person at heart, he isn't joking.

All of this, of course, would be meaningless if the music didn't live up to this implicit promise of inclusiveness. Which is why it is so significant that the compositional devices which have become all but synonymous with Kirschner's oeuvre – the silences, the processed acoustic resonances, the chamber music feel, the Feldman-esque ambiances, the dynamic richness within an otherwise quiet space – are like landmarks or reference points on a road leading you straight into a compellingly confusing sonic world. The

closer you listen, the less they appear as ‘sonic signatures’ but as functional choices, as flexible instruments returning in ever-changing contexts and constellations – there is not a bar of silence that serves the same purpose or evokes the same sensation in the audience here.

In fact, I occasionally think the silences are where the actual music takes place, where the echo of what has just been heard brushes the listener’s subconscious – take them away, and the entire architecture of the composition falls apart. What this implies is that there is no longer just one correct perspective – the composer’s – nor a state of complete arbitrariness. In his portrait of Philip Glass, Robert Maycock opened with a chapter on ‘how to listen’ to Glass’ music, explicating his technique of rhythmical shifts. With Kirschner, that neither appears necessary nor possible. There is a fragile balance between intent and freedom in his pieces, which is constantly renegotiated without ever reaching a final resolution. Wandelweiser composer Antoine Beugner once defined the score as a contract between the composer and the performers, valid for as long as it was interesting enough for instrumentalists to follow its instructions. Perhaps a composition, for Kirschner, is a similar contract with the listener, never complete without the interpretation of the recipient. It may also explain the astounding richness of the remixes and reworkings included with *Imperfect Forms*, which range from subtle effect processings to radical experiments, from concise miniatures to immersive environments, from beguiling visual backdrops to the sounds to their use as a narrative element in Andy Graydon’s *The Findings*. When Tom Hodge submitted his contribution to the project, Kirschner’s immediate response was that it “sounded better than the original”. I would like to take that thought one step further and claim that, with its more gripping and goal-oriented dramaturgy, Hodge’s piece actually sounds as though it were the original. The composer isn’t taking a step back here, putting on the glasses of relativity or shying away from responsibility. But the more his work leads others to pass on the underlying ideas to the next generation, the better.

Which, really, is the whole point of a project like this. Even though we have included an expansive interview about all aspects of his music as well as Simon Cummings’ spectacularly detailed analysis of his work, neither of these are, strictly speaking, required. For all of its ambition, Kirschner’s music is not supposed to be complicated at

all. It wants to be inviting and exciting, sensual and mysterious, romantic and riveting, and it wants to challenge and entertain you all at once. Increasingly, I'm seeing the 'nakedness' of kennethkirschner.com as an opportunity to shut out the never-ending drone of tweets and posts, of opinions, comments and criticism, of news feeds, PR cycles and information streams. Back in the early 90s, Kirschner would run around New York with his iPod, using the shuffle function to navigate his way through centuries of composition and following the path of music wherever it might lead him. As a listener, perhaps, the best way of appreciating his music is to forget you ever read this and do the same.

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## Determined/Indeterminate: An Exploration of the Music of Kenneth Kirschner

| Simon Cummings

For just over a quarter of a century, Kenneth Kirschner's music has been making its presence felt in quiet, understated fashion. Before one even begins to spend time with it, contrasts are overwhelmingly apparent. Unlike so many composers, who jostle and desperately cry out for attention in a seemingly ever-expanding confusion of self-promotion, Kirschner has opted to disseminate his work without fanfare and for the most part without notice (a mailing list was only begun in 2012), silently adding new works to his sparse, text-only website, each bearing a title that simply states a date. Such nonchalance seems almost absurd within contemporary musical culture; the fact that his substantial oeuvre has nonetheless won appreciation and respect from a steadily growing audience is a testament to its consistency and imagination. An exploration and celebration of his work at this time is both opportune and long overdue.

Kirschner has created a sizeable body of work during the last 25 years, consisting of around 146 pieces with a combined duration of over 40 hours. His rate of production



has been steady, averaging six new works per year. Running throughout these works is a series of preoccupations that delineate distinct phases of his musical evolution. These trains of thought form the foundation and the grain of Kirschner's output, manifesting themselves in nascent form in the earliest works and persisting, highly developed, in the music he creates today.

His earliest published work, 'May 19, 1988', created when the composer was 17 years old, is an ear-blanching experience. Its blend of dated MIDI sounds and melody coated in kitschy sugar, captured in an exasperatingly lo-fi recording, sounds like the archetypal product of any teenager's bedroom doodlings, and is far from a promising prospect. In hindsight, it is tempting to think of 'May 19, 1988' not as a starting point but rather a final look back before moving beyond. Yet, as with so much of Kirschner's music, it is more (or, depending how you look at it, less) than it seems. Originally titled 'Prelude, G major' and composed for a high school production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Kirschner revisited this music when asked to create a piece for an installation at Princeton University. This was in 2008 and, not unsurprisingly, Kirschner found fault with music composed two decades earlier:

The show was about mediation and memory, and it occurred to me that my old *Glass Menagerie* 'Prelude' would be quite fitting. But the recording I'd done of it back in 1988 was hugely flawed, and [...] it seemed the only way forward was to damage it further. So I crushed the recording down into the battered remnant you hear up on the site, and it was installed on a street corner between the university and the road leading to my old high school where the performance took place. After that, it somehow made sense to me at the time to just throw the recording up on the site, if only as an inside joke to those people from my hometown who still insist it's the best thing I've ever done.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore 'May 19, 1988', as experienced, is not so much an ancient curiosity from the composer's youth but a kind of 'anti-redux', a reimagined rendition that seeks to exacerbate and aestheticise the perceived flaws of the original. Kirschner's account makes it sound like a last resort, but this approach to sound is one of the most significant recurring elements of Kirschner's compositional language. Furthermore, the creation of 'May 19, 1988' also demonstrates the most fundamental aspect of Kirschner's

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation: Simon Cummings and Kenneth Kirschner (Chapter 4). Unless otherwise attributed, all quotations are taken from this conversation.

music, namely that it is presented as a recording, a resultant artefact from unseen prior endeavour, essentially removed from the act of live performance.

Very early on, I decided quite consciously that my work was never going to be about performing, that is was going to be about recording, about the nature of recording and what you could do with it if you let go of the constraints of performance. The finished work would culminate in a recording, not a performance, and if that makes it more like some sort of sonic sculpture than what people might traditionally think of as music, then fine. Because I believe interesting things can happen when you start to think this way.<sup>2</sup>

An issue highlighted by ‘May 19, 1988’ arises from the fact that the title of each work is the date on which composition was begun, rather than – as might be expected – the completion date. As Kirschner’s works are almost never complemented with programme notes or accompanying texts, the titles are thereby the sole point of non-musical contact between composer and listener. It is therefore interesting to note that this one piece of seemingly tangible information is rendered moot as the length of time taken to create the work is ostensibly unknown. The fact that ‘May 19, 1988’ was actually created twenty years after that date illustrates how deceptive and potentially misleading these titles can be. How does one contextualise this piece when it intermingles compositional attitudes separated and informed by two decades of development? From a musicological perspective, the titles of Kirschner’s works, denoting points of origin rather than conclusion, operate in a manner akin to Icelandic family names<sup>3</sup>; lineage and development can be traced, but in a way that is far from straightforward.

### **Songs without words: July 18, 1989 – March 5, 1994**

Although two decades separate the start and end of work on ‘May 19, 1988’, the fact that it is nonetheless the immature product of a young musician (rather than the fabricated idea of one) is easy enough to recognise. Yet just the following year, Kirschner would find the beginnings of a more mature compositional voice, establishing fundamental ideas that would occupy his thinking for the next five years, ideas derived from the basic song structures that pervaded his teenage creativity. Almost half of

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation: Tobias Fischer and Kenneth Kirschner (Chapter 3).

<sup>3</sup> Icelandic surnames are derived from a combination of the father’s first name plus a gender-specific suffix; tracing lineage is therefore not a straightforward task.

the 21 pieces he composed during this period demonstrate that influence, having short durations – typically between four and seven minutes – and a clearly-defined, conventional harmonic language, showing a predilection for minor tonalities (often inflected with the Phrygian mode). Articulated by repeating chord sequences and various layers of melodic and rhythmic material, the substance of these works lies in the simple juxtaposition and interaction arising from playing with these layers. Indeed, “playing” seems entirely the right word, as these pieces in particular have a playfulness that sets them apart from much of Kirschner’s later work.

‘July 18, 1989’ is not just a fitting example of these early ‘songs without words’, the piece also serves as Kirschner’s de facto Opus 1. In many ways, it is a more refined example of the kind of music heard in ‘May 19, 1988’, with a relaxed tempo and simple melody – oboe alternating with marimba, embellished with finger bells and light percussion – borne along on a simple progression of four chords (which, in a rare exception, are in a major key). Aesthetically, the music is ‘clean’, so it is abundantly clear that the sounds used are synthetic, and stylistically, it would serve as a perfectly adequate piece of incidental music; it sounds rather dated, but from a contemporary perspective that only adds to its charm. It is important to note that, while this piece came subsequent to an outlook rooted in songwriting and betrays various characteristics of that idiom, structurally it is working towards a very different end. There is little discernible trace of verse-chorus patterns – a kind of call and response is as close as it gets – and in fact the most obvious musical form it resembles is the Baroque chaconne, a cyclical harmonic sequence becoming the foundation for melodic variation above. Kirschner has summarised his compositional outlook at this time as being concerned with “building, through a sort of ‘vertical improvisation’ of loops (much as one does in dance music) [...] interlocking tonal structures whose gradual entrances and exits formed the linear development of the piece”. This model would form the basis of several subsequent works. ‘January 12, 1992’ is directly comparable (its triple metre making the Baroque connotations of the music even stronger, redolent of a courtly dance or round), but most of the eight or so related works draw on minimalistic gestures to emphasise the element of repetition and thereby reinforce both the ‘bedrock’, so to speak, upon which the various layers are juxtaposed, as well as the sense of momentum. Kirschner varies the structural clarity in these pieces, so that while most are sectionally straightforward,

launching immediately into their respective cyclic behaviours, others incorporate elements that break up this formality. 'August 5, 1991' begins with a lengthy quasi-rubato piano solo, while 'August 29, 1992' (also known as 'Dead Television Sings' – and, as such, the only work of Kirschner's to bear a non-functional title) emerges out of the blank noise of static. What they all share, though, is the overtly synthetic nature of their sound sources. Even the aforementioned 'August 29, 1992', which Kirschner states "consists entirely of sounds recorded from dead television channels", is treated such that it lacks the obvious sense of being created from real field recordings.

These early pieces may seem to be only distantly (if at all) related to the directions and stylistic considerations that have come to typify his music in later years. Yet the use of cyclic structures is highly significant. Resulting in compositions that derive their narrative from the juxtaposition of a palette of elements – rather than the systematic development of those elements – is of fundamental importance to Kirschner's entire attitude towards composition. Furthermore, among the pieces composed during this early period are a number that already begin to detach from the conventions carried over from adolescence. This detachment can be heard in as early a work as 'August 25, 1990'. The elements consist of soft ethnic percussion driving a slow, repeating fretless bassline (a clear ground bass), upon which a collection of piano melodies and gestures play out. The harmony oscillates between two triads (Gm/E-flat), making the tonality ambiguous – minor and major feel equally strong – but more importantly, due to their commonality, creating a sense of motionlessness; in essence, the back and forth between these chords results in a harmonic drone. Several of Kirschner's earliest works use a similar approach; 'September 3, 1992' and 'April 27, 1993' also use two triads, tonic-dominant oscillations that produce a never-ending series of cadences. Oscillating less widely, 'September 12, 1993' moves between adjacent triads to create a restive but ultimately restrained music; 'March 5, 1994' does the same, but use of the Phrygian mode brings the triads even closer together, increasing the sense of immobility. But just as frequently Kirschner explored more clear-cut drones, removing harmonic progression altogether and instead shifting layers of material above a single chord. 'August 4, 1992' was the first to do this, albeit with momentary cadential lurches, but 'March 3, 1993' and 'October 30, 1993' pursue the idea more single-mindedly. Particularly striking about these primarily static works is that in most of them, Kirschner radically loosens the tempo, and in some –

‘October 30, 1993’ being the best example – abandons pulse entirely. Becoming in effect sonic mobiles, they gradually came to predominate this early period of Kirschner’s compositional life, as well as prefiguring the direction he would pursue even more rigorously in the years ahead.

### **Breaking the chains of the known: September 10, 1994 – March 15, 1999**

At the start of 1994, Kirschner experienced what he has described as an “epiphany”, in the wake of listening to Morton Feldman’s Piano and String Quartet<sup>4</sup>. The effect on Kirschner’s music was dramatic, initiating a new period of creativity that would reject almost entirely song-derived ideas and develop his existing drone-based techniques into new forms. This shift in outlook is vividly heard in ‘September 10, 1994’, the work that marks a watershed in Kirschner’s output. It is different in almost every respect from his previous music, dispensing with all traces of pulse, melody and harmony and opting for just a single timbre, that of ethnic bells. Elements of repetition and drone are all that remain from before, now intensely focussed on an ongoing series of gestural phrases. Each phrase is unique but highly similar to those around it, rethinking the drone aspect from one rooted in harmonic stillness to one articulated by similarity of utterance. But perhaps the most radical and significant change in Kirschner’s approach was to give these motivic phrases considerable space in which to be heard, cushioning them in lengthy silent pauses. The result was his then longest work, lasting almost half an hour. ‘September 10, 1994’ ushered in a period of considerable experimentation, and while it led to works of similar character – ‘March 6, 1995’ and ‘September 11, 1996’ are ambient synth equivalents – Kirschner’s music from this period is characterised by a growing interest in texture. This can first be heard in ‘June 18, 1995’, which initially seems to be a drone-based work, vague electronic squiggles above a warm, unchanging chord. But clanging bells that fade in after a couple of minutes trigger a series of timbral shifts; the bells occupy the foreground but yield to wooden percussion and a period similar to the opening, with no discernible impulse at all. Structurally, the work employs a clear extension of Kirschner’s use of discrete layers of material, the linear narrative arising out of their timbral juxtaposition.

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<sup>4</sup> Conversation: Tobias Fischer and Kenneth Kirschner (Chapter 3).

While 'June 18, 1995' ostensibly bears little resemblance to the austere drift of works like 'September 10, 1994', the aspect of material similarity is just as important; contrast is felt due to the lengthy pauses between each phrase. In this textural context, it is the behaviour of the material that unifies the work, rather than focussing on a single timbral voice, and variety is felt in the two episodes that contain non-percussive elements.

'March 12, 1997', another texture work, is very similar; the material is also percussive – assertive drums – emerging from a nebulous cloud of sound. However, this becomes a background omnipresence, so variation instead arises here from abrupt adjustments to the timbral nature of the drum sounds. 'February 17, 1996' and 'July 2, 1997' do much the same but their timbre is dry and wooden throughout, so material contrasts are heard in the density of the percussion, which varies a great deal as the piece progresses.

Not all of the texture works Kirschner composed during this time are founded upon materials that are fundamentally similar. Indeed, 'January 25, 1997' began a new line of investigation, exploring what might be called 'timbral counterpoint', created from disparate elements acting simultaneously but independently. Although pulse and conventional harmony are abandoned, in a sense these elements can be heard as an abstraction of those used in the more conventional song-derived works discussed above. Percussive timbres – dry and essentially pitch- and pulse-less – are emphatically present, usually foregrounded, together with an assortment of pitched timbres, forming both chordal and melodic shapes; noise is also used, but in such a way as to fall somewhere between the pitched/unpitched poles. 'August 13, 1997' is a more thoroughgoing exercise, creating a fascinating tension (the strange, unexpected ending – shrouded in wind and a kind of synthetic vocal sound – is especially memorable), and in the 21-minute 'September 19, 1998', Kirschner establishes a potent form of quietude, reducing everything to lowercase levels. Not all signs of earlier ideas have been lost, though; 'July 7, 1998' traces its textural development through heavyweight drum patterns and an implacable pulse; 'March 15, 1999' expands this idea upwards, its jangling minimalist texture encompassing repetitive, slowly undulating piano notes; and 'December 11, 1998', also rooted in rhythm, is almost a wistful throwback, except the meandering nature of its piano melody and chord progressions make clear that much has changed.

Interspersed among the drift- and texture-based works of this period, several pieces stand apart, different in nature as well as being significant with regard to later developments in Kirschner's language. 'January 10, 1998' does away with both timbral similarity and smooth linear narrative, instead deploying highly diverse materials as structural blocks. The tenor of the work reflects 'September 10, 1994' – gentle dynamic, large amounts of space allowed to permeate – but the marked contrast between its constituent elements results in music that is highly episodic. It finds something of a companion in 'November 23, 1998' (although the latter piece still has texture as its locus of attention), but apart from this Kirschner would not continue to explore episodic structures for another eight years. Different again – in fact, unprecedented at this stage – is 'November 3, 1998'. Although clearly electronic, it is unquestionably chamber music, comprising a synthetic piano, strings, brass, percussion and voices plus purely electronic sounds unlike anything acoustic. It makes no sense here to speak of diverse elements, as they are all clearly working together as a single, multi-faceted entity. Aesthetically, 'November 3, 1998' brings to mind the Synclavier music of Frank Zappa<sup>5</sup>, obviously electronic but rooted in and alluding (even aspiring) to the conventions of instrumental music. The work has importance beyond just this aspect; Kirschner describes it as, "the first time I really remember spending as much time and effort crafting the silences in a piece as I did the sounds. And that's a direction I've very much continued in, ever more obsessively".

But arguably the most significant piece from this experimental period is 'May 3, 1997', a work dominated almost exclusively by the sound of the piano. Kirschner's first exploration of the piano was 'January 29, 1994', in which notes and figures repeat compulsively, eventually forming gestural shapes, in an essentially static harmonic plane. The language of 'May 3, 1997' is rather different, informed by the developments brought about by 'September 10, 1994'. At over 37 minutes' duration, it became Kirschner's lengthiest composition, presenting a collection of drawn-out episodes, each concerned with inexact repetitions of a particular piano phrase. Interspersed among these are sections that introduce gently percussive elements, but in such a way as not to detract focus from the piano. In that sense, it displays connections to both the drift and the episodic works outlined above. Yet Kirschner introduces a new element: the material is surrounded by an omnipresent surface of auditory 'dirt', various forms of hiss

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<sup>5</sup> cf. *Boulez Conducts Zappa: The Perfect Stranger and Civilization Phaze III*.

and noise that cake the music and lend it the qualities of a lo-fi field recording. This was prompted by practical and prosaic reasons, not dissimilar to those described above that would, many years later, determine the way ‘May 19, 1988’ would be finalised:

The “piano” in it is actually just a single low-res piano sample [...], and originally it was just going to be that and the percussion. But that sample has all this horrible noise in it, so that as each note was played a very clear hiss would come in and out with it, and it just sounded terrible. It occurred to me that one way to cover it up would be by adding more noise – so I sampled the noise floor on the outputs of a couple of my hardware synths, and added it in as another layer. And to me that really became a crucial part of the composition, another voice, a key expressive element in the whole thing. So it was initially very much about making a virtue of necessity, but eventually the noise and damage became like another instrument to me...

Hitherto, Kirschner had occasionally mitigated the obviously synthetic nature of his timbres through use of reverb (as in ‘January 27, 1995’)<sup>6</sup>, but the introduction of pseudo-incident noise in ‘May 3, 1997’ renders the synthetic sounds more plausible, contextualising them as part of a seemingly authentic sonic object. This idea – echoed in ‘January 2, 1999’ – would assume central importance in the next period of his development.

### **Beyond the crutch of repetition: February 12, 2000 – April 27, 2004**

For the next four years Kirschner’s output became intensely focussed on piano- and texture-based works. However, in an interesting twist of development, only one of the ten piano pieces would incorporate noise in the manner of ‘May 3, 1997’. That line of thought would instead be brought to bear on the texture pieces, while Kirschner opted to strip back the piano’s timbre by muting it, alluding to the quality of lo-fi recordings without overt imitation.

The way material unfolds in some of these piano works is surprisingly abstract. That is not the case with ‘February 12, 2000’, which comprises short, motivic snippets repeated an even number of times (usually two, four or eight) followed by pauses. But beginning with ‘April 3, 2001’ and continuing through ‘July 7, 2001’ and ‘August 18,

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, it is worth noting that Kirschner’s favoured timbres – bells, piano, percussion – are among the easiest to synthesize convincingly.



2001', Kirschner avoids repetition entirely, creating a profoundly austere atmosphere by simply presenting collections of well-spaced chords, separated by larger spaces, with absolutely no dynamic variation. To an extent this is a return to the stillness of 'September 10, 1994', but here the 'similarity of utterance' is less tangible, resting entirely on the unrelenting solemnity of its delivery. This in turn destroys conventional notions of continuity, leaving one wondering whether the apparent groupings of chords are merely an illusion, and if they are, what the wider points of connection might be. For the most part, though, Kirschner's concern here is an expansion of the more direct kind of stasis brought about through obvious repetition. Around the start of 2002, he began five works in relatively quick succession – on December 9, January 27, January 28, February 27 and March 13 – each of which continues the basic idea of 'February 12, 2000', tiny motivic phrases repeated in groups, positively dripping with reverb through their surrounding pauses. They lack the layer of artificial 'dirt' heard in 'May 3, 1997', but the muted piano sound, together with audible (perhaps emphasised) artefacts of its synthesised origin, combine to give the impression that these pieces may possibly be digitised versions of an acoustic original.

In his texture music as well, Kirschner was becoming increasingly abstract. 'May 13, 2000' is his first dedicated noise study, juxtaposing highly differentiated blocks of granular sound. There is no attempt here even to hint at sources – indeed, it is entirely possible to believe they are synthetically created – but in subsequent works Kirschner began to play with the abstract qualities of noise through an explicit but subtle connection to field recordings. Although the sources remain elusive, it is nonetheless abundantly clear that there are sources (recordings made in Kirschner's immediate neighbourhood in New York), and the resultant textures thereby maintain a tense, liminal relationship both with their origins and with the listener. Kirschner uses layering techniques in 'May 13, 2000', clearly reminiscent of his song-based works, and an episodic structure in 'September 4, 2000', like a series of sound exhibits, but the rest of his texture works from this period are exceptionally fluid, moving slowly and smoothly to form large-scale, continually evolving noise-fabrics. Silence plays little part in them, yet while the nature of these fabrics can be dense and abrasive ('August 6, 2000', 'October 22, 2000'), more often than not they are restrained, even gentle. Both 'May 6, 2001' and 'July 18, 2002' typify this quieter tendency, dropping to a lowercase

dynamic at times. ‘September 27, 2002’ and ‘February 8, 2003’ move away from noise in the direction of pitched elements, explored further in ‘April 21, 2003’, where they predominate (albeit for just three-and-a-half minutes), and to a greater extent in ‘June 8, 2003’, becoming a rich, resonant point of origin from which the piece slowly withdraws into another lowercase habitat, increasingly claustrophobic. All of these ideas are brought together in ‘April 27, 2004’, one of Kirschner’s most impressive works and an effective summation of his textural concerns from this period. Principally episodic, it strikes a fascinating balance between immovability and effervescence, favouring the latter. This is in part achieved by polarising the music to just high and low pitch registers, making the work’s character beautifully ambiguous, simultaneously serious, even weighty, yet extremely delicate (indeed, many of the materials, particularly in the first half, sound as though they required the compositional equivalent of kid gloves).

It is worth noting here that this period of Kirschner’s output includes a significant division in his work as a whole. As stated above, each piece is titled after the date upon which composition was begun. While the completion date is not explicitly stated, Kirschner has provided a clue of sorts in the metadata within each audio file. ‘May 19, 1988’, for example, contains this information within the ‘Comments’ tag: “v.feb08; aka Prelude, G major”; the date reference in this instance, February 2008, is to when the revised version was completed. All of Kirschner’s works contain this additional information, and it is therefore possible to determine the duration from when each piece was begun until its revisions were completed – in other words, the ‘gestation period’ of each piece. However, examining these durations reveals a striking bifurcation: the pieces from ‘May 19, 1988’ to ‘March 13, 2002’ – two-fifths of Kirschner’s oeuvre – seemingly have a lengthy gestation of between one and 20 years, while all subsequent works have a gestation of no more than 8 months. The shift is an abrupt one, too: ‘March 13, 2002’ took nearly seven years; ‘July 18, 2002’, its immediate successor, just five months. The earliest revision date of any piece is October 2002, and in fact this is the point when Kirschner first began to make his work available online. All works composed prior to this time were remastered to make them more presentable (with the already-discussed exception of ‘May 19, 1988’, no other material alterations were made), which explains the surprising length of the earliest works’ gestation periods.

## **Indeterminacy: July 29, 2004 – December 2, 2005**

The abstract nature of the aforementioned piano and texture works derives from the fact that Kirschner was increasingly drawing on chance procedures, allowing his structures to have a more randomised arrangement. This gradual loosening of creative control now found its most natural expression in a series of nine works beginning with ‘July 29, 2004’. Rather than presenting the music in a preordained ‘finished’ form – i.e., as a self-contained audio file – Kirschner instead devised a method for creating the pieces in real time. This was accomplished using a program written using the multimedia software Flash; this program – run within a web browser, initiated by the listener – selects from a pool of sound fragments, moving randomly between them, continuing indefinitely until a stop button is clicked, at which point the music slowly fades out. As well as being the first, ‘July 29, 2004’ is also the simplest of the indeterminate works, using a pool of 35 very short fragments – none longer than twenty seconds; each containing a single piano gesture – interspersed with short pauses. Although indeterminate, it can be clearly heard as a continuation of the piano works from the preceding years.

Its immediate successor, ‘August 26, 2004’, begins from a similar point of origin, 35 piano fragments, but creates a more complex soundscape by superimposing several layers of these fragments simultaneously, resulting in music that draws closer to Kirschner’s texture music. The fragments are divided into two groups of 21 and 14 respectively; these are then assigned to three layers of activity, the group of 21 to layers one and two, and the 14 to layer three<sup>7</sup>. The piece begins with the first layer, followed – after delays of ten and five seconds respectively – by layers two and three. Each layer behaves in much the same way, choosing from its fragments at random, occasionally separated by short pauses (not in layer two). Procedurally, the piece swiftly assumes a long-term ‘steady state’ once all three layers are introduced, but sonically exhibits significant short- and mid-term variety, due both to the size of the pool of fragments as well as their being considerably longer than in ‘July 29, 2004’, here lasting as long as 106 seconds. The pauses in each layer, of either twenty or thirty seconds, have as much likelihood of occurring as the sound fragments, but are less perceptible in their own right than in the way they preserve clarity in the texture as it grows in complexity.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘August 26, 2004’ is the only indeterminate work to assign an unequal number of fragments to each layer.

This process is the model for all of the subsequent indeterminate works. Two of them, 'April 20, 2005' and 'May 3, 2005', continue to explore the possibilities of the piano, and are the most intensive and multi-layered of these works, comprising eight layers each, and are consequently among the most behaviourally complex pieces in Kirschner's entire output. As already noted, they are closely associated with the texture works of the preceding years, but the use of distinctly muted piano sounds echoes strongly the piano works of 2001–2. Furthermore, Kirschner reintroduces harmony as an active force, having hitherto been an essentially dormant or at least incidental element in his work since 1994. 'May 3, 2005' hints at the Phrygian modality that occurred regularly in his early work, but 'April 20, 2005' is more subtle, sounding like a cadence at tipping point, precariously perched around its locus of liminality. This harmonic stasis lends both pieces a strong audible connection to the drone works. All told, as a vivid synthesis of several of Kirschner's compositional approaches achieved through an indeterminate process, this pair of works is remarkable enough, but 'April 20, 2005' achieves real magnificence due to the deeply atmospheric *mise-en-scène* it inhabits, a brooding nocturnal space in which the piano, tarnished with rust-like digital artefacts, its upper harmonics lost, chimes out as though deeply submerged in water. The remaining indeterminate works are more single-mindedly textural, mostly comprised of an assortment of percussive materials ('July 9, 2005'; 'September 8, 2005'; 'October 15, 2005'). 'August 10, 2005' is different insofar as it lacks any rhythmic element whatsoever, instead concerned with slowly shifting, droning clouds of sound. But the supreme example of this – and one of Kirschner's most stunning creations – is 'January 15, 2005', fourteen lengthy fragments of abstract electronics layered five times to produce an intense, heavy, seamless acoustic soundscape that keeps reinventing itself over very long periods of time.

These pieces, particularly when heard in their wider context, force an evaluation of the listening experience, particularly with regard to expectation. To some extent, one is drawn to – and perhaps actively seeks – some acknowledgement of narrative or at least direction in Kirschner's 'determinate' music. But the indeterminate pieces, both on the micro (fragments played in a random order) and macro scale (open-ended, finished *ad libitum*) defy notions of a predetermined narrative sense, so it is tempting simply to jettison such expectations in this context. However, in practice this proves to be flawed,

and in respect to both the indeterminate and determinate works. Indeed, the way form and content interrelate and beget each other is often a nebulous aspect of Kirschner's music.

...there's definitely a case to be made that the "form" of my pieces is really just an emergent property – a side effect, really – of the processes used to create them. [...] what passes for form in my work is very much rooted in the processes – both technological and methodological – that I employ, and arises quite naturally from them.

The series [of indeterminate pieces] was originally a response to the constraints and limitations that had built up in my work at the time, and represented to me very much an extension of my then-current practices – the next logical step. But what I found was that I missed [...] the crafting of a narrative, the sense of getting it "right". [...] The indeterminate pieces can create wonderful and unexpected musical moments – and can KEEP creating them, in the way a fixed piece never can – but the price you pay is that you give up the joy of sculpting the top-level form of the work, and the additional level of craftsmanship and expressivity that comes with it.

From a compositional perspective, Kirschner is right, insofar as these pieces necessitate the abnegation of a certain amount of control. Yet the implication that indeterminate music is incapable of narrativity is not so much true as subjectively false. Earlier, the process used in these pieces was described as one that becomes a 'steady state', and as such – somewhat analogous to the law of large numbers – when heard over extended periods of time (typically more than about 45 minutes), the indeterminate works are indeed narratively null, exhibiting a long-term equilibrium. But reducing one's aural scope – an entirely legitimate thing to do, as the durational and structural aspects of these pieces are undefined and aleatoric, respectively – the music passes over peaks of intensity and through valleys of repose, a process that invites connections to be made between what has passed, what is happening now and what one expects may happen soon. Moreover, the peaks occasionally expand into powerful lengthy plateaux, becoming transfixed, ecstatic even. It may be inaccurate to describe this as a 'narrative', but there is something undeniably dramatic about the resultant structural ebb and flow, and its ability to be expressive is beyond doubt.

These considerations give pause for thought with respect to the determinate works as well. As Kirschner indicates above, the indeterminate pieces were an extension of his compositional practice, which suggests that the search for a narrative component in the ‘fixed’ works – or, at least, the assumption that there is such – is problematic. In both cases, Kirschner’s use of a ‘steady state’ makes for an obvious comparison with Brian Eno’s philosophy behind ambient music<sup>8</sup>, wherein material is conceived to be simultaneously ‘interesting’ and ‘ignorable’. In this context, the indeterminate works and many of the fixed works can be heard as a rethinking of the ambient aesthetic, one less concerned with loops and cycles than with an open-ended scrutiny and re-evaluation of its collection of sonic objects.

I tend to be critical of electronic music that just grabs a loop and runs it forever, if only because I know how easy that is to do – it’s built right into the nature of the medium. And I’ve always been very focused on the challenge of how to move beyond that, how to create an electronic music that evolves and grows organically throughout the duration of a given piece. So I’d like to think that I do bring a degree of complexity to the narrative and linear evolution of each piece – even though, yes, what’s being developed does have a sense of stasis about it, because it’s all an examination of the same idea from different angles, perspectives, dimensions. It’s like I’m trying in each piece to see the same timeless object from every possible viewpoint simultaneously...

[Feldman’s music is] the exact opposite of what Brian Eno is talking about – it’s not ignorable, it doesn’t accommodate many levels of listening. Now it’s true that I aspire to those higher Feldman-esque levels in my work, however infrequently I may succeed in reaching them. But what I’d really like to do is [...] create a music that responds dynamically to different levels of effort or attention, and rewards the listener proportionally for what they put into it. I’m reminded in this of my favorite writer Thomas Pynchon: with him, you very much get back from his work what you put into it. Read it superficially, and yes, you’ll get something, you may enjoy it, it may work for you at some level. But really dive in, put a great amount of effort and thought and time and dedication into it, and it gives back proportionally – there’s an intricacy there that rewards a deep level of involvement.

In many ways, it is possible to see the period in which the indeterminate works were created as the last to date in which Kirschner’s creativity would find expression primarily

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<sup>8</sup> Eno’s philosophy for ambient music is contained within the liner notes of his 1978 album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*; the final line states that, “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.”

through just one or two kinds of compositional approach. Since then, his output has been consistently diverse, exploring numerous discrete lines of inquiry simultaneously.

### **Synthetic realism and genuine artifice: March 16, 2006 – May 25, 2010**

Kirschner's return to fixed, determinate music coincided with his then longest work, the 72½-minute 'March 16, 2006'. In many respects, it displays familiar characteristics: piano material throughout, as though taken from a very lo-fi recording, cut into fragments that pass by, occasionally repeating, interspersed with pauses. However, the use of repetition is never exact; indeed, phrases are at first rudely curtailed, and only allowed to play out on later hearings, before switching to different but ostensibly related bits of material. This gives the work an episodic structure, something essentially absent since 'January 10, 1998', but which would quickly become highly significant in Kirschner's work and remains so today. Additionally, 'March 16, 2006' breaks with established patterns through an abrupt shift in tenor a little over halfway through, the piano becoming increasingly indistinct and hauntological. Its successor, 'April 17, 2006', almost seems to continue where the former work leaves off, its own piano material heavily caked in layers of detritus. Kirschner did not compose many more piano works during this period, but the few that he did are unique in the extent to which they aspire to an altogether new kind of realism. Beginning with 'March 20, 2007', Kirschner did away completely with artificial noise as a means of 'authentication', as heard in practically all of his preceding piano music. Now the piano sounds clean, vibrant and above all real, replete with seemingly natural sustain (as opposed to reverb) and even the soft thud of the sustain pedal being pressed. Behaviourally, the piece – along with 'June 21, 2007' and 'September 30, 2007' – is a continuation of the piano works from 2002, comprising repetitions of short melodic ideas, but the verisimilitude of the instrumental sound in these works (notwithstanding the fact that it is, still, synthetic) was strikingly new to Kirschner's music.

Such realism would subsequently be extended beyond the realm of the acoustic, in a clutch of electronic works from the same period. As previously discussed, Kirschner's concern had usually been to colour and tarnish synthetic material so as to exhibit more closely the qualities of an authentic acoustic recording, but this was not always the

case. Indeed, one of the most striking qualities of many of the indeterminate works, particularly ‘January 15, 2005’, is their overt electronic nature. Looking further back, dispersed throughout earlier phases of his output are a small number of pieces that, in their wider context, sound almost defiantly synthetic. ‘October 13, 2001’, for example, is concerned with the juxtaposition and interaction of raw electronic tones, with only an occasional piano note as a nod to where Kirschner’s attention was most fixed at the time. Having placed electronics demonstratively in the foreground in those pieces, Kirschner now made their raw timbres his focus as he explored episodic structures further. ‘July 17, 2006’ is something of a distillation of the 2004 electronic works, behaviourally simpler and embracing their more austere aspect. Its episodes are defined by grouped repetitions of pure sine tone diads; harmony, dynamics, rhythm, momentum – all of these play no part in the piece whatsoever. In a brave act of asceticism, Kirschner simply allows the diads a certain amount of fluidity from episode to episode, resulting in quasi-tonal progressions as well as buzzing dissonant clashes. This is expanded slightly in ‘August 19, 2006’, where the tones enter one after the other to form triads, while a purring texture swirls gently in the middle distance. ‘September 10, 2006’ juxtaposes starkly contrasting static sound-slabs, each designed to obfuscate their pitch content through clusters; ‘October 19, 2006’ is no less stark or static, but its brief, sleekly gliding sections allow more pitched material to make it to the surface.

