

Glossolalia (with Marginalia)

The following excerpts were freely extracted and transcribed by Newton Armstrong from a conversation between Chris Mann and Chris Dench, recorded on 24 September, 1994. Commentaries were added after the transcript had been returned.

In transcribing these fragments of conversation I have taken the liberty of restating the message in a less convoluted form than the original. (Chris Dench)

On not having read Dench:

From composer* to talent

The process has been other than what was agreed to. (As I understand it Dench has re-written his utterances (which I understood to be part of a dialogue) to incorporate what we had defined as exegesis.)

I am no longer responsible for my utterances because I am no longer responsible for their context. (I resent being defined as irresponsible.)

Exegesis (what was/is of interest is dialogue - the vocabulary clearance of different industrial traditions) has become representation and representation is at best a design flaw, at worst simply unethical.

*collaboration is what you do with the enemy (Chris Mann)

To do listening through music is the same as doing aesthetics through things. There's no ethics in the past.

In earlier times composers composed sound. They were sometimes paid. Thereafter they composed listening. For which they were not paid. After listening, composers were paid again - to compose hearing out. (Chris Mann)

CD

CD: One of the things which I had wanted to discuss with you is that we both involve a lot of stacking in what we do. In your case, though, this stacking has to remain conceptual, because, unless you were to somehow create a polyphonic vocal work, you are stuck with a linear delivery... admittedly when I've heard you perform it's been virtually polyphonic.

CM: Oh, you say the nicest things. I was talking to somebody the other day about how is it that I got to work with words and voice, and I found myself making this observation about the fact that the voice is still, as far as I can tell, the most interesting, and most complex sound source, and words are the most complex thing that voices do.

CD: For many years I've been an admirer of Trevor Wishart's work, investigating the whole gamut of vocal sounds and attempting to compose with this complete palette in a socially responsible way. I've always been particularly impressed with a section in Vox 2 where one of the low male voices mimics a Japanese nagauta vocalisation with astonishing accuracy, a realisation achieved entirely through decipherment of the, exceed-

CM

surf city

complex is of course an abstract noun - conducive (more or less) to stacking ("It's the sense under the word that makes the sentence." Oskar Mann)

ingly complex, specially invented, notation - the singer wouldn't need to have seen any bunnaku to be able to arrive at the correct sound, and you see this brings us to redundancy, because I could imagine you going in the Wishart direction, but you seem to have accepted that a lot of that cross-cultural, technical stuff is irrelevant to your needs.

CM: Well, yes I do. Twenty-five years ago I did a lot of work with extended vocal techniques. Roy Hart was the push that I took up, and I was disappointed in IRCAM because somebody had come up to me at a performance and laid in to me, and accused me of refusing to use Bantu clicks, and they thought that what I'd made was a compendium of all known vocal tricks, and . . .

CD: But that's the IRCAM thing, isn't it? If it's not an encyclopedia then it's not worth having.

CM: I found that I became more and more interested in speech, and in gossip.

CD: I've always understood a clear distinction between listening and hearing. I find the postmodern stance that we need only hear music offensive. When I do listen to much recent music, I find it empty.

CM: Listening has never been the prime function of music, I'm sure, and 98% of that which passes for listening is not listening, it is what I would have done, or it is was the last piece of music that I heard like this or not like this, or the last time I heard this piece of music I thought it was . . ., or I was in this situation or whatever.

CM: Is the way ethics and aesthetics are confusable as a project, of using one to argue the other, is that not something like the problem of real time, in that I spent six months working on this piece and it took seven and a half minutes to realise?

CD: Perhaps I should ask my bank manager. The assumption that spending an inordinate amount of time on cramming a wealth of detail into the music is significant at a higher level than the merely, momentarily "audible" underpins much of my work. This I interpret as an ethical decision, to make the music somehow count at a, dare I say, mystical level. The assessment as to whether I am correct in seeing this as ethical rather than aesthetical depends a lot on where one stands on archetypes . . .

