

When Scott Rosenberg (born 1972) began his freshman year at Wesleyan University in 1990 he fantasized about studying music, but he wasn't sure if he was a good enough musician to seriously entertain the idea. Still, his interest was strong enough that he enrolled in a class that focused on improvisation. Growing up in Los Angeles, he'd come to love improvisation and experimentation, discovering the free-jamming sixties rock bands as a high school student, which eventually led to him appreciate such rock-informed improvisers as Eugene Chadbourne and Henry Kaiser; John Coltrane and Charlie Parker were just around the corner. He'd been playing the guitar for a few years—without any formal training—conducting his own intuitive experiments with extended feedback and improv.

Still, back then he had no idea who his class instructor Anthony Braxton was; Braxton was also just starting at Wesleyan. “We get in there and he puts ‘Composition #96,’ or something like that, down in front of us, possibly some of the most difficult music written in the second half of the century, and he just gives us a downbeat,” says Rosenberg. “All of a sudden I was going from basically never playing notated music and hardly knowing the notes on the staff to total immersion in a completely evolved concept, and I was sold. It was like coming home. I had never had that experience before, and hearing those sounds was one of the most comforting things I’ve ever experienced. It was that first month of college that convinced me that I wanted to be a musician.”

The experience galvanized Rosenberg—who quickly put aside the guitar, then settled on the saxophone after struggling with the trumpet for several years—and he says that his most fundamental goals as a musician and composer materialized during this early period of college. He wanted to combine the seat-of-the-pants thrills and heavy individuality of improvisation with the physical heft meticulous composition could produce. “My theoretical understanding of the music was way more developed than my technical ability, and it was very frustrating,” he says. But he adds that his Wesleyan professors were all encouraging. “They all had the attitude that you access your creativity at the level that you’re at at any given point in your development.” While Braxton remains a primary influence, Rosenberg also cites Muhal Richard Abrams, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, George Lewis, and John Cage as key inspirations, as he draws freely from composed, aleatoric, and improvised approaches, mixing and matching as he sees fit.

In the years since college Rosenberg has taken all sorts of detours—from abstract onomatopoeic solo work to post-AACM big-band music to through-composed chamber compositions—but he has never truly veered from the path that he first set for himself as a college freshman. On *Creative Orchestra Music, Chicago 2001*, he nails that ideal, composing floor-rattling orchestral music that revels in the powerful muscle and dynamism of a 26-strong group, while liberally interspersing extended sections of spiky free improvisation, whether it’s produced by a featured soloist or ad hoc groupings.

“I hope to develop a body of work for an improvising large ensemble, and that’s something that’s always been an imperative for me, to write orchestral music that incorporates improvisations,” he says. “I think the large ensemble medium is the most powerful combination because it’s not just a symbolic expression of community, but it’s an actually communal action. It’s not just representative, but it actually is something, and when you incorporate improvisation into that you are raising the importance of the individual to the same level of importance of the group and the composer, and I think that’s really powerful.”

Rosenberg has worked with large ensemble music off and on since 1993, but he first recorded in this format in 1997 when he made the album *IE* with a 27-piece group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Rosenberg attended Mills College for graduate school and stuck around, quickly making connections and friendships with players in the small but bustling improvised music scene. He spent five years there and he has continued to work and maintain strong relationships with many players there. In the summer of 1999 he moved to Chicago, and it was as a free improviser that he first infiltrated the scene. But he wanted to spend more time on his compositions, and after a year of laying the groundwork he was finally able to put some steady groups together.

As 2001 approached Rosenberg vowed to form, pen a repertoire, and perform with three distinct groups. “There’s no question that it was the six most productive months in my life so far,” he says. He assembled the zigzagging chamber quintet called the Skronktet, a post-bop quartet called Red, and convened the Creative Orchestra. All of these projects drew upon some of Chicago’s youngest and most promising players, some of whom have begun to make a name for themselves since this album was made. The previous large ensemble recording is considerably looser and rougher than the one you hold in your hands, and Rosenberg says that for the Chicago album he was more deliberate about assembling the orchestra, although it’s worth noting that he also brought in a pair of old pals from California, guitarist John Shiurba and reedist Jesse Gilbert, to fill out the group. “There is something to getting large numbers and incorporating as many people as possible, but for something like this every member of the ensemble has to be able to carry his own weight, and I wanted to feature every member as an improviser, and if possible, get each person to contribute something personal to the project. I think the players in Chicago are some of the best players in the country, and they have that combination of being really serious musicians, being able to deal with difficult notation, and being dedicated to making it to rehearsals and to working on the music. They’re also fantastic improvisers. I think [the album] is a testament to how many great musicians there are in the area and how generous they are.”