‘October 19, 2006’ is part of a distinct thread of works in which Kirschner presents the material via a pointillistic sequence of short phrases, fading in and out within the space of just a few seconds. An early incarnation of this can be heard as far back as ‘March 6, 1995’, and less prominently among the elements of several works from 1997–8<sup>9</sup>, but it was not until three short works from 2004 – ‘January 17, 2004’, ‘February 19, 2004’, and ‘November 18, 2004’ – that it would become formalised. Despite their brevity – ‘January 17, 2004’ is under two minutes long – each of these pieces strikes a balance between austerity and warmth that is decidedly unsettling (comparisons with the Lynchian music of Angelo Badalamenti are obvious). Kirschner continued to explore this in ‘July 5, 2008’, another episodic work, which wholeheartedly exploits the sinister undertones that such ephemeral material can engender; its periodically-changing chords are dense, low in register and somewhat stolid, like laboured breathing. A similar, later

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<sup>9</sup> cf. ‘October 8, 1997’, ‘January 10, 1998’, ‘July 7, 1998’ and ‘December 11, 1998’.



work, 'January 21, 2009', seems on the one hand lighter and faster moving, but this only reinforces the repetitions of its often sharply dissonant chords, rendering them disquietingly obsessive.

In these and in other episodic works, pitch clearly remains important. 'February 24, 2008' fills each of its segments with highly florid, faux-Romantic piano material (continuing the strain of super-realism described above), while 'April 22, 2008' and 'May 12, 2008' explore overlapping but independent tonal ideas that are subsequently reworked and processed, never losing their initial pitch focus. But textural concerns were returning to dominate Kirschner's thinking. More than half of the 18 works begun during 2008–9 have texture either as their driving force or as an essential component. They encompass a very wide timbral palette, sometimes asserting clarity, as in the bells and piano of 'June 5, 2009', a piece that takes the form of a subtle diptych, or the relentless percussion patterns of 'April 13, 2009' and 'October 26, 2009', throwbacks to Kirschner's interest in minimalism. Other works obfuscate their origins, retaining an acousmatic quality (comparable to the texture pieces composed between 2000 and 2002) such as the heavily filtered, gravelly layers of 'March 31, 2008' that clearly began life as a (synthetic) piano. This work is notable in having an unusually clear linear direction – as opposed to episodes or stases – undergoing a gradual transition, thinning out into a soft ambient atmosphere (a characteristic shared with 'February 25, 2010', where the density slowly reduces). A drum kit is the source of the frantic movement in 'April 10, 2008', a piece that also dissipates at its conclusion, but more abruptly; 'March 16, 2010' is something of a sibling work, but with greater emphasis on the noise aspects of its source material.

More often than not, though, Kirschner presents these texture pieces as abstract meditations, devoid of specific points of sonic origin. Especially impressive in this respect are the muscular shifts of 'September 13, 2008', harmonic material buried deep within a noisy exterior. The continual flux of its elements forces the ear to move back and forth between the surface of the music and its substrata, creating a kind of empathic 'resonance' in the listener that mirrors the nature of the work itself. But perhaps the most sublime of Kirschner's texture pieces from this period is 'September 27, 2009'. A short ambient work with no hard edges, the genteel delicacy of its almost static chord

progressions feels like the product of hectic repetitive movement blurred by rich reverb. The effect is very striking indeed, an aural paradox in which the music appears to be pushing along and pulling back simultaneously. This textural emphasis would ultimately subsume his episodic music, ranging from the anecdotal clarity of ‘November 7, 2008’ (comprising around 15 highly differentiated interlocking and overlapping sections, a veritable catalogue of acousmatic allusion) to the nebulous percussive material that fills both ‘January 2, 2010’ and ‘February 1, 2010’, the latter – based on field recordings from a sound installation by Hawaiian artist Andy Graydon<sup>10</sup> – drawing on hauntology as well as noise.

### **The dominance of texture: July 6, 2010 – October 28, 2013**

The last three years have been among Kirschner’s most productive, while also displaying a wider diversity than ever before. Following a lengthy absence, the piano returned to his music in ‘July 6, 2010’, a melodic but constricted work, sounding purposeful but circumscribed, occupying just the middle range of the instrument. Its sound – anticipated a couple of years earlier in ‘October 23, 2008’ – is treated such that at times it resembles a prepared piano. This is taken further in ‘October 29, 2010’, where the instrument sounds akin to a Japanese koto, an effect – heavily processed – that also forms the basis of the extended texture in ‘November 7, 2010’; now, the whole range of the keyboard is used, but its meandering behaviour and flat dynamic keep the music relatively static. ‘November 18, 2011’ is something of an amalgam of these pieces, using a limited range of notes – making it harmonically immobile – and a kind of arbitrary repetitiveness; here, though, the realism of the instrument returns to that demonstrated in the 2007 piano works, sounding exactly like a field recording of someone picking out ideas at the instrument. ‘July 10, 2012’ is similar but more intensive, exploring a constant slew of improvisatory gestures, like a brainstorming exercise.

All of these are short works of under seven minutes’ duration, but more significant are two far lengthier piano pieces from 2011, ‘January 18, 2011’ and ‘July 29, 2011’. The former, lasting over 50 minutes, is on the one hand a return to the hauntological emphasis of Kirschner’s earlier work (the material sounds as though it has been compiled

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<sup>10</sup> *Untitled (fault)*, an installation for 2-channel sound and acetate phonograph record; for more information, see <http://www.andygraydon.net/index.php?/works/untitled-fault/>.

from multiple, very different quality recordings). But he brings to ‘January 18, 2011’ a disconcerting, unseen force of a kind barely hinted at five years earlier in ‘March 16, 2006’. The piano’s phrases are abruptly cut off as though subject to the whim of some powerful unseen hand; the artifice this practice proclaims – effectively turning the piece into a sonic patchwork, each phrase the product of crude cut-and-paste – establishes a fascinating and uncanny friction against the apparent genuineness of the recordings. The latter work, by contrast, takes Kirschner’s experiments with authenticity to a hyperreal extreme. ‘Close-miced’ doesn’t begin to cover it; to listen to ‘July 29, 2011’ is to become the miniaturised inhabitant of a vast grand piano, enclosed on all sides by resonance, pounding hammer thuds and the distant swoosh of the player’s movements. The piece displays a similar kind of harmonic stasis to that in the shorter works – brought about here through arbitrariness of pitch rather than limitation – but employs a vivid and characterful use of dynamics, occasionally bruising the ear with unexpected outbursts. Kirschner’s most recent composition to date, ‘October 28, 2013’, turns this kind of stasis into a 12-minute display of home-spun ecstasy. Like its more abstract predecessor ‘October 2, 2011’, the piano is aligned with resonant metallic keyboard percussion, but here they are together transfixed around an occasionally kinked but otherwise unshifting harmonic centre.

Having been so prominent earlier in his output, Kirschner has composed just three obviously episodic works in the last few years. Two of them continue to play with notions of realism, presenting ethnic percussive sounds, chiefly that of the mbira. In ‘May 1, 2012’, there is the sense of a field recording that has been extensively treated, its timbres muted and muffled in assorted ways, but ‘April 4, 2012’ could hardly be more different. To all intents and purposes, it comports itself as an entirely authentic ethnomusicological recording (in the vein of David Fanshawe), capturing occasions of exotic cultural music-making. Of all Kirschner’s works, this above all others challenges one’s understanding of the role (or, at least, one’s perception of the role) of the composer. On this point, Kirschner is very clear:

...it comes across as being a disconnected collection of found sounds. But the whole question of having things feel “composed” is an important one to me, and it’s certainly something I strive for in much of my work. Sometimes, and that piece [‘April 4, 2012’] is a case in point, the fact that the narrative ends up being

very loosely structured, episodic, broken up by silence, is actually a sign of failure from my point of view. [...] Because what I always aim to achieve is a real sense of composition, in terms of having the top-level structures hold together in a very necessary-sounding way.

Kirschner's self-deprecation is a little harsh, yet the fact remains that the only demonstrative sign of a creative hand in 'April 4, 2012' is to be heard in the work's episodic structure.

But it is exploration of texture that has remained the dominant force in Kirschner's music of the last few years. Just how dominant can be seen not only in their number (10 of 25 pieces since mid-2010) but also in their scale, with several exceeding 90 minutes' duration. One of these, 'July 17, 2010', was until recently Kirschner's lengthiest composition, lasting 125 minutes. It is not infeasible to hear the work as episodic in character – it is; although, as Kirschner admits, “the underlying segments are really long, sometimes well over 10 minutes each” – but its primary sonic impression overwhelmingly asserts the play of texture. Percussion prevails throughout, but in the most light, aerated way, with Kirschner's timbres sounding like tuned pieces of glass and metal glancing off each other, forming dense networks of clouds, collisions and cross-rhythms. The unifying force of this restricted palette, coupled with the extended time frame, negates the episodic sense underpinning the work; one doesn't so much perceive 'joins' as hear familiar shapes and patterns re-emerge in a transformed state. As such, the textural fabric of 'July 17, 2010' feels like a single piece of sonic cloth, one that constantly reveals new details of its weave and its very fibres.

Despite lasting a mere fifth of its duration, 'January 4, 2011' can be regarded as something of a sibling to 'July 17, 2010'. It too focuses upon wooden and metallic percussive sounds derived from recordings of Kirschner himself playing these instruments (thereby presented with the same vivid realism as 'April 4, 2012'). Once again, the work's episodic structure is militated against by the subtle interplay of its bursts of simple, improvisatory material. Many of Kirschner's recent texture works, though, avoid rhythmic impetus completely and explore more ambient soundfields, incorporating elements of drone. Often this is in tandem with a strong sense of restriction or filtering, creating small, enfeebled textures that almost seem to stall under

their own fragility, an approach exemplified by ‘September 5, 2010’, the drained, droning material of which is impoverished to the point of sounding half-formed. ‘November 7, 2010’ is, if anything, even more weak due to its inclusion of heavily processed piano, by turns submerged and exhausted; similarly stunted is ‘May 8, 2012’, a piece that seems to aspire to the rich viscosity of ambient music, but struggles to overreach the confines of its mobile but consistently narrow bandwidth. ‘July 3, 2011’ allows a rhythmic presence in the form of an endless loop of minimalistic melody, but confines it within a cloud of noise that progressively consumes it (another rare example of a linear process in Kirschner’s work).

While each of these pieces practically flaunts its inadequacies, ‘June 5, 2012’ (something of an expansion of ‘September 5, 2010’), turns apparent lack into advantage. Incorporating recordings of violist Tawnya Popoff, the texture Kirschner creates here again plays out as though shrouded in felt, muffled and faint, but its effect, like music moving in slow motion, is altogether more mysterious and magical, transcending its meagre dimensions by enveloping the listener deep within them. This is extended in ‘March 15, 2013’, but in a notable shift, ramps up and ultimately breaks the air of suspension with an aggressive, dirty conclusion. Two of Kirschner’s most recent texture works can be heard to continue this kind of aggression, but in a very different way. Fuelled by minimalistic loops, both ‘April 16, 2013’ and ‘June 23, 2013’ doggedly pursue their limited range through variation – the former through gradual timbral and registral shifts, the latter via a kaleidoscopic sequence of knob-twiddling, a ferocious act of filtering that turns the material over and over, reshaping and reconsidering it through a host of bandwidths and colourations.

Not just different but essentially unique both in Kirschner’s texture music and his output as a whole is ‘July 14, 2011’, notable for being both an obvious personal experiment as well as an (unintentional) acknowledgement of a prevailing popular trend. The piece consists of a time-stretched recording of the first movement from J. S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 1, lasting a little over an hour and a half. This is not the place to discuss the issues arising from the curious contemporary fascination with time-stretched audio<sup>11</sup>, but it is obvious even to the most casual listener that the piece suffers

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<sup>11</sup> In the sense of time stretch qua time stretch, rather than as a component in a multifaceted compositional work.

the same maladies that afflict almost all such works, chiefly a genericisation of its source material (inevitably rendered a miasmic mush) and subsequent diminishing returns, the elements of interest in the original either destroyed or exhausted when compelled to speak over such massively extended durations. Kirschner acknowledges mixed feelings about the work:

I don't feel I can consider it my "own" composition. It's really closer to a readymade or a found object [...] And those are Bach's harmonies, not mine; never in a million years could I achieve something like that. So maybe I've shifted your perspective on Bach's writing a little, given you a new angle on it, but ultimately I'm not really responsible for what's important there.<sup>12</sup>

One of the real hazards, I think, of the kind of solo electronic music that I do is getting overly isolated in one's hermetic little world and not having the sort of feedback and constraints that naturally arise in more social or group-oriented art forms. Working alone like that, you can very easily come to believe that what you're doing is radically new, whereas the truth is that you're simply out of touch. And when I did that Bach stretch, I was just totally unaware of the uses and abuses of the technology [...] Fortunately it was never a piece that I really took particularly "seriously" [...] I have a certain affection for it, and I know there's people out there who really genuinely love it; yet there's also people [...] who quite understandably don't care for it – and in the end, I myself just basically think it doesn't belong...

### **Conclusion: chamber music & beyond**

Arguably the most interesting development of the last few years is Kirschner's leaning towards chamber music. 'November 3, 1998', discussed above, had been an intriguing one-off in this respect, for the most part since Kirschner was not intentionally seeking to emulate an ensemble. In fact, he has described that very aspect as "merely incidental [...] just a slightly different variation in terms of sound design", but retrospectively it is clearly the work's most defining characteristic. Despite their obviously synthetic nature, the range of instrumental timbres used – including piano, strings, voice and even a tuba of sorts – and the nature of their polyphony come across entirely as material suitable for live performance. Over ten years would pass before Kirschner would compose something similar, but when he did, in 'May 21, 2009', the result is as close to instrumental music as one can imagine. To all intents and purposes an eight-minute work for piano quintet,

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<sup>12</sup> Conversation: Tobias Fischer and Kenneth Kirschner (Chapter 3).

it is the interactions among the virtual ensemble and their relationship to the material that is of foremost importance; in no way does Kirschner cause the listener to question the veracity of the ‘instruments’. As such, it is his first work to step demonstrably into the tradition of the concert hall.

This approach, which has the music of Feldman as both influence and aspiration, found considerably larger-scale expression in ‘September 25, 2010’, a 47-minute piece essentially composed for woodwind and strings that, like ‘May 21, 2009’, continues the pointillist thread in Kirschner’s work. Consisting of short, fleeting chords, following each other in an intuitive but otherwise uncoordinated progression, enclosed in deep silences, it is among the most demanding and impenetrable of Kirschner’s works, and he himself has gone so far as to call it a “failure”:

I dreamed of doing a music without repetition, in which every single event happened once, only once, and yet was perfect and necessary, clear and certain. There would be a logic and an order to every sound that occurred, an exact structure, and yet each element would be just one unrepeated unique moment. I don’t think I succeeded at this. But what you start hearing with the lineage of pieces that goes from ‘April 3, 2001’, into ‘August 18, 2001’, and on to the (more successful, in my opinion) experiments like ‘October 13, 2001’, is very much this desire: the desire to break away from the crutch of repetition that I had leaned on for so long. And yes, I’ll admit, there was a bit of a rivalry there with Feldman – this sense that if I could crack the code and find a way to build a music like this, then I would have finally done something actually new, something that wasn’t entirely within his shadow. Again, I don’t think it worked, I don’t think I succeeded. I at least never found a consistent set of methods I could use to reliably work in this direction. Even a much later piece like ‘September 25, 2010’ [...] is more a sort of lament for the failure of this approach, rather than any real victory or triumph, I feel.

In the wake of such judgement, it is perhaps not surprising that his next ‘chamber’ work, ‘June 9, 2011’, abandons pointillism in favour of soft, sustained notes slowly overlapping each other. The wind and string timbres are sensitively punctuated by the lightest of percussive glances, together forming textures seemingly out of strands of gossamer. These are used to create an assortment of differently proportioned episodes that undergo protracted fades at their close, before being swallowed up in silence.

Notwithstanding the episodic structure, something of the ‘steady state’ from the indeterminate works can be heard here, as it can in what is arguably Kirschner’s finest ‘chamber’ work to date, ‘September 13, 2012’. The size of the implied ensemble is his biggest, incorporating wind, strings, piano and percussion, and while the nature of their material is again ostensibly static and quasi-arbitrary – the counterpoint seems essentially passive – it is rich, variegated and complex. Furthermore, structurally speaking the piece exhibits a strong sense of direction, noticeable after only seven of its 29 minutes, passing from broad polyphony into the highest extreme of register, driven by piano and glockenspiel. The latter half presents a modified recapitulation of the former, less dense than its opening and more sustained than its conclusion, this time dominated by strings (strongly resembling ‘June 9, 2011’).

The introduction and assimilation of chamber music tropes into Kirschner’s work seems to hold significant potentialities. Not only has it led to the most substantial compositions he has composed in recent years, but it has brought about an unprecedented enrichment, in terms of both complexity and subtlety. ‘January 10, 2012’ and ‘October 13, 2012’, of 96 and 127 minutes’ duration respectively, testify to the compositional scope and creative confidence Kirschner continues to find in this area. The latter work – the longest in his entire output – is a refinement of the paradigm established by ‘September 25, 2010’; to return to a piece described as “a sort of lament for the failure of this approach” and then to reimagine and expand it to over two hours’ duration reveals, beneath the critique, a striking sense of conviction in the music’s conceptual firmament. ‘January 10, 2012’, by contrast, is one of Kirschner’s most complex ‘chamber’ pieces, in some ways a synthesis of everything he has composed hitherto. The quasi-instrumental texture, incorporating vibraphone and strings (slightly distanced through being field recordings – and processed recordings at that) in addition to electronic tones, move and intermingle within a quintessentially ‘Kirschnerian’ habitat, floating like motes within an ultimately static soundfield.

Considering the almost incredible range of diversity in his music through the last 25 years, it is a difficult task to predict where Kenneth Kirschner’s imagination will take him next. However, it seems likely that the influence of styles, manners and ideas from the world of chamber music will continue to make their presence felt, in music that



demonstrates an increasingly refined and intricate fusion of previously independent compositional preoccupations and approaches. One thing is doubtless, however: Kirschner's music will continue to surprise, confuse and dazzle. It is a very exciting prospect.

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**3**

## Conversation: Tobias Fischer and Kenneth Kirschner

**Biographies typically start off with a thorough analysis of the young composer's family as an early indication of future greatness. Interestingly, many composers themselves don't believe their childhood was quite that essential in their path towards music. How was this for you? What role did music play in your parental home? Other than gently nudging you towards the piano, what role did your parents play in shaping your perspective on music?**

My parents were undoubtedly the single most important influence on my life – yet interestingly, they were almost completely non-musical. They were literary people, and literature was very much the model of art in our household. My mother famously took one piano lesson once and learned how to play 'Für Elise' by Beethoven on our old out-of-tune piano – which she played, horribly, over and over, throughout my entire childhood. My father had doubtless encountered music in any number of the great works of literature, but whether he'd ever actually heard any was less clear. And this is ironic, because my parents were profoundly cultured people, true intellectuals – it's just that music wasn't their focus. And so what the eventual discovery of music opened up for me was a sort of new space, the possibility of finding my own path or way forward. I had always assumed I would be

**If I understood correctly, you didn't get off to a great start with music, as your first piano lessons don't seem to have been a huge success. This changed when you discovered the synthesizer. You've attributed this to the fact that it seemed impossible to you as a child to write something new on the piano – that its possibilities had been exhausted. I am curious as to what brought about this impression. What did the synthesizer, an instrument with a shorter, yet nonetheless impressive history of its own, bring to the table that seemed so appealing?**

a writer or teacher, like my parents, and there's still to me all these years later the hint of something strange and new, something unexpected, in music.

When I first saw that little Casio that had such a huge impact on me, all I remember saying, over and over again, was, "It can do drums!" Somehow that just struck me as impossibly futuristic, indescribably high-tech, like something sent back in time from a distant sci-fi future. If you imagine the most incredibly advanced technology from the coolest science fiction movie you've ever seen, well, that's how that little Casio MT-60 seemed to me back in 1982. (And in truth, after decades of searching, I finally managed to track down an aged MT-60 on eBay – and the drums are still awesome!) There's something about 80s technology, for someone who grew up at the time, that will always be the epitome of an impending high-tech future, no matter how absurd or pathetic it may seem in retrospect.

But whatever it was, it was very, very different from my dusty old piano. When I had thought of the piano as being exhausted, my naïve sense as a little kid was that every possible combination of notes had, literally, already been played at some point in the instrument's hundreds of years of history. And yet, with the synthesizer, here was something that was completely new, that seemed like it hadn't existed just yesterday – and there was this sense that you could create something truly new with it, if only because the thing hadn't been around long enough for people to figure out what it could do. There was no history, only a future.

There was also, I should say, something slightly illicit about the synthesizer in those early days – a real sense of it being somehow almost unethical. There was this widespread discourse at the time that synthesizers were replacing “real” musicians, rendering them obsolete – and one spent a lot of time back then apologizing for working in this reprehensible new medium. I’m not imagining this – I remember coming across some random 80s documentary about synthesizers decades later where the guy in it kept essentially saying, over and over, “I play synthesizer – but that’s OK!” There was this constant need to apologize for what you did, because it was presumed to be a fundamentally sinister technology.

And of course, people didn’t get it. I remember the first concert of electronic music I ever did; it was probably late 1983, and a friend and I played a cover version of Gary Numan’s ‘Cars’ on every little Casio we could find. We performed with our backs to the audience. And were met with total, complete bafflement.

But it wasn’t just novelty that the synthesizer represented to me. Before synthesizers, there were two crucial blocks, two invisible walls, separating me from music. One was a genuine lack of interest: all the music I had been exposed to hadn’t really grabbed me, hadn’t meant anything to me or spoken to me in any meaningful way. This was especially true in terms of my practice as a musician: quite conventionally, I’d been taught classical music, but that all seemed like an abstract, meaningless game to me, just an empty manipulation of symbols. But at the exact same time that I discovered the synthesizer, I

finally developed – quite late – an interest in pop music. And here, in the music of the early 80s, was finally something that spoke quite directly to my experience – my experience as a teenager in the early 80s, that is! – and I could suddenly understand how music could be meaningful and useful and important. And so here was a source of motivation, a destination worth getting to.

And what the synthesizer gave me was a way to get there, a path I had the ability to follow. That was the other block: I'd never been able to penetrate the options that had been put before me for creating music. Foremost amongst these barriers was classical notation: I've always said, only semi-jokingly, that I suffer from some undiagnosed form of musical dyslexia; notation has always remained opaque to me – wildly counterintuitive at best, impenetrable at worst. As a young student, I'd find any way I could around it, frequently asking my piano teachers to play pieces for me then perfectly mimicking what they did while moving my eyes across the page – all to avoid actually reading music. So even if there was somewhere I wanted to go, I had no way to get there.

But the synthesizer – here was something I could understand. I was a nerdy enough kid to immediately see a million ways I could use the thing. Instead of an impenetrable system of written notation, keys to be played rightly or wrongly, and teachers hovering nearby to correct any errors, here were buttons to be pressed and knobs to be turned and switches to be thrown and things that it seemed somehow I could do myself, without teachers or lessons or recitals, without a right way or a

**They say a lot can be learned from looking at someone's record collection. What did yours contain during your school days?**

wrong way. And with the discovery of all that wonderfully cheesy synth pop of the early 80s, which spoke so clearly to me at that exact right age, I had somewhere to go. Something I wanted to say. And so the two barriers were defeated: I suddenly had a tool I could use to make music, and I suddenly had a music I wanted to make.

It was the golden age of the "45"! I'm not sure if anyone even knows what that is anymore, but these were little 45 RPM vinyl "singles" that had one of the pop hits of the day, plus a less prestigious "B side", and I remember me and my little brother going to the local record store and obsessively collecting 45s of all the latest songs we'd heard on the radio. This was also of course the great age of the "One Hit Wonder", so the 45 was certainly the perfect medium for the day. But that said, there were many albums that had a big effect on me, as albums: first and foremost Gary Numan's *The Pleasure Principle*, but beyond that a random list immediately brings up things like *In Visible Silence* by Art of Noise, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Byrne & Eno, Jarre's *Oxygene*, Glass' *Glassworks*, Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* – and who knows how many more I'm too embarrassed to mention. There have been many great and important albums in my life – but in those early days, it was always far more about the songs, the individual songs. And it's interesting, because I don't think of myself as an "album person" even now – I release one piece at a time online, I hate compiling my albums, I resist the idea of somehow binding these pieces irreversibly together – and I wonder whether some of that might go back to that early 80s culture of the 45.

**In an earlier interview, you said: “I’ve played in punk bands, done covers of Cage’s 4’33”, built compositions out of dead television channels and urban street noises”. Can you tell me about these stories in a bit more depth, please?**

The good news about my high school punk band was that we literally never did make it out of the garage (regrettably, some of my 80s cover bands did). But I eventually did do a punk show in public a few years later – it was at a little club called the Pyramid on Avenue A in New York’s East Village, which at the time was still a pretty adventurous place to be. I played with this other punk kid I’d recently met, who did cyberpunk/industrial music like me; we called ourselves “Intentional Systems” (a pretentious little philosophy reference of mine). Many, many years later, I learned that, unbeknownst to me at the time, and having passed himself off as this experienced musician, the other guy in the band was actually performing for the first time ever in public. His name was Taylor Deupree.

The 4’33” cover story goes back to my series of “anti-war songs” I did in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war. I had been hanging around the fringes of protests against the impending war, and felt a desperate need to do something – anything – to resist or express dissent. And so I started carrying my little field recorder with me and making these collages of the sounds of the anti-war movement in New York, and posting them to my site. So that people around the world could hear that there was dissent. Like so much else from those times, it was a futile gesture – but it was at least a gesture. I documented most of the really big protests, and perhaps the most dramatic recording in the series – which I kept up on my site for years afterwards – was a recording of a spontaneous near-riot that took place in Times Square the night after the invasion began. It was the sounds of pouring rain, chaos, anger, even violence – but to me the most powerful

moment is the very end, when, leaving Times Square, I encountered a griot in the subway, and a music that has always had a near-magical effect on me; it was the possibility of peace and hope amidst so much anger and despair.

But to get back to the 4'33" cover – that was actually from a few days earlier. There was a silent candlelight anti-war vigil to be held in my neighborhood in the northernmost reaches of Manhattan – and I hear "silent" and think Cage, of course. And so I took my little field recorder and got 4 minutes and 33 seconds of the protest – mostly the sounds of night and quiet, with a little gentle singing. That's the story.

Your next question brings me to the only piece on my entire website – it's true! – with a real title: 'Dead Television Sings'. (Of course, it's hidden under the clever pseudonym 'August 29, 1992', with the title only appearing in the mp3 tag, so you have to download it first.) It was 1992, and I was a young kid new to New York City living alone in the then-obscure neighborhood of Chelsea. There was a feeling that we were all in it together: my next-door neighbor pirated electricity off me through the bathroom air vent, and we'd had the clever idea of dropping a line of coaxial cable down the main air shaft of the building so that I could pirate cable TV off a friend on the first floor. Now, I very rarely watched TV, only when I was really in the depths of despair or boredom, but it seemed nice to have. Well, one day, there I was miserable over something, and I just said, who cares, I'll turn on the TV and watch something pointless. And I switched on the TV and...



static. Turns out Clarence downstairs was cleaning or rearranging things, and had pulled the plug. But rather than just switch it off in further despair, I kept watching. Staring at the screen. And saw a whole world in that static. Because it wasn't just white noise – there were patterns, movements, differences from dead channel to dead channel. And suddenly, here was a song. I immediately hooked the TV up to my old Emax sampler and started grabbing the sounds of all the different dead channels, each with their own distortions and modulations and chaotic frequencies governed by who knows what electromagnetic madness. And I started building. And 'Dead Television Sings' is the piece I built. Taylor still maintains it's the best thing I've ever done.

The origin of the "urban street noises" series is pretty well known – that's my 2000-2001 field recording series, with each piece built from the sounds of a different New York neighborhood. It all grew out of a big crisis in my life and work, and the technique was simple: walk around the city with a concealed tape recorder, take the sounds home, chop them up in my sampler, and build something. I'm never quite sure how I feel about this series, whether it was really an important stage in my work in its own right, or just something I had to get through to move forward – but take a listen and judge for yourself.

**You've described your academic years as "conservative and stifling". What were they like in practice, and in what way did you draw some positive experiences from them nonetheless?**

It was immediately very strange for me being in that environment. The other students in the class were just there taking a class. They tried to get the right answers and get a good grade on the exam. When they had to write a piece, it was homework. None of this made any sense to me. Music, composing – this was what I did.

It's what I had been doing for years – without anyone telling me what to do, how to do it, even whether to do it. And to sit in a class in which there's suddenly a right way and a wrong way to write, a way to pass or fail, get an A or just a B-, well, it all made no sense to me.

There's one particular story that for me epitomizes what that experience was all about. It was the end of my first full year studying music academically, and it had been a really tough time for me artistically. Taking this formalized approach had necessitated a huge reduction in my vocabulary, in the complexity of the harmonies I could "legally" use. I'd always been a very intuitive composer, willing to use whatever notes, chords or ideas worked – but here, I was forced to go back and simplify my vocabulary, in order to painstakingly learn the historical "right" way of doing things, per the Western tradition. It was a struggle, and I found that a lot of the inspiration and creativity was getting drained out of me. I couldn't write, and when I wrote, it was terrible, boring, bland.

But toward the end of that first year, as I was working on my final piece for the semester – a piano piece – I did finally sit down and write something good. In the opening of that piano piece was this wonderful little skip in the bass line that gave it a unique, perfect feel – it was a strange and unusual progression, but it worked, it grabbed you. If I could play it for you right now, you'd see what I mean. Well, I finished up my "homework" and eventually sat down with the professor to review my work. And the first thing he did was take one look at that progression and say, "Your sevenths don't resolve properly." And I took a look,

thought about it, and said, "Yeah, you're right; they don't." And he said, "But no, you don't understand, your sevenths, they don't resolve properly." And I said, "No, no, I understand, you're right, they don't resolve properly." And he said, "Yes, well – you have to change it." And I said, "WHAT?" And he immediately played this trite little progression – something you've heard a million times.

So we get into this huge fight. And we go through the rest of my piece, and fight over this and that little thing, but he can't let go of those sevenths. And finally he comes back to it, yet again, saying, "Look, the reason I'm here is to teach you the historical rules that have been used for composition in Western music." And I realized: he's right. That's exactly why he's here, and it makes no sense for me to sit here and argue and pick fights and battle over these things. He's just doing his job, that's exactly why he's here – and exactly why I shouldn't be. It was a moment of perfect understanding. And I took out my eraser and erased those notes, and put in his correct, trite progression. I invited no one to the final performance, dropped out of the program, and moved to New York.

**Your circle of friends in New York includes many sound artists. One of the deepest connections is your friendship with Taylor Deupree. Tell me a bit about it, please. How did you meet up with him for the first time? How did your releases on 12k come about? And, most intriguingly: How has your creative exchange changed now that Taylor, as you once put it, is making 'hillbilly music'?**

Ha ha, I've been waiting a long time for someone to ask me to tell this story! The year was 1990, and I was a student at an academic institution in New York City that shall remain nameless but that is commonly known by a three-letter acronym, two letters of which are identical to the usual abbreviation of the city's name. I signed up for a class called "The Psychology of Music" because, hey, I was interested in psychology, and I was interested in music. It was one of those grueling classes

that meets for 3 hours once a week. At the very first class, I immediately knew that something was horribly wrong. The professor, who was insane, spent what seemed like the entire three hours vehemently denouncing any form of music that wasn't Western classical as "just noise". This seemed to be the entire content of the class – a long tirade on how all other forms of music are completely, inherently evil. And those mindless students just ate it up, robotically recording in their notebooks "all music not Western classical = noise". The only person in the class who looked like they had any capacity for independent thought was this punk kid sitting silently in the back row. As the professor's ranting went on and on, I just got angrier and angrier. Picture three hours of this, with no chance of escape. Finally the three hours were up, and I stormed out of the room, imagining the misery that would await me, once a week, in this room, for the rest of the semester. As I stomped down the stairs, I noticed the punk kid next to me. Now, I was already a New Yorker, and I knew that you just don't accost random strangers. But I was so angry I couldn't help myself. I turned to the punk kid and started ranting, "THAT PROFESSOR IS CRAZY BECAUSE WESTERN MUSIC ISN'T THE ONLY MUSIC IN THE WORLD AND I DO ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND ELECTRONIC MUSIC CAN BE GREAT ART AND SHE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND..." and on and on like this. And the punk kid is very quiet. And finally he says, "Uh, you do electronic music?" "YES." "Uh, me too." "REALLY?" "Uh, yeah." "WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO YOU DO?" Turns out we did the exact same thing. "WHAT SYNTHS DO YOU HAVE?" Actually, we both had almost the exact same gear. We formed a band on the spot.

After our early industrial days, though, Taylor and I went – musically speaking – in fairly different directions. Taylor spent the 90s doing ambient (as Human Mesh Dance) and early minimal techno, with Prototype 909 (I remember all three of them showing up at my apartment the morning after they'd written what would become their first album, bleary-eyed and frantically waving this DAT of theirs and saying I just had to hear it). And while he was doing that, I was very much in my post-Glass, pre-Feldman stage, doing stuff influenced by classical minimalism, working with or imitating acoustic instruments, and writing a lot for ballet and modern dance. But Taylor and I were always in touch, always following what the other was doing, and constantly going back and forth with our trademark sarcastic emails on unbelievably nerdy technical subjects.

What happened next was, in the late 90s and early 2000s, a sort of re-convergence: around the time of the founding of 12k, Taylor got more and more into experimental work, just as my music was once again becoming more overtly electronic. And so it made sense – after years of my stubborn resistance! – for me to finally start releasing music on CD by working with Taylor and 12k. And throughout that decade we were very much on a similar path, exploring the integration of acoustic instruments with the electronics that had always been our main focus. And so you have *post\_piano*, and all that.

But...“hillbilly music”? Did I really say that? Out loud? In public? I'm not at all surprised. What happened was that Taylor left Brooklyn and moved to the countryside, to upstate

New York, and his music began more and more to reflect that new environment. But as much as I like to joke about him moving into “folk” or “country” music, about letting his entire life be taken over by the acoustic guitar (banjo is next, I shake my finger and warn!), the criticism isn’t really fair, or even serious. Whatever the differences in the external trappings of his work – in the sound design or surface style – there’s an amazing consistency to Taylor’s music over the years, and I think you can listen to anything from his early ambient stuff, through the hyper-digital explorations of early 12k, into his more acoustically-driven current works, and you’ll hear the same message, the same style, the same fundamental voice. So when that banjo album finally does come out, I’m sure it’ll be every bit as Taylor as anything he’s ever done.