I have long believed in the efficacy of certain ritual actions; one such ritual action is the cyphering of certain personally significant information into the musical text. Whether this concealment (see Bateson: Angels Fear) in the score has any acoustical corollary remains one of my primary compositional preoccupations. A comparable coding can be heard in Nunes' Tif'ereth.

redundancy is a concrete noun useful in definition of decoration and noise, a moralist's positivism

as a philosophy of language

The holographic codings-in are partly to do with the ritual action mentioned above; this particular belief-system is predicated on my conviction that aural perception is processed at several levels of behaviour: the immediate and local, the structural middle-ground, and a general landscape-like totality. Information immanent in the music may well be comprehended by reference to clues provided elsewhere in the heard text. Thus memory is a major functionary in the comprehension of a musical utterance of a more than trivial size. A failure to engage with these larger frames of understanding will result in an architectural aphasia.

CM: It's something to do with not knowing. This is why I was interested in dialogue. What interests me in performance is to be confronted by something which is either completely notated, but which is radically ambiguous, so it is something which you have to attempt to survive, so it looks superficially like improvisation, so there is a level of not knowing. And that not knowing is a version, a parallel, a manifestation of what it is that is insufficient in aesthetics, such that we require ethics.

CD: I have to admit that I abandoned any concern with aesthetics, as such, longer ago than I can remember. I see the means of surviving as a performer in one of my works being an access of the grace of interpretation. There is a kind of holographic matrix of information, a composed-in self-similarity, that provides the key to how to reconcile the superficial differences and arrive at an intelligible rendering of the piece.

CM: This is how I regard the piece which is well-formed, and grammatical, and reflexive, and has within it all of the instructions which relate to how it should be realised.

CD: No, not all, I would hope. I mean something quite ambitious by the instructions I try to structurally code into the text and texture of the music. This has to do with how I expect all those "ethical" elements that are incorporated into pieces to have an audible result in the attitudes players adopt towards them. I have no expectation of audiences picking this stuff up, that is decidedly not its purpose. But I hope that eventually listeners, whether external or internal to the performances, will intuit, is that the word? . . . infer, perhaps, some of the hidden meanings. Which brings us back to your not knowing.

CM: Is that an advertisement for transcendence?

((

(i.e. in parentheses)

level of not knowing x ,

X a

ethics x , or))

(That the performer realise a strategy that may enable conspiracy (with an audience)?)

By declarative music we agreed that we meant: "as in 'I know 'cos I was there'" (CM). For an example of a declarative composer, see (hear) the work of George Benjamin.

i.e. filtration.

CD: No. It's an attempt to work with a rather mundane transcendence. A qualified transcendence.

CM: Is there any other kind of transcendence?

CD: I'm waiting to see.

CD: Declarative music I imagine as starting from certain knowns and restating them... in some cases, ad nauseam. I don't think either of us would be interested in giving that sort of thing any headroom at all. There is a school of thought which says that music can only be declarative, whereas it seems to me that this would-be "objectivity" is a ground zero, on which one is obliged to build in order to say more than nothing.

CM: That's ideology. Then all you can ever argue is that my ideology is bigger than your ideology.

CD: For which reason it seems to me that it is unethical to spend all that money on getting a piece played that only provides people with that which they are already long familiar.

CM: To require to prove that you know what you think you know is something that they don't do in kindergarten any more.

CD: The idea that language imposes specific systemic and structural constraints on the ways in which we perceive and act upon the world and each other, seems to me to be close to the reasons why I use process as a compositional mechanism. The whole point about using process is that it introduces constraints that might be productive.

CM: How is this not what we were talking about?
... Wittgenstein beating his head against the limits of language. One of the things that a piece does, in various ways and under various guises, is to establish the grammar of its apprehension, which is how it is that you demand an intelligence.

CD: But perhaps the difference between a speculative and a declarative music is that a speculative music wants to subvert those constraints or attempts to...

CM: To analyse them, or to take them for a walk.

CD: As opposed to the other type of music that assumes proofs and is complacent about them.

CM: What could proof ever be but complacent?

cf. propositional - i.e. that which it most self-evidently is not