As generous as they may be, Rosenberg’s own ability and willingness to work behind the scenes is certainly a key to his success so far. “I think part of my job as a composer or musician, and maybe it’s even something I have a propensity for, is organizing,” he says. “I like working with other musicians on that scale, and I like the results, and I like meeting people.” That predilection served him well in Chicago, where actively getting the word out and taking the music directly to an audience worked for Ken Vandermark. “I’ve learned about marketing and being in Chicago was a good education for that. There is something valuable about pitching the right project to the right audience.” Rosenberg also operates his own record label, Barely Auditable, and when he was in Chicago he sporadically organized concerts given by himself and other improvisers in a coach house behind his apartment that he dubbed Brickhouse.

The present recording was made on March 10, 2001, two days after the group gave a rigorous, triumphant performance of this music at Chicago’s HotHouse. Of the five pieces only *Tehr* (2000) was written specifically for this project, but the other pieces—all originally written during Rosenberg’s Bay Area years—have been radically rearranged and rewritten for this project. Of *Tehr* Rosenberg says, “It’s probably the most orchestral-minded piece, and I’d say it’s indicative of the direction I’d like to follow for this format.” Indeed, the various improvised sections—determined before each performance, whether it’s who will be active or what pitches will be used—fit seamlessly with the composer’s complex, dissonant writing. It leaves the listener wondering what is composed and what’s created in the instant.

Wash (1995), on the other hand, features no improvisation. Rosenberg originally wrote the piece for a string quartet, but it was never performed publicly or recorded. The version here uses only about one-seventh of the original composition. The piece has the feel of a soundtrack for a particularly harrowing thriller, as shifting slabs of sound constantly and restlessly shift density and color, each orchestral ring of calm upended by a higher-pitched block of sound or collided into by a new voicing that explodes with dissonance. *7x with Sttm* combines two different compositions. *7x* (1997) is a significantly revamped excerpt of the untitled second piece from *IE*, its tempo much faster and with different instrumentation, but it’s still built from the same graphic score, a series of dots spaced between high and low lines. There is no specific pitch and rhythmic direction, although the notation implies relative pitch once the score is assigned a note value. There are seven different voicings, here doubled and tripled in different instrument combinations, but aside from controlling duration, the pitch choices are all made by the performers. *Sttm* (2001) employs the same precepts, but gives the performance more compositional material.

Forgetting Song (1997) was first written for a 12-piece string-and-percussion group, and was performed once in San Francisco not long after it was composed. Once again Rosenberg has rearranged the piece for his large ensemble; whereas the original had no improvisation, here trombonist Jeb Bishop and vocalist Carol Genetti improvise over the written composition. The skill of the improvisers is made clear by their careful integration within the score, but their solo lines also add tension and counterpoint. An indelible recurring theme played on electric guitar, piano, vibes, and percussion suggests the herky-jerk clopping of a horse, and helps to give the piece its center. Finally, *Toys* (1996), a musical five-ring circus, is perhaps the album's most playful piece. It's also the most spacious piece here, and while chordal thunder rules elsewhere, here single-note lines dominate. The orchestra is split into five discrete groups spread around the room, each with a leader who has five or so "pieces" to choose from for his group. There are between fifteen and twenty pieces altogether, and there is some overlap between the five groups. "The idea is that there's a box of toys and they can reach in and grab one and play with it," says Rosenberg. Improvisation doesn't figure into the performance aside from the choices made by the group leader who also dictates the tempo and volume of each of the different pieces. The performance here makes it plain that the musicians operated with admirable restraint, cooperation, and a great deal of attention to what the other groups were doing.

While orchestras once dominated jazz back in the swing era, economic circumstances long ago turned the format into the exception rather than the rule. While there are still a good number of swinging big bands, the music here clearly belongs to another, more vital tradition. Albums like Braxton's classic *Creative Orchestra Music 1976*, the large-band work of Abrams, and the improv-dominated transmissions of the Globe Unity Orchestra can all register as antecedents to Rosenberg's music in disparate ways, each using composition and improvisation in different measures. William Parker's Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra and Barry Guy's London Jazz Composer's Orchestra suggest that the creative orchestra is still alive and well, but unlike those composers Rosenberg is more willing to let go of the jazz vocabulary while retaining its improvisational energy and edge, giving his rigorous writing an often-changing complexion.