**The netlabel scene in the early years of the new Millennium seems to have been an incredibly fruitful period from the outside. How do you remember the time yourself? How did your first releases on some of these labels come about? What made the idea of making one’s music freely available, which so many composers still haven’t got round to a decade later, so attractive to you straight away?**

My attitude to the early netlabel scene was one of total promiscuity! I figured, hey, my philosophy is to release all my music freely online – and so when netlabels would contact me and ask to release something of mine, I’d just say yes, sure, of course. So long as it was still freely available on my own site. And that’s how I ended up with so many releases – I just said yes to everything! And that seemed quite consistent with what I was trying to achieve, which was both to spread my own work as widely and freely as possible, and to hopefully emphasize in my own small way the importance of these issues.

Releasing my music freely online is something I had planned and intended long before it was actually possible to do so. My thinking on it probably dates back to the late 80s, when I first became involved with what wasn’t

even yet known as Internet, much less “the” Internet (I’m one of those rare people who still cringes quietly at the “the”). And by the early 90s and my immersion in the cyberpunk subculture of the time, I was quite sure about what I wanted to do.

But the funny thing is that, for years, I was preoccupied with being the “first” composer to do this sort of thing. It seemed so obvious to me that everyone would soon enough release all their music freely online, that I wanted to make sure I was the guy who got out there first and got known for it. Of course, this is absurd in many respects – in the idea that it matters who does it first, or that I could even be remotely original in the context of such a broad techno-cultural trend. But the bigger irony is that, still, today...nobody does this! Why? I just assumed that every composer, from now on, would release all their work freely online – it seemed so clear to me. Yet here I am, the only crazy person doing it. And I’m still not entirely sure why that is.

**At the beginning of the netlabel movement, there were a few major articles about you and your radical stance in favour of free culture. A netlabel like Thinner was generating tens of thousands of downloads with their releases. Was there a moment when the free music project seemed to be getting really big? Why did things eventually collapse, with all but a handful of the original labels folding, from your perspective?**

I do remember when I first had music released on Thinner, thinking, “Wow, now I’m really going to rule the world!” Well, here I am, still somehow not ruling the world. What happened? Where did things go wrong? And why?

You could argue, on the one hand, that netlabels didn’t attract the quality of work that traditional labels do. And maybe that’s true, and part of it – but if so, why didn’t they?

Well, the functions of a label have never been simply those of manufacturing and distributing physical objects: they are filters, curators,

seals of approval or quality. All of these roles are important, and useful – but one critical thing labels also do is create a sense of authority, of prestige. There’s a whole politics of prestige that goes along with a label, with being “on a label”, having releases “out on CD”. It’s a powerful way of setting your work apart, of creating an aura of legitimacy or importance around it. And I’m as guilty of this as anyone – I’ve always used my physical CDs as a marker of prestige, as a way to seem important or established or recognized. The online release of my music has never been enough to achieve this, sad as that is for me to say. I wish it were otherwise.

So I think a big part of what happened was a failure of the netlabel scene to reach a critical mass of prestige. Against the backdrop of the established label system, this new way of thinking just didn’t take hold, or couldn’t take hold fast enough. You never reached a point of being at a party and saying, “Ah, yes, I’m on netlabel X.” Not in the way in which one still will proudly say, “Ah yes, well, my new CD is coming out on label Y.” And so the netlabels were superseded by the more commercial digital ecosystem that exists now, which retains a lot of the old system, the old ways, the old powers. Of course, the new system isn’t all bad; it has its pros and cons. But I’m still sorry we lost.

**To many, the border between the netlabel scene and “piracy” wasn’t easy to draw. How do you see the relation between the two, and what was your own perspective on what is commonly referred to as “illegal file sharing”?**

It’s easy to forget (or deny) that there was something wonderfully utopian about the early Napster days. There was this sense that all possible music was out there, at your fingertips, and that you needed only reach out to hear it. You could reach out and pluck every work of music ever out of the air before you –



it was the first time this seemed possible. As if the music was there all the time, just waiting for you. It was somehow a very different feeling than we have nowadays, even with a big service like Spotify; there is always a sense now of commerce, of control, of confinement. But with Napster, it was somehow closer to the spirit of music itself, what we dream of music being, if it could somehow escape the imperfections of our society.

And when the record companies did finally come for Napster, when the end was close, I remember going around quoting the famous last words of Obi-Wan Kenobi: "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine." I hope I wasn't totally wrong about that.

**To many, the netlabel scene was as much about politics as it was about music. How was this for you? In what way did you think this movement (if one can call it that) would really be able to bring about change in the domain of copyright and corporate ownership of music? Or to put it differently: What were your personal hopes and aspirations with regards to these developments?**

Yes, it was absolutely about politics, and still is. To treat a digital object as if it were a physical object is a political act; it takes a whole system of power, of social force, to maintain the illusion that a pattern of data obeys the same fundamental laws as a loaf of bread or a barrel of oil. I laugh at this every time I go to my library and try to "borrow" an e-book, only to be told it's "out".

In talking about these things, I always come back to my earliest experiences with computers. There were no computers when I was very young – or at least none that I knew about and had access to. You certainly didn't have a computer in your house. But then, in the early 80s, the Apple II arrived, and my friends and I immediately all became very skilled and enthusiastic young software pirates. We could copy just about any game, and this struck me as an unadulterated good

thing. We were still kids, not even teenagers, and computer games were just the latest toys. But all our toys until then had been zero-sum games: you have a toy, I want it, I take it, you lose it. But here was something new: my friend has a game, I take it, my friend has it, I have it. It seemed very hard to argue with this logic. But many people tried, telling me over and over that it was “wrong” to copy software. There were careful, thoughtful arguments supporting this, and some of them even made a little sense to me. But I just couldn’t get past how great it was to be able to have something good, and to give it to someone else, and to still have it. So at some basic level I never did listen to all those people telling me how inherently wrong copying software was, and I’ve tried very hard to retain what’s good in that attitude and keep it intact all these years.

And what’s good is this. There are things in the world – knowledge, art, science – that are not depleted by being used. Things of great value that are not consumed in the act of experiencing them. Things that, I think, by their nature, ought to be shared freely and available to all. But all of these good and important things circulate through an economic and political system that is based on scarcity, on the regulation and uneven distribution of limited resources. Now, you can take these things – these good and important patterns – and force them into this system. You can treat them as if they’re physical objects, create an artificial scarcity to limit their proliferation and spread, to control them and stop them and restrict access. But to me, to artificially create scarcity where none exists – there’s something perverse, something sick about that. It reflects what’s worst in our society.

**Let's turn away from your biography and talk about music in a bit more depth. Most people, and even many composers, like to think of sound and music as "absolute and formless phenomena", which can just be put anywhere without consequences. And yet, the exact opposite seems to be true. Just recently, Andy Graydon told me about an idea of his to flood a room with images, just like one would flood a room with sound. In both cases, either acoustic or visual stimuli are very much dependent on the objects placed in this room, the textures of the walls, the dimensions of the room, the position of the observer. What this means is that music can take on different shapes of the space it is presented in to a significant degree. To me, this has very important consequences which are rarely considered today. Why, do you think, has Western Music distanced itself so much from (or chosen to ignore) this fundamental – and in a way trivial – fact over the past 200 years?**

And new technology is always an opportunity for change, for doing something differently – maybe better. So I've always felt that we need to seize this moment, this brief moment as these technologies are changing, and use it to see what happens if you do things differently. To experiment, in the hopes that there might be better ways. And so I tell people to copy my music.

Plato! Not to beat the guy up, but that's where just about any intractably sticky problem you come across in Western thought can be traced back to (though to be fair, I think he was just expressing issues that originate in the structure of our language and the limits of our little brains). But to push what you're saying a little further, take a recording of a Bach piece and pitch-shift it down by 1/100 of a semitone. Is it the same piece? Nobody but the most insanely perfect-pitched listener will hear the difference. So we say yes. What about two different performances of the same piece? Sure, same piece, right. But what if one of them is Glenn Gould playing the opening prelude of the Well-Tempered Clavier (with all his infamous humming and liberal alterations), and the other is me sitting at my old out-of-tune piano squinting at a printout of a PDF of the score trying to remember, uh, which note is that down there again? Hang on, uh, C, B, A, G...um...right right, there it is! (Ploink ploink ploink.) Same piece?

And what if you take a recording of, say, the first movement of the first Brandenburg Concerto and time-stretch it by a factor of 20? I ask because I've done exactly this for one of my infamously lame non-performance performances I've got coming up in NYC

soon (in which I hit play on some preexisting sound file and walk away, or better yet, have someone else hit play for me). OK, there's a few weird digital artifacts in there, and it's now 96 minutes long – but how is this qualitatively different from that 0.01 semitone shift we just mentioned? Is it still the Brandenburg Concerto? I can tell you it's certainly a totally different experience, a sort of musical Fantastic Voyage in which your microscopic submarine gets inserted into the still-breathing body of Tonality itself (perhaps in some desperate attempt to keep it alive?). But is it the same piece?

When you keep running into the same problem again and again, sooner or later you have to concede that it's not the music's fault – there's something fundamentally wrong with our language, our concepts, our whole way of thinking about these questions. And it's right there in the word that keeps bouncing back at us: "same". The basic concept of identity, of sameness, of self = self that runs through Western thought and music is at some very deep level flawed, and that's where our old friend Plato comes in. We're all still stuck in his eternal world of perfect timeless forms and essences, whether we like it or not – it's how we get through the day. We're not built to think difference in itself, only sameness. And when you do start to pick away at these clear and clean notions of stable identity, suddenly everything starts falling down around you. Our language, our concepts, our discourse – they can't keep up, even if the music itself is doing just fine.

To get back to your original acoustical example, if you and I go to the "same"

concert, and you sit in the chair next to me, and the sound bounces slightly differently off some acoustic feature of the space, are we at the same concert? And if so, where does that same concert exist? Your chair, my chair, the performer's chair? The mics that are picking it up to send it into a lossy mp3 stream scattered as packets across the net? Some average of all those perspectives? The "piece itself", the "real" piece of music, whatever that might be? (You know, the REAL one – keep saying it over and over again and maybe pointing with your index finger if it'll help.) OK then, the score? Even, if all else fails...the "composer's" "intention"?

You can go on like this forever, and eventually, I think, you just have to throw out the whole concept of identity as it's practiced in everyday life, and, historically, in Western thought. All of which to say, perhaps Laurie Anderson was being overly optimistic when she asked us to let  $x = x$ .

**I suppose your point of doubting whether or not two people are ever witnessing the same concert could also made about the home listening environment – are we listening to the same piece if you are using your high-end stereo system, while I've plugged in my \$5 earphones? And yet, it's also a point which many artists have simply ignored with some justification, since, in practice, the differences appear to be negligible and don't seem to matter. I am wondering, with what you said, whether you think they do and should – and what this means for someone working with sound, like you. Can one, as a composer, use the non-sameness of the listening experience to one's advantage?**

They say you should ideally mix on both a really high-end sound system and a really low-end one, and you see this often in good recording studios, where you have these super-expensive near-field monitors sitting right there with crappy little computer speakers right next to them. The idea is that you're trying to balance the mix in a way that works for all the different sound systems – of whatever quality – on which people might be listening. Of course, with electronic music, and especially experimental electronic music, this becomes much more challenging – because the timbres themselves are your medium, and established rules for the proper presentation of the sounds don't really exist. It's not

like you're trying to find the right balance between the kick drum and the bass, or to make sure the guitar doesn't overwhelm the vocals; the sounds you're working with have no accepted "right" or "wrong" way of being heard. You could almost think of mixing a rock or pop song as being representational, like a representational painting, in which you can be closer or farther from an accurate depiction of reality, whereas experimental electronics is more like abstraction, in which there's no clear way to say what is true or correct, because the work is essentially creating its own reality.

In a way, this is a kind of freedom – I like to think that there are many right ways of hearing a given piece of mine, different circumstances that don't necessarily detract from it, but instead provide different perspectives or vantage points on the music. But perhaps this is just an excuse for my shortcomings as an engineer! Or a convenient rationalization that lets me be a little less neurotic about my mixes. After all, no one is going to hear these pieces in the exact way that I intend them to be heard – which is sitting in my studio, in my chair, wearing my headphones, experiencing them exactly as I did when I was writing them. Following this line of argument to its logical conclusion, I'd have to damage my listeners' ears so that they have the exact same age-related frequency losses and tinnitus that I myself suffer from. Perhaps hidden in those missing frequencies in my ears are whole new musical worlds that I'm missing out on – or terrible mistakes that I've accidentally left in! There's no way for me to know.

**I'm sure the idea of "sameness" is ultimately a universal philosophical issue. But perhaps music is by its nature particularly prone to some of the paradoxes you just mentioned.**

**The entire career of someone like Francisco López, for example, seems to be based on the assertion that music has no form, that its defiance of terms like "same" is precisely what renders it unique. At the same time, whenever people start working with music, it attains qualities of a language as well, be it through the use of harmony to express emotion or through a personal selection of timbre – which, in turn, implies a certain "functionality" or "concreteness". Where do you stand between these poles? How do you see the tangibility of music?**

You know, I've never really gotten the whole intangibility of music thing. To me, music is just about the most tangible, tactile thing there is – though maybe that's because I do electronic music, which is all about getting your hands dirty. When I was a kid, my mother got into ceramics and set up a pottery studio in our basement – she had a kick-wheel, tons of clays and glazes, a kiln. And I used to go down there and make just the most unbelievable mess. If you've ever "thrown a pot", as they say, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And that whole sense of being covered in mud, splattering water and clay and dirt and chaos everywhere – that's how electronic music feels to me. Which is not exactly what one would call intangible.

So where do people get this sense of intangibility from? Are they confusing tangibility with visibility? Because yeah, you can't see music – although that doesn't make it any less structured or complex, any less real, any less material. Whereas with a lot of other art forms, you can point to an object and say there it is – there's the painting, there's your novel, let's go to that movie. While music just seems to drift disembodied through the aether, however false we know that impression to be. And then there's touch: you can't touch music, and our whole sense of the concrete is tied up with touch. But you DO touch music – just not with your hands. That's what music is, it's your ears touching patterned compressions and rarefactions of air. So I don't buy that angle either.

I actually think some of this intangibility thing is caught up in our notions of time and transience. We have trouble with the fact that

music is an innately temporal art form – that music is, in some very fundamental way, made out of time. Because you can't have timeless music; you can have repetitive music, music that's still, music that seems frozen – but that repetition or stillness or deep freeze all have to take place within time (even if it's only the listener's time, even if the composer just hits loop). This isn't like a sculpture or a painting, which can just sit there, or at least seem to. I mean, what would a literally atemporal piece of music be? A single sample at 44.1 kilohertz, by our arbitrary standards? What is that, one 44,100th of a second? Zap! Done. The ultimate glitch music, gone before you know it's there.

Which brings us to the perception that music is transitory, ephemeral – that it exists for a moment and is gone. We live in a culture that biases the static over the evolving, and chooses painting and sculpture as the dominant models of art, which seem to escape time. And music, of course, is going in completely the other direction. But I think that there's a very basic mistake underneath all this, because you're saying, on the one hand, OK, the music was there, now it's evaporated, it's gone, but hey, that painting is still hanging there in that museum. But this is a real failure of our understanding of time, tangled up in our illusions about the integrity of objects. You go to the beach and there's a big boulder there, a big rock, and you say, hey, that's a rock. But it isn't. It's a mountain that's making a very, very slow transition to being the sand you see all around you. And it's our arrogance or delusion to say that the rock "exists". So that eternal painting hanging there on that wall is dissipating as surely as the last reverb tail of



**And yet, I cannot take a piece of music in my hands and carry it to work with me. Unlike a sandwich, which I can carry with me in my lunch box, I will have to burn it to a CD or load it onto my mp3 player to be able to appreciate it. Without a carrier, it ceases to exist, and yet, the carrier is not the music. When a painting gets packed away in an old attic, gathering dust, it still occupies space. When a score doesn't get played, the music simply doesn't come into being. Don't these examples prove that music lacks a real physicality, which, in turn, questions its tangibility?**

any fading piece of music – just at a slightly different speed.

Here is something we easily forget: that the data in a computer, those patterns of ones and zeroes, are every bit as physical as that sandwich in your lunch box; they're just harder to see. A piece of music ONLY exists physically, though that physicality takes many different forms and shapes – from the notes scrawled on a page, through the gestures of a performer, to the bits on a hard drive, to the compressions and rarefactions of the air as the sound waves approach the listener. But throughout all these forms, there are consistent patterns, structures that are preserved, and that's where we must seek to locate music. Mathematicians talk about symmetry as that which remains unchanged under different kinds of transformation, and I think that's the way we have to start to think about music as well. There are sets of relations, patterns and structures, preserved symmetries that leap from place to place, medium to medium; the translation from one form to another never makes the pattern any less physical, less material, less real. In fact, one could argue that that's all reality or physicality is – persistent patterns across shifting substrates. Just as they say that every atom in your body is cycled out within x amount of time, even as "you" ostensibly remain the same. The point is that, ultimately, I don't believe that music is ever in any way dematerialized; it never lacks a real physicality, never comes "into" or "out of" being, whatever we might take such slippery words to mean. It's just that we don't yet have the vocabulary to speak clearly about these things, to characterize the nature of these persistent

**Nonetheless, many still believe that the musical work exists outside of its performance, that it has an absolute and immutable nature. From this point of view, the music is in the score, ready to be read, understood and (ideally) enjoyed. Perhaps the idea of music being intangible is grounded in the paradox this attitude creates: that, on the one hand, music can be compressed into signs and data, which, in turn, can be read like a book by those capable of understanding them. And that, on the other, in the moment of performance, it is precisely all the factors which can NOT be encoded this way which decide its impact.**

patterns, mobile symmetries, and consistent structures that jump from form to form and medium to medium without ever becoming any less real. We're not there yet – but we'll get there, and maybe music is a good way to learn.

There was certainly a time when the whole "magic of performance" thing made sense – the idea that there's some ineffable somethingness to the moment of performance that defines the essential musicality of the music, or something like that. But it wasn't always that way, and we're certainly well past it now. The crux is the score. Before there were scores, when music was purely an "oral tradition", music just was performance, and performance just was music – there was no question or ambiguity, no schism. It was only with the rise of a written tradition, quite specifically in Western music, that this whole question could even get asked. And at this point the "magic" idea almost makes sense – there's a moment of "inspiration", a literal breathing of life into an apparently non-living music, that one can point to and imagine as essential to the nature of the process (even if this was never an issue before the rise of Western notation, even if the music of other cultures gets along perfectly fine without it).

But we've moved beyond this now, the moment has passed – and I think this change comes down to one key 20th century technology: the recording. It starts off innocently enough – you're just capturing a performance, taking a snapshot of that old magic. Listen to Bartok's field recordings of Eastern European folk music, those amazing little wax cylinders where you feel like you

can almost reach through the noise and chaos of the recording process and touch the people, now long dead, who are singing as they've sung for generations. But something's already changed, and strange things start happening. Soon enough, people start sifting through old funk records for moments when everybody stops playing except the drummer, and grabbing those little moments and using them as a foundation to start, what is it, it's not exactly singing, it's not exactly talking, it's rhythmic, it's – and suddenly here's a whole new genre exploding into existence, right from the technology itself. So it makes perfect sense that a work of such self-conscious machine aesthetic as "Trans-Europe Express" can be dropped onto an 808 at a foundational moment of hip-hop, perfect sense. But where do you situate that "magic of performance" now? Is it the moment when Kraftwerk pressed down that sequence of keys on their synthesizers? The moment when Afrika Bambaataa sampled them? Somewhere wired into the circuitry of the vocoder that's intoning, "Rock, rock, planet rock"? It's all become scrambled.

And it only gets worse. Because now you can have music that has essentially no performative component, and yet nonetheless clearly is music as we know it. Very early on, I decided quite consciously that my work was never going to be about performing, that it was going to be about recording, about the nature of recording and what you could do with it if you let go of the constraints of performance. The finished work would culminate in a recording, not a performance, and if that makes it more like some sort of sonic sculpture than what people might

traditionally think of as music, then fine. Because I believe interesting things can happen when you start to think this way. Take a look at a little piano piece of mine: 'July 6, 2010'. It sounds like a cute little piano thing, innocent enough. But there's no piano there at all, and I never even touched the keys of a keyboard in building it. The notes were generated algorithmically by the computer, and the "piano" you're hearing is just a mathematical model, it's not even sampled. Even the recording itself is artificially damaged, given a false patina of age to play up the "recordingness" of the recording, and that patina itself is also just a string of numbers. Thus we have a piano piece that has no piano and no performance, captured in an apparently decayed recording that never really existed as anything other than a complex series of zeroes and ones. Do we therefore have to exclude this from being music on the grounds that there's no magical performance anywhere in the whole process? Some people, very silly people I think, might say yes – but for most of us, our idea of music has broadened, and we're able to live comfortably with multiple parallel concepts of what music can be.

**In his book *The Recording Angel*, Evan Eisenberg has magnificently explained how recordings have deeply changed our perception of music. Your approach seems to take that one step further. What are the consequences if music is, as you put it, about recording? How far can one go with this thought if one is expressing it within the very medium that is its focal point?**

I'm reminded of the scene in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* in which an endless series of record players are destroyed by records specifically designed to vibrate at their resonant frequency. As if we could create a recording that's so about the nature of recording, so self-referential, as to cause it to somehow self-destruct. And it's an appropriate image, I think, because ultimately, this sort of thing does become self-defeating: I don't want my music to become some endless meta-commentary on the nature of recording. I think

that as you push these conceptual elements further, they actually become less and less interesting, and I find myself just wanting to go back to writing music, only music. So while I'm interested in the conceptual aspects of music, and do deliberately incorporate them – at times, in controlled ways – within my work, to me it's ultimately not what my work is about. And when I say that my work is "about recording", I'm more trying to say that it's about the specifically musical possibilities that recording opens up for us, the new compositional vistas, the things that you can do now that you couldn't do before – that's where my real interest lies. In the end, I'm just not a conceptualist. Much as I love and am devoted to Cage, I ultimately don't think that conceptualism in music gets you very far. Cage was a wonderful liberation to sound, and opened up worlds for us, but I think there's something in the nature of music that resists pure conceptualism. And perhaps that's yet another reason why I'm a musician rather than some other kind of artist.

**To me, it has always seemed as though, despite its focus on recording, your music plays with rather than downright refutes the notion of a "performance". When I'm listening to a piece like 'November 7, 2010', I'm still seeing, hearing and feeling acoustic instruments in a very small, intimate space. The associations evoked in the process, the border running between the "new" and "old" aesthetic aren't just production questions – to me, they're part of the piece. So if not inside a real space and through "living and breathing" musicians, how does the music come into being? Who is playing, where are they playing? Are the answers to those questions really "software" and "a virtual space"?**

When I first got into Feldman (and bear with me, this will make sense with your question eventually), I was very focused on the atonality of his work. It seemed to me that Feldman would build his harmonic structures out of "nonsense" chords, groups of notes that had no innate meaning or signification within the tonal system, and then use these ostensibly "meaningless" sonorities to focus you on the materiality of sound, rather than on the semiotics of music. I had even put together a whole essay on the subject in my head, to be called "How to Explain Feldman to Aliens" (the gist of which was that you wouldn't have to, it would just make sense). And then

one day I was looking out the window on a long train ride (one of those perfect listening environments), with Aki Takahashi playing, appropriately enough, Feldman's Triadic Memories on the headphones – and my entire perspective shifted. I realized that Feldman's music is profoundly tonal. Not tonal in the sense of having a tonic, or starting in C major and finding its way back there, or speaking that language we all know so well from a million pop songs – but rather in the sense of presupposing a knowledge of tonality. Feldman doesn't simply ignore tonality – he makes his whole work a methodical game of approach and avoidance with it, a constant back and forth of tension and release with the tonal system itself, just as that very system is built from ordered patterns of tension and release around well-defined harmonic centers. So tonality is a fundamental expressive element of Feldman's work, even if his music remains atonal; he plays our knowledge of tonality like an instrument. This was a big realization for me.

Now, my music is never going to be as profound as Feldman's, and it would take way more space than we have in this short little interview to detail the ten thousand reasons why. But I think there's a connection to what you're saying here, an interesting parallel with what Feldman is doing with harmony. Because you're absolutely right: I'm not avoiding performance in my music; my music is every bit as much about performance as it is about recording. But it's a game of approach and avoidance with it, of tension and release, of tricks and traps and questions and evasions around our whole sense of what musical performance is, or should be. The struggle

between these two concepts, between these two poles of performance and recording, is a very basic, very fundamental animating tension in my work. I think my music very much tries to play on our existing cultural notions of performance, even as it's pretending to be just a recording, nothing but a recording; it moves within the tension between the two concepts, just as Feldman's work exists in the space he opens up between the rigid structures of the tonal system and the wilderness of atonality.

So yes, all those instruments you hear in the piece you mention, the spaces they're playing in, the scrape of the bow on the string, the strike of the mallet on the bell, the thudding of the piano's sustain pedal as it's released, the effects of wear and time on the aging master tape – none of it is "real", it's all taking place inside a microchip. And yet it's not quite that simple, not just an easily dismissible case of something being merely "fake", I hope. Because the music is very much about playing with your awareness of these different systems of musical perception and meaning, with these questions of what is a recording, what is a performance, who is playing and where – all of those questions are tucked away in there somewhere, or at least I'd like them to be. Because ultimately, the semiotics of music is the real instrument I'm trying to play, however tentatively, however haltingly, however much I still need practice.

**Feldman doesn't only play tonality like an instrument – after all, he was also very much inspired by the visual arts and sought for connections/points of contact of abstract (or rather: non-figurative) painting with abstract (or rather: non-representational) music. Do you think that in this sense Feldman's work fits in with my supposition that a lot of musical history may have been written by synaesthetics – or was something else at work here? What do the visual references add to his work, and what remains of it if you deduct them? And, finally, how does all of this relate to your own playing of the recording as an instrument? Is a musical pattern the same as a visual pattern?**

Interestingly, the whole Feldman/Abstract Expressionist angle has never been that much of a focus for me – which is not in any way to say it wasn't incredibly important for Feldman himself. He really saw himself as translating the insights of the Abstract Expressionists into the medium of sound, and there's no doubt that they had a huge, huge impact on his work. But to me, this is only one aspect of Feldman's wider achievement. My feeling is that the main thing Feldman gets from the Abstract Expressionists (beyond an unproblematic, heroic concept of Art capital A that we today can only envy!) is that almost mystical devotion to texture and surface, that sense of hushed reverence before pure materiality that pervades both their and his work. It's wonderful and crucial to his music, but to me that one aspect doesn't begin to exhaust what Feldman gives us.

And it's not simply a matter of translating Abstract Expressionist paintings into time, into the temporal dimension, of "bringing them to life" through sound, so to speak. Take a look at Stan Brakhage's gorgeous hand-painted films, which to me are exactly that – Abstract Expressionism brought to life, to time, to motion. It's amazing, it's beautiful – but it's not yet Feldman. Because there's so much more – so much else – going on in his music.

Yes, Feldman understands surfaces, he forces you right up against them, forces you to feel them with an almost tactile urgency; this is all very Abstract Expressionist, very Rothko in particular. But there are worlds behind, beneath and beyond those surfaces – there's structure, pattern, and an intricate dance with symmetry that's uniquely his own; there are



patterns within patterns, shifting and unlocking forms, leaps of innovation in large-scale narrative all built out from that initial tactile surface. And this is where we come to that other great visual referent of Feldman's, that other great inspiration: his beloved "oriental" (i.e., Near and Middle Eastern) rugs.

And this, to me, is where it really gets interesting. Because you're not just dealing with a shared aesthetic of surfaces and their materiality – here is the whole world of Feldmanian structure mapped out in the visual realm. You can lift whole structures out of those carpets, transpose them intact into Feldman's music, and then put them right back where they came from again. Everywhere you turn you find homologies, isomorphisms, parallels, correspondences; it's like seeing a printout of his music rendered in fabric, or like listening with your eyes to what he's teaching us about systems and forms and the nature of pattern. I say it again and again: Feldman had an understanding of the universe like those of the great physicists, and his rugs are a textbook of equations and diagrams mapping out the new cosmology he's shown us. To a musical illiterate like me, they're the most clear and precise scores one could hope for.

**Why do you think Feldman, possibly one of the most literate composers the world has ever seen, who could easily have used any musical catalyst, regardless of its complexity, as a point of departure, chose to be inspired by these visual cues? And, to reverse the question: Why do you, as a self-declared 'musical illiterate', choose to operate within a realm which sits at the cusp of the classical Western tradition? What are the oriental rugs in your world of composition?**

You'll be shocked to hear this, but I'm kind of a geek – so perhaps my rugs are philosophy, and science, and mathematics, and all these ostensibly "extra-musical" influences that I bring into what I do. And music is just a way of translating all these different systems from one form or medium into another, just as Feldman pulled the "crippled symmetries" of his carpets across into his music. It's not a literal translation; my work isn't "about" these

things in any direct or descriptive way – but the resonances are there, they seep through. I've always seen my work this way, and have always felt that the interplay between these different areas of interest is very porous. When you're working in such an abstract medium as music, you can pull inspiration from all over the place, pick out high-level structures and translate them across different fields, and still have it all make sense in some very basic way. And so even as a relatively non-visual person myself, it makes total sense to me that Feldman's biggest inspirations were visual, just as I'm constantly throwing all sorts of crazy ideas into the blender and somehow ending up with music.

As for why I ended up situated at the cusp or edge of the classical Western tradition, that's a trickier question. I worry sometimes that I ended up there because of the whole "Western Classical = Art" equation that runs so subtly and perniciously through our culture. Did I see associating myself with classical music as the only way for my work to be perceived as Art Capital A? It's hard, because growing up there wasn't any other real paradigm for how one could be a musician and still do work that was about asking difficult questions and pushing the limits of the possible. I hope that's changing, and that we can detach our problematic idea of "art" from any one tradition. Though perhaps the right route to take is rather to dissolve that idea of art itself into something more molecular and useful.

**How come, from your insider's perspective, so many of the New York composers – even the young ones – are still so heavily influenced and inspired by Cage and Feldman? What precisely is it that has kept these two composers so relevant over all these years?**

I wonder if there's something technological to it – something about their work that allows itself to be adapted to these new musical technologies that increasingly surround us. Certainly this is a big part of it for me: Cage gives you the conceptual framework, the freedom you need to think about new ways of creating music, new ways of thinking about sound and composition. And Feldman gives you the materiality, the tactility, the physicality of sound – and of course, that's what electronic music is all about. So I think there's a kinship there, a real affinity between the approach and concern of the New York School of the 50s and contemporary electronic music. I remember having a sample on my old Emax sampler of John Cage saying something about all music being percussion music, about percussion music being the music of the future. And of course, all music is electronic music. I've always wanted to teach a class that would be called "All Music Is Electronic Music". I'm not sure quite what that means, or what the class would be about – but somehow it makes sense to me.

**Tell me about the epiphany you experienced when hearing the Piano and String Quartet for the first time.**

It was late 1993, I was 23 years old, and someone had just given me my usual Christmas present of a gift certificate from one of the great used records stores of the world, the Princeton Record Exchange. So there I was digging through old CDs trying to figure out what I should get, and I saw a CD by that guy Feldman. I'd heard of him, Feldman, blah blah blah, one of those people you "have to" hear. I had no interest. Why? Because I'd seen his picture. You know the pictures I mean: Morty staring bitterly at the camera, cigarette dangling from his lip, glaring at you. And I remember thinking so

clearly: THIS is everything I hate. This is everything I'm against. These awful bitter academic composers. No joy. No love of music. Analytical, passionless, just staring at you angry and empty and cold. But I thought, hey, let me get this out of the way. I've got to say I've heard this guy, to cross it off my list, here's the gift certificate, the CD is basically free, let me throw it in the pile. So I did.

I got home, and was sitting at the kitchen table in the house where I grew up, and I threw the CD onto my old Discman. And everything stopped. I only had a few minutes, I had to get back to the city – but something had happened.

I got on the train to New York, and put the CD back on. The train broke down. This happens all the time, and it drives me completely insane. I just can't stand not making progress. I tap my feet and bounce up and down and chew my fingernails until the train starts up again. But this time, I didn't notice. I didn't care.

It was a few days before I was able to listen to the whole thing – on New Year's Day 1994, as I recall. I sat in my old Chelsea apartment, my first New York City apartment, and heard the whole Piano and String Quartet all the way through for the very first time. And something inside me broke. Something snapped. It was exactly that feeling one has in a very strong, very intense drug experience, that feeling of terror that you're not going to be able to come back, that you'll never find your way back again – except that it's not just a feeling of terror, it's also a feeling of joy. Of freedom. That feeling that something in you has broken

the chains of the known, and that you'll never be able to go back – and that maybe, just maybe, that's OK. That's how I felt at the end of that piece, a panicked fear that something in me had snapped forever and sent me into a permanent, ecstatic state of joy, and that I'd never be able to come back again.

And I never did.

**Looking back on that moment today,  
what you think it was about that piece  
that caused something inside you  
to snap?**

Well, the core of any good epiphany really falls under Proposition 7 of Wittgenstein's Tractatus – but I can at least talk a little about the musical impact it had on me. I think there were two things that immediately hit me on first hearing Feldman: the new harmonic vocabulary, and the new blueprint he gives us for how you can build a piece in terms of its top-level form. The revolution in harmony is quite clear: here was a way to make pure dissonance beautiful – not just intellectually beautiful, in that cold and severe way you find in some 12-tone systems, but really physically gorgeous. And that's built on two things: quiet and repetition. Feldman turns down the volume to negative 11, and suddenly your relationship with these, let's be honest, potentially quite brutal sonorities just changes immediately. It's a completely different feeling, a completely different experience at that edge-of-perception level. And then there's the repetition: by using repetition, even in the complex and fractured way that he does, he gradually teaches you how to handle these new harmonies; Feldman's repetition is almost a form of pedagogy. If you strung together every one of those underlying chords one after another with no pause and no repetition, you'd turn green and throw up, no doubt about it. But the repetition eases you into it; you learn

as you go, and it brings you into his world.

And then there's the large-scale organization of the thing. It's radically flat – it's like you've taken this huge complex object and just spread it out on a single perfect Euclidian plane. Every traditional way I'd learned of structuring a piece, from the pop songs I grew up on to the silly minuets they made me write in college, is just gone, vanished. All our old ideas of how to organize a piece of music get thrown out, yet it all somehow still makes sense – that's what's so amazing. Just do this, then that, then this, then another thing, and another, yet with a logic, an order, a necessity. It seems so simple, so obvious in retrospect, but it's a huge, huge break, something totally new. I remember reading an academic paper once where somebody tries to prove that a late-period Feldman piece has a fundamental A-B-A form, which is the funniest thing I've ever heard. It still cracks me up.

So these were the things that hit me immediately; now take a look at how all this propagated through my own work. The last published piece up on my site before I heard the P&SQ is 'November 15, 1993'. First off, it's an absolutely tonal piece. Sure, I'd been exposed to alternatives, but none had ever grabbed me, so that's just the language I spoke then. And then when you start to take it apart, you can very easily see the vestiges of song form in there, which is of course where I'd grown up (as we all do). It's not quite exactly verse verse chorus verse chorus [rockin' guitar solo!] verse chorus chorus fade, but it's close. It's a cute little piece, but, you know, it's not quite as radical as I imagined it to be at the time!

Now fast forward to less than a year later, after I'd had a little time to digest and metabolize the P&SQ. 'September 10, 1994' is something completely different, and for me marks a huge break in my work. There's plenty of tonal moments, but there's also a willingness to run away from all that, to unknown lands and strange dissonant wildernesses, to take some crazy turn and go off in a bizarre direction that just a year earlier would have been total gibberish to me. And the large-scale form is totally different: it's radically linear, broken up into a segmentarity that's since become the main organizing principle of my work. So no more rockin' guitar solos, I'm afraid.

I'm working on a piece right now ('October 2, 2011') that's almost a distant sequel to 'September 10, 1994'. But if you think about the fact that 17 years separate 'September 10, 1994' and 'October 2, 2011', which seem like close cousins, while less than 10 months separate 'November 15, 1993' and 'September 10, 1994', which live in entirely different universes, you'll see just how hard the P&SQ hit me.

**Why did those "silly minuets" you wrote in college suddenly seem silly, and why there was really no turning back to the old ways? After all, the insights gained through the P&SQ could have become an addition or complement to your vocabulary – instead, they turned into the core of your work.**

Well, the minuets seemed silly because they were silly! Actually, they were kind of cute, and I'm always meaning to pull up a string patch and do a little cheap recording of them just for fun. But what was silly was the fact that I felt I had to write them – that I was forcing myself into an idiom that I had no relation to, that made no sense to me, all because of what I felt I "ought" to be, or what a composer ought to be. It was about people's expectations, societal expectations, and not about honest expression. And I was lucky to be able to see very quickly that this was the wrong path for

me, and that I needed to get out of that world.

As for why the P&SQ, and Feldman in general, took over my life, well, that's a longer story. I think we all have a tendency, in looking back at our personal history and development, to reconstruct our narratives retrospectively, to add in the sort of little teleologies that only hindsight makes possible, so that things in one's life seem to lead up meaningfully to certain points and events. But I've nevertheless always had the feeling that with the truly critical moments in my development, there's a point in time where I'm "waiting" for something to happen. Waiting for that thing. That exact thing that will make the difference. I'm seeking it, even if I don't yet know what it is. I remember drifting through modern literature for years, reading this, reading that, yeah, sure, I'm into it, fine, this is fun. Then: *Gravity's Rainbow*. And that was it. It was like I had been waiting for it all along. And in philosophy, it was even stronger for me. When I finally encountered Deleuze & Guattari, it was like I'd spent my whole life waiting for that one moment, that one point where all the lines converged and everything snapped into place. And my experience with Feldman was very much like that: it was exactly what I needed, exactly when I needed it; everything that had come before it suddenly looked like a trivial precursor, and everything after it would forever be different. So of course it changed everything, and of course there was no going back.

But the sad part, and the thing that I really struggle with, is the sense that, once these huge, incomparable, irreversible encounters take place...they're over. You've found those



formative, fundamental influences, those basic building blocks of your thought and life – and you won't be able to have the experience of finding them again. There won't be another Pynchon for me (though *Against the Day* may surpass *Gravity's Rainbow*), there won't be another Deleuze & Guattari...and there won't be another Feldman. There won't be that shock, there won't be that revelation, there won't be that earthquake of a new world coming into being. And there's a real sadness to that, knowing that you won't go through that experience again.

The hope, of course, is that you're eventually able to provide this sort of experience to someone else – to the "next generation", if you will. And in theory, that now becomes my "job", my responsibility – to hopefully, one day, be able to offer that kind of insight to others. I certainly don't feel equal to the task; I don't feel I've created the caliber of work to be able to provide that level of inspiration to someone else, at least not yet. But I'm still learning.

**Do you believe, as Feldman appears to have done, that the music should create its own form, that harmonic language and arrangement cannot be separated? Why is the song form – or any other form the Western tradition has come up with – no longer relevant for your own work?**

It's funny, but the only traditional form I've really ever worked in was song form. They force-fed me a few other forms in college, but they never really went anywhere or meant anything to me. And song form was for so long my language, the only language I knew – as it is for everyone, really. It's still the dominant way of organizing music. And part of that is narrative, because we love songs, we love those little stories, those cheesy or occasionally profound pop tunes. Little bite-sized worlds; there's a universality there. Right now my kid is obsessed with Bowie's 'Space Oddity'; he's very worried about Major Tom, and keeps suggesting he go to Mars and visit the

Curiosity rover if he can't come back to Earth. So there's something in these little stories that really speaks to us, even if they're strange and are about drifting off into space.

But eventually, form itself starts to drift off into space. And that was a real liberation for me – this sense that you could choose your own form, or have no form whatsoever, throw everything away and start over using only your own rules. It wasn't until my mid 20s that it even occurred to me that you could decide this sort of thing for yourself, that you could make up your own forms, experiment, find your own ways of organizing things. And a lot of that is about letting go of authority, of the perception of needing to conform to some tradition or school, which is I think something every artist has to go through. It's a scary but necessary process. Because once you say goodbye to Earth, you just have to hope your spaceship knows which way to go.

**Tell me about organising pieces through segmentarity. Is there a spatial component to this, the idea of "sculpting" music – or is it something entirely different?**

I actually visualize these things as a sort of irregular helix – like a single fiber that twists and turns and bends, starting at one point and spiraling away to leave you off somewhere entirely else. Like a curved 1-dimensional line bending and twisting erratically through a 3-dimensional space, or a chain of amino acids folding into a protein. Each segment happens only once, and yet there should be a single thread that runs through them all – a sense of integrity to the structure as a whole. So we're not talking an A-B-A form, or A-B-B-A, or A-B-C-A, or A-A-B-A-B-C(!)-A-B-B, but more like:

A-B-C-D-E-F-G...Z

Or, to put it in the actual form I use:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7...n

With n being the total number of segments in the piece. But what are these segments? Compositionally, each usually represents a harmonically “stable” space – maybe simple, maybe complex and changing, but stable enough to act as a single musical unit. Often this comes about through repetition, giving you an area of local stability amidst the changing global evolution of the piece. But where these segments are really coming from, I think, is the nature of electronic music, the constraints of the medium, the technical process itself. Because how do you create this stuff? Well, you play with synths, you twist knobs, you fling sounds around and have fun and experiment and play around until...THAT, that’s good, I like that, hit record. And when you hit record you get a file. And that’s where these segments are ultimately coming from – they’re a sound file I’ve hit record on, a moment where something’s “worked”. This is for me the “writing” process, though it’s really more like writing to the hard drive. You improvise and play and have fun, and when you find a good moment, you hit record and grab it. And what develops is this growing collection of files on your hard drive, and these are the foundation from which the structure of the piece grows.

OK, so you’ve got a bunch of files. Now what? Let’s go back to the piece I’m working on now, ‘October 2, 2011’. There’s 39 segments, 39 files sitting on the hard drive. And they’re numbered 1 to 39. OK, what do we do with them? What order do we put them in? Well, there’s a lot of ways you could rearrange them. I mean, a lot. Elementary combinatorics tells us that the number of different ways to

arrange, or permute, a set of 39 objects is represented by the factorial of 39. And that is:

20,397,882,081,197,443,358,640,281,739,  
902,897,356,800,000,000

Or about  $2 \times 10$  to the power of 46, which is a 2 followed by 46 zeroes. Let's say someone gives me a pile of money so I can quit my day job, my kid starts sleeping through the night, I get a personal helicopter to take me around so I don't have to wait for the subway, etc., etc., and all that time I make sure I'm making the most efficient possible use of every free moment I have. Well, I'll be long dead before I make even the slightest scratch on all the possible versions of that piece. So you've got to have some way to find your way through it all, some rule of thumb, some heuristic for structuring this data, for getting through all these crazy possibilities.

Now what I used to do was to just take all the fragments, throw them up in the air, and let them fall randomly, and that was the starting point for editing the piece – but for a number of reasons I've gotten away from this (long story). What I do now is just keep the thing linear, at least as a starting point. So 1 is 1, 2 is 2, and n is n. The first draft of the piece is thus all the segments linked together in chronological order, one after another. So it goes:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7...39

Then to edit, I start taking out things that don't work. Maybe a segment's no good, maybe it doesn't get along with its neighbors or the transition doesn't move right. So I start

killing stuff, while still keeping it linear – so if 4 is bad, maybe it goes 1, 2, 3, 5. Or if that doesn't work, 1, 2, 3, 6. Just play around with things that way. Is this the best of all possible orders, all possible permutations? No way to know – I don't have that kind of time on my hands. But it gives you a place to start, and a process that's tractable. So that instead of taking several billion years to finish a piece, you can do it in a month or two.

And I also cheat. This helps. It helps particularly with beginnings and endings, which are very particular, very demanding parts of any piece. So if the beginning doesn't work, I'll just move something from somewhere else that sounds like a good start. Or if the ending's no good, same thing. If your rules aren't serving you, you throw them out. That's what's going on with 'October 2, 2011' right now; here's the map of what I think will be the final order of the segments:

1, 2, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 27, 29, 30, 23, 24

So as you can see, other than the stuff that's been spliced out, it's all in order, numerical order, chronological order, the order in which it was recorded, right up until you get to the end and that 23-24 tail – and that's where I moved stuff around, because it felt like an ending. And what's gotten us there is a gradual process of whittling away and editing down from that original linear structure of segments 1 to 39 linked together one after the other. Again, is this the best possible piece, the best possible arrangement of this material? There's no way to know. But it will at least get finished, and hopefully someone will hear it – which is for now the best methodology I've got.

**One piece that seems a little different from this is your “infamously lame” Bach piece. What were some of the reactions in the audience on the questions raised by it? Were they inspired or rather even confronted by the production process behind the music? With regards to these pieces and compared to your other work, do you actually consider them “compositions” and, more to the point, “your own compositions”?**

[Note added in proof: For those of you following closely at home, the piece was edited further after this discussion, so that the final sequence became: 1, 2, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 23, 24.]

Audience? You think people actually show up for this sort of thing? Yeah OK, I admit, there were a few people there, and the most interesting recurring comment I got was that people loved it “when the choir came in”. Of course, there’s no choir in the Brandenburg Concerto – so I think that gives you a sense of how transformed the music was by the process involved. But people did seem to like it, and I really liked it, so after much agonizing, I finally decided to post the thing to my website (hidden under the clever pseudonym ‘July 14, 2011’). And since then I’ve continued to get some very nice feedback on it.

None of this, however, has made me feel any less uncomfortable about having the piece up on my site – and precisely because I really don’t feel I can consider it my “own” composition. It’s really closer to a readymade or a found object – and yet it’s paradoxical, because it’s not a conceptual work. It’s not about the “concept” of stretching a Bach piece, it’s about the musical result – the beauty of the harmonies. And those are Bach’s harmonies, not mine; never in a million years could I achieve something like that. So maybe I’ve shifted your perspective on Bach’s writing a little, given you a new angle on it, but ultimately I’m not really responsible for what’s important there. And so even setting aside the worries that people will give me too much credit for a piece in which I’ve done so little, I do feel awkward about having it up on my site

– and precisely because of this sense that it's in some very basic way not my own.

Plus there's also a certain awkwardness to having just the one Bach piece, because... why stop there? Why just the first movement, or just that Brandenburg, or just Bach works for that matter? The process is so simple, and could, I think, interestingly illuminate so many different pieces of music, that it's hard to make sense of having just the one up there. I could go on and on stretching all sorts of different stuff (think of the Feldman possibilities!), and fill my site with them – yet all this would be time taken away from my "own" work. You've got limited resources as a composer, you can only do so many things in the time you have available; you've got to pick your battles. And I wouldn't want this sort of exercise, no matter how fun or intriguing, to detract from my getting my own work done.

And so, in the long run, the Bach stretch may end up joining that very exclusive club of pieces of mine that I discreetly pull off the site when no one's looking. So listen while you can!

**I am listening to the piece right now and it IS incredibly beautiful, almost to the point where it sounds as though it was originally written like this. Psychologically, meanwhile, I am intrigued by the fact that you put so much emphasis on the fact that the harmonies are Bach's – that you 'don't believe in composers' as you once put it, and yet you're nonetheless defending Bach's claims to his piece. Perhaps it would be interesting to discuss where authorship begins for a music which deals with recording. After all, to me, at least conceptually, there could hardly be a composition which fits this description better than your Bach piece – it is, in a way, a PURE recording, after all...**

Interestingly, in my parallel conversation with Simon, he's very critical of the Bach piece, and sees it as a "failed experiment". From his point of view, the process behind it is so facile and transparent – it uses widely available, free software in a way that's not at all original – that there's just not a lot of artistry involved. And he's absolutely right, I think – I'm really not bringing much to the table here, beyond coming up with an idea, pushing a button and letting someone else's software do the work. And yet, there it is, the recording exists, and I too think it's a strangely compelling object.

What's to be done?

Well, what we do is we start going on and on about the concept of the recording, the problematics of modern sound technology, the nature of authorship and all that! It's true that I do joke about not believing in composers, and I'm serious as well when I say it. I always talk about Bach as being a certain singular point in the evolution of music itself – that moment when the tonal system spoke in its own voice, through him, more clearly than it ever had before, and perhaps since. And I also joke about being interested only in Western music “up to Bach and after Feldman” – and here too I'm not totally kidding. Just as Western philosophy has famously been described as a series of footnotes to Plato, I think much of Western music could quite fairly be called a series of footnotes to Bach. Again, I'm not concerned here with Bach the person, Bach the “composer” – I'm talking about that moment in time and space when these systems came together and started speaking, and which we commonly refer to using the convenient four-letter shorthand “Bach”.

But the moment we're at now, the questions we're now facing, are those of technology, modern information technology, and its place and role in the continuing evolution of music. So there are going to be software programs that can radically slow down pieces of music, and yes, someone is going to feed Bach into them, and yes, interestingly, sometimes the results are going to be beautiful. It doesn't really matter who does this, who pushes the button, but that it's getting done, it's happening – and we need to bring our philosophy of music up to speed to the point



where we can understand and talk about what's going on here. Why is an object like this beautiful? What is it in the thing that affects us? There's a set of structures there that move us in a particular way, and there are many different ways that those structures can be transformed and altered while still retaining the fundamental underlying symmetries that have these effects on us. A more traditional example would be a guy like Glenn Gould, who can come along and show you that, whoa, yeah, play this thing fast-fast and it becomes something profoundly new – something the same yet new, newly beautiful. But perhaps our technology now can show us that there are still other ways of hearing these same structures, new and previously unknown ways of experiencing them. But it's the symmetries, the conserved patterns and their transformations, that matter, not whether this nerd or that nerd pushed the button. So here, if there ever was, is a piece that calls for being released anonymously! Take my name off the thing and everything would become so much clearer and easier.

**Since you've already hinted at the 'messy' and hands-on way you work with sound, why don't you take me through one of your works so I can understand the tangible aspects of the process. I was thinking of 'January 4, 2011', since that piece seems to hark back to your own childhood days in a way.**

The piece certainly has an innocent or childlike sound to it – but in truth, I'm not sure I ever touched a xylophone as a kid! As with so much of my work, the feel of the piece really came from the raw materials themselves. I've talked elsewhere about how I ended up with those sounds, but let me quickly run through it again: I got access to the music room at the local elementary school on the small island we go to in the summer, and I found this whole wall of little xylophones and metallophones the kids learn on. My intention in playing them wasn't to "compose", it wasn't to write – I was just banging away to get some raw sounds

that I figured I'd process in some suitably avant-garde fashion later. But for precisely this reason, I ended up playing really well – I wasn't self-conscious, or "trying too hard", but just smashing away and having fun. Of course, I have no actual skills at playing mallet instruments in any serious way – but I do know how to hit things with sticks and have a good time! And when I went back and tried to do "serious" work with the recordings, I found that they resisted it – their real strength was in their free flow and spontaneity. This is very much what I mean when I talk about being tactile in my approach: a lot of my process is about "listening" to the material I'm working with, trying to figure out what it "wants"; you have to put aside your preconceptions and expectations, and just try to hear. And when I finally managed to listen clearly, to step aside and hear the sounds themselves – well, they in a way already were what they wanted to be. That roughness, that freedom and fluidity – the mistakes and errors, the moments the mallet missed the metal key and loudly hit the wood – that's what the piece wanted to be about. And the instruments were all diatonic – they had innocence built right into them. So what you hear in the final composition is not so much a grand design or plan or intention, but very much just me responding to the source recordings themselves, to their inherent traits and properties.

From there it was pretty much the process I was using for most pieces at the time: playing multiple complex recordings against each other while continuously varying their pitch microtonally. One particular piece of software I use has the ability to change the pitch continuously up and down with just a single

control – which sounds simple and common enough, but actually isn't really. Most pitch controls break things down into semitones and fine-tuning, so you have one knob you can turn to change things chromatically, and another that will vary the cents, the microtones. But that's not very intuitive if you're just searching, feeling around intuitively for microtunings. And what I found with this metaphorical big knob that just changes the pitch continuously is that you can spin these recordings up and down against each other until they just sort of snap into place – until some cool microtonal relationship gels. Now the thing isn't designed to do this, I should note – I'm abusing the software, as usual! I'm sure that if they thought about it or noticed or imagined people would be using the program this way, they'd lock it to semitones – but I love the fact that it doesn't work "properly" and you can use this ostensible failing to find these wonderful microtonal worlds hidden away in there.

So from there I recorded a bunch of fragments – I don't remember how many, but there were, as always, quite a few. Each was of two different mallet instrument recordings running against each other, but subtly microtuned, so that each individual line remains tonal, but together they're playing off each other with these barely perceptible microtonal interactions. Then comes the hard part of building a narrative from these fragments, finding a way to make it all make sense. And that's the long process of editing for me – of finding a beginning, finding ways one fragment can move or morph into another, how they tell a story, what that story is, where it goes, and eventually how it ends. It's very, very hard – or sometimes very, very easy. I don't remember

**We've talked a lot about time in music, and – for the sake of the argument, and because I find this to be an intriguing topic – I'd suggest that many people seem to confuse physical time and musical (experiential) time. Of course, a piece of music requires physical time to be consumed (so do novels, sculptures and paintings). But this is rarely what attracts us to music. Rather we are often intrigued by its capacity to bend physical time into an intensely experienced musical time, which seems completely detached from our daily routines and quotidian cycles: When I think back to a performance of 'For Philip Guston' in Aachen, it seems to occupy even more than the six hours it actually took – and much less at the same time. Also, Feldman's long pieces are often performed as open performances, where you both move around inside the music and inside the concert hall. Can't "spatial qualities" and "tangibility" result in a music in which the temporal element dissolves into a dream-like state?**

which it was with that piece! But eventually it evolved into the final form you hear. And from there it's just a lot of painstaking editing out of mistakes and glitches and errors and bad moments, cleaning it all up, honing and polishing the recording itself, and you're done.

All in all, I'd say that the process behind 'January 4, 2011' is an atypical one for a piece of mine – but in theory, if you're an experimental composer, every piece of yours should be atypical! So I guess it's as good a case study as any.

I'm one of those people fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to hear Feldman's Second String Quartet performed in its entirety. I was desperate for years to hear the SQ2, but no one was playing it, and for a long time there were no recordings out. Then, in quick succession, a couple recordings got released, and I immediately snapped them up. And they sat on my shelf unheard, still in the shrink wrap. I didn't really understand why – until I finally heard the piece performed. And then I realized that to hear the SQ2 on CD is like looking at a postcard of a place – and to hear it performed is to go to that place. And it very much is a place. An experience. An experience that (I'm told!) is very much like running a marathon: you go through crises, you go through periods of peace and struggle, triumph and fear; it's this epic, innately temporal experience. Because this is a piece that is most profoundly about time, about experiencing duration, getting inside it, into a world that can only be opened up in a vast space like that.

And yes, the time becomes about space, and the space about time. When I finally heard the

SQ2, it was a performance by the FLUX Quartet at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall in NYC. At the start of the show, they got up and said, feel free to move around during the performance, try out different seats, and hey, anybody out there that wants to come onstage while we're playing, well, come on up! And I cynically thought, what kind of a show-off goes up and sits on stage at Carnegie Hall? But let me tell you: after 4+ hours, I was like, I'm going on stage! And I hopped right up there and spent the last hour or so of the piece lying on the floor right behind the quartet. It was a religious experience.

All of this makes me think about what's going on in my own work – because, you know, especially nowadays, I've got some longer pieces! Two hours is my record, and I'm working on a 100-minute piece right now. They could get longer. But I have to say that I have a certain degree of skepticism, a certain degree of doubt, about what I'm doing in these longer pieces. And that's because I think there's a very fundamental difference between a performed work of very long duration, and a recording of very long duration.

First off, why did Feldman's pieces get so long? I personally think of there as being two main answers to this, both of them right in their own way. The first is that there was something that he could only tell us through these very long pieces – something about the nature of time, the nature of duration itself. This is the philosophical perspective, the theoretical perspective, the experiential perspective, and it's very important to understanding what he's doing.

But I also think there was something else going on, and that was that...he was having fun! He just loved writing, and he couldn't stop. And this is very much what happens to me. I start going with these pieces, and I just can't stop writing. And with each piece, I'm trying to exhaust the possibilities of what can be done with that particular set of materials, or that particular set of rules or that scenario or concept or approach. I tend not to write the same piece twice, no matter how much I love a given piece; I always want to find and take a new approach with the next thing, to do something totally different. So there's this almost desperate desire to wring every last ounce of possibility out of whatever I'm working on. Plus, as I said, it's fun, and you don't want to stop.

So I generate a tremendous amount of material. This is also, I should note, much, much easier to do electronically than it is with actual "writing" – writing scores, that is, as with Feldman. With electronic music, it's often hard NOT to generate a lot of sound. And so you end up with a lot of material on your hands, and, much as I try to edit, and select only the best, and hone things carefully, you do end up with some very long pieces – with some pieces that very much "want" to be long.

But I find myself wondering whether this is the right thing to do – whether it's a good thing. Because if I ever come up with a 6-hour recording, well, that's a very, very different thing than a 6-hour performance. There's no inviting the listener to wander the venue, try out every seat in the house, maybe even come onstage with the string quartet. The context is totally different – and totally different for

every listener, every time. How do you listen to something like a 6-hour recording, sitting there at home? What happens if the phone rings? Do you check email? Make dinner? Does your life go on, as, let's admit, it often tends to with recordings? Or do you somehow carve out 6 hours, 6 whole hours of time, where you're doing absolutely nothing but sitting there listening to this crazy thing? I can't imagine it. I can't imagine anyone doing it. And in all honesty, even with my own pieces, I wouldn't do it myself. Even my 2-hour piece 'July 17, 2010' I've never heard all the way through – it was written almost as a little dare to myself, to write something I could never actually hear, because I wrote it when my kid was two months old and wasn't about to give me two uninterrupted hours of anything.

So I really question what it is I'm asking of people with these long pieces, and I have doubts about it. But you know, I'm having fun. So I keep going. Sorry!

**This brings us back to the start of the conversation, and the issue of whether the creative and sonic space is a vital part of the composition to you. Which leads me to the following question: Could one, for example, hire a chamber music ensemble and have them – through whatever "extended techniques" may be required – recreate one of your pieces in a concert hall without losing something essential?**

There's that sticky word again – "essence". And we're back once more at those same questions of identity we were talking about earlier. Would a chamber music ensemble performing a piece of mine by means of extended techniques be "essentially" the "same" piece? No, it would be something else entirely, something different and new – which would make it all the more interesting, I think. And no one would be more eager to hear it than me!

But even as I'm tempted to say question answered, case closed, let's move on...it gets trickier. Because there's this very clear, very intuitive sense that there are pieces of mine that a chamber ensemble could pick up

and play, and you'd say, hey, that's it, I love that piece. While there's others that would necessarily have to move through so many degrees of abstraction and interpretation as to become something entirely new. Go dig through the late 80s / early 90s stuff on my site and you'll find any number of recordings, even ostensibly "electronic" ones, that you can easily imagine a string quartet, or a chamber ensemble, or even just a pianist picking up and playing, and it would totally make sense; no one would question whether it's the "same" piece. And then you'll find a lot of work that would take quite radical acts of interpretation to perform acoustically, and it's a real question whether anyone could, out of context, even recognize it as mine.

So what is it in a given piece that gives us this sense? Perhaps it becomes a question of what a piece is "about" – what holds it together, what differentiates it or makes it cohere. You could say that my early pieces are about a more traditional way of writing – about writing melodies, harmonies, chord progressions, thinking in those terms. Those you could translate easily, since you're just moving the harmonic structures over to another set of timbres, an operation that we're all very accustomed to. Bach, after all, wrote the Art of the Fugue without specifying any intended instruments, and none of us doubt that whether we hear it on harpsichord or string ensemble or synthesizer, we're hearing the Art of the Fugue; there's a structure there, an algebraic structure, that we can latch on to and identify.

But now look at 'Etude Aux Chemins de Fer' by Pierre Schaeffer. Here's a piece that's not



only rooted in a very specific instrument – trains! – but perhaps in those specific trains from the 1940s themselves. It would almost seem like a different piece with different trains, though maybe you could somehow do a “cover version” of it. But if you’re covering it, would you record modern trains, diesel and electric trains? Or perhaps you should use “period instruments” and go with steam trains! It starts to seem silly, but it’s actually a serious question. What is it that you’re translating, what aspects or facets of the work? Which structures are you lifting out of a given piece and moving into the new context? And is there a line beyond which it becomes a “new” piece? These are tricky questions, with no clear-cut answers.

We could then ask what would happen if you tried adapting some of my recent pieces. A lot of these use very chamber-music-like sounds – there’s strings, there’s winds, there’s piano and percussion. I’m sure you could find someone to figure out and recreate most of the timbres quite effectively. But (and you knew there was a “but” coming), for me at least, these pieces are all about the tuning. What holds them together, what makes them cohere, is, for me, these crazy microtuning systems I’m using. But those systems are all generated by chance – each piece uses many different tuning ratios, all derived by chance procedures and then obliterated in the writing process. And I’ve no idea how you’d reverse engineer that, even with the most perfect pitch or the best spectral analysis out there. But who knows, maybe it could be done – and I’d be first in line to buy tickets for the premiere!

**Let's talk about the meaning of one of the elements your work has frequently been almost stereotypically reduced to: Silence. How do you personally perceive the silence contained within the structure of your pieces? As duration? Inner reverberation? The absence of sound? A pool of potential waiting to be set free? A rest?**

I feel like there's two main strategies toward silence in modern music: conceptual and structural. The conceptual approach is Cagean: it's silence as idea, as concept, as meaning (even if it's intended as a false concept, a non-existent or illusory reality, as one could argue is the case with 4'33"). Here silence is deployed in a network of meaning, to signify void or absence; it's caught up in a system of interpretation where the listener is expected to fill in the blanks. This all goes back through Cage to Duchamp, and resonates with conceptual art and its contemporary offspring that you'll find running around galleries everywhere.

The other approach is structural, and really this is the pole I myself gravitate toward. Here silence is deployed as a compositional tool or organizing principle in structuring music; it's less about the idea of silence, than about what silence does. How it acts, versus what it means. How you can use it to articulate sound, rather than how it signifies in a system of abstract meaning. This is my area of interest. Yes, there are conceptual resonances in my work, you can argue there's times I'm talking "about" silence rather than using it musically, but that isn't really my focus or the direction I want to go in. To me silence is one more tool in my musical toolbox – a unique and important tool, but one among many. It's another color of paint on the palette – "clear" paint, if you will. To continue that metaphor, I'm not trying to focus you on the canvas, or on the canvasness of the canvas – that's the conceptual approach. Maybe it's in there in my work, or you can bring it in, but it's not what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to paint with clear paint, as one among many colors.

This brings me to a broader point, a critique of what I often think of as “the music of omission”. We’ve all been to concerts like this, where the performer is trying to get you to focus on what they’re leaving out, rather than what they’re actually playing. Maybe it’s an unchanging drone, or a simple repeating note, or a use of silence – but the idea is to use what they’re not doing to put you into a certain aesthetic state, often trancelike or meditative. Doubtless there are many amazing musicians who can pull this off, and I certainly don’t want to dismiss the entire approach. But much of the time, for me, this attitude, this stance, is a disappointment. I’m not interested in what’s not happening – I want to hear what IS happening, the positivity of the work. Lisa Simpson, in the audience during a jazz solo, suggests to an unimpressed fellow listener that “you have to listen to the notes she’s NOT playing”, to which the disgruntled patron replies, “Pffft, I can do that at home.” Well, maybe I agree with him a little.

So in my own work at least, I’m trying to go in the opposite direction – I want the music to be structured and complex in its own regard, I want it to give you something you didn’t already have, rather than to create an empty space where you have to fill in the blanks. And my attitude toward silence reflects this: silence for me is positive, it’s structural, it’s a concrete architectural element in the construction of my work. Take out the silence and the piece collapses, or should. It’s a load-bearing wall, a stone buttress, the precise angle of the vaulting in the ceiling. I always say that architecture is what keeps things from falling down, or rather, architecture is a way of having things fall down so precisely that they keep standing up. It

**And yet, it is interesting that similar approaches, in which silence is 'emancipated', have sprung up across the world and across scenes at the very same time. I am often reminded of your use of silence when listening to the music of the Wandelweiser composers collective, for example. Why, do you think, is silence, of all compositional devices, enjoying this sudden popularity? What is it that makes you, as in some of your pieces, paint not just WITH transparent color, but FOREMOST with it?**

takes a complex, intricate opposition of forces and tensions to keep the roof from falling on your head. And for me, silence is one of those forces.

Well, what is rhythm but patterns of presence and absence? Rhythm is one of those fundamental, deep-deep elements at the foundation of music, and perhaps silence has become a sort of meta-rhythm in my music, and many other people's. I do very much see it this way, and I definitely "think" rhythmically as I'm composing some of those insanely detailed silences in my work. It's very much the same process, that sense of getting the right "feel" or "groove", but at a higher level of organization. I test and test the silences, and play around with them endlessly until they "move" right. And that's rhythm, that's what rhythm's about. So perhaps I don't even use silence at all in my work – maybe I'm just playing really, really slowly!

Of course, one's perception of these things is quite relative. My friend Sawako was telling me the story of a concert she was at in Japan where the performers on stage began the show with something like 30 minutes of silence – and she absolutely insisted it was the most natural thing in the world, and no one thought anything of it. I may be infamous for my crazy silences, but in a situation like that, I think I'd be like, "Come on, start the show!"

And you end up in strange situations, with this sort of music. One of my favorite stories along these lines was my ironic first experience hearing the music of Ralph Steinbrüchel, whose work I now of course love. Richard Chartier had just released his first album on Line, so

**I think one of the advantages of using silence in this positive, structural fashion is that it allows it to be meaningful in far more ways than Cage allowed it to: It is taking on different functionalities in almost every piece of yours, thereby increasing the complexity of the work in an engaging fashion. And yet, from the reviews of your music, it seems that the "silence as an idea" school has been so successful that people are finding it hard to NOT see it as a concept and to appreciate it as being different (in the reality of the composition) each time.**

**This may point to the problem that one's personal actions as an artist may be overshadowed by the abstractions created by schools, movements and the media: If I'm using a sustained rhythmical ostinato, I'm a minimalist by default. If I'm using algorithmic processes, I'm a serialist. And if I'm using silence, then my work is "about silence" in some form or the other. And all of these equations are, from my point of view, turning the focus away from the work at hand and towards factors outside of it, thereby reducing its uniqueness (not in the sense of newness**

here was this new guy I'd never heard, and I settled down on my couch with my old Discman and my best headphones, and hit play. Hmmm. Very minimal. Very, very minimal. I mean, like... nothing. I grew increasingly annoyed. I was like, come on Richard, what are you thinking releasing this? There's just nothing here, it's going nowhere, this is ridiculous. I stuck with it and stuck with it, tried and tried, but got nowhere. I grew more and more exasperated until I finally glanced down at the Discman. The batteries were dead.

In truth, I'm really not worried about the toolbox itself being reduced – the tools are there, and I'd hope that any open-minded composer would be willing to grab any tool that gets the job done, no matter what its pedigree or provenance. And I think that as a composer, it's not your job to worry about schools or movements or genres; in fact, it's your job to ignore that sort of thing as much as possible and get on with your work. It certainly shouldn't limit you in the tools you're willing to use – and if you let this sort of external categorization constrain or limit what you're actually writing, well, I think that's a real failure of your responsibility as an artist.

But it's an endless struggle against the categories imposed on music; they're everywhere, you can't escape them. I'm reminded of when I was in my early 20s going into the (then still existent) Tower Records in New York. The Classical music section was hermetically sealed off behind a pristine wall of glass, and to get to it you had to pass through New Age. And I remember living in abject terror at the thought that my music,

or progressiveness, but of autonomy).

**With this in mind, in what way do you feel that the toolbox of a composer today may actually have been reduced – rather than, as has frequently been suggested, vastly increased – through the multiplicity of approaches and associated philosophies available today?**

if it ever one day got released on CD, might be “misclassified” as new age. All I wanted was to get my work through that wall, behind glass, into the realm of Art. And there’s so much wrong with that way of thinking. I’d like to believe that I don’t think like that anymore, or that I’ve at least come a long ways in breaking free from it. Nowadays I’d be more inclined to laugh and say, sure, I’d love more classical listeners for my work, that would be great – but just imagine what my music could do for some poor unsuspecting new age person! You’re sitting there waiting for tranquility and major sevenths and waterfalls, and you get...well, whatever it is I do. It’d be like the ultimate bad acid trip, and I’d love to have that kind of impact on someone’s life. So file me under new age, I say.

This also reminds me of one of my great failed projects of recent history. A couple years back, while Taylor Deupree and I were in Paris to play a concert, we decided that our next project together was going to be what we called our “long-awaited hip-hop album.” We were actually going to call it that; just as everybody was sitting around waiting for *post\_piano 3*, they’d have suddenly gotten *The Long-Awaited Hip-Hop Album*. And it was no joke. Taylor and I started out doing industrial music together 20+ years ago, and we were hugely influenced by hip-hop, especially Public Enemy. And this was going to be our Public Enemy tribute album. I even came up with all these clever track titles that were nerd/hacker takes on Public Enemy songs (e.g., “9.1 is a Joke” – that was my best). Taylor went into a frenzy and ordered a used SP-1200 while we were still in Paris, and I flew back to New York and immediately started creating beats (I was

going to be the DJ and he was going to be the MC – more or less). They were crazy beats, all in multiple different time signatures at once. And if I do say so myself, they were awesome. And then the whole thing stalled.

What happened? Well, years ago, Taylor had left Brooklyn and moved to the countryside. And hip-hop just wasn't in him anymore. He couldn't do it. It's like that scene in *The Wire* where Cutty, having been out of the game for decades, finds that he can't kill a young rival; he says, "It's just not in me anymore." And you think Avon is going to immediately shoot him in the head, but instead he gives him a big hug and wishes him well. Well, I tried to be gracious like Avon; I didn't immediately shoot Taylor in the head. But the project never moved forward.

And it's a shame, because I think that album would have been the perfect demonstration of what I'm talking about – that it's critical not to let yourself get constrained by someone else's idea of your genre or school or movement. Whatever sort of music we may be associated with, whatever sort of music you may hear us playing, our interests and influences go way beyond that. Because when I go visit Taylor in upstate New York, and we're driving around in his car, it's not like we're fighting for control of the stereo to see whether I'm going to put on Feldman's String Quartet #2 or he's going to put on Eno's Thursday Afternoon. Last time I was up there, we put on 'Stigmata' by Ministry...and my kid immediately fell asleep in the back seat.

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## Conversation: Simon Cummings and Kenneth Kirschner

**Would it be right to assume that, as you're frequently working with sound files – moving them around, re-ordering them, deleting them as seems appropriate – the durations of your works are incidental rather than something predetermined? In other words, the pieces are as long as they 'need' to be?**

That's exactly right – the process itself, and ultimately the quality of the material, is what determines the duration, rather than any plan or pre-established design. I want every piece to be at least 6 hours long! And so far none of them are. What happens is that I write and write and write: the first stage of composing for me is just creating sound after sound after sound, fragment after fragment after fragment, idea after idea after idea. This goes on for days. I go on and on until I can't go on any more – to the point of real exhaustion. And eventually I just have to acknowledge to myself that I'm done, that I can't, or at least shouldn't, go on any more. So you have this tremendous amount of material that gets generated, and it's often many, many hours of raw stuff. But usually, most of the time, it's terrible, or at least most of it is. So I start cutting and cutting, and when I'm down to



just the good stuff, just the core or essence of what's best in there, then that's what decides the length.