Peter Margasak is a staff writer at the *Chicago Reader*, where he has written the weekly *Post No Bills* column since 1996. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Downbeat*, and *JazzTimes*.

Composer's Notes

The orchestra's main power lies in its ability to consume and transport the listener. The sheer tonnage of vibrations generated by a large ensemble cannot be replicated or approximated by mere volume or electronic reproduction. The raw acoustic phenomenon of twenty-or-more instruments working together in a single space to form a single sound entity is a radical and unmatched kinetic force.

In addition, when the sounds being generated are motivated by something other than plain market demands and commercial gain, the effect is even more powerful. The significance then moves from the instruments to the instrumentalists. The concurrence of so many people engaging in a creative, generative act not in the pursuit of personal wealth but simply for the pleasure, curiosity, experience, desire, stimulation (or whatever word most accurately describes why creative musicians do what they do) of it, is an act of communal upheaval: a protest in the face of commerce and the market-driven reality that surrounds us in every aspect of our social universe.

To then add improvisation to the orchestral palette, and the implications that are posed by spontaneous music generation, is to knowingly step completely outside the institutional orchestral tradition. It is, however, to enter into another tradition established by such pioneers as Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Muhal Richard Abrams, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Cage, among others. The major thing that these composers have in common is that they had to go outside the normal channels in order to get their work considered and performed by large groups of musicians.

They could not make this music alone. Had it not been for the supportive, energetic, creative people around them, their large ensemble music would never be heard.

This is what drives me to work in this medium: the combined sound and energy that can add up to a force so much larger than its constituent parts. And it's not just the music itself that works this way. It's the immeasurable support along the way of all the members that adds up to an incredible wealth of generosity: It's Nathaniel Braddock arranging to have the music photocopied for free; Mat Daly vastly under-pricing his artwork and silk-screening; John Shiurba and Jesse Gilbert flying on their own dime from California to join the choir; Megan Tiedt pulling herself out of a sickbed to come to the studio to fill in the brass section on one track; Bruce Finkleman, Chris Daisy and D. Bayne offering their spaces (and in some cases their homes) for free rehearsal when the scheduled space fell through; Tim Daisy arranging all of those rehearsals; Jerome Bryerton carting plastic chairs back and forth to rehearsals; Chris Hoffman and Drew Morgan jumping in when both cellos dropped out; Jeb Bishop arranging for a cab to pick him up at the studio so he could stay longer at the session and go directly to the airport; Laurie Lee Moses and Kyle Bruckmann for getting sent to the wrong rehearsal space, persevering, and still making it to rehearsal on time; it's The Illinois Arts Council, WNUR, and The Hot House for their support along the way; and it's especially all the players for putting up with last-minute changes, poor penmanship, less-than-perfect conducting, and next-to-no money, then still playing their hearts out.

—*Scott Rosenberg*

Scott Rosenberg is a multi-reed player and composer who is focused on creating a body of work that blends the influences of contemporary composition, jazz, and free improvisation. He has performed widely in the United States and Europe with many of the finest improvising musicians. He has lived and been active in the music communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, Paris, and New York.

Jim Baker has been playing in and around Chicago as a pianist, keyboardist, and synthesist for more than two decades, mostly in improvisational contexts. He has performed and recorded in concerts, festivals, and clubs in the United States and Europe with a myriad of musicians including Michael Zerang, Mars Williams, Ken Vandermark, Nicholas Tremulis, Damon Short, Nicole Mitchell, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Steve Hunt, Guillermo Gregorio, Kyle Bruckmann, David Boykin, Janet Bean, Fred Anderson, and many, many others. He can be heard on recordings on Okka Disk, Hat-Art, Atavistic, Thrill Jockey, Boxmedia, Dreamtime, Musica Genera, Explain, Quinnah, Locust, Disturbing, and Island.

Matt Bauder is a saxophonist and composer who has studied with Ed Sarath, Anthony Braxton, Ron Kuivila, and Alvin Lucier. He has been an active member of the creative and improvised music scenes in Ann Arbor, Chicago, and New York where he has performed with Jeff Parker, Chad Taylor, Ken Vandermark, Jeb Bishop, Zach Wallace, Aaron Siegel, Anthony Braxton, and Phil Minton, among many others. He is featured on many recordings, including a duo with bassist Jason Ajemian (Locust Music), Warne Defever's *When Flowers Covered the Earth* (Perforate My Heart Music), and Neil Michael Hagerty's *Howling Hex* (Drag City), to name a recent few.