Look at the two most recent things I've done. Both 'September 13, 2012' and my current work in progress 'October 13, 2012' started with many hours of raw material. But in the former's case, to build a coherent story and focus on the very best material, there were huge, huge cuts, and the final piece is a mere 30 minutes. A big disappointment! But with 'October 13, 2012', the act of madness I'm immersed in now, somehow a lot of it – most of it, even – was really good. It all made sense, it flowed, it held together, there was a logic there. And now the crazy thing is going to be 2 hours.

**Perhaps it was just a throwaway remark, but do you really want every piece to be "at least 6 hours long", and if you do, why? I guess I'd assumed both from listening and from our previous conversations that your focus in each piece was pretty much entirely on the process, and that the issue of duration wasn't just coincidental (as you've just confirmed) but ultimately irrelevant to the piece itself.**

It was really more of a throwaway remark – but the idea behind it is that with every piece, I'm always wildly overambitious. If I'm envisioning a 3-minute piece, I want it to be the most complex and hyperstructured 3 minutes you've ever heard, something to make your head explode. And if my writing is going well, I want to keep writing forever, or at least for a ridiculously long time. But helpfully, most of the time, I'm not only wildly overambitious but also wildly overconfident, and by the next morning or the next week or whenever, many of those sounds I was so excited about may not seem quite so impressive after all. So fortunately not everything becomes insanely long, because I do try hard to be my own toughest editor.

**There is of course a massive difference in what happens to the listener when confronted by pieces of 2 minutes, 20 minutes or 2 hours respectively (something I touched on when writing about 'July 17, 2010' last year). So while the duration is ultimately a byproduct of the processes at play, as that duration starts to become apparent – in a general sense, i.e., when you realize it's going to last in excess of an hour, for example – does that in turn have an effect on the way you continue editing/honing the material? Put another way, have your longest works brought about a different approach due to the concomitant demands of their duration, or is it not a significant concern?**

**Can you elaborate a little about this different perspective, and the compositional changes it brings about?**

**Six of your works have extended durations, and their episodic nature makes one wonder why there are so few that you've allowed to speak over such long periods of time. In the case of pieces like 'January 10, 2012' and 'March 16, 2006', it's understandable, as the distinction between the episodes is extremely subtle (even calling them 'episodes' is perhaps stretching things a bit), but 'November 7, 2008' is highly variegated and full of contrasts, and its episodes are of similar length to those in many of your shorter episodic works. So is there something specific that allows these extended works to be so much longer, and is it just incidental – bearing in mind what you've said about longer works enabling you to "let go of a lot of the little details" – that there are so few of them?**

Yes, the experience of doing these long pieces is very, very different – mainly because it compels me to be less neurotic! Because you just have to let go of a lot of the little details – you can't agonize over every last thing, which I have a very strong tendency to do. If you're ever going to finish something really big, you can't lose sight of the forest, the big picture; there's just not time to worry about every last microscopic detail. It requires a totally different perspective, a different way of thinking, and it forces me to set aside many of my usual control issues and neuroses. So ultimately there's something very healthy for me in doing on these large pieces.

One of the most basic axioms of my work is that it...shouldn't suck. And if I haven't "allowed" a piece of music to speak over an extreme length of time, that's because it would most likely have been horribly painful to be afflicted with the thing for so long! Even a perfectly nice 5-minute piece or an eminently reasonable 20-minute one can become an unbearable burden on the listener (and composer!) if allowed to grow to a length at which it just doesn't fundamentally have anything to say. So it's very rare that I feel that there's enough happening in a given work to justify this sort of duration, much as I'd love to see every piece hit 6 hours or more, as I've semi-jokingly said. But as always, you've got to be your own toughest editor.

One of the key underlying aspects of my work is that my pieces are always built up hierarchically: smaller modules or components get combined and recombined and built up into bigger objects, which in turn get built into bigger ones, etc., and eventually some of these

snap together and unfold in such a way that they become really long – whether due to a lot of small segments “surviving” my editing, or to the basic segments themselves just being really long. These are the two main pathways by which a piece of mine can become very big – it can be built out of a handful of very big objects, or it can be made out of a LOT of smaller ones. In some pieces, such as ‘July 17, 2010’ and ‘January 10, 2012’, the underlying segments are really long, sometimes well over 10 minutes each, and that’s because I was just having way too much fun pushing the sounds through these complex parameter spaces, so I just kept going and going and going. Conversely, you have a piece like ‘October 13, 2012’, the new viola thing, in which the individual segments are quite short – just simple repetitions of two or three or sometimes more, separated by silence. But there’s a huge number of them, because the quality of the individual fragments was unusually strong, and almost all of them ended up making it past that brutal editor who wants to delete everything.

But the important point is that there is always in my work this underlying principle of segmentarity, of building up larger structures from smaller ones, and that what causes a long piece to be long is that some aspect of this process has taken off and starting running away with itself. The pieces aren’t planned in advance to be long; the length is rather an emergent property of the underlying material from which they’re built. It’s certainly not the case that I have a single huge vision for a piece stretching over many hours, all planned meticulously in advance. I was recently going through long works with Taylor Deupree, and he apparently seriously asked (specifically in

reference to 'January 10, 2012') whether I had played the individual lines of the piece through as uninterrupted 90-minute takes. I could only laugh – I doubt I could get through even a single 10-minute take without my kid coming up, saying "Dada, what you doing?" and grabbing my headphones off my head. (He usually then smiles, listens patiently for a few seconds, and says, "I want Fela!") So this way of building things is very much a virtue of necessity.

**I'd presumed that the titles of your works were named for the date on which they were completed. As you've alluded to 'October 13, 2012' – which at time of writing, is unfinished – is it in fact the date on which work is begun?**

Yeah, it's the date on which it's begun. Which is the safest way to go, because even then I still try to cheat sometimes – there will be some date that has a bad association, or that I don't like the symmetry of or something, and I'll be like, "Hmmm, maybe I'll start writing tomorrow instead!" And if I was going with the end date as the title, then I'd be way too tempted to just keep adding little 1 dB changes in EQ or something until I get to a date that sounds "cool" to me. More seriously, there's often a real crystallization that takes place on the first day of work – the moment the concept comes together, or the writing really takes off in some unexpected direction – so I think the starting date is ultimately more meaningful than the ending date.

**I think that's very interesting, as I've always put more emphasis on the date when composition is completed – partly as a vestige of classical training (you see this kind of thing in scores going back at least a century) but also due to the – for me – often very lengthy period of preliminary thinking and preparatory work that precedes the more labor-intensive, sat-at-the-desk task of composing the actual notes/**

I think this leads us in some interesting directions about two very fundamental compositional approaches – for want of better words, let's call them "classical" and "technological". The classical approach is very much what you describe, and very much what's been practiced historically in Western music – it's about working with abstracted, relatively high-level structures and relationships, building out melodies and harmonies and

**material, and to which it's usually rather difficult to give a start date. On the other hand, perhaps we're talking about the same thing, and the day on which I would sit at the desk corresponds to your "real crystallization that takes place on the first day of work". Is it preparation that leads to that "crystallization", and if so, of what kind? In conjunction with this, you talk about being your own "toughest editor"; is that editing process entirely intuitive (you've spoken in the past about using "insight"), or is it guided by other things, i.e. by preliminary work/decisions that have a subsequent bearing on where/how the music will proceed?**

rhythms through planning or visualization or prior conceptualization, and then realizing them sonically with instruments after these structures have been completed. I always come back to the example of the Art of the Fugue, whose structures can be imposed on almost any sort of tonal sound. In the "technological" group, on the other hand, I'd put people like myself, techno musicians, pop artists working with synths, musique concrete people, etc. And here the direction, the vector if you will, is the exact opposite: you start with sound itself, and build up from there. Neither approach is better, and both have their strengths and weaknesses. But again, the key difference is in the directionality – whether you're imposing previously planned and thought-out forms on sonic matter, or taking raw sonic matter in all its materiality as your starting point and drawing structures and forms out of it. In each case you follow a different path and get different kinds of results. And each, as you suggest, implies a different "dating system": for the classical approach, the completion date makes for the better title – it's the culmination of a carefully structured process that is realized in the moment of its completion. Whereas for the tech approach, the starting date makes more sense: that's the moment when some crystal or ore or vein of musicality is discovered deep inside the dirty and chaotic mines of sound.

And as I said, I do very much lump myself in with electronic dance musicians and pop artists, even though the final result of my process may by itself sound more "classical" – but it's the process here that I'm focused on, the ways in which these things are put together, not the end result. Consider what

happens when you give me two difference assignments or commissions. Say you come to me and say, Ken, your mission is to give me a dubstep album; get to work. Well, I'm going to dive right into that, and if I do say so myself, you're going to get a really, really awesome dubstep album out of me. And that's because those methods are very compatible with the way I work – it's something I understand. But conversely, say you come to me and ask for a very traditional piece for string quartet. I'm not to meet the musicians, I can't record them, and what you want from me is a written score in classical notation that's going to be handed over to the players, who then rehearse and perform it; I'll be in the audience hoping for the best. Well, it's going to be a disaster. I can't do it. I don't have the skills; I don't think that way. It's just not going to work – because I'll immediately be transported, skills-wise, right back to 1988, where I left off as a naive teenager only just starting to understand how to do this sort of thing. Everything I've learned since then has been built on a completely different foundation, and none of it translates. So I'll beg and plead not to be put into that situation: I'll say, no, no, just let me at that string quartet with a couple mics and a field recorder, give me some sounds, raw sounds, to throw into my machines, and I promise you something really cool. But notation scrawled on paper – from me that will be hopeless.

Moving on to your editing question, I think that, yes, this part of the process is guided by a sort of intuition or instinct, rather than any plan or pre-established design for the piece. Here again it's very much a question of responding, in an almost tactile fashion, to an existing collection of very material objects,

and coming to understand their interrelations and relative strengths and weaknesses. It's about following the sounds. And while I do sometimes have a vague plan for the general sort of piece I'd like to write, often these plans are as much obstructions as anything else; for me, any preconceived notions I might have about what I want a piece to be will more often than not block me from actually hearing the sounds in front of me clearly. And even if a piece does, ultimately, bear some resemblance to my early notions of what I wanted it to be (rather than, say, tearing off in some totally unrelated direction when those initial plans fail), there's often a very difficult process of getting myself to listen, really listen, to what the piece "wants", rather than what I want. And understanding what a piece of music wants to be is probably the hardest part of composing, for me.

**Your work is 'published' on your website, but the compositions date back almost 25 years. So when did that become your approach, and how did you disseminate your work before the Internet became widespread?**

I definitely envisioned releasing my music online long before it became technologically feasible to do so; I was probably starting to think about these things in the late 1980s, and was quite certain about what I wanted to do by the early 90s. Before that? Well, for years I made cassettes for people and very optimistically wrote "this music may be freely copied" on each – and that certainly doesn't get you very far! When CDRs became possible I started burning them for anyone I could hand one to. And I was also doing other stuff at the time to try to get my work known – music for dance and such – and none of that got me very far either. Ironically, it was only after online digital music actually became possible (following the mp3 revolution of the late 90s) that I started releasing "normal" commercial CDs – and that was simply because

**You're better at it than you think! Going back to those earliest days, 'July 18, 1989' feels like your 'Opus 1', yet it's preceded by the curiosity that is 'May 19, 1988' – I'd be interested to know more about this piece, and why it's your first published work. The contrasts with your later work – even with 'July 18, 1989' – feel extreme, and if you can bear me being a little frank, the cheesy, generic quality of the sounds combined with the lo-fi recording (real? fake?) make it rather difficult to listen to! Do you discern any points of origin within 'May 19, 1988'?**

I had belatedly realized that I was hopeless at promoting my own work. After dreaming for years and years of building a free online archive of my music, and finally having that goal within reach, it was quite startling to realize that the site would just sit there silently, with no traffic, no visitors, no listeners, unless I found some way to communicate the existence of my work to people. In truth, it's something I'm still not very good at.

This is a very interesting point you bring up, and as you can imagine there's a lot of complicated pre-history involved. For years, I had 'July 18, 1989' as the earliest piece on my site, and I think it really does make sense in this role. For me, it represents the first piece in what I see as the second "period" in my writing – marking a transition between my earliest stuff (1982-1988), in which I worked very much using a "songwriting" approach (thinking in terms of chord progressions and melodies, structuring the work in song form, etc.), and the next period, which to me was all about structure – about building, through a sort of "vertical improvisation" of loops (much as one does in dance music) these interlocking tonal structures whose gradual entrances and exits formed the linear development of the piece. With 'July 18, 1989', the date also has a very deep personal meaning to me, plus, well, it's a cute little piece! So it made sense, as you say, as an Opus 1.

'May 19, 1988', on the other hand, marked for me in many ways the culmination of the previous period in my work – that songwriting stage in which I was really thinking in terms of pop music, however purely instrumental the realization. That piece, formerly known as



'Prelude, G major' was originally developed as the overture to a score for a high school production of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (a production which incidentally starred a kid named Ethan Hawke, who later continued on with his acting). Some people who knew me as a teenager (most notably my younger brother) maintain that my sappy *Glass Menagerie* score remains the apex of my artistic achievement, and are constantly whining, "Aw, you should do more stuff like that!" Clearly I disagree, but I do have a certain affection for the thing.

The way it ended up on my site is this: in 2008, I was asked to do a little installation piece for a project at Princeton University – and Princeton, NJ is my hometown, where I grew up. The show was about mediation and memory, and it occurred to me that my old *Glass Menagerie* 'Prelude' would be quite fitting. But the recording I'd done of it back in 1988 was hugely flawed, and here again was a case where it seemed the only way forward was to damage it further. So I crushed the recording down into the battered remnant you hear up on the site, and it was installed on a street corner between the university and the road leading to my old high school where the performance took place. After that, it somehow made sense to me at the time to just throw the recording up on the site, if only as an inside joke to those people from my hometown who still insist it's the best thing I've ever done.

Of course, there's a lot more early material that comes before 'May 19, 1988' – I've got recordings going back as far as 1982-1983. And most of them are quite embarrassingly terrible (a great example is one little synth

thing that a friend, on hearing it years later, started dramatically overdubbing with the voiceover of a beer commercial – “The bold new taste...”; it worked way too perfectly). I’m often tempted to throw these things out there for purely historical interest/amusement, and that’s pretty much what happened with ‘May 19, 1988’. Plus it seemed cool to extend my “published” works back another year in time!

But now that you mention it, I find myself wondering whether I should take it down. ‘July 18, 1989’ does make more sense as an “Opus 1”, and without knowing the backstory and context of ‘May 19, 1988’, it may be a little baffling to people. There’s a strong tendency, as you can imagine, for people to go back and listen to the very first piece on my site, and perhaps ‘May 19, 1988’ just isn’t the right place for them to start. There’s also the fact that there’s not much that can be done for the recording quality of it (if you can imagine, the undamaged version sounds worse – trust me), whereas ‘July 18, 1989’ was among the first pieces I ever recorded to DAT, so it could easily be remastered and sound quite professional.

All of which to say, you have a point here, and I’m going to put some thought into this. I’ve been meaning to remaster some of those earliest pieces on my site (precisely because so many people focus on them, for better or worse), and that might be the time to pull down ‘May 19, 1988’ and put ‘July 18, 1989’ back into its previous role as my first “officially” published piece.

**That's your prerogative, of course, but I wasn't trying to hint that! I suppose composers do need to take a curatorial role, to some extent (and this particularly applies to you, where almost all of your work is only available directly from your own website), but I've often wondered whether it's helpful for us to try to act in a musicological role towards our own work, i.e. trying to pinpoint and outwardly communicate connections between compositions, lines of development, etc. Do you think it's valuable for a composer to try to understand and/or project such things to the audience, or is it better left for others to fathom? This situation is perhaps somewhat different if the work in question is an experiment, one that might not have lived up to expectations. For example, my thoughts when I listened to 'July 14, 2011' – the time-stretched Bach movement – was that, for all sorts of reasons, this was precisely a "failed experiment" (forgive my candor), and it would therefore make perfect sense for it to be subsequently removed from your available works. By contrast, 'May 19, 1988' seems the opposite of an experiment, declaring, "This is where I am, right now", and in the light of all that follows, comes across like a last look backwards before moving on somewhere new. That doesn't mean it can't be removed from public view, but equally it doesn't necessarily hinder an appreciation of what it is you're trying to do. But then again, perhaps you would describe all your music as an "experiment"...?**

I have to say, it's really a huge challenge being the "curator" of the "canon" of one's own work! And the pieces you mention here are perfect examples of the difficulties involved. Take that Bach thing: I have a certain affection for it, and I know there's people out there who really genuinely love it; yet there's also people (like yourself!) who quite understandably don't care for it – and in the end, I myself just basically think it doesn't belong on my site. Yet...where else is it going to go? I so love the simple format of my site, and I don't want to endlessly proliferate pages and subpages based on my momentary opinions of one piece or another. Though that would certainly be one solution to the puzzle of 'May 19, 1988': I've always wanted to create an "early works" section of the site where I could throw all those embarrassing little teenage recordings for anyone who might for whatever reason be interested. But that's one more page to curate, one more set of questions and problems. In truth, the thing on my site that troubles me the most is the perpetually uncomfortable state of the indeterminate series from 2004-2005. Not only are they compositionally and technologically distinct from everything else (built in Flash rather than simple audio recordings), but I live in constant fear that the things are just going to stop working one of these days! Some revision to Flash or to the browser standards is just going to render them unplayable sooner or later; they already spit out lots of errors on the Mac when you load them, though you can still get them to play. And if they break, I don't have the skills to fix them. So there's one more set of worries...

And this is without even getting into the question of my own curation of my "normal"

works, which changes all the time. I'll often go and listen to a piece after a chunk of time and say, wow, OK, I know what I was trying to do, but it's just not there, it's not good enough, it should come down – and then I could go back to the exact same piece in a better mood or at a better point in time and feel it's absolutely essential to my overall artistic project! So basically I'm not to be trusted on this, but I don't know of anyone else who wants the job. All of which to say, I'm ultimately not sure that the composer is the best person to be the curator of his or her own works. But in my case, I've made a choice to release my music in such a way that the duty does fall to me, so I just try not to mess it up too badly.

**To some extent, due to the way digital audio files are disseminated today, curatorial decisions have their limits when it comes to withdrawing pieces. Even if you were to remove works like 'May 19, 1988' or the Bach stretch, people would still have those pieces in their libraries, so in that sense the act of withdrawal – from a practical perspective – is rendered moot. Perhaps the kind of curatorial outlook you're describing – putting works out there and just leaving them to it – is another aspect of the 'classical' / 'technological' dualism you mentioned. As someone who both began and has spent much of his compositional life within 'classical' institutions (music colleges), it's instilled in me a sense of – for want of a better word – 'ownership', which means that if I feel inclined to withdraw a work, then I have the right to do that, a right that will most likely be respected by musicians – until I die, of course, when composers' works seem to enter the realm of 'free for all'(!). But I would**

It's an interesting point: I think that technology does start to permeate the entire lifecycle of a piece of music, even beyond its role in the compositional process. And I've always been very much a person who lives within the "technological" world, in this regard; I love the fact that you quite literally lose control of your own creations once they get out there and start proliferating. There's a point at which they grow up, they leave home, they go off and live their own lives. And as digital recordings, especially, they become porous – they mutate and recombine with other music, evolve and grow in new and unexpected directions. There's almost a hint here of an old pre-notation "oral tradition", in which music was just this stuff floating amongst people, going around like the flu, mixing with other bugs and coming back in a new guise every year. And perhaps it's even our notion of the score – of there being a single fixed, written, "true text" of a musical work – that creates the sense that compositions are these solid, enduring objects.

**only do that with instrumental music; with my technological hat on, I don't think I would try to withdraw an electronic piece that I've put into the public domain, simply because once it's out, it's out, forever. So I can see your point entirely, although I don't think you should preclude from yourself the option of withdrawing pieces simply because of their technological nature.**

**You mentioned before about discerning what a piece "wants to be"; obviously, that can be difficult and time-consuming, and I wonder whether 'May 19, 1988' is unique in having two decades separating its start and end date? And as a slightly whimsical aside, have you ever begun more than one piece on the same day – and then renamed them so as to avoid a conflict of titles?**

Maybe technology is moving us in another direction, simultaneously backwards and forwards in time, as everything becomes more liquid and fluid. This isn't to say I don't believe in compositions; I really strive for there to be a structural integrity to every piece I write, so that it's not just a loose collection of sounds that can be taken apart without consequence and reassembled into any other shape, in any new context. But conversely, I do love that process of dissolution and recombination: I love to see what happens to my work as it gets molecularized and spread around like useful little genes being swapped by bacteria. So I think there's room for both perspectives. And we should also remember that the written notes sitting there in ink on a score are every bit as likely to march off the page and start wandering around on their own; it's just that the process is much less transparent to us.

Ha, to answer the second question first – I have! Well, sort of. And both dates are wrong. 'April 27, 1991' was actually written sometime in the summer of 1990, but then recorded on April 27, 1991. 'April 28, 1991' was ALSO recorded on April 27, 1991, and also written (earlier, I think) in the summer of 1990; it actually underwent far more significant revisions on April 27, 1991 than 'April 27, 1991' did, but it was published much later, so the title was already taken. In the end, since both dates were made-up anyway, I decided to just move its title forward by one day and call it close enough.

And there's no piece so far that has such a long separation as 'May 19, 1988' – though as we talked about, it wasn't so much "completed" in 2008 as revisited, then published on a whim.

**It's perhaps helpful for me to say just a little about why I regard the Bach stretch as a "failed experiment". It seems to me to be entirely separate from everything else you've done. It doesn't explore or extend the ideas that occupy the rest of your work – on the contrary, it taps into a vein that's been rather too heavily tapped in the last few years. I don't regard sound stretching as an evil in any way – it's been employed in various ways in some of my own works – but what you did in that piece didn't seem to do much that was different from the hoard of creative barbarians who've used it to do exactly what you did, namely slow something down massively and then marvel at the sonic weirdness that ensues. So there was an air of disappointment in that reaction – particularly as one musician did just this on a release in 2011, and it was horrifying to see how many people were taken in by its utter vacuity and pretentiousness. It angered me massively at the time, and I think a vestige of that indignance manifested itself when I heard your Bach stretch. That only scratches the surface of my reaction and feelings about it, but it perhaps clarifies a bit why I described it the way I did.**

I have, though, been toying for some time with releasing something I call 'September 24, 1983': it's a recording from (I think) 1984 of a piece I (I think) wrote in 1983 right after I got my first real synthesizer, a Roland Juno-60; the title-date would be in honor of the day I got the synth, and would give us a separation of three decades! I'm not sure it has any real artistic merit, but maybe I'll release it as a special limited-edition 30-year joke this fall.

I'm actually quite comfortable in saying, on the record, that what you're describing here is yet another example of my basically having no idea what's going on in the world around me! And it's an important point to emphasize, because one of the real hazards, I think, of the kind of solo electronic music that I do is getting overly isolated in one's hermetic little world and not having the sort of feedback and constraints that naturally arise in more social or group-oriented art forms. Working alone like that, you can very easily come to believe that what you're doing is radically new, whereas the truth is that you're simply out of touch. And when I did that Bach stretch, I was just totally unaware of the uses and abuses of the technology that you're describing here. Fortunately it was never a piece that I really took particularly "seriously", but a trickier case was my 2000-2001 field recording series: at the time, I genuinely believed that no one, ever, had had the idea of wandering around a city with a tape recorder and building pieces out of the resulting urban soundscapes. Well, whatever relative merits those pieces might have in retrospect, wild originality is not among them! At the time I was just clueless about the broader context that I was stumbling into. And this to me is a real occupational hazard

**Yes, the view from the ivory tower is invariably an impressive one! One of the most prevalent ideas running through your music is the establishing of a kind of 'stasis', specifically one that arises out of a variety of material(s) moving locally, but in such a way as to diffuse large-scale notions of development and, to an extent, interaction (this is particularly the case in your later work). Of course, there's an obvious connection to the epiphanic experience Feldman's music brought about in you, yet many of your earliest published works already show strong leanings in that direction. I'm thinking of pieces like 'October 30, 1993' (perhaps the strongest example from this period) and 'March 3, 1993', and even 'September 3, 1992' and 'April 27, 1993'. They still use rhythm and harmony in conventional ways, but the lack of an overt sense of overall direction or development is striking. Have you always had a sensibility towards musical stases? Does direction or development have any significant place in your work? And might the first contact with Feldman have been a kind of ultimate "crystallization" (to use your word), not so much bringing about a change of direction but clarifying ideas and intentions that were already latent?**

of doing very solitary work, particularly in a technological medium. When you're in the echo chamber of your own mind, things can easily seem far more impressive than they will in the cold objective light of day.

Yeah, there was definitely something in that first Feldman encounter that was very much a moment of recognition more than anything else – a sense of "Yes, of course! That's what I've been wanting to do all along!" It was something profoundly new for me, yet profoundly familiar, and in retrospect so clear and obvious. And it does tie in with that sense of stasis that's always been latent in my work, as you point out – though I do think that this is more a stasis of "content" than of "form", if that makes any sense. Particularly in my post-Feldman works, I think there's a good deal of linear development in most of my pieces, much more so than you hear in a lot of electronic music – but it's all development around the same theme, the same message or story. I tend to be critical of electronic music that just grabs a loop and runs it forever, if only because I know how easy that is to do – it's built right into the nature of the medium. And I've always been very focused on the challenge of how to move beyond that, how to create an electronic music that evolves and grows organically throughout the duration of a given piece. So I'd like to think that I do bring a degree of complexity to the narrative and linear evolution of each piece – even though, yes, what's being developed does have a sense of stasis about it, because it's all an examination of the same idea from different angles, perspectives, dimensions. It's like I'm trying in each piece to see the same timeless object from every possible viewpoint simultaneously

– but because music is a temporal art form (ultimately we do have to hit play, we do have to hit stop), what you're seeing is one particular pathway, one particular pan or camera sweep or transit or journey around this stable solid thing that I'm trying to get at. So you get this slowly mutating 3D slice of, say, a 248-dimensional object, but the hope is that you somehow piece together or infer what the object is, so that amidst all this movement and change is a hint or glimpse of something unmoving and unchanging. And I hope that's what you're hearing.

**That's definitely what I hear in a lot of your work, and I wonder whether it's truest therefore not to make a distinction in these cases between "content" and "form". I know you're stressing the point about narrative and the evolution of material (or, rather, one's perception of evolution; the materials themselves don't always change), but the formal environment you've created for these pieces is surely part & parcel of the content that fills them. To put it another way, is there a "form" at all, or is what we're calling "form" merely the passive byproduct of the active, intuitive behavior and interactions of the materials, of the "content"? This makes me think again of the indeterminate pieces, which on the one hand have the loosest notion of "form" – and yet are they really fundamentally different from your determinate works? We've discussed duration before, which is arrived at intuitively based on your compositional editing process, so surely one could argue that "form" is at most a secondary element in your music?**

Yeah, there's definitely a case to be made that the "form" of my pieces is really just an emergent property – a side effect, really – of the processes used to create them. And the indeterminate pieces were very much only a slight variation on the techniques I was using throughout my work at the time. Just as Feldman's late works have been described as "Feldman playing his own indeterminate pieces", you could say that my indeterminate pieces were me just not editing my own pieces! (Though there's perhaps a little more artistry and effort involved than that.) But the broader point certainly stands, which is that much of what passes for form in my work is very much rooted in the processes – both technological and methodological – that I employ, and arises quite naturally from them. And this is something that intensified after I shifted back out of the indeterminate series, because at that point, my "top-level" structuring process changed to become much more simple and transparent. Where I had previously used a lot of chance procedures and random recombination of material to create complexity and large-scale structure, beginning around



2005 I began much more simply laying out materials linearly in the order in which they were composed. And so what happens is that the large-scale form or narrative of the piece becomes (with some variation due to editing) a quite literal record of the composing process itself – almost a documentation of it. And the narrative of the piece retraces the steps I took in writing it – the experiences I went through, the things I found as I followed the trajectory of these particular sounds and ideas. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, if you will.

That said, I do want to emphasize very strongly that, to me, process is very much a means to an end, and what matters most of all is the final audible – musical – result. Many people have remarked on hearing about my methods, “Oh wow, that makes so much more sense now; I wish I’d known that before I heard the music.” But I really reject that. If you don’t like what you’re hearing when you hear my music, the music has failed. And no amount of fancy footwork or desperate hand-waving from me about my methods can fix that. The weird methodologies and processes I develop are just a way for me to get to an interesting musical place, and if you don’t find that place interesting, then please, please, just delete the music. I have no interest at all in being some hyper-intellectual composer whose methods are more interesting than the music that results from them. That’s just not what I’m about.

**Quite a few of your pieces seem to have their centre (or thereabouts) as a structurally significant point – introducing significantly different material, shifting in a new direction, etc. – is that deliberate, or purely a coincidence?**

This is a very interesting observation, and I think you’re onto something – this definitely does happen sometimes in my work. I’d say it’s not really either deliberate or coincidental, but more an artifact of my working process – an emergent effect. Just like I was saying

before about writing and writing until I get totally exhausted, what happens sometimes is that I'm writing and writing – and getting tired! – and then I come to a place of clarity or resolution, and that's often a very beautiful place. And then I say, hey, this piece ain't so bad after all! And there's this second wind that happens, this renewed burst of energy, and I find some new direction to head off in before running myself into the ground yet again. You'll hear this very clearly on the big viola thing I'm doing right now: precisely halfway through there's a very clear sense of closure and stability and conclusion and tranquility, and then it just picks up and starts again, and goes (I hope) to some new and interesting places. And that's very much a reflection of what I'm going through as I write.

**That all makes sense – and seems to reinforce the point I was making above about the inherent expressiveness of your music irrespective of the expressive qualities of the material itself. In the indeterminate works, does the Flash coding do anything to the mp3 fragments other than play through them in a random/undetermined fashion? If not, then maybe they could be presented like the *Fragments* release you did for the now-defunct Musica Excentrica netlabel, and allow people to play the fragments shuffled in any audio player. For what it's worth, the indeterminate pieces are among my favorite of your works, for reasons I've never been quite able to put my finger on.**

I'm glad you like them! And yeah, they're really very simple: just a bunch of little audio players on shuffle mode stacked on top of each other; there's no DSP or anything fancy going on. And yes, that long-forgotten *Fragments* release is basically a single-track version of this type of piece, whereas the Flash ones on my site usually have 3 to 5 tracks or so going on simultaneously. Unfortunately the multi-track approach makes it impossible to play the full pieces on a regular CD or mp3 player, but there are any number of other ways to realize them technologically. And whatever my own frustrations and anxieties about the pieces, I do have a real affection for them, and I think there's still tremendous untapped potential there. I can very vaguely allude to several top-secret projects currently in the works that might carry these ideas forward – but more I cannot say, for now!

**Let's examine the indeterminate aspect a little further. Do you see it as an extension of your previous practice or a break from it? I'm thinking particularly of the texture pieces from 2002 onwards; the indeterminate works seem to represent a kind of apotheosis of the shifting but essentially grounded materials heard in those earlier pieces. Yet your subsequent preoccupation with heavily episodic music suggests that you may have found the indeterminate approach to be somewhat limited. So I'm curious to know more about your view of indeterminacy. Certainly the approach you've taken since, despite being guided by intuition (in terms of how you compose and then position the various segments of what you've called an "irregular helix"), results in works with a fixed, definite form, which contrasts strongly with the indeterminate approach.**

The single biggest lesson I learned from the indeterminate pieces was that I love editing. The series was originally a response to the constraints and limitations that had built up in my work at the time, and represented to me very much an extension of my then-current practices – the next logical step, rather than any sharp break. But what I found was that I missed the editing. I missed the crafting of a narrative, the sense of getting it "right". Indeterminate music is all about letting go: it's about setting things up in such a way to maximize your chances of a good result, but ultimately giving up control of what that final result will be. And I love control! I love telling a story, building a narrative, having a piece start out in one place and dump you off on another planet entirely. The indeterminate pieces can create wonderful and unexpected musical moments – and can KEEP creating them, in the way a fixed piece never can – but the price you pay is that you give up the joy of sculpting the top-level form of the work, and the additional level of craftsmanship and expressivity that comes with it. It was the indeterminate series that really taught me how important this is to me. It's like there's a whole level of meaning that's just not there anymore. Again, you gain a lot, there's tremendous excitement and potential in indeterminacy, but you also lose something. And even if the technological aspect of putting these things together hadn't been so prohibitively difficult, I expect I would have eventually lost interest or drifted in other directions for exactly this reason.

**Listening to the indeterminate works, and being conscious of their lack of intentional narrative, is interesting when one considers them in relation to the 'fixed' works. The inclination is to look for – or at least assume – a sense of narrative or direction (whether intentional or subjective) in the fixed works, and to abandon that in the indeterminate pieces. But that seems flawed, even false, in many ways due to the sonic results; I hear plenty of what I have to call 'narrative' in the indeterminate works, and likewise a lack of it in some of the fixed works. This makes me wonder whether there's any scope for viewing either or both of these types of work within the ethos that Brian Eno established for ambient music in the late 1970s, particularly his philosophy that it "must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting". The 'steady state' that many of your works – especially the indeterminate works – inhabit suggests that there's potentially a meaningful parallel here.**

When I first got into Feldman, I remember thinking, "Wow, this is awesome, I'm going to listen to this all the time!" Perfect music for doing the dishes, right? But you put it on in the background, and the music is gone – it dissipates. You just simply can't listen to Feldman that way – he demands your total attention, and if you don't provide it, you hear nothing. So here's the exact opposite of what Brian Eno is talking about – it's not ignorable, it doesn't accommodate many levels of listening. Now it's true that I aspire to those higher Feldman-esque levels in my work, however infrequently I may succeed in reaching them. But what I'd really like to do is precisely what you say – to create a music that responds dynamically to different levels of effort or attention, and rewards the listener proportionally for what they put into it. I'm reminded in this of my favorite writer Thomas Pynchon: with him, you very much get back from his work what you put into it. Read it superficially, and yes, you'll get something, you may enjoy it, it may work for you at some level. But really dive in, put a great amount of effort and thought and time and dedication into it, and it gives back proportionally – there's an intricacy there that rewards a deep level of involvement. All of which to say, I guess I'm hoping to have my cake and eat it too.

**How do you judge a piece to have 'succeeded', or do you not think in those terms? Is it easy for you to arrive at a point where you can say "this piece is now finished"? Also, we've established that the titles of your works are the effective compositional start dates, but do you keep any record of the completion dates? Or the dates they were published online for that matter? To seek to examine your work chronologically (as I'm doing in what I'm writing) is to encounter the immediate difficulty of having little idea of the respective lengths of time they took to create! Considering that 'May 19, 1988' didn't emerge in its final form until twenty years later, this can have significant ramifications on the nature of the material. Furthermore, it has an interesting effect on the titles of your works, which appear to be the only bit of information you're giving away (as you don't write accompanying texts, etc.), yet their meaningfulness is actually extremely vague.**

Yeah, the dates are more intended as an index or abstract system of naming than as any coherent record of what I was working on at a given time. And even I don't keep notes on when I finish each piece! I can always figure it out by looking at the last save dates on the source files, and I do keep meaning to put the completion dates into my own calendar, so at least I know when things were finished – but somehow I never get around to it.

For years, though, one absolute axiom of my work was that I would never start a new piece until I had finished the one I was working on. I started this system when I first got a DAT deck, and with it the ability to do CD quality recordings, in 1992, and it served me well for decades; I really felt it was the secret of my productivity. Before that, everything would always be a "work in progress" – I'd always find one excuse or another for not finishing pieces, and everything would remain in a perpetual state of imperceptible ongoing revision. The final stages of work on a piece are invariably the most tedious and least inspiring, and the truth was I basically just never wanted to sit down and do the hard work of finishing anything. So this rule became very crucial for me, and really helped me move forward in my work. I think it's incredibly important to completely finish and set aside a given piece, to be done and move beyond it, so that you can go on to the next set of questions and problems. It's something I strongly recommend to every artist I know.

But this being said, I should confess that I recently decided I've reached a sufficient level of discipline – or perhaps even, dare I say it, "maturity"! – to allow myself to have multiple

pieces in progress at once. This is something that's changed for me just in the last few years, and so far it's gone OK. But this does mean that nowadays, you'd be back to having no real idea about what I'm working on when!

As for deciding when a piece is finished, it's always a very subtle blend of satisfaction with the state of the work, resolution of the major outstanding problems in it, and...complete despairing exhaustion! My general rule of thumb is that if I'm immediately undoing the majority of changes I've just made, the thing's done. I'll move a given note a half second forward in time, change a level by +1 dB, etc., then on the next pass I'll move that same note a half second backwards to where it was before and put the level back down 1 dB. This to me is one of the surest signs I'm done – and after going on pointlessly like this for a few days or weeks, even I will finally admit that the time has come!

To get back to your initial question of judging the "success" of a piece, I'm not sure that there's any one formula, or even any consistent pattern. Sometimes I think my favorites are the easiest! And there's often something to this, a good example being 'November 7, 2010', which was not only a piece that was quick and easy to do, but that opened up a whole new line of exploration for me. These things sometimes go together – where something that's really new or different just sort of snaps into place all at once, and its newness or novelty leads you in very promising directions. But then again, a piece like 'March 1, 2009', which is a personal favorite of mine, didn't really lead me anywhere else; it's just sort of a unique, one-off thing, in terms of its approach.

And of course, as I've said before, my opinions of these things are always changing – I'm always rewriting my own history, my own sense of what's important or in the site's "canon". Plus listeners will often find merit in pieces that I'm disappointed by, and conversely I'll often love and stand by pieces that are universally reviled, or, worse, ignored. So I think, in the end, "success" in music is about as meaningful as "success" in life; it's just a word, and not necessarily a very helpful one.

**I can appreciate that, from the context of a compositional outlook that's being guided by the material itself, i.e. not being made to conform to a predetermined plan or schema. So do you engage in any significant self-critique? Or do you prefer simply to keep looking forward, making new pieces rather than spending time analyzing previous ones? And on a related point, do you listen to your own music?**

I used to listen to my own music more, but nowadays, well...there's just so damn much of it! I find that I can't even remember a lot of the stuff I've done; I remember the basics, of course, the general gist of each piece – but the individual twists and turns become less and less familiar. It's been funny hearing all the remixes for this book project, because often a given sample or fragment will sound very familiar, but even I can't place exactly where it came from. So I find myself spending more and more time as I get older looking forward and pushing onward with wherever I'm going, rather than going back and re-examining where I've been. Hopefully this is a healthy thing.

**Returning to the matter of completion dates for your music, there are discreet date references (and occasionally other things) contained in the comments field of the mp3 metadata, so are these the dates when the piece was actually finished and/or uploaded to your website?**

Ha, I can see you're thinking you've finally cracked the code here, unearthed the big secret, and now everything will fall into place! Well, yes, you are onto something: those little metadata tags are what I think of as "version numbers", and I've always embedded them in my mp3s. And for almost any recent piece, it will give you the answer you're searching for: that's the month and year in which the recording was finished and posted to my site. But – and you knew there'd be a but! – what those tags are really meant to indicate is

the particular version of the recording you're hearing. As time goes on, and as my tools and (hopefully) skills evolve, I like to go back to old recordings and try to improve the sound quality on them; very occasionally I'll make substantive changes to a piece or rethink it in some way, but much more often this is just remastering with newer technology. And the real purpose of those tags is to designate which version of the mastered recording you're hearing. Thus, recent pieces are all done with my latest tech, so they should pretty sound good. But as you go further and further back in time, the sound quality gets worse – as do the engineering skills! So when I have time, I like to go back and try to improve stuff. Thus the older the piece, the more likely it is, sooner or later, to have been remastered at some point – and thus to have a more recent version tag, which is, paradoxically, LESS accurate in terms of the information you're seeking! So the better an older piece sounds, the less your chances of knowing when it was actually finished – and I've once again made things hopelessly convoluted for you, as was always my plan.

**That's almost a relief – I didn't want to assume it was going to be quite as straightforward as my question suggested! When one examines those metadata dates in relation to the titular dates, something interesting emerges. All of your works since 'July 18, 2002' have a difference between the dates of just a few months (no more than eight), but every piece before that has a considerably larger time-span, of between one and twenty years! This marked split in your output is surely more than a coincidence, and it suggests various things, chiefly an increasing propensity for remastering/**

Ha ha, for once I can give you a straight answer! Your impressive data mining has indeed detected something real, a real event in my work, but it's not perhaps what you're expecting. What you've discovered amidst all that data is this: the birth of kennethkirschner.com. In the fall of 2002, with the release of my first CD (*post\_piano*) impending, I desperately needed to get some sort of website online to replace the pathetic placeholder that had been sitting there forlornly for some time. I finally cobbled together a crude site, and launched it just in time for a small release from 12k's old Term netlabel, followed soon thereafter by the release of



**reworking a piece the older it is, which corresponds with what you've just said.**

**But the sudden jump from a gap of years to months ('March 13, 2002' has a gap of over 6½ years; 'July 18, 2002' is just five months) implies this is as far as you've reached in your ongoing remastering project. Is that the case, and if so, can one expect revisions to the works from 'July 18, 2002' onward? And speaking of revisions, your description of a desire "to improve stuff" focuses on sound quality, but do you make material changes as well?**

*post\_piano* on Sub Rosa. The tiny site started out with just three mp3s of pieces I had some vague confidence in, but it led to a huge change in my work: from then on, whenever a new piece was finished, it went straight up on the site. This was how I had always dreamed of working, and how I still do today. Over time, the site gradually expanded to include more and more old (pre-2002, that is) pieces, as well as room for more and more of the new ones, eventually including everything I'd done, rather than just a rotating selection, as was initially the case. But the pattern you're seeing in all that data is the precise result of this change in my work: from late 2002 onwards, new pieces were immediately mastered, tagged with those "version numbers", and posted online, whereas pieces from before that date only gradually got cleaned up and incorporated into the site.

Alas, this also shows the degree to which my vaunted "mastering program" remains a mere aspiration. I'm really pained by what I see as the sub-standard sound quality on a lot of those earlier recordings, but it's just so hard to find the time to go back and bring them up to my current standards. There's a huge difference between my skills just a decade ago and those today, and I'd love to see all those pieces I mastered in the early and mid 2000s improved. But this is one of those trade-offs I'm always struggling with: I've got limited time, limited resources, and any time put into improving old works is time taken away from writing new ones. And for me, it's always the new work that's most exciting, that I most want to focus on; the temptation is always too great to write something new, rather than put my time toward improving old pieces. And because of this, far fewer of those older pieces

have been properly remastered than I'd have liked.

I do, though, tend to limit this sort of thing to just remastering, rather than any kind of substantive edits or material changes (the deliberate damaging of good old 'May 19, 1988' is an exception in this regard). If I can barely find the time to merely remaster these old works, imagine the disaster it would be if I tried to completely rethink or rework each old piece from a modern point of view! I'd never write another note. And in a way, it would also be a little against the spirit of what I'm trying to do, which is to make each piece the result of a particular time, a particular set of questions and problems in my work – so for me to try to re-compose a piece from 1993 or 2003 in the world of 2013 just doesn't make sense. Just as, if I'm still alive and writing in 2023 or (let's hope) 2033, I'd like to think I won't be spending all my time worrying about what I did wrong in 2013.

**The fact that many of your pieces employ synthetic instrumental sounds is interesting when one considers how often there's a field recording/hauntological quality brought to bear on the material. Is that an attempt to increase the element of realism in the music or is it working towards a different end?**

Well, a certain amount of it is what you might call the Instagram effect – everyone's running around taking lots and lots of really mediocre digital photos with their phones, but somehow when you make them look WORSE, they look better! There's an aestheticization of the flaws and failings. And in electronic music, especially when working with purely electronic sounds, there are a lot of serious constraints built right in: play the same note twice, and it's the SAME note, in a way you could never play a note on a violin twice. And the human ear picks up on that right away. So yes, I deliberately dive in there and damage a lot of synthetic stuff, precisely for the purpose of pushing the limitations of the medium out of the foreground

**Well, there's a debate to be had about whether Instagram is indeed "an aestheticization of the flaws and failings" of an image, or whether it's more directly concerned with aspects of nostalgia that seem to arise with increasing frequency from a rather vague dissatisfaction with digitalia.**

**Nonetheless, I take your point about the desire to escape from the inexpressive nature of synthetic sounds, yet it begs the question: why work with synthetic sounds in the first place if there's going to be the need for 'damage' later on (which is no less synthetic, though less noticeably)? Why not work directly with recordings of actual instruments?**

and trying to turn the failings of the technology into an aesthetic strategy.

That's certainly very true, and I should say that the semiotics of nostalgia do have an impact on me whether I like it or not. For example, I'm a big Duke Ellington fan, and I'm always a little embarrassed at the fact that a clean, modern-sounding recording never has quite the same effect on me as a static-ridden, dirty, noisy, bandpassed old record. So clearly it's not just the composition I'm focusing on, but the broader sonic references and context that the composition is embedded in. And this is something I consciously try to make use of in my own work as well.

A lot of it comes down to just what I have on hand. And synthesizers and samplers are something I always have access to, whereas acoustic instruments, and skilled players, are much less available to me. I work completely independently, outside of academia or anywhere I might be able to turn up lots of good acoustic musicians, and I certainly don't have the funding to be constantly hiring people. So I end up working with what I come across.

Consider 2012: the recurring sounds in my work are viola and mbira. Why? Well, a while back my good friend Igor Ballereau was, quite rightly, critiquing my reliance on samples rather than acoustic instruments, which prompted a long hand-wringing response from me lamenting my lack of access to acoustic instruments and good players. And I said, ah, if only I had a string quartet! Even just a single viola! And, well, Igor took pity on me, and immediately emailed his favorite violist, Tawnya

Popoff, to see if she'd be willing to help. And that's how the whole viola thing got started.

Meanwhile, I had this big plan early in the year for a new piano piece, and went over to do some recordings at the apartment of my friend Joshue Ott, who's got a piano right down the street from me. But he'd forgotten that his cleaning lady was coming that day – and a piano isn't something you can easily schlepp from room to room to avoid a vacuum cleaner. However, unbeknownst to me, Josh had this huge collection of mbiras sitting in the back of his studio...and those can easily flee vacuum cleaners! And so 2012 ends up with a bunch of mbira pieces, all thanks to the cleaning lady.

All of which to say, if while hanging out at the playground, I discover that one of my kid's friend's parents plays, say, bassoon, and another maybe mridangam – well, get ready for a lot of works for bassoon and mridangam!

**Do you think it inhibits the ability of your musical 'voice' to speak with sufficient clarity without these layers of artificial dirt applied to the material? The synthetic sounds, after all, are being manipulated by a human instinct that is intrinsically expressive, irrespective of the fact the sounds themselves could be thought of as inexpressive. In a nutshell (and notwithstanding their stylistic differences), does a work like 'January 29, 1994' have more expressive potential than 'May 3, 1997'?**

To me, the dirt has really become part of my voice – even to the point of cliché, I sometimes worry ("Take piano, add noise, instant mopey Kirschner piece!"). But I do love it, and 'May 3, 1997' is just the right example to see where it all comes from. The "piano" in it is actually just a single low-res piano sample (the same one later used for the first *post\_piano* album), and originally it was just going to be that and the percussion. But that sample has all this horrible noise in it, so that as each note was played a very clear hiss would come in and out with it, and it just sounded terrible. It occurred to me that one way to cover it up would be by adding more noise – so I sampled the noise floor on the outputs of a couple of my hardware synths, and added it in as another layer. And

**I think there's a lot tied up in this question, particularly with regard to the comments you've made about Feldman (in the interview with Tobias). What I'm wondering is whether you're striving for what we could call the "macro-expression" that one hears in so much Feldman, where individual sounds and gestures, taken on their own, could well be described as cold and inexpressive, but in the – often, much – bigger context, they become part of a deeply provocative and emotional work. With that in mind, is the 'dirt' in your work necessary?**

to me that really became a crucial part of the composition, another voice, a key expressive element in the whole thing. So it was initially very much about making a virtue of necessity, but eventually the noise and damage became like another instrument to me, and I still treat it that way.

Well, the main difference between me and Feldman is that he's a much better composer! And this isn't just me being insecure; I really feel I understand the limitations of my own work very well, perhaps better than may be immediately apparent to a lot of listeners. And where Feldman is able to do precisely what you describe – take these icy, anonymous fragments and build them up into a profound and compelling macro-structure – my approach goes in a different direction, by necessity. Yes, I'm taking some of his tonal vocabulary, and some aspects of his sense of form – but I really don't have the skills to do with it all that he does. So the individual fragments and motifs of my work speak to you much more directly, are more overtly expressive, in part because I'm just not able to operate at his level. Though, of course, there's nothing wrong with this, and maybe it's only my envy at his abilities that makes my own approach seem comparatively trivial.

And to get back to the dirt, I think that focusing in on these issues of timbre that I have access to as an electronic musician is, for me, another way to compensate for not having those truly Feldman-level skills. Or, perhaps to put it more positively, it's a way for me to carve out a unique space or niche for myself, without simply imitating what Feldman does. I tend to go back and forth on this – so take your pick!

**Do you want your pieces to feel 'composed'? In this respect, a piece that comes to mind is 'April 4, 2012', which sounds plausibly like an authentic ethnic field recording.**

**Which perhaps answers my earlier question about striving for a Feldman-esque kind of "macro-expression". It's interesting that you describe the episodic nature of 'April 4, 2012' as a symptom of its "failure", as a large number of your works – particularly between 2006 and 2010 – are structured in this way. Presumably, episodic structures mean a lot more to you than just a means of stringing together fragments that don't "get along"?**

Yes, that's definitely one of my "faux authentic" ethnographic recordings! And like many of those pieces, it comes across as being a disconnected collection of found sounds. But the whole question of having things feel "composed" is an important one to me, and it's certainly something I strive for in much of my work. Sometimes, and that piece is a case in point, the fact that the narrative ends up being very loosely structured, episodic, broken up by silence, is actually a sign of failure from my point of view. I always want to have a lot of different levels of structure and order in my pieces, but there's times where the sounds just don't "get along" – nothing snaps together, nothing assembles itself. And sometimes, in those cases, if I do really like the underlying material, I'll fall back to just stringing together these fragments one after the other. I guess it's an OK approach, but it always feels like a bit of a failure to me. Because what I always aim to achieve is a real sense of composition, in terms of having the top-level structures hold together in a very necessary-sounding way.

Yeah, most of my work does have this episodic or segmentary quality to it – it's really one of those basic ways in which I structure things. But nowadays I guess I just like the seams to show a little less! Breaking things up by big silences – I feel like I've done that, I've been there, I get it. So when the only way I can find to piece things together is by means of those big silences, rather than some more elegant or subtle transformation, I do feel it's a bit of a disappointment. Of course, that's one of many different kinds of silences I use – contrast it, for example, with the recent big viola piece ('October 13, 2012'), where the silences are used quite differently, and where I'm quite

happy with the results. I guess in a piece like 'April 4, 2012' the silences between segments are disappointing to me because they're playing a structural role that I would have preferred to see filled by sound. 'June 9, 2011' is another example of this problem, in a piece I otherwise quite like. But it just didn't work any other way.

**So how would you characterize your use of silence in 'October 13, 2012', and how does it differ from those pieces where it's used to aid sounds that don't "get along"?**

The silence there is really a constitutive element of the composition – its rhythm, almost. There's no way you could conceptualize that piece without the silences – imagine trying to take them out, and what that would sound like, and you'll see what I mean. But if you look at 'April 4, 2012' or 'June 9, 2011', you can quite easily imagine those pieces without the silences. This isn't to say that the silences don't perhaps "work" at some level, that they don't have some merit – but they are to me somehow less essential. Knowing the process and development of the pieces as I do, I know that those silences are there merely by default – since I couldn't find any other way of connecting up the disparate structures that they separate. But with 'October 13, 2012', the silences are built right into the most basic design of the piece; they're very much what the piece is "about" – they're one of the rules or parameters or axioms of the way the piece has been put together from the very start, rather than an accident of the editing process. So to me that's a very different use of silence, and one that I'm much more satisfied with.

**'November 3, 1998' stands out from the pieces you were composing at the time (1994-1999); in contrast to the drift- & texture-based ideas you were exploring, this piece seems to be what amounts to a synthetic chamber piece.**

**There were no precedents for this in your work, and it would be a long time until you'd return to this kind of thing (at least six years), so I'm interested how this piece came about, and your thoughts and intentions behind it.**

'November 3, 1998' has a bit of a storied history to it: it's a piece that, for reasons I don't fully understand, tends to have a very intense effect – a very intensely negative effect! – on people who know me personally. An ex-girlfriend, when I was writing it, would lock herself in the bathroom and refuse to come out until it had stopped playing. Another girlfriend, on hearing just a few moments of it, ripped my very expensive studio headphones off her head and threw them across the room. A very close friend calmly explained that I hadn't written it; rather, he insisted, a being from another dimension, composed of pure evil, had come to earth, studied my methods, and tried to create a "Kirschner piece", but had failed because it was composed solely of pure evil. My older brother laughed heartily with me after hearing all these stories, but then, on actually listening to the piece, turned pale and made me swear I would never mock anyone ever again for being disturbed by it.

I'm really not sure why the thing has this effect on people – in particular on people who know me well. Especially because I myself find the piece to be relatively innocuous! I even considered abandoning it back in 1998 because it just wasn't holding my interest. And here again you see my focus on process, because when I was writing it, I found it to be a bit boring and disappointing because it was, for me, more of the same: I was using basically the same methods to put it together that I'd been using in all of my work at the time. The "chamber music" sound of the piece struck me as merely incidental; it was just a slightly different variation in terms of sound design from the "drift & texture" pieces you mention – the core process was the same. Thus it's



**You've got me wondering whether the reasons I find 'November 3, 1998' such a deeply striking piece are precisely the same reasons as those who had such a problem with it! I think the lack of precedent in your work must have a lot to do with it; even though a piece like 'August 13, 1997' is starting to examine this kind of more aloof abstraction, the foundations of a lot of your pieces from this time were either rhythmic and/or percussive, which is perhaps more 'safe', more 'tangible', from a listening perspective. But it's not just the shift into abstraction: I wonder whether there's an element of the 'uncanny valley' manifesting itself here – the presentation of the piece as a synthetic chamber piece taps into a kind of quasi-realism that you hadn't really laid claim to before, and that aspect of 'November 3, 1998' is especially engrossing. There's no reason at all why this couldn't be played in a live context by musicians, and that in itself separates the piece from most of your previous output. I know for you this was "merely incidental", but I would argue that it's perhaps the work's most defining characteristic.**

particularly fascinating to me that it stands out so starkly nowadays, both in the context of its sound design and in terms of the strange reactions people have to it.

The "uncanny valley" idea is an interesting suggestion, and I wonder if that's part of what gets under the skin of people with this piece. But by that logic, the piece would then become paradoxically less compelling if it were realized by live musicians! And I'm not sure that would be the case; I think it really could work very well with acoustic instruments. Some people have suggested that the particular tone of the piece really lies in its use of silence – specifically in the ways in which the silences in the piece constantly play with and frustrate your expectations. And that was definitively a way in which this piece did really break new ground for me: whatever the pros and cons of the sound design (and personally I think some of it works, and some of it is pretty dated and weak now), 'November 3, 1998' was the first time I really remember spending as much time and effort crafting the silences in a piece as I did the sounds. And that's a direction I've very much continued in, ever more obsessively.

**It's good that we've finally got to explore notions of silence, as it's easy to get entirely preoccupied with sound as though that was all that mattered! I know this begs the question of what "silence" is (or isn't) in the first place, but how does silence manifest itself in your compositional thinking? Is it the implied 'stage' upon which the various surface elements play out, glimpsed between them? Is it, in this sense, a 'passive' silence? Or is it a more (if this isn't oxymoronic) 'substantial' element, an 'active' silence that's not perhaps as significant as the non-silent materials?**

**Let's get back to the idea of synthetic chamber music. 'November 3, 1998' may have been anomalous in your work at the time, but you've composed numerous pieces since that sound extremely close to instrumental chamber works. This seems to be an increasing interest in the last few years – I'm thinking of works like 'May 21, 2009', 'September 25, 2010' and especially 'June 9, 2011'**

I think I use silence in both of these ways – and probably many more. This is something I try quite consciously to do in my work, which is to not rely on a single monolithic notion of what silence is or should be, but rather to deploy it a variety of ways, as a tool that changes its nature depending on the role it's being called on to play. So yes, you can find pieces of mine, many of them in fact, where silence is the stage on which the sounds act out their lives, where it plays that role of a passive or background supporting element. And then there's pieces in which silence is very much one of the "colors" I'm using, as I talk about with Tobias – where it acts as a sort of "clear paint". There are times when silence clears the palate between otherwise exhaustingly complex sounds, times where it's a predominantly rhythmic element that gives a piece its flow and sense of motion...and who knows how many more uses. But interestingly, the one way I don't think of myself as using silence is in the more traditional Cagean sense, as what we might call "the idea of silence". To me silence is always very much a compositional element, a physical thing, rather than a strictly theoretical or conceptual device – though one could of course quite legitimately read those aspects into the music.

I think there may very well be! There's a definite strain of my work that's about trying to create chamber music by other means. And the means I have available to me are, of course, electronic. Yet hopefully it's not just a matter of trying to do a "fake" chamber piece, but rather of doing a sort of hybrid work that you couldn't accomplish otherwise. Even in my most "realistic" sounding instrumental pieces, I'd like to think that, on listening closely enough, you'd

**and 'September 13, 2012'. Is this a conscious trend/leaning from your perspective? It seems too conscious and deliberate to be described as "merely incidental" (as in 'November 3, 1998'). So is there perhaps now a frustrated instrumental composer starting to lurk within the electronic sound artist?**

**There's an interesting shift in the tenor of your music during 2006 and 2007. In the electronic pieces ('July 17, 2006', 'August 19, 2006', etc.) you emphasize their real – i.e. synthetic – character in a way that you had more or less avoided before ('January 15, 2005' and 'October 13, 2001' are rare exceptions); and in the three piano pieces beginning with 'March 20, 2007', the piano material sounds more real than ever before – complete with the noise of pedals being depressed and natural sustain rather than reverb. Was this a desire to embrace a new kind (or at least a new level) of realism in your work?**

be able to find any number of impossibilities in it – ways the thing just couldn't have been done with traditional instruments, whether it's a matter of microtuning, chaotic or aleatoric rhythms, techniques that would be unplayable on the original instrument, whatever. So hopefully running somewhere just below the surface in these "natural" sounding works is something profoundly strange and quite unnatural.

Ha, "reality" is a dangerous word! Take a look at 'March 20, 2007': what you hear is me sitting at a close-miked, meantone-tuned grand piano on stage in Frank Gehry's Disney Hall in Los Angeles. But please, it's not like the L.A. Philharmonic gave me keys to their space and let me go in and start messing with the tuning pegs on their grand. The "piano" is just a bunch of math inside a computer; it's not even sampled – it's a physical model. I've gotten lots of compliments on my miking techniques on those pedals in particular – and the pedals don't even exist! The rich wooden keys you hear going down were actually played on a cheap, broken plastic keyboard. As for the Gehry space, it's an impulse response in a convolution reverb; more math. So everything "real" in that piece is totally "fake" – and of course, conversely, there's many, many pieces of mine that sound completely electronic or synthetic but that have nonetheless been entirely built from acoustic instruments and "natural" sound sources. The point is not just to blur the lines between what is "real" and what isn't, but to abandon them entirely. And that to me is the beauty of working in this medium: everything is at your disposal, every sound, every possibility, all equal and all available. So if you're in the mood to sit down

**But I'm wondering whether there was a concern here to assert realism more – or, rather, in a different way – than before. As you've previously described, earlier in your work the introduction of artificial noise elements helped to lend an air of authenticity while simultaneously masking some of the more obviously synthetic aspects of the sounds with which you were working, but those three piano pieces I mentioned – beginning with 'March 20, 2007' – give the impression that you were striving for a kind of transparency that you'd not hitherto attempted. Coupled with the obvious artificiality (in the sense that they are synthetically created sounds) of the electronic pieces from the previous year, they present an interesting two-pronged attack of sorts, one of 'synthetic realism' (the piano pieces), the other of 'genuine artifice' (the electronic works). Together, they do seem to assert a pretty powerful determination for these pieces to be perceived as 'non-artificial'. Was any of that a conscious effort on your part, or was it more incidental to your outlook than it appears?**

at that grand piano on stage in Gehry's hall (as I clearly was that day), you can – but if you'd prefer to travel to some other solar system or unimagined alternate dimension, that's just as much an option.

Actually there was something else going on there. I was going through a tough time in 2007 – some serious health problems, amongst other disasters – and one more challenge was an ongoing sense of artistic frustration or disappointment. I felt that things just weren't going anywhere, I wasn't moving forward. And the pieces you mention were part of what I thought of at the time as the "Morandi solution" for getting around that block. Do you know Giorgio Morandi? Here's a guy who painted...bottles. Just bottles. Endless, endless bottles – plus pitchers, jugs, cups, just what was sitting around the kitchen, apparently. And yet in his work is this amazing cosmos. There's this sense that if you can just focus clearly enough on what's right in front of you, you can discover worlds. And the piano has always been what's right in front of me. So when times are tough, or I'm struggling to move forward, I'll often sit down at the piano (or the piano software!), and try to look very closely at things. And those piano pieces were a part of that approach. So to me it was less about any conscious campaign of questioning realism vs. artifice or synthesis vs. authenticity or anything like that, than it was about trying to get down to the very most basic elements of my way of composing. To look at the bottles right in front of me.

**Why do you think the piano has assumed such importance in your work? How do you feel your music benefits from using the piano as a medium? Is it anything to do with the instrument's inherent 'neutrality', in terms of the essential stability of its basic timbre (notwithstanding the fact you often mute the instrument in your work)?**

A lot of it is my history and comfort with the piano. I first started studying piano at age 5, and it's by far the instrument I know best. I should emphasize, though, that I'm really a very poor pianist: in my heyday I rose to the level of being a merely competent pop keyboardist, but even those limited skills have long since atrophied. (Watch me fumble through some of the 80s hits at which I was once adept, and you'll see what I'm talking about!) But what I can do is get the emotional effects I'm looking for – even if I'm not a skilled performer, I do feel I have a degree of affective insight into the instrument. And this is why I turn to it again and again in my work, and also because it offers me a sort of neutrality, though not exactly for the stability of timbre you mentioned. There's a transparency there for me with piano, a simplicity; I still "think" like a pianist, or perhaps think of everything in terms of the piano – it's like a default setting for me. So I often fall back to it as a way of sketching out ideas or new directions, or for simplifying things so I can think in purely harmonic terms, or as a place I go when other things aren't working out.

**So does that suggest that pieces using different instrumentations might begin life as piano sketches? The piano is essentially percussive in nature, and percussion (both dry and resonant) is clearly a major timbral preoccupation in your work.**

It's more for testing out new approaches or concepts – I think it would be hard to literally translate a piece from piano into different sounds, given the strange way I work. But I definitely do often test out new techniques by doing an "easy" piano piece first, and then later try to extend the methods by doing a piece with more challenging or diverse sounds if the approach seems promising.

**I'm interested too in your remark about thinking in "purely harmonic terms". Examining your work as a whole, it seems to me that harmony was a significant, even primary compositional parameter in your earliest work (particularly from 'July 18, 1989' to 'March 5, 1994', in the form of repeating chord sequences, usually minor and often with a Phrygian modal inflection), but has assumed less importance since that time. Does that seem a fair assessment? And either way, how does harmony manifest itself in your compositional thinking today? Do you regard it as a primary (active) parameter or is it incidental to other aspects (passive)?**

**Ethnic instruments feature regularly – what draws you to these?**

I'm using the term "harmony" very loosely here, perhaps to the point of opacity – as a reference to any simultaneous use of multiple pitches, rather than, say, to traditional tonal harmony. Thus I'll sometimes find myself talking about the "harmony" in a piece like 'January 18, 2011', which has pairs of interlocked atonal systems of equal tempered pitches interacting microtonally. So perhaps the word "harmony" is a stretch! But it's hopefully a not too misleading shorthand for talking about general systems of simultaneous pitch.

But yes, there is a definite transition that takes place exactly at the point in my work that you mention, which is precisely when I first encountered Feldman. And that opened up my vocabulary in a whole new way. But wherever I'm falling on the tonal/atonal spectrum at a given moment, it's always pitch and harmony that are for me the principal carriers of emotion in music. I'll often find myself doing really cool percussion pieces – not chromatic percussion stuff, but pure percussion-percussion, if you will – and however fun the sounds and rhythms may be, I tend to get bored and abandon these pieces. Because without an affective foundation, some emotional direction or grounding to the piece, I just lose interest. And that's why I still think of myself as being very focused on harmony, in the broadest sense of the word.

I just love diversity of sound, of timbre – all the amazing possibilities that are out there. But it's a tricky balance, because you don't want to just imitate the music of other cultures, or strip off superficial aesthetic layers to get some "ethnic" effect. I've certainly done a lot of what one might call faux ethnographic field

recording pieces, pieces that are supposed to sound like dusty wax cylinders of some as-yet undiscovered land. But ultimately that doesn't take you very far, if only because there are so many real and wonderful ethnographic field recordings out there; somehow it doesn't seem to achieve that much to just produce new fake ones. But on the other hand, I do have a real and genuine love of a lot of these musical traditions, and so I end up going back in these directions regardless of the doubts I might have about what I'm doing. I'm right now working on some music for a dance piece involving Indian classical music. Here's a music that I have the highest, highest regard for, and absolutely no formal training in whatsoever. But I'd like to think I have a degree of insight into the music, and so I'm working with a lot of Indian classical recordings and playing around with them in ways that are experimental and strange and avant-garde, but that hopefully are also true at some level to the source material.

**An obvious omission from that 'diversity of sound' is the human voice. It only features obviously in your work on two occasions, 'August 4, 1992' and 'June 20, 2012' (almost twenty years apart!). A few other works include what sounds like synthetic vocal sounds, but in general the human voice is conspicuous by its absence in your work. Is that deliberate?**

It's a very good point! There are vocals – "real" vocals, that is, versus purely synthetic stuff – scattered throughout my work, but there's nothing like Feldman's 'Three Voices' – yet. And that's certainly not for lack of desire. The human voice is the very best instrument we have, and it's one I do very much hope to work with one day in a substantive, large-scale way. Perhaps I'm just waiting for the right vocalist. I've recorded some people before, but with both instrumentalists and especially vocalists, it's hard for me to get what I "need" out of people – which is why I so often end up turning to instruments I can play myself, like piano or percussion. And what I need is a very specific balance of chaos and stability, of simplicity and diversity. It's something that's

**In the earliest period of your output (1989-94), use of minimalistic materials (though not methods) occurs regularly. Is minimalism an interest of yours?**

hard to communicate, and so quite often the recordings I make of performers, especially vocalists, don't work out, or don't work out the way I want them to. All of which to say, I guess I'm holding out for Meredith Monk. So, Meredith, if you're reading this...call me!

Minimalism is where I come from; it's my roots. My older brother got me into Philip Glass when I was maybe 14 or 15, and for me he was really the very first definition or paradigm of what a "composer" is, and what I eventually aspired to be. Albums like *Glassworks*, *Songs from Liquid Days*, and *Koyaanisqatsi* were hugely, hugely influential to me as I was just starting out. And while his music hasn't really evolved over time in the direction that I'd have liked to have seen it go, his work is very deeply rooted amongst my earliest crucial influences.

Steve Reich I got into a bit later, and his work, particularly in terms of rhythm, is also a big influence. Pieces like 'Drumming' and 'Music for 18 Musicians' are among my favorites, but a lot of his other music I've never really bonded with harmonically. This may sound superficial, but I think that if every single piece he ever wrote was in a minor key, he'd be my favorite composer ever!

But the most important minimalist for me, today, is Meredith Monk. The voice is the original synthesizer, and I feel a very strong kinship with her explorations of pure timbre. And there's also, for want of a better word, a real honesty in her work that I treasure. Her music is emotionally direct, forthright – it's unafraid to be elegantly simple when elegant simplicity is what's called for. She's my favorite living composer. I'm a total fan, and if I ever



**Contextually speaking, 'March 15, 1999' seems a particularly curious piece, bringing together piano chords that change slowly, one note at a time, and intensely driving beats. Can you recall what your thoughts/intentions were regarding this piece?**

met her in person, I'd probably faint more quickly than my pre-teen niece would at the sight of One Direction. A while back, my wife did a workshop with Meredith, and while in her bathroom noticed that she uses the same brand of deodorant that I do. As you can imagine, this struck me as a very profound connection!

'March 15, 1999' is a piece that has a very deep and intense personal significance to me. And in truth I've always been a little sad that no one really pays much attention to it. To start off with just the composition itself, it was set in motion by my love of jungle and breakbeats, and a desire to play around with something in that direction. The big percussion works I was doing at the time (its predecessors being 'March 12, 1997' and 'July 7, 1998') all used a sort of dualistic approach: the rhythms were realized by all these complexly interesting percussion lines, while the harmonic content was carried by a separate layer of sound (in the case of 'March 12, 1997' the big, slowly evolving washes of sound, and in 'July 7, 1998' those simple little synth lines). I don't remember exactly how I hit on the piano thing, but somehow that monotonously rhythmic, chromatically evolving structure just snapped together perfectly with the homemade breakbeats I had put together. So that's how it got built.

But the significance of the piece for me runs much deeper. It was the very last work I did before what was to be one of the most disruptive personal and artistic breaks in my life. Shortly after I finished the piece, my life fell into a series of very severe crises that ultimately led to my essentially losing a year's

worth of writing – something that had never happened to me before and I hope never happens again. It was a very, very dark time for me, and the yearning and striving emotions of ‘March 15, 1999’ – especially the final dramatic “needle pull” at the very end – came to symbolize for me the huge break that was about to take place in my life.

For a long time, the next piece in the “canon” of my work was ‘May 13, 2000’, and for me the transition from the desperate hopes of ‘March 15, 1999’ to the brutal cosmic chaos of ‘May 13, 2000’ was a very meaningful moment in the timeline of my published works. It was a huge break in time, a huge break in style; the old systems had fallen apart, and the new ones were strange and alien, all but unrecognizable.