Trombonist **Jeb Bishop** has made Chicago his base of musical operations since 1993.

Nathaniel Braddock is a Chicago-based composer and guitar player and has performed and recorded with Ancient Greeks, The Zincs, The Braddock Guitar Ensemble, The Butcher Shop Quartet, Ensemble No Amnesia, the Javanese gamelan Sri Sedana, and numerous other improvised music units. His work draws on sources as diverse as African guitar, Indonesian ensembles, microtonal theory, and change-ringing. He has presented many new works for dance with choreographer Asimina Chremos.

Nick Broste is a trombonist and composer living in Chicago. His current projects include the Nick Broste Trio, a duo with percussionist Frank Rosaly, Brian Dibblee's Thread Quintet, and Keefe Jackson's Project, as well as ad hoc activities with other creative artists.

Oboist **Kyle Bruckmann** has lived in Chicago since 1996, working as a classical musician while collaborating regularly with some of the city's most creative resident and visiting improvisers and sound artists, including Jim Baker, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jeb Bishop, Michael Zerang, Guillermo Gregorio, Olivia Block, Polwechsel, Nmperrign, and Boris Hauf. Ongoing affiliations include the electroacoustic duo EKG (with Ernst Karel), the quintet Wrack, and the experimental punk montrosity Lozenge.

Chicago percussionist **Jerome Bryerton** has toured and performed with Wolfgang Fuchs, Frank Gratkowski, Cecil Taylor, and Peter Van Bergen. He can be heard on FMP's 2002 Total Music Meeting sampler as well as Balance Point Acoustic recordings 003 and 006.

Steve Butters is a freelance percussionist in the Chicago area. As an advocate for contemporary music, Butters has performed throughout the United States and has premiered several new works for solo percussion. He performs regularly with Ensemble No Amnesia, Tone Road Ramblers, Steel Express, Basement Junta, and Walleye. He has recorded for the Opus One, Einstein, and Drag City labels. He is currently on the faculty of Chicago State University and Elgin Community College.

Tim Daisy has been involved in Chicago's creative music scene since moving there in 1997. Current projects include The Vandermark 5, Triage, Dragons 1976, Unclocked, and The Chicago Improvisers Group.

Carol Genetti is an experimental vocalist focused on improvisation and exploration of the human voice. Armed with a dynamic range of extended vocal techniques from melodic to noise, Genetti has created a non-verbal sound palette that has a provocative depth and breadth. Genetti has toured throughout the United States, Canada, France, and Germany and has collaborated with a large number of like-minded artists.

Jesse Gilbert is a Los Angeles-based composer, multi-instrumentalist, and software engineer who has developed an extensive body of work centering around aspects of improvisation and cross-disciplinary collaboration, with a focus on networks and new media. His work has been presented widely in the United States and Europe.

Flutist **Lisa Goethe-McGinn** is a performer/interpreter of contemporary music and free improvisation. Based in Chicago, she has an active career as a soloist and chamber musician performing in many festivals and music series throughout the United States and abroad.

Saxophonist **Paul Hartsaw** studied music composition and critical theory at Central Michigan and Western Michigan University. Since he moved to Chicago in 2000 he has worked with Bill Brimfield, Jim Baker, Frank Rosaly, Scott Rosenberg, Keefe Jackson, and Karl Siegfried, and has led the groups Desiring-Machines, meta-stable zoo, and the Paul Hartsaw Trio.

Kyle Hernandez holds a Master's degree in Music from the University of Wisconsin, where he was a student of Richard Davis. Prior to becoming interested and active in the creative improvised-music scene, he was a member of the Chicago Civic Orchestra.

Cellist **Christopher Hoffman**, in addition to composing and performing with his own ensembles, has also performed with such artists as Michael Attias, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Matt Turner, Hal Rammel, Andrew Drury, Cock ESP, Vincent Davis, the vig, and many others. He currently lives in New York.

Elizabeth Kennedy received a Bachelor's of Music in double bass performance from the University of Iowa in 1999. She now resides in Chicago, performing original contemporary music with her husband and partner in the folk-inspired duo L&J. They recently toured the United Kingdom supporting their debut album *holding the lights on*.

Cornetist **Todd Margasak** makes sounds that seem to emanate from the jazz tradition and from household appliances and simple hand tools. A former student of AACM trumpeter Ameen Muhammad and hard bopper Johnny Coles, Margasak appears on recordings on the Cadence and Truck Stop labels.