Yet throughout much of that long silence, I had been trying and trying to write. Amidst the hundred failed directions I struggled to move in during that 1999-2000 gap, one did – much later – prove fertile. An incredibly simple, stripped down, austere little piano piece I wrote as yet another desperate experiment became the blueprint for what would later be the first *post\_piano* album; it was actually the piece I played for Taylor to demonstrate the concept to him. And going back and listening to that abandoned track years later, I found that it did, after all, have some merit, even beyond the many later pieces that grew out of it. And so here again was one of those tough curatorial decisions! Eventually I decided that being all deep and mysterious about the big 1999-2000 break in my work was not only meaningless without the proper context – but probably nobody had even noticed it at all! So I finally decided to go back and rework that

**To learn some of that emotional backstory certainly helps to clarify why 'March 15, 1999' feels so much like the end of a chapter in your output (in my original notes for what I'm writing at the moment, I made that piece the last in a period beginning with 'September 10, 1994'). That's due less to the subsequent 11-month gap in your works, but the fact that, after half a decade (1994-99) of quite diverse experimentation, you then spent the next four years focusing almost entirely on piano and texture works. So it's clear that there was a significant creative shift at this point. Was your intention to home in on these two key areas – and, let's face it, piano music and texture works dominate your output – for more intense exploration? It's noteworthy too that your music became a lot more abstract from 2000 onwards; you spoke of how "the old systems had fallen apart", so how was your creative outlook evolving at this point? I wonder whether random/chance procedures were involved, which may have led the way toward the indeterminate works that followed?**

little piano piece, and now it stands there – 'February 12, 2000' – right in the midst of that huge gap, showing, at least to me, that even when you think there is nothing but emptiness or failure, little unexpected things can still be growing.

I break up my work in the exact same way! 'September 10, 1994' is definitely the start of a distinct period, which eventually concludes (or comes crashing down) with 'March 15, 1999'. The focus on more noise-based works, specifically via field recordings, was, again, just a reaction to what I was going through at the time, rather than some premeditated aesthetic strategy – it was an attempt to find sufficient means to express what I felt needed expressing. But what you see is that as that initial wave of noise and chaos dissipated, the piano starts to return – specifically with the cute little 'April 3, 2001', which I've always had a certain affection for. It's like things had stabilized enough for piano again to be possible, for it to precipitate out of all that static, and so that's what you start to hear again.

The piano was, though, heading in a different direction, or at least trying to. The circa 2000 field recording series used the same basic approach, compositionally, as in the heyday of chance procedures in my music, from 1997-1999, although of course with radically different timbres. But what I really wanted to be doing at the time was a music that didn't rely at all on repetition. As we've talked about, minimalism is where I come from, minimalism and pop music, and so repetition quite naturally became a very fundamental part of my vocabulary. But starting in 2001, I

really wanted to move beyond it. I dreamed of doing a music without repetition, in which every single event happened once, only once, and yet was perfect and necessary, clear and certain. There would be a logic and an order to every sound that occurred, an exact structure, and yet each element would be just one unrepeated unique moment. I don't think I succeeded at this. But what you start hearing with the lineage of pieces that goes from 'April 3, 2001', into 'August 18, 2001', and on to the (more successful, in my opinion) experiments like 'October 13, 2001', is very much this desire: the desire to break away from the crutch of repetition that I had leaned on for so long. And yes, I'll admit, there was a bit of a rivalry there with Feldman – this sense that if I could crack the code and find a way to build a music like this, then I would have finally done something actually new, something that wasn't entirely within his shadow. Again, I don't think it worked, I don't think I succeeded. I at least never found a consistent set of methods I could use to reliably work in this direction. Even a much later piece like 'September 25, 2010' from *Twenty Ten* is more a sort of lament for the failure of this approach, rather than any real victory or triumph, I feel. And so over time I moved further and further away from these ambitions, and have become, I hope, a little more comfortable with, or at least a little less ashamed of, the place of repetition within my work. But I still want to do this, to go in this direction, and in truth I know how to do it – it's just that it'll take an A.I.; human-level intelligence isn't enough.

**That desire to break away from repetition – was it a difficult/daunting thing to do? I wonder because, although you composed three piano works ('April 3, 2001', 'July 7, 2001' and 'August 18, 2001') that are markedly abstract – and in this respect contrast strongly with earlier work – they were swiftly followed by a series of pieces (beginning with 'December 9, 2001') that emphatically return to repetition. What was the guiding principle behind the abstract piano works beginning with 'April 3, 2001', and to what (if any) extent did this experimenting away from repetition affect your compositional thinking then and beyond?**

**Also – and I ask this simply because you alluded to that painful episode in your life within the context of your work – to what extent does emotion become channeled or integrated into your music? Are your works serving that kind of expressive end or, as we've discussed in other areas, is its expressive content passive, left to the listener without any active assertions on your part?**

It was brutally difficult! And as I said, it's not something I feel I ever really mastered. Those non-repetitive piano works you mention were very much about obsessively zooming in on one sonority at a time and trying – slowly, painfully – to build up a narrative note by note, chord by chord, blow by blow. It was rough, and, again, it never gelled into a consistent, reliable set of methods. But I certainly learned a lot from it, and that sense of obsessive attention to the minutest of harmonic details – that sense of reaching in and feeling around for what a group of notes is, at some very deep level, SAYING to you – that's something that's had a huge impact on my later development, and that I think has ultimately been very helpful to me. And this is a wall that I may very well continue to bang my head against in the future – a big wall like that is just too much of a temptation.

That's definitely a complex discourse! The first thing to emphasize is that I very much don't see myself as a subjective composer – I'm not interested in expressing my "feelings" to the listener, or having them feel or experience what I have felt or experienced in any literal or direct way. It's not about representation, or about communication. It's about intensity, pure intensity, and for me intensity in music has always been channeled through emotion, through affect. To me, this is where the power of music over us derives from – this ability it has to propagate these intensive affects through us. So I try to capture and utilize that intensity in my work, even as I try for it not to be about me, poor me, poor little me. It's not about your sad little story, or your little problems, or this or that thing that happened to you, but about the forces that are

unleashed and rechanneled through life and through music; it's about capturing intensities in structured sound and retransmitting them elsewhere, further and beyond. It's about flow and propagation of anonymous, powerful forces – forces that are all the more powerful for remaining abstract, rather than being tied to any one individual's personal story or specific biography. And that to me is the beauty of music – that its abstraction allows it to speak broadly, to be reconfigured and re-understood by different listeners, in different places and different times, and put to strange new uses and unexpected ends without ever being tied down to one fixed meaning or interpretation.

**Returning to 'September 25, 2010', it's interesting that while you describe it – somewhat harshly, I think – as a "failure", you've returned to a similar kind of music (i.e., characterized by a sporadic, pointillist type of delivery) in one of your more recent pieces (also your longest work to date), 'October 13, 2012'. It's especially notable, as you'd conspicuously moved away from it in works like 'January 10, 2012' and 'September 13, 2012'. So was 'October 13, 2012' a fresh attempt at this kind of approach?**

Actually, 'October 13, 2012' was an "easy" piece for me – which may seem like a strange thing to say about such a ridiculously long work! But there's a method to this particular madness, and it's repetition. Writing 'October 13, 2012' was for me all about working out the symmetries of the repetitions, and that's a process that to me has very clear decision criteria and that I know how to do quite well. That's one of the reasons the thing became so huge: I was on comfortable ground, and was confident with the material – and that's entirely because the whole piece is built on very basic and familiar structures of repetition. But take away that repetition, that crutch, and – for me as a composer, and maybe for you as a listener, I don't know – everything changes. Each decision, each artistic choice, becomes a struggle – you've got to ask yourself why every single thing is the way it is, rather than otherwise. Without that structuring repetition, it's immediately much less clear why one given sonority stays in and another comes out, why one sound "works" and another doesn't; you're

just dealing with events hanging there in space, and it's scary. 'September 25, 2010' was a piece I started and abandoned, and then only returned to quite a long time later, with very different ideas in mind of how to approach it – and as you can see I still have some insecurity about the outcome. It's a tremendous adventure, of course, trying to build something like that, and as we've said it's something I'm increasingly tempted to return to. But it's a whole other game from a simple, friendly little thing like 'October 13, 2012'!

**It's now over 25 years since your first published work, and I wonder if this milestone has been the cause of any reflection. What are your thoughts when you survey your work over the last quarter century? And do you have any sense of where you might be heading in the years ahead? In that sense, do you have compositional 'aspirations' – or is it a case of allowing intuition to find its own way forward?**

I guess I just want to keep going. Every piece teaches me something I didn't know before; each piece is an opportunity to understand something new, solve a problem, ask a question that I hadn't previously been able to articulate. And my goal I think is to just continue learning. I certainly know a lot more than I once did – look at where I was at in 1988, or 1998, or 2008 – and what I want is to really just continue that process. So hopefully there will be quite a few more dates up on the site yet.

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## Music for Shuffling

| Marc Weidenbaum, *Disquiet* (2005)

New York-based composer Kenneth Kirschner is a believer. “If I have a religion in life,” he says, “it’s the iPod.” Asked to detail the tenets of this faith, he quotes science-fiction writer William Gibson, who once noted, “The Walkman changed the way we understand cities.” Gibson’s much-referenced comment touches on how personal technology has allowed music to provide an unprecedented running commentary on everyday life, accompanying us in our heads as we make our way through the physical world, shaping perspective, mood and experience.

If Gibson’s futurist fiction is informed by technology, Kirschner’s art is enabled by it. In Kirschner’s case, that technology is Flash, the ubiquitous multimedia software language that powers countless Internet websites. Kirschner uses Flash to compose ever-changing pieces of music. These compositions generally consist of a set number of MP3s that are randomly layered simultaneously, and that can play for as long as the listener desires. A piece of music that is indeterminate – to borrow a word from John Cage, one of Kirschner’s role models – has no inherent end.



Kirschner also records and performs more traditional music, or what he calls “fixed” compositions, those old-fashioned pieces with, you know, a beginning, an end, and a middle smack between ‘em. He’s released CDs of his own and in collaboration with talented microsound composer Taylor Deupree. Earlier this year the duo released *post\_piano 2*, a sequel to a well-regarded album that built quiet textures from material sampled from an old piano. The album is on 12k, the label run by Deupree.

What follows is a lengthy conversation with Kirschner, in which he talks about how the iPod, with its shuffle option, helped him realize his interest in continuing the tradition of indeterminate music. He likens his works, which often involve shifting layers of sound summoned randomly from a set batch of sound files, to several iPods working in tandem. Call it “Music for Shuffling.” Of course, it’s more complex than that. For one thing, Kirschner spends a lot of time fine-tuning the number and content of those sound files, adding silence to the end and beginning of individual files to get the balance right – at least to the extent that he can control what will, inevitably, be set on random. For another, his experiments required the participation of a programmer, Craig Swann.

Kirschner discusses the makings of his music in detail, from his habit of naming pieces with dates, to his struggle to create music that minimizes repetition, to how anyone can access the “open source” raw MP3 sound files of his compositions. A call for remixes based on *post\_piano 2* drew over 100 entries, including pieces by Dale Lloyd, Stephan Mathieu and Minus Pilots. “It was an amazing process for me personally,” says Kirschner, “getting to hear so many creative people taking my work and building new and exciting things from it.”

Most of the music discussed here is available as a free download or, in the case of the Flash pieces, stream on Kirschner’s website, [kennethkirschner.com](http://kennethkirschner.com).

**This may not be surprising, but I especially want to ask about the “indeterminate” pieces on your website. Could you explain where they’re coming from?**

Well, let me start off with a quick overview of the genesis of the indeterminate series, and where I see it going. All of my thinking on indeterminate music, of course, comes from [John] Cage and [Morton] Feldman. There’s

a key Cagean distinction between chance procedures, which can be used to create a fixed work, and true indeterminacy, in which the structure of the composition itself varies with each realization. Now, I've used chance procedures in my work for over a decade, but until recently, I'd had no real interest in indeterminate music. I tended to side on this with Feldman, who, after helping pioneer indeterminate music with Cage, returned to fixed composition. Feldman has a great quote on the subject: "An indeterminate music can lead only to catastrophe. This catastrophe we allowed to take place. Behind it was sound – which unified everything."

What got me thinking about actually writing some indeterminate work was a conversation with my friend Taylor Deupree a couple years back. Taylor had this idea of doing a mini CD-ROM series on 12k, his label, that he wanted to call Music for iPods – the idea was for us to write pieces built out of a huge number of tiny fragments, maybe 50 or 100 short MP3 files, that you'd then play on the iPod in shuffle mode. This struck me as a fascinating compositional challenge, a totally different way of writing, and I was very eager to try it out. But like so many of our ideas, we didn't get around to actually doing it – yet. Still, it did get me thinking on the subject.

By early 2004, it seemed to me that a better idea would be to do some sort of software-based indeterminate piece. With the shuffle idea, you can only have one "layer" of material going on at once. But it seemed like it should be fairly simple, technologically speaking, to have several layers going at once, as if you were running three iPods, say, or three copies

of iTunes. And this would certainly be much more challenging compositionally – how do you write a polyphonic piece when you don't know what's going to happen, and when, sooner or later, everything possible will happen? And the whole idea of building the indeterminacy into the piece technologically was totally fascinating to me. If you did it online, you'd have a piece of music that would be continually mutating and evolving, and that the listener could turn on or off like a faucet. I had the whole thing planned out in my mind – but it was all totally theoretical, since I have no programming skills whatsoever. I had no clue as to how one would go about actually building something like this.

Then, in the summer of 2004, I was invited to play at OFFF (the Online Flash Film Festival) in Valencia, Spain. Speaking there was Craig Swann, of Crash!Media, who specializes in Flash audio. And my first thought was, hey, here's just the guy to help realize my crazy ideas! Fortunately, he was very intrigued by the concept, and we started corresponding and kicking around ideas right after the festival.

The first piece in the series was 'July 29, 2004', which I really just intended as a technology test rather than any sort of serious composition. It was basically a Flash realization of the Music for iPods concept: just a little shuffle player for short MP3s, but now built online in Flash. I don't think the piece is very interesting musically, and I hesitated even to publish it on my site – but it did at least show that we could get the concept off the ground.

With the next piece, though, things started to get more interesting. 'August 26, 2004' has three overlapping layers, and it's

also something I put a lot of work into compositionally. I think you can start to hear the potential of the concept with this one, and I'm very pleased with the way it came out.

'January 15, 2005', the next piece, has a completely different sound: it's a dense continuum of slowly evolving textures, and I think it's an interesting juxtaposition to the previous pieces – very much an attempt to show the range of what's possible. From there, I tried, really tried, to take a break from the indeterminate series – but I somehow didn't quite escape it. The one ostensibly "fixed" piece I did – 'April 20, 2005' – I'm now thinking of rebuilding as an indeterminate piece, because I feel like that's what it really "wants" to be.

In September 2005 I posted three new pieces: 'May 3, 2005', 'July 9, 2005', and 'August 10, 2005' – a piano piece, a piece based on field recordings of the ocean, and a dissonant electronic thing, respectively. None of them are running yet in a truly generative mode, as Craig and I are still building out the next generation of our Flash templates; these will allow for more sophisticated compositions, and will likely be downloadable, browser-based applications to avoid the streaming issues that arise when these pieces get too complex. So as of now, fall 2005, those latest three pieces are just up there as fixed MP3 examples, with the properly generative versions currently in the pipeline and hopefully coming soon.

Since then, I've started work on a series of indeterminate percussion pieces that I'm very excited about. While I always have a bit of a bias toward whatever I've done most

recently, I really feel like these new pieces are the best yet in the series – that they go the farthest toward being actual living, breathing, autonomous little creatures. And these too will of course be posted as soon as the software for them is ready.

The next step for the project, I hope, will be a CD-ROM release of some of these pieces, which 12k is tentatively interested in doing. One idea is to call it *Four Infinite Songs*, or however many we end up including. I'm very excited about this, and hope it actually happens.

**If you're comfortable allowing listeners to peer behind the curtain, could you describe with some detail how the pieces dated 'July 29, 2004' and 'August 26, 2004' function?**

Well, as noted earlier, these pieces can really be thought of as simply one – or many – virtual iPods on shuffle play. In terms of how it's actually built in Flash, for this I'd have to refer you to Craig. But the basic structure is that each layer – each "iPod" – has a group of MP3s that it draws on, selecting one at a time in random order. These first two pieces use a lot of silence; this results from a combination of delays due to downloading, and intentional grafting of silences onto the MP3s themselves, which come together, hopefully, to give the right flow and spacing to the piece. I have a sense of how I want each piece to "move," but it takes some tweaking to get the right combination of these factors. I do, though, love the idea that the Internet itself, through delays in network traffic, is helping compose the pieces!

Let me go into a little more detail about the structure of 'August 26, 2004'. The piece has three layers: the first is the piano recordings, of which there are 14; this forms one layer. Then there are two layers of electronic sounds,

both of which draw on the same set of 21 MP3s. So there will be up to three things going on at once – one piano and two synths – though often of course there's only one or two, or none, because the next MP3s are still downloading. Feel free to hit the folder itself ([kennethkirschner.com/082604/](http://kennethkirschner.com/082604/)) so you can see the different files and hopefully get a better sense of how it's put together. I don't mind people looking behind the curtain!

This might also be a good time to mention that I certainly conceive this project – like all of my work – as being essentially open source. The intention is not only to share the ideas involved, and get people thinking about the possibilities of this sort of technologically based indeterminate music, but to actually share the tools we're developing as well. So if any of your readers want to try this sort of thing out, or even contribute to the project's development, they really shouldn't hesitate to get in touch with us.

**On 'August 26, 2004', there were piano bits that reminded me of indeterminate music by John Cage. I now understand it's safe to say that's not a coincidence, that Cage's work was on your mind as you composed this work. Could you describe the tradition of indeterminate music on which you drew?**

These ideas all come from Cage, as well as from Feldman and the other composers of the New York School of the 1950s. Nothing here is new! It's all completely derived from their innovations, and this series is really just my attempt to adapt their concepts to a new environment. 'July 29, 2004', in fact, was written quite self-consciously as an homage to Cage, specifically to his late-period piano works. I figured that if we could successfully pull off a "cheap imitation" Cage piece, then we could hopefully try moving on to something a little more original!

**I found myself a little frustrated while listening to 'August 26, 2004' – not with the piece itself, but with the fact that I needed to listen to it online, that my iPod inherently cannot play generative music, only "fixed" audio files. Again, my frustration had nothing to do with you or with your piece, but with the limitations of my own technology. Perhaps a web-ready device like a Treo would serve me better?**

If I have a religion in life, it's the iPod. So I know exactly how you feel. My original vision for these indeterminate pieces was to have a function through which you could "request" an MP3 of any duration, a sort of "MP3 generator": you'd, say, ask the program for a 5-minute version, and it would compile a downloadable MP3 for you. You want a different 5-minute version, plus a 25-minute version and two 10-minute versions? Just type it in. The composition then becomes almost biological, in that it's constantly reproducing itself in new and unexpected forms.

While this is definitely a cool idea, and I'd love to see it happen, Craig assures me that it's totally hopeless in Flash – the technology just isn't designed for that sort of thing. But perhaps one day we can realize these pieces in another platform or language in which this sort of functionality can be built. And if any of your readers has a suggestion on how to do this – call me!

Even though the "generator" concept remains the best long-term solution to the portable music question, I am still trying to come up with some options for the present. Anyone can of course record the output of the piece using a program like WireTap or Audio Hijack on the Mac. For the pieces that aren't yet running generatively, I've posted mp3 examples, and I hope to do this for all the pieces in the series with my next major site update. And eventually, if we do the CD-ROM, I'd definitely want to include a large number of "fixed" MP3s on it for people to play on iPods – hopefully something crazy like 20 or 30 versions of each piece, just to get the point across.

**When you were fine-tuning the piece, were there particular listening environments you had in mind?**

I'd like to think that these pieces could be adaptable to a wide variety of environments. I myself always have some ridiculously specific sense of how my music should be heard, and I work really hard not to let that get in the way of other listeners' interpretations, which are of course much more important than my own. I do, though, feel like these pieces could work well in an installation context, and hopefully I'll get to experiment with something like that at some point. I'm also really, really tempted to use them in live performance – because I hate performing. And with these pieces, I could just either walk off stage or do a Milli Vanilli, and that would sure be a whole lot more fun for me.

**Is there an optimal length of play time, in your opinion?**

Well, I myself had to listen to each piece for very, very long periods of time, just to debug and get the composition right. I'd go crazy waiting for the damn thing to play the sounds I needed to hear, since of course I have no control over it. But these are my issues! For a normal listener, I'd hope that the piece could be meaningful and interesting no matter how long or short a time they wanted to listen for.

**Are the silences in 'November 18, 2004' intended to be heard as pure silence, at least silence in the Cage sense – silence that frames the sound inherent in the world around us – or is there sound occurring that I am not noticing?**

First off, yes, if I've mastered the piece right, the silences in there should be true "digital black," with nothing hidden going on. So you're not missing anything. But yes, Cage's whole concept of silence is that there's no such thing: true silence doesn't exist. We're always surrounded by sound, if only because we're embodied, as he realized when he went into the anechoic chamber. So inevitably something like 'November 18, 2004' will be interacting with and framing its environment, and the "silences" will not be truly silent.



That said, however, the questions I'm asking with 'November 18, 2004' are not so much about silence, at least for me. The genealogy of 'November 18, 2004' goes back at least to a piece of mine called 'April 3, 2001' and to a whole series of basic compositional questions I've been asking, and struggling with, for some time. I've wanted for several years now to be able to create a music that doesn't depend at all on repetition: everything happens once, only once, and yet the piece hangs together, there's a logic and a necessity to each moment, each event. Repetition has always been one of those fundamental structural elements of my work – a load-bearing wall in the architecture, if you will. Now there's nothing wrong with this, of course – I grew up on 1980s pop and classical minimalism, and so I certainly have nothing against repetition, per se. But realizing how much I've leaned on it all these years, there's a desire to question that assumption, to see what can be done if you use no repetition at all. And let me tell you, it ain't easy.

This whole series of pieces has been a real struggle for me, and I'm certainly not there yet, at least in terms of having any sort of confidence or reliable methodology. Without repetition, you're constantly threatened with chaos, with the unformed and the incomprehensible, and you certainly don't want your listeners to finish out the piece nauseous and beaten down. My workaround has been these silences. To me, they're like the ginger you have between pieces of sushi – they clear the palate. So you're hit with a dissonant, harmonically complex sound – and then you get to rest. And have a moment to reflect and recover. And then comes the next sound. But you retain a memory of the previous sound,

**You've mentioned how you work hard not to get in the way of listeners' interpretations of your music. Is that why your pieces have such basic titles, and why there's so little text information on your website?**

**Speaking of what classical minimalism and '80s pop have in common, the earliest MP3 on your site, from 1989, bears little resemblance to your more recent work. Yet, to borrow your description of how the phases in 'November 18, 2004' work in the mind's ear, once I heard 'July 18, 1989' I found it hard not to remember it when listening to the new stuff. To cut to the chase, can you describe how you got from 'July 18, 1989' to 'November 18, 2004'?**

so there's this whole series of complex, almost subliminal relationships that move across those silences, like ghostly afterimages. And that, to me, is what the big silences in these pieces are all about. But again, with this series, I don't feel I've succeeded yet; I'm really still learning.

Exactly! When I was younger I used to title all my pieces, and the titles were unbearably pretentious, a total disaster. I began to suspect that they were actually somehow harming the music itself. Then I tried giving everything a pseudo-classical title – Prelude! Allegro! – which pushed the pretentiousness even a step further, really. In 1989 I started using the dates, and as the lesser of many evils, they've clearly stuck. And yes, the site follows the same philosophy. I'm just not confident that pictures of my cats or a list of my favorite Doctor Who episodes would significantly enhance the listener's interpretation of the music.

Wow, that's a long story! But let me at least try to give a quick overview. First off, there's a whole period in my work, ranging from 1982-1989, that isn't represented at all on the site. I was a kid then, and was writing either pop songs realized entirely on synthesizer – since I couldn't sing – or little faux classical pieces, also all synth. There's actually some fun stuff in there, and maybe one day I'll put up a little page of "early recordings" so people can hear where I'm coming from. But for now even the best of these recordings are crippled by either embarrassingly poor production values, embarrassingly pretentious titles, or some combination of both.

What unifies this early period, I think, is a reliance on song form: at some level you can parse almost every piece down to a “verse verse chorus verse chorus verse chorus chorus” sort of thing, and most were written quite traditionally by focusing on chord progressions and melodies. What changes with ‘July 18, 1989’ and the pieces that follow is not so much the song form, which often endures at some level, but rather the method of assembly. This was the point at which I started using what I sometimes call “vertical improvisation” – basically loop-based composition, as is common in dance music. You write a riff, loop it, then starting playing another riff over it, slowly building up a structure from the interacting parts. The epitome of this approach, it seems to me, is a piece like ‘December 15, 1992’.

The trick here, though, is that a dependence on these interlocking components generally makes for a static harmonic structure. Evolution is hard, and each piece ends up only expressing one essential idea. And so the next major transition in my work starts to happen around 1994, although the missing links aren’t posted on the site yet – a lot of my work still isn’t mastered and online. There are two key factors in this change, and you could call them Feldman and Cage. I first heard Feldman in late 1993, and this was immediately a huge and life-changing shock, a whole new way of thinking. My work at that point basically becomes a more and more frantic attempt to imitate Feldman. And from Cage, it’s at that time that I start integrating chance procedures directly into my compositional methods, mainly to determine the large-scale structure of the pieces. What you get is a style of composition that’s much more complex in terms of its

linear development and how it's able to evolve harmonically. The apotheosis of this period would be something like 'October 8, 1997', and you can immediately hear that there's no longer a single structure that underlies the piece – it's become more of a growing, evolving thing, as Feldman might say.

The transition out of this period is still ongoing, and the destination remains unclear. Even in 2004 I was still doing pieces that use the older methods, like 'April 27, 2004', But the questions I'm asking now are moving in other directions, both of which we've been discussing: on the one hand, indeterminacy and the possibilities it offers, and on the other, a piece like 'November 18, 2004' and its associated questions of what an a-repetitive music can be. Both of these are direct reactions to the previous period in my work and the questions and limitations that became apparent from it, just as that period was a reaction to the previous one, and so on. The hardest part in music is knowing what questions to ask. Each individual piece poses new questions for the next piece, and in each broader period there is some limitation or concern that gets taken up in the longer term. And so for me, there's definitely a unity, or at least a consistent narrative thread, to what I've been doing throughout all the work you hear on the site.

Also, if I can take a moment to editorialize, I'd like to add one more thought. One thing that I like about my site is that I do keep all these old pieces up and accessible, whatever style they're written in. If I have one criticism of the current electronic scene, it's that it's way too fashion-driven. For a lot of people, if they don't hear the hip clicks and glitches and really high

frequencies and really low frequencies that they're expecting, they just tune out. And this is a real misunderstanding, I think, of what electronic music is all about: I mean, we have such an unbelievable palette, such a range of sounds to explore – why limit yourself? And so I'm really pleased to present works that don't conform to what people expect in terms of sound design. I myself think that some of my best work comes from 1997, 1998, 1999 – and I think it's all the better for not being glitchy or microsound or whatever. Sure, clicks and pops are fun to play with, and can be quite expressive, but within a few years they're going to be laughable for anything but a Retro Sounds of the '00s collection. I'd like to think that good composition and good sound design are values that can endure beyond any single trend or fashion.

**So, I have to tell you, though I've been writing about "free" music for some time, about musicians and labels putting music online for download at no charge, your response made me think of something I hadn't really thought of before in any depth. To back up for a second, I think it's safe to say that indeterminacy is a generation marker in modern composition, maybe something even more stark: a philosophical line that composers fall on one side or the other, in terms of whether or not they're comfortable with it. I think that much is understood. Now, you mention how your projects are "essentially open source". This suggests to me to that "open source" is a comparable generational or philosophical marker for musicians. Thinking of your composer-peers, can you describe what others think about your comfort in posting music for free, and welcoming the unmediated input of others?**

I think that's a very, very interesting suggestion. And I think we've come a long way in exactly that direction. I was a teenage cyberpunk, and for years I'd scribble "This music may be freely copied" on cassettes I'd make for people. Everyone just thought I was nuts. I'd make no effort to put my work out on CD, saying that one day a magical technology would come along that would allow music to zip freely and effortlessly around the world. Again, nuts. So I'd make big long speeches on the freedom of information and the commodification of digital copies and on and on, and people would listen patiently and smile and discreetly note the location of the fire exits. And one of the things that has been a real step forward, I think, is the fact that I don't have to make those speeches anymore. I tell people that I release my music freely online, and they say, "Oh, cool." They get it.

Whether or not they agree, or would do it themselves, they at least get the concept. And I think that shows you how far we've come.

Of course, nobody has been a bigger help in getting this point across than the music industry themselves, who really know how to win friends. Their desperate, brutal tactics have really helped show people what's at stake here. Back when they were getting ready to kill Napster, I was going around repeating over and over the famous last words of Ben Kenobi: "If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." And that's exactly what's happened. No matter how many doors they kick down, or how many kids they threaten to drag off to Guantanamo Bay, they can't win. Of course, they can't lose either, not with so much money and so many lawyers. And so the answer, for me at least, is to just step outside of the whole discourse. To help build a parallel world of music, a community rather than an industry. And I think that this is exactly what you see happening now, with the rise of Creative Commons, netlabels, and a whole generation, I hope, of people who have a fundamentally different conception of the nature and role of the digital copy. Of course, I certainly don't condemn anyone who wants to follow a more traditional model in the hopes of making more money off their music; the goal, I think, should be to work toward a plurality of models, in which there's a continuum of acceptable practices, with total openness at one end of a much larger spectrum. But what's important now, I think, is for artists concerned about these issues to lead by example, to use their own work to stand up for what they think is right, so that we do have a future in which a real digital commons remains possible.

**When *post\_piano 2* was released earlier this year, you set up a call for remixes on the 12k Records website, a select number of which are now available for download. Is this another example of your “open source” approach?**

Yes, absolutely. And the *post\_piano 2* Open Remix Project, or “PP2ORP”, as Taylor and I colorfully call it, has really been a tremendously rewarding experience for me. The idea was to invite other composers to follow the same process that Taylor and I had used in writing *post\_piano 2*: to take my little piano sketch ‘November 11, 2003’ and build something new out of it. When we sent out that call for submissions, we were nervous that we wouldn’t even receive enough tracks to build a release out of, much less a good or impressive release. But we were stunned by the response. We received over a hundred new recordings, from all over the world, and it took us months and months just to listen to them all. It was an amazing process for me personally, getting to hear so many creative people taking my work and building new and exciting things from it. It’s really what I’ve always wanted my music to be about, so it was very inspiring for me, a real honor. And 12k’s netlabel, Term, has now published a selection of the tracks we received – it’s a wonderful collection, and I really recommend your readers check it out.

**You joke about the iPod being your religion. Could you describe the fundamental tenets of this faith?**

Well, I’m a New Yorker, and a devout believer in the virtues of mobile music. To me, there are few higher forms of experience than walking the streets of New York City with just the right music playing. It all goes back to a quote from William Gibson I came across many years ago: “The Walkman changed the way we understand cities. I first heard Joy Division on a Walkman, and I remain unable to separate the experience of the music’s bleak majesty from the first heady discovery of the pleasures of musically encapsulated fast-forward urban motion.” Now, as a religious Joy Division fan, my first thought was, I’ve got to move to the

city and do this. And that's exactly what I did.

I'd also add that one of the great side effects of the iPod's wild success is the widespread, genuine love of the shuffle feature that's developed – to the point, even, of Apple's very courageously basing their whole iPod Shuffle on it. The beauty of the thing is that all these iPod listeners have become unwitting Cageans! Which just goes to show you that great artists are people who are just a little bit ahead of their time, as if the technology itself has only now caught up with where Cage was at 50 years ago.

**I'm fascinated with a particular aspect of your fine-tuning of the material, that you grafted silence onto the MP3s to get the flow right. Did you know you'd have to do this at the outset, or did it occur to you, and to Craig Swann, as you were working on the project?**

From the start I knew the silences would be tricky, and there was definitely a process of trial and error involved in getting them right. Actually, for 'July 29, 2004', we had tried out building a little silence generator into the Flash file, so that you weren't downloading blank space, which seemed silly. But that actually made things harder, because I found myself trying to balance three different kinds of silence: the inevitable little silences in the MP3 files, the silences due to download delays, and the silences added in by the Flash file. It was all just too complex to figure out, and so with 'August 26, 2004' I ended up only juggling the grafted MP3 silences and the download silences, and that helped. Of course, all these pieces get tested out on my low-end DSL line – who knows how they move on different speed connections. I just keep telling myself that this whole series is about my learning to let go of things.



6

## 15 Questions to Kenneth Kirschner

| Tobias Fischer, Tokafi (2006)

A few years ago, Kenneth Kirschner would make one speech after another calling for the freedom of information to be applied to the music industry. Back in those days, which he now refers to as his “cyberpunk” phase, he was still publishing his music on tapes, encouraging everyone to copy it and spread it at will. Since then, the parameters have changed dramatically and a whole world of music has opened up, just waiting for listeners to download to their PCs, laptops, iPods or other devices. Kirschner’s ideals have turned into a reality, and unlike many other “revolutionaries”, he has actually stayed true to them: his entire oeuvre, hours and hours of music, is available at no cost from his website. This includes his indeterminate compositions – tracks influenced by Cagean concepts, consisting of several layers of music which are algorithmically put into a new order and new overlaps with each listen. This may lead to some confusion, and so might his site (which solely consists of a string of time lines) and the titles of his tracks (their date of conception). In the end, though, confusion is not Ken’s business. Despite its experimental character, there are simply too many good-old fashioned moments of melodic appeal, spellbinding harmonic progression and sheer beauty in his music. In theory and in practice, this is indeed a whole new world of sound.

**Hi! How are you? Where are you?**

The answer to both questions: Block Island. (It's a tiny, beautiful island off the coast of New England; in other words, I'm doing very well, thank you.)

**What or who was your biggest influence as an artist? Do you see yourself as part of a certain tradition or as part of a movement?**

I usually cite my three biggest influences as Morton Feldman (music), Thomas Pynchon (literature), and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (philosophy). In terms of traditions, experimental music has always been something of an anti-tradition, an anti-movement. Thus you could say that I'm a loyal and devoted member of a movement that rejects all movements.

**What's your view on the music scene at present? Is there a crisis?**

I hope so! Music proceeds by crises. In my own work, every time I feel that I've finally figured it out, found the magic formula, perfected the perfect method, discovered the right way to write for the rest of my life – it means I'm headed for stagnation and failure. So we have to seek out our crises, in our own work as well as in music itself – it's the only way things move forward.

**What does the term "new" mean to you in connection with music?**

People talk a lot about "new music" as a genre, but it's a term that I've never really been able to fully embrace – I feel like it's one of those concepts that's so broad as to lose all meaning. I mean, you could say Arvo Pärt is new music; you could also say Peaches is. I'm a fan of both artists, but you have to wonder about any single category that tries to unify the two.

**How do you see the relationship between sound and composition?**

I've always seen music as being composed of three fundamental elements: pitch, rhythm, and timbre or sound. Like many composers today, I'm very focused on sound; we get this from modern technology, with its vast palette of possibilities, as well as from sound-oriented

predecessors like Feldman. But unlike a lot of electronic artists today, I also have a serious interest in harmony, in pitch, in drawing on these more traditional elements of music and bringing them into the very sound-focused world of digital music. So for me sound remains just one part of a larger compositional whole.

**How strictly do you separate improvising and composing?**

Improvising is for me a key part of my whole composition process – I usually compose in spontaneous and unpredictable bursts of activity, improvising freely and using software to capture those moments of inspiration that succeed, that are worth keeping. But this improvisation is never an end in itself – it's a rich means of generating material, yes, but for me composition is all about editing. It's about the discipline of taking all these great, fun, inspired moments and crafting them into something that has a narrative, a necessity, a coherence – a story.

**What constitutes a good live performance in your opinion? What's your approach to performing on stage?**

It's a dangerous art, live electronic music. With nothing more than a nerd with a computer up there on stage pushing buttons, you could just be hitting play on a single pre-recorded sound file and then checking email; I've in fact been tempted to do this myself. And so I think it's important to try to achieve a real spontaneity, a real sense of interaction and improvisation, which is something that the best laptop performances do occasionally achieve. But I don't feel that I myself have really succeeded at this. I've tried many approaches and many techniques in my solo shows, and I've never really been satisfied with any of them. The truth is, I'm not that interested in performing. I think the strength of my work lies in editing, in the obsessive attention to detail that can be brought to composition and recording. And so

**A lot of people feel that some of the radical experiments of modern compositions can no longer be qualified as "music". Would you draw a border – and if so, where?**

**Are "serious" and "popular" really two different types of music or just empty words without a meaning?**

**Do you feel an artist has a certain duty towards anyone but himself? Or to put it differently: Should art have a political/social or any other aspect apart from a personal sensation?**

I really don't take my live shows that seriously; I do them because people want me to, but my real love, my real focus, is composing.

I've played in punk bands, done covers of Cage's 4'33", built compositions out of dead television channels and urban street noises. The whole debate about whether something is or isn't "music" has never really been that interesting to me.

When you hear the word "serious" applied to music, it's usually a code word for Western classical. My standard joke on this subject is as follows: I'm a big fan of Western classical music, up to and including Bach; then I feel like it goes through a bit of a dry spell until you get to Feldman. The point being that everyone chooses their own tastes, their own aesthetic, their own sense of what is valuable or important, and we shouldn't get too hung up on pre-existing notions of what does or doesn't constitute "serious" music. Let's not forget that Duke Ellington wrote "popular" music, and it's hard to imagine a more serious composer.

The question here seems to be: can/should/must art be political? I would say that great art can be political, but that there is much great art that isn't. To draw examples from the visual arts, you could look at the Berlin Dadaists or of course something like 'Guernica' to see great art that's inherently political – but then you can also look to artists like Cornell and Calder, two of my favourites, to see art whose connection to any political reading is remote at best. In terms of my own work, I generally think of its main political component as being the way in which it's distributed: freely, online, under open licenses. But that said, I also do have some

**True or false: People need to be educated about music before they can really appreciate it.**

pieces that are overtly political – just take a listen to ‘March 20, 2003’.

False.

**Imagine a situation in which there’d be no such thing as copyright and everybody were free to use musical material as a basis for their own compositions – would that be an improvement to the current situation?**

I got to experience this very situation when I wrote ‘June 8, 2003’ for the 12k anthology *Two Point Two*: I approached all the artists on the CD, and received from them either sounds, or permission to use some of their existing sounds. And let me tell you, it was great fun. Of course, there are pros and cons, possibilities and limitations, to working with others’ sounds rather than your own – but it certainly can be very inspiring and very enjoyable. And this is precisely what I aim for when I encourage others to work freely with my own compositions, to transform and build on them, to incorporate elements into their own work – it’s about trying to encourage and support exactly this kind of open collaboration. And when I get a CD or an mp3 from someone who’s taken something I’ve done and built something new out of it, it’s just tremendously rewarding for me.

**You are given the position of artistic director of a festival. What would be on your program?**

I think there remains a certain degree of mutual non-understanding between the worlds of the 20th century “classical” avant-garde and the contemporary experimental electronic scene. Many electronic people, for example, call themselves “minimalists”, yet have never heard Glass, Reich, Monk, etc. And many “classical” people who know this work well just aren’t aware of how these traditions are being expanded and extended in the current electronic scene. And so what I’d want to do would be a festival that brings together both of these worlds, that intersperses classical

**Many artists dream of a “magnum opus”. Do you have a vision of what yours would sound like?**

minimalists with electronic minimalists, Feldman and Cage with digital music, the acoustic experiments of the 20th century with the electronic ones of the 21st. Because we’re all really dealing with the same sets of problems here, the same concerns and questions.

As I get older, I really feel that my ambition, more and more, is to write pop music. I mean this semi-seriously, in the same way that Deleuze & Guattari said they wrote *A Thousand Plateaus* for teenagers. I’ve spent so many years now writing music that tries to be challenging, that tries to be “new” and formally experimental, that there’s this growing desire to just write what I like, to write what I love. And that to me is the definition of pop music. To write what you love. But of course, by this point, what I love has been so warped by so many years of experimentation that what comes out won’t sound like pop music at all, or perhaps only the pop music of a distant, alien world. But the instinct behind it should be that same pop instinct of direct and honest expression, even if no one would mistake the results for a Top 40 hit. All of this is not to say that I don’t want to be Duran Duran, because of course I do. It’s just that I don’t have the hair for it.

7

## Interview with Kenneth Kirschner

| Tobias Fischer, Tokafi (2007)

It's been almost exactly a year since we last spoke to Ken, his inspirations as a composer and his aspirations of writing pieces in Duran Duran style. Strangely enough, we not even once touched upon the issue of the piano in his oeuvre, which would have been an obvious choice. Quite a lot has happened since that first interview. A narrow staircase prevented his very own piano from joining him in his new apartment and thus temporarily robbed him of the chance of using the instrument he is probably most associated with on a daily basis. All of which should suffice to explain why we chose the piano as the theme of this round of debate. A recent release further intensified the need for clarification: Kirschner's 'May 3, 1997' (one of *Three Compositions* on SIRR Records) is built around the awe-inspiring title track, a thirty-minute long tour de force of piano clusters, chords, congruencies and contortions and an enveloping mass of electronic metaphors. It thus once again focuses on the search for new forms and modes of expression for the instrument amidst a tradition spanning centuries. The album also follows the second volume of *post\_piano* as well as a couple of live sessions with close friend Taylor Deupree, in which Deupree uses his laptop to engage in a dialogue with

Kirschner's live piano performance. The piano is everywhere in Kenneth's oeuvre, and yet he keeps insisting that he is not a pianist. How can this be? The question looks like a good starting point to catch up with his personal history as well as his thoughts on Cage, Feldman and – Elton John.

**Hi! How are you? Where are you?**

Nowadays I spend my summers shuttling back and forth between two points along a terminal moraine from the last ice age: Brooklyn, in New York City, and Block Island, off the coast of Rhode Island. This interview will have been written at both locations, as well as points in between.

**What's on your schedule at the moment?**

Well, it's been a difficult year for me: I've been dealing with some significant health problems, among other disasters, all of which has limited my ability to take on projects and collaborations. So I've just been focusing what energy I can on writing. Thus the best place to hear what I've been up to is, as usual, my website, where I hope to post some new recordings in the next month or two.

**You started playing the piano at the age of five. Was that a choice you made yourself or were you "gently coaxed" into picking up an instrument?**

Yeah, I was certainly coaxed by my parents into taking piano lessons, all in your typical middle-class-suburban-let's-see-if-junior-has-any-musical-talent type of way. Interestingly, although my parents were these brilliant literary, intellectual people, they were almost completely non-musical. My mother only knew how to play Beethoven's Für Elise on piano, which she played over and over again throughout my entire childhood very, very badly. My father was aware, I think, that there was this thing called music, which was some sort of modulated sound that had emotional effects on people, but it wasn't entirely clear that he'd ever actually heard any. Again, this is quite odd, since my parents were incredibly



**I suppose (correct me if I'm wrong) that you started playing the piano with the classical repertoire. When did you have the feeling that you wanted to switch to something different and – your own music?**

**How would you describe your relationship with the piano in the year 2007? Is it an addiction, do you need to play every day? Do you still "practice"?**

cultured and creative – it's just that music wasn't a big part of their lives. And perhaps that became part of the attraction for me, that music offered a different direction, something new and unexplored.

Yes, I started with classical music, which I thought was just incredibly boring. But I was a very obedient child, and I stuck with it because my parents wanted me to. It wasn't until I was 12, in 1982, that things changed. I was on a school field trip, and I met this kid David Giuffre, today still my best friend, who had brought with him a little Casiotone MT-60 synthesizer. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. I got my own little Casio and started writing my own music immediately.

Now this is one of those things I say over and over again, but which no one ever seems to believe: I'm not a pianist! Yes, I can press down keys on the instrument, and sometimes I have some vague theoretical sense of what I'm playing, but none of this makes me a pianist. And I have enough respect for the artistry of real pianists to insist that I'm not one. Consider my friend Dan Tepfer, who's a phenomenal young jazz musician. Dan is a pianist; I'm a guy who likes to play with synthesizers, and who just can't stop using piano sounds. This is not to say that one or the other is better or worse – I'd like to think that the world needs synthesizer geeks just as much as it needs jazz pianists, or techno DJs, or Indian classical percussionists. But if you're Zakir Hussein, and everyone just seems to assume that you're this awesome techno DJ, then I think you do have some responsibility to say, no, actually, I play tabla. All of which to say, yes, I'm addicted to piano, and no, I never practice.

**You mentioned that you found the academic atmosphere to be “conservative and stifling”. Did that, in any way, change your perception of the piano and of the repertoire you were interested in?**

I think my frustrations with academia actually drove me away from piano for some time – and it’s only been through a long path that I’ve found my way back to it. Because for me, the possibility of creating new music has always been tied to the potential of electronic music. This brings me tangentially to a key story in my whole relationship with the piano, which took place long before my encounter with academia, but which seemed to anticipate it in a way. One day, when I was maybe 5 or 6 years old, I was sitting at the piano with my mother next to me, and she turned to me and said, “Write something.” And I remember thinking very clearly: it’s impossible. I remember looking at those 88 keys, keys which had been fixed in those exact patterns for hundreds of years, and I believed, naively, that every possible combination of notes must have, at some point in time, already been written. Of course, I realize now that this isn’t literally true – and yet in a sense I was onto something. Because there was this sense that the piano was exhausted, that its possibilities were exhausted, and that the only way to move forward, to do something new, was to find another path, a way out of that history. And it was not until years later, when I first encountered that little synthesizer, that I came to believe that new music was really possible. Or at least that it was something that I myself could aspire to create.

**Your music is electronically processed to a large extent. Why, then, are you still interested in the piano as a basis?**

I think piano is often for me the clearest and most direct way to get across a harmonic or emotional idea – which to me is almost the same thing, as I really see harmony as being the principle carrier or medium of emotion in music. And so when I want to say something very directly, or very clearly, I often end up

falling back on piano – because I know what I can do with it. So there's a clarity of expression there, and a confidence I feel in knowing how to find the result I'm looking for. And there's also a simplicity, which can be a nice break from the technical side of electronic music, much as I enjoy that. And I often find myself turning to that simplicity when I'm asking very basic questions about music, questions of form, of narrative, of what a composition is, or can be. And I often end up writing pieces that ask those questions first on piano, then later adapting what I've learned to other more technical tools.

**Were Ligeti's and Cage's prepared piano studies in any way an issue for you (possibly during your academic years)? Have you ever considered changing the instrument in this physical way, instead of the digital method of editing?**

Cage's prepared piano music has certainly been a big influence on me, and that's a direction I'd love to explore one day. But right now I don't have a real piano! This is the sad truth. When I moved to my current apartment in 2006, I failed to take into account the geometry of the building's staircase, and my piano couldn't make it, it just couldn't be done. So it's living down the street with my friends Anne Guthrie and Billy Gomberg, and my studio is all electronic these days. But what for me has been very helpful is the wonderful Pianoteq, a piano physical model which is actually quite impressive. With the right processing, the sound can be quite compelling, plus you have control over a large number of parameters that you obviously can't tweak on a physical instrument. Thus the little mean-tone piano piece 'March 20, 2007' up on my site is all Pianoteq, and I've got another piece, 'June 21, 2007', this one actually equal tempered, coming soon as well. But until they start to put stray nuts and bolts into their model, or I get a new apartment, prepared piano per se will have to wait.

**Do you keep up with the contemporary piano repertoire? Is there any composer out there who inspires you for your work on the piano?**

My brother Ted does a nice impersonation of me that goes, "Morton Feldman! Morton Feldman! Morton Feldman!" in a sort of nasal, annoying voice. Which about sums it up. I'm really not up to speed on everything that's going on in the world of piano music, and it's the legacy of Feldman that I tend to focus on, almost monomaniacally. Certainly a piece like Triadic Memories is hugely important to me, but to really understanding where it is I'm coming from, you need to look at the Piano and String Quartet. I first heard the P&SQ in the final days of 1993, and, sad as it is to say, I really don't believe that I'll ever have an epiphany like that again in my life.

**Especially with the ten-year-old 'May 3, 1997' from your latest release on SIRR, I had the feeling that you were looking for new, spontaneous and organic ways for the piano and electronics to interact. Is that a direction you still consider to be fruitful today?**

Continuing on from what I was just saying, I think you could look at all of my work with the intersection of piano and electronics as a sort of pathetic attempt to rewrite Feldman's Piano and String Quartet as Piano and Synthesizer. Because that piece is always what I'm trying to get to, what I'm reaching for – and I never quite make it. I'm not sure I even come close. I listened to the entire P&SQ again earlier this year, and I was really struck by how it represents a sort of limit for me, a limit in the mathematical sense, something one's always approaching but never quite reaches. The intricacy and genius of that piece, that one piece – it will always be beyond my grasp. But the hope is that in my endless, bumbling attempts to mimic it, I might occasionally stumble onto something interesting or new.

**Having asked all that: Have you ever thought about recording an album with unprocessed solo piano works?**

I love the idea, and I probably would never do it – because I just don't think it would be good enough. If there is anything interesting in what I'm doing, it comes from this tension between the piano and the electronics, and not from

**In our previous conversation, you also mentioned that you found electronic live performance to be “a dangerous art”, because of its restricted performance aspect. I was wondering why you haven’t chosen to integrate the piano into your concerts, to counterweight the laptop stasis.**

**I had the slight impression that the piano used to be the main starting point for your pieces until a few years ago, but that in more recent work you have made a discreet switch to different source material. Is that a correct perception?**

my skills or abilities as a pianist or a composer of piano music. So I think I’d just feel way too self-conscious about publishing an entire album of nothing but my piano noodlings, fun as it might be for me.

Actually, my friend Taylor Deupree and I have been doing a series of concerts over the last few years taking exactly this approach. We walk on stage with nothing, no plan, no sounds, nothing. I sit down at a piano and start playing, and Taylor samples my playing into his laptop and starts slicing it up and sending processed fragments back at me. And I in turn respond to those, and we go back and forth, and build up a piece from it, all on the spot, all improvised. It’s totally terrifying, and occasionally successful. As with a lot of fully improvised music, you get some great moments, and you get some train wrecks. But Taylor and I have been working together for nearly 20 years now, and we know each other really well, so we usually manage to keep it from going entirely off the rails.

If you look at just about any period in my work, you’ll find pieces that are totally focused on piano, or that are all about piano-type thinking, and then you’ll find pieces right next to them that have nothing to do with piano at all, that are all about escape from the piano, escaping from that mode of thought, into a world of insects, or particles, or strange forces or other planets. This is one of those long-term themes that runs through my work, this constant push and pull, back and forth, to and from the piano. And it’s certainly true of my recent work as well. So while I wouldn’t say that I’m moving away from using piano as a source, I would certainly agree that this tension is one of those key dynamics that animates what I’m doing.

**You mentioned you really wanted to turn towards pop, but didn't have the hair to be Duran Duran. Do you think you could have the pianistic technique to be Elton John?**

I have neither the pianistic technique nor the fashion sensibility to be Elton John. Needless to say. But this does remind me of a great line I heard about my playing. I had contributed some material for vidnaObmana's *Opera for Four Fusion Works* – basically just my usual Feldman impersonations, i.e., simple, repetitive piano patterns. And he then took them and looped them further, making them even more repetitive. And one of the reviews came in, and it said the piano playing was so repetitive it "makes Harold Budd sound like Liberace." And I thought that was just the greatest line I'd ever heard! I really love it, and I quote it all the time.

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## Interview with Kenneth Kirschner

| Tobias Fischer, Beat Magazine (2009)

One sometimes wonders how far Kenneth Kirschner could have come if giving away his releases for free had been nothing but a clever marketing ploy. Maybe today he would be receiving enormous sums for high-profile speeches at futurological congresses. Maybe he'd be offering luxuriously packaged vinyl box sets of his early works. And most certainly he would have devised some clever digital strategy wherein the free was merely a teaser to attract his fans to a plethora of non-free goodies, mugs, t-shirts and his regular tours all around the world. As it happens, however, Kirschner truly supports the idea (and the ideal) of sharing one's art, defying the popular position that the ego is responsible for everything that's beautiful and stimulating. "I don't really believe in composers", Kirschner says today, and: "Music is a distributed, collective system that remixes itself through us" – perhaps this is also why he values the role of the DJ as an educator, catalyst and distributor of music in society much more highly than many of his academic colleagues. It is obvious that positions such as these, in a media landscape which is increasingly anchoring itself in the cult of personality, is not going to get you dirty-rich and famous, even though Kirschner enjoyed his fair share of attention when

he first launched his website as a permanent archive for every official piece he has ever written (it has retained its minimalistic allure to the present day). But the consistent quality of his work, despite his occasional bouts of prolific productivity, is living proof against the widely held falsity (fixed in copyright legislation) that financial compensation is a prerequisite to creativity. It is not the only paradox in Kirschner's oeuvre, which is still being sold in small but respectable quantities on CDs all over the world despite being available for free online. This interview, for example, took place a short while after the release of his most recent album, *Filaments & Voids*, on Taylor Deupree's 12k Records, which managed to turn into both his most demanding and successful full-length to date. And everyone suspecting this to be part of a clever strategy to sell physical items has got it wrong again. With production costs at an all-time high for 12k, Kirschner jokes: "I think Taylor suspects it's just part of my ongoing campaign to bankrupt his label!"

***Filaments & Voids* is your most expensive and longest album; it deals with silence, and all of the material is freely available from your website. Still, it has been very successful. Is that success testimony to the fact that there are alternative ways of promoting your music to the old model?**

I'm glad you think it's been successful! I myself am never entirely confident. Just as each individual piece I write is an experiment, my entire distribution philosophy is a kind of experiment as well. So far, it hasn't gone too horribly wrong, but maybe I've just been lucky. I've managed to maintain a balance between keeping all my music freely available on my website, while also releasing the occasional CD when I can. But I think it's really still a challenge to get people to focus seriously and thoughtfully on work that's solely released online. For one thing, there's no real framework for reviewing pieces published online – I only get reviews when I put out a physical CD, which is ironic, because the individual tracks on that album will usually have been up on my site for quite some time. There's also still a perception that online releases somehow aren't as "serious" or "legitimate" as work that's been released through more traditional channels – there's still a real sense of hierarchy, with CDs



considered the most respected format. To a certain extent this makes sense, in that a CD has historically had a label behind it, which means there's been a process of selection and curation and quality control that has gone into it, whereas anyone can just go ahead and put anything online – there's no filter. Labels have always played this dual role, providing both the means of production for the physical object, and a curatorial process – the selecting and crafting of an aesthetic, a seal of approval or quality. But CDs are on their way out now – we all know this. And we're going to have to develop new ways of finding our way through all the music that's out there, of deciding what standards are going to apply in this new world. And that's part of what I'm trying to do with my site – to see if it's possible to just write music and put it out there and have faith that the people who need to find it will do so.

**You started simply releasing your compositions on your website as they were finished when the idea was still in its infancy. Why, at the time, were you no longer that interested in the album format anymore?**

As a composer, I really think on a piece by piece basis, rather than album by album. Each piece for me poses a particular set of questions and problems, and hopefully opens up a new set of questions and problems for the next piece. I'm not usually interested in writing the same piece twice, though perhaps sometimes I do. And when I'm working on a piece, I tend not to think about how it will relate to other things I've done. I don't think, "Hey, I'm working on my next album!" It's always, "I'm working on the new piece."

And while I certainly enjoy crafting the longer narrative of an album, finding the right selection and getting the flow right, building a story out of it all – there's always this voice in my head saying, "Why only this?" Why only this one selection, this one track order? Why can't

there be many? Because other combinations could be just as good. And I start to worry that people will think this is “the” order, “the” only way these pieces should be heard, which of course isn’t the case. The best thing, really, would be to have every individual CD be unique, crafted just for one listener. I used to do that with mix tapes of my music, long before I had CDs out, and I always really loved finding just the right story to tell, just once, to one particular person, and then later taking maybe those same pieces and putting together a totally different story for a different person. And in a sense that’s what you can do now with my website.

**Was one of the considerations of your move to the web that this allows you to document and share your creative path as you go along, complete with what you consider failures?**

Oh trust me, you don’t hear the failures! Right now, there are 16 dead pieces lying on my hard drive from just the last 6 months alone. For every piece that goes up on my site, there are usually at least 3 or 4 that never make it that far, that I abandon either early on or after a lot of very frustrated and unhappy work. And generally, that’s because they’re really not any good. I’m a big believer in being one’s own toughest editor, and I delete a huge amount of work, even within pieces that survive: for example, ‘March 16, 2006’, which takes up the entire second CD of *Filaments & Voids*, was originally over 6 hours long. And we’re not talking Feldman’s Second String Quartet here – most of it was really awful. So you edit and edit and edit, and delete and delete and delete, until you get down to some core or kernel of essential quality that has the traits you’re looking for. And this applies to one’s overall body of work as well. So while there are some pieces up on my site that I may, in retrospect, consider failures, I always had at least some faith in them when I first posted them. The

**As with *Filaments & Voids*, you're still releasing physical albums from time to time. What, to you, is the difference between this physical product and the online file – is it really just the fact that you're holding a CD and a booklet in your hands?**

vast numbers of real failures you'll hopefully never hear.

As an artist, I have to confess that I'm really just not very interested in physical objects. Perhaps this is because, unlike a lot of my friends and colleagues, I'm not also a designer or a visual artist – I'm just a musician. And because of this, I end up staking out a fairly extreme position toward the "objectless" end of the distribution spectrum, where what you get from me is just a music file with a title – and even the title is just a date! So you're really not getting much of anything at all, except pure sound.

That said, though, I do have a great appreciation for the very beautiful physical objects that others create, and for me this aspect often becomes part of a collaboration. *Filaments & Voids* is a good example: Taylor's design ends up being an integral part of what the project ultimately becomes, as does Marc's text. I'm working right now on a project with Canadian multimedia madman Herman Kolgen, and if you know skoltz\_kolgen's stunning *Silent Room* – which is just about the most impressive combination of physical and digital object you can imagine – you'll understand why I'm quite excited to see how this particular physical object turns out.

**In one of your earlier interviews, two important quotes came up: "If I have a religion in life, it's the iPod." And: "The Walkman changed the way we understand cities." So what, would you say, has file sharing done to change how we understand music?**

What strikes me most nowadays is just the sheer volume, the sheer amount of music that's immediately accessible to you at any moment. There's gigs and gigs and gigs sitting on my hard drive. And having such a tremendous amount of music instantly accessible changes your relationship to it, I think – it changes the way you listen, and the way you think

about music. I sometimes feel like it's almost impossible for me these days to actually want to hear a particular piece of music – the quantity is just so overwhelming, you don't know where to begin. What do you do if all the music in the world is at your fingertips? If you can point your finger and hear anything, anytime, anywhere? How do you find your way through it all, navigate, draw a path that makes sense and has meaning? And how does this change our sense of aesthetics, even our sense of what music is, or can be?

You have to find new approaches, new ways of thinking and hearing, new methods and tools to navigate this world of sound. Think of what shuffle play has become – a whole new way to approach your music collection, as if we all had little John Cages sitting inside our computers. These days I find myself listening to streaming music a lot more, which for me is simultaneously a way to avoid responsibility for making choices, and also a nostalgia for my pop music days in the 1980s, when radio was at the center of everything. And then there's dance music: DJs are as much curators as they are performers, sifting through a vast and intimidating body of music and making it comprehensible to their audiences. So we find ways to navigate this sea of music, even though our tools and our understanding are still evolving.

**You're extremely forward-thinking when it comes to technology, but you're not always able to realize your ideas yourself. Is that frustrating sometimes?**

Yeah, I have endless crazy ideas I'd love to realize, but that I just don't have the skills to pull off. This is one of those inherent challenges of working in a technological medium – you have to balance honing your technical skills with actually getting around to writing music. I'm sure that, if I really worked at it, I could

learn enough programming to allow me to realize some of my more bizarre ideas – but all that time would have to be taken away from composing. And so what I end up doing is just taking the skills and abilities I have, and the level of technology I have, and trying to push it in new directions. To work creatively within my own limitations. Because what I'm really most interested in is how new technology allows us to think differently about music, to conceptualize different possibilities of what music can be – and you don't necessarily have to be the most extreme geek in the world to do that. We haven't yet begun to exhaust the possibilities of what electronic music can do.

**Most of your music is freely available on the web and you've initiated several collaborative open source projects. Would it be correct to say that your interest exclusively goes out to musical results rather than questions of ownership?**

These questions are very interesting to me, because, on a philosophical level, I don't really believe in composers. When I meet someone, I'm forced to tell them that I'm a "composer," but I know it's not really true. There's no such thing as a composer, as this magical person who creates music out of thin air. Music is a distributed, collective system that remixes itself through us. There's a single, incomprehensibly complex signal path that runs from every piece of music I've ever heard, into a messy tangle of neurons and sequencers and plugins, up onto a website and off into the net, and then hopefully onwards – and none of it looks anything like a guy wearing a wig scratching stylized symbols onto parchment using a quill made from a bird's wing. In fact, if you could see the guy with the wig clearly enough, he'd probably look more like an effects chain or a patch bay, a complex machine for recombining patterned sound. The best thing would be to somehow perceive music in its pure, pre-personal state. It may travel in interesting ways through particular people, but it ultimately isn't

a game of authorship or ownership – it's more collective and impersonal than that. This is something that comes across clearly in dance music, where the vast majority of the people creating the music are anonymous. You may know the DJ, but you generally have no idea who wrote any individual piece of music. To traditional notions of authorship, this seems terribly wrong – but from a more modern point of view, this way is much more honest, more reflective of the way things actually work. Before I started publishing my music, I used to dream of even going so far as to release it completely unattributed – no composer, no name, nothing. Just put it out there on the net and watch it go. And that really would be the ideal, not just from a philosophical point of view, but as a challenge: how could you write something so distinctive, so compelling, that even without a name attached people would begin to take notice, to suspect that there's some secret structure or hidden system of meaning within this body of disconnected sounds? It's hard, maybe impossible. I never had the courage to try it myself, and it's clearly too late now!

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## On *Twenty Ten*

| Tobias Fischer, Tokafi (2011)

Two months ago, Kenneth Kirschner wrote me an enthusiastic email, letting me know that he had “grown hopelessly annoyed” with his website and finally overhauled it. To others, this might have constituted a rather trivial affair, but with Kirschner, whose homepage represents an up-to-date archive of his entire oeuvre, it qualified as an incisive decision. Intrigued, I browsed straight over and spent about half an hour listening to his recent work ‘June 9, 2011’, a slowly breathing maelstrom of quietly rasping string fields and prepared piano droplets, while looking at a white screen filled with nothing but a timeline and track titles. And as much as I tried to discover changes of any kind, I just couldn’t make them out. It was then that I realized how hard it must be for an artist like Kirschner to find an audience in a world accustomed to unambiguity and instant satisfaction. Although his complete work was available for gratuitous download, it never came for free, demanding full attention and active participation. And it relied seminally on the listener’s ability to differentiate between two seemingly identical tones, the intricacies of a virtual bow scraping across the virtual strings of a software-generated violin. I did like the courageous minimalism of Kirschner’s new homepage a lot. But I

sure hoped he hadn't stashed out a couple of thousand bucks on a fashionable agency to come up with the design.

That said, Kirschner has never been without his ardent followers. 12k's Taylor Deupree has probably been the biggest champion of his work, if only by taking it out of this beautifully sober environment, framing it with associative imagery, providing a context and offering discrete hints at how to approach this equally intimate and intimidating galaxy. Proving the efficacy of the approach, 2008's *Filaments & Voids* on 12k quickly sold out its 1000-copy print run despite its almost provocatively challenging contents. The success was, at least partly, down to the album almost monothematically focusing on silence as a structural constant. In a sense, this also made it slightly misleading: freshly-won fans will now vainly peruse the almost three hours of music on *Twenty Ten* in search of a similarly striking and easily deductible concept. As if to consciously wipe out any expectations, the first of three discs opens with a piece built entirely from xylophone and glockenspiel sounds recorded one afternoon at his son's kindergarten in New York. Although, as closer inspection will reveal, 'January 4, 2011' is an intricately constructed composition with clearly delineated sections of thematic presentation, development and reprise, it has an unusual playfulness and timbral lightness to it, as Kirschner groups his lines into gleeful rhythmical patterns, occasionally speeding up his sequences into humorous sprints. And despite silence playing an important role in almost everything that follows, it never turns into a conceptual anchor, remaining just one device among many in his toolbox.

If the album is more open to interpretation than its predecessor, then this is a logical result of how the material was selected: according to Kirschner, he simply played Deupree some of his latest pieces at his apartment, with the latter picking those he liked best. Which is not to say that *Twenty Ten* is without its inner map or leitmotifs: a focus on the refined nuances and possibilities of a strictly reduced set of colours and techniques is one recurring interest, for example. Using classical solo or ensemble settings as departure points for acoustic architectures which would previously have seemed unsustainable over these lengths – two out of three discs here are made up of just one epic track – is another. Kirschner is initially designing and organizing his tracks as though they were traditional nocturnes, quintets or fantasies and then uses technology



to take them far beyond the possibilities available to composers of the Romantic age. Kirschner himself has referred to his work as being “about the act of recording”, and what that means is that their essential characteristics and defining features are not so much physical performances or “the materials in themselves”, but the long and arduous process which follows – the cutting up and realigning of themes, the tweaking of sonic details, the layering of elements. In an analogy with the Baroque variation model, it is not the melody itself which counts, but what is done to it, the transformational eye of a needle the music has to squeeze through on its way to sublimation.

The most perplexing demonstration of this philosophy is provided on ‘September 25, 2010’, comprising a sequence of island-like chords generously spread out over a forty-seven-minute canvas. It is an astounding display of economy and patience, as Kirschner introduces sonic events at a rate of about three to four per minute, arriving at a total of 142 in the end, each one of them preceded and followed by a large span of complete silence. There are passages where there seems to be a connection between two successive chords, the beginning of a sequence. But these notions are immediately dispelled, and although the stretches of silence appear to all be of a roughly similar length, their durations never follow a discernible pattern. There may or may not be a system at work here, but even if there is, it remains outside of the audience’s reach or perception. Even the last chord, a sensual and anything but concluding construct, could just as well be the first. Soon, one has lost count and given up on trying to figure things out, losing oneself agreeably in the tide and flood of events.

The press release makes a point of mentioning that there are “no repetitions and no recurrences”. But in fact, with millions of possible combinatory possibilities, that is actually the least interesting aspect here. The really astounding thing is that although he doesn’t repeat a single chord, Kirschner has managed to nonetheless create a sense of coherency. Silence and minimalism may take away a lot of notes – but in doing so, they paradoxically add a lot more interpretational layers in turn. They also sharpen one’s senses for the most minute details: after a couple of spins, one suddenly realizes that, in fact, the piece doesn’t actually contain any “chords” at all. Rather, each note within a triad is treated like an individual line, with its own attack and decay, its own volume and dynamic curve, its own degree of processing. As a result, these short passages all

have an inner dramaturgy to them, like a succession of equally related and self-sufficient, ultra-condensed miniatures. Some of them will leave you cold, but others are touching enough to make the tears well up in your eyes.

It is tiny, but momentous realizations like these that *Twenty Ten* is built around, precious instances when the trivial takes on a revelatory radiance. Kirschner isn't looking for the truth; he is gauging its validity as a concept, and it is precisely this courteous disobedience to the gods of reason that makes his work stand out. The thing about epiphanies, is this, after all: they happen when you least expect them – and in places where even seemingly insignificant changes can make you see things in an entirely different light.

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## Pirate This Music

| Molly Sheridan, *NewMusicBox* (2013)

Before Napster was even an idea living in Shawn Fanning's dorm room, composer Kenneth Kirschner saw something idealistic and beautiful in the notion of sending his music out into the world in a way that was freely accessible to everyone. "I'm not telling you to copy other things," Kirschner clarifies. "But I am telling you to pirate my music – because I think it's important."

When you visit Kirschner's über-minimalist single-page website, you get a clearer sense of how central this outlook is to his work. Since its launch in late 2002, new pieces have been posted upon completion (older works have also been added, rounding out the breadth of the catalog) and all are freely downloadable (as MP3s and, since 2010, FLACs). Each work carries a date in a hazy cornflower blue font as its sole identifier – it's the date that the piece's concept "crystallized" for Kirschner, a filing system that he characterizes as "a disaster that I love." The track's total running time is the only other detail listed. No program notes are offered, no composer bio included. Scroll all the way down the page past the last (which is to say the first) track, 'May 19, 1988', and you get

the only information on the music's creator on offer here: you can email him, follow him on Twitter, or sign up for the mailing list.

The lack of explanatory material about his music on his website is quite intentional. Kirschner wants listeners to focus on the end result and is uninterested in seducing them with detailed notes about his compositional process, because "if you don't like what you're hearing, the methods have already failed."

Considering all he's keeping under his hat, the fact that all the work is available at no cost suits Kirschner. "If you can download it freely, then you can take a risk with it," he points out. "And I think, being an experimental composer, it's about encouraging a listener to take risks." This obviously begs some personal financial questions, and Kirschner is very forthcoming on this point, explaining that he works part-time in an unrelated field as a freelance copy editor. "I basically do just enough work to get by and support my music while giving myself the maximum amount of time and freedom. It's a tricky balance, and there are definitely tradeoffs."

To source the building blocks for his compositions, Kirschner works with live instrumentalists, coaching and recording sounds with them. He's also comfortable enough at the piano to produce what he needs, and isn't afraid to knock out some of his own percussion as well. Field recordings and sample libraries round out his sound palette. From there, it's a process of improvisation and chance procedures to build up musical material, and then a lot of editing at a desk in his Brooklyn home until the final piece takes shape.

What electronic music gives you the ability to do is to obsessively edit everything. You have more control than you ever should have. And you can take chaos and take chance and take unexpected events and capture them and let them become an essential part of a composition. So you're not composing intentionally a lot of the time, you're reacting to what's happening with the technology and what's happening with the parameters that you've set up.

When that obsessive editing is complete, the file is posted to Kirschner's website. A few record labels, including 12k, have put out collections of his work, though the CD covers often carry the printed suggestion that "this music may be freely copied."

While he does occasionally perform live, Kirschner is adamant that the recording is the work. He doesn't create scores in the traditional sense, associating printed music with a certain anxiety. "I've always felt I had some very basic form of musical dyslexia," he explains. "Notation was very intimidating to me. It was something I could never connect with, and I could never have become a musician in any sort of serious sense if I had to go that path."

Coming of age at a time when synthesizers and drum machines and four-track recorders were at hand, however, meant that he could create music in a way that worked for him and he wasn't blocked by tools that he just couldn't use.

I've always known this is what I wanted to do. I was fortunately very clear on this since I was twelve or thirteen: that I want to do this kind of music, I want to do it in a certain sort of way, present it in a certain way, distribute it in a certain way, have it philosophically structured in a certain way. And I've stuck to that program.

In many ways, Kirschner sees it all as a grand experiment in objectless, abstract music. "I think it's a cool thing to try and see if it works."

"And by 'trying it'," he concedes, his laugh filling the room, "I mean my entire life."