Multi-instrumentalist and composer **Laurie Lee Moses** is an ardent improviser. Although she is known mostly for her fiery piano and saxophone work, she can also be seen dancing, singing, making sly asides, or twiddling knobs on gizmos.

Todd Munnik performs on saxophone and clarinet in Chicago and Madison, Wisconsin. He can be found filling the member roster of Tomato Box, End of Last Year, and Ten Sleeps Trio.

Andrew Morgan has been playing the cello, among other instruments, since he was five. As a classical composer, his works have been performed in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Jen Clare Paulson studied viola and koto in college before receiving a Master's degree in performance from Northwestern University. Since then, she has been teaching and playing in Chicago. Her musical projects range from the Elgin Symphony Orchestra to Kyle Bruckmann's experimental quintet, Wrack, and she has collaborated with such musicians as Guillermo Gregorio, Gene Coleman, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jeff Kowalkowski, and Jack the Dog. She currently studies with viola guru Sally Chisholm in Madison, Wisconsin.

Jason Roebke is a bassist and composer living in Chicago. He is active in the groups tigersmilk (Rob Mazurek and Dylan van der Schyff), The Valentine Trio (Fred Lonberg-Holm and Glenn Kotche), Terminal 4 (Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jeb Bishop, Ben Vida), and his own Rapid Croche (Aram Shelton and Tim Daisy).

Aram Shelton studied classical saxophone at the University of Florida and moved to Chicago in the spring of 1999. Since then, he has been active in Chicago's creative music scene as a composer and a performer on saxophone, clarinet, and Powerbook. He is also involved in collaborating with visual artists in performance to create a cohesive blend of visual and aural art.

John Shiurba is a composer and guitarist whose musical pursuits include improvisation, art-rock, modern composition, and noise. Shiurba has recorded and toured the United States and Europe as a member of the bands Eskimo, The Molecules, and Spezza Rotto, as a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Scott Rosenberg's Skronktet West, and SFSound. In 1998 Shiurba formed the improvised music label Limited Sedition, which has released twenty-eight CDs documenting the diverse and lively Bay Area improvised music scene.

Megan Tiedt is currently a freelance tubist and low-brass instructor in the Chicago area. She has a Master of Music from Yale University and a Bachelor of Music from the University of Michigan. Megan has played in numerous musical organizations, including the Kenosha Symphony, Elmhurst Symphony, Chicago Brass Choir, Celebration Brass Quintet, and AIMS Festival Orchestra in Graz, Austria. She has studied with many renowned teachers, including Arnold Jacobs, former principal tubist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Trumpeter, composer, and arranger **Nate Walcott** has lived in Chicago since 1996 and has performed with such groups as the Glenn Miller Orchestra, the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, and David Boykin's Expanse, Pinetop Seven, Califone, Mark Eitzel, Jay Bennett, Bright Eyes, and Ugly Cassinova. In addition, Walcott leads his own octet, which features his compositions and arrangements.

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Are. Super J 081996.

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El: The Rosenberg Skronktet West. Spool, Arc 01.

IE, for large ensemble. Barely Auditable 000.

Owe: Scott Rosenberg's Red. Cadence Jazz Records CJR 1135.

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SCOTT ROSENBERG (b. 1972)

CREATIVE ORCHESTRA MUSIC, CHICAGO 2001

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1. *Tehr* (2000) 9:38
2. *Wash* (1995) 9:02
3. *7x* (1997) *with Sttm* (2001) 13:36
4. *Forgetting Song* (1997) 13:32
5. *Toys* (1996) 18:34

Lisa Goethe-McGinn, flute; Kyle Bruckmann, oboe; Matt Bauder, Jesse Gilbert, Paul Hartsaw, Laurie Lee Moses, Todd Munnik, Aram Shelton, reeds; Todd Margasak, Nathaniel Walcott, trumpets; Jeb Bishop, Nick Broste, trombones; Megan Tiedt, tuba; Carol Genetti, voice; Nathaniel Braddock, John Shiurba, guitars; Jen Clare Paulson, viola; Chris Hoffman, Drew Morgan, violoncellos; Kyle Hernandez, Elizabeth Kennedy, Jason Roebke, contrabasses; Steve Butters, Jerome Bryerton, Tim Daisy, percussion; Jim Baker, piano/synthesizer; Scott Rosenberg, conductor

Conductors on *Toys*:

Matt Bauder, Nick Broste, Kyle Bruckmann, Steve Butters, Kyle Hernandez

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