

ALVIN LUCIER (b. 1931)
VESPERS AND OTHER EARLY WORKS

New World Records 80604-2

Vespers (1969)

This is the fulfillment of a dream for a new kind of music. There is nothing like *Vespers* in the literature of music. It is a completely new way of defining what music is, and the definition is given to us in a purely realized form.

In *Vespers* the musical experience comes from the special “meaning” that the sounds give to the space in which they are performed. This “meaning” of space is something we have not been invited to appreciate before. Also in the equation, and equally important, the sounds, as what we have come to the concert to hear, do not have any musical meaning apart from their relationship to the space. In *Vespers* the music is not heard even in imagination except in the performance.

There have always been anecdotes about some other (older) music using space in a purposeful way. But these are just anecdotes. We have no way to hear such music. We cannot be sure if the stories are anything but the expression of a dream, a dream of a possibility, superimposed on history.

But many composers have acted on the dream, theatrically taking sounds away from the stage, away from a presentation in front of the listener. Ensembles or single instruments have been moved to the back of the hall and to places around the edges of the hall. The failure of this idea has been obscured by the legal and conventional difficulties built into the architecture. The architecture faces forward. The fire marshal wants everybody to face forward and wants no stuff in the aisles. To put instruments in the back of the hall or in the aisles is simply a mistake, as long as the composer avails himself or herself of the luxury of the controlled environment (and the security provided by the fire marshal.) Everybody knows it.

Predictably, composers complain that the problem is in the design of the halls. (And in the fire marshal.) But that is wrong. The deeper problem for composers—and the reason the halls were built to present the music in front of the listener—is that humans have learned over a long time to change position so that any sounds will come from the front, if this is possible to arrange, in order that the sounds can be located. Marshall McLuhan pointed out (even in the 1950s, when architects were being pushed to make performance spaces that didn’t use the proscenium) that sounds from anywhere except directly in front are heard as a threat. We turn to face the threat. That is a rule of survival. Sounds from the rear (even a clarinet—or, maybe, especially a clarinet) are unacceptable. (This matter of sounds from the rear heard as a threat was brought into the theater by groups like the Living Theatre, who wanted the sounds they made to be heard as a threat. We hear sounds from the rear today in scary movies.)

The problem of music from behind us—still with us, as of this writing; electronic music magazines full of advertisements for yet another new surround-sound idea—arises in the question of what sounds are used to make the music. Lucier’s solution is to change the sounds radically. And to find sounds that would not “exist” were they not complemented by the architecture of the performance space. (*Vespers* can be performed outdoors, but the result is probably too subtle to be useful.) Lucier makes the performance space more important than it has been for a long time.

The solution is impeccable. The work is performed on Sondols™ (Sonar-dolphin echolocation devices). The Sondols make a high intensity, very directionally focused click whose repetition rate can be varied manually. A series of clicks, bouncing directly off a wall or a chair or whatever object and then indirectly off another wall or whatever object, like a billiard ball of sound, but acting in three dimensions, creates an image of the performance space in the listener’s perception. In *Vespers* the listener is in a completely artificial and elegant space, but still a space that conforms to the rules of nature.

That means that this music cannot be recorded faithfully. No number of microphones and loudspeakers can reproduce the relationship between the sounds and the space in which the sounds create the musical experience.

The performance on this CD, then, is merely a documentation of reality. Like a photograph, it is not the real thing. But it moves us (musically) in exactly the way a photograph—existing out of time, as this recorded document exists apart from space—moves us to re-create the reality for ourselves.

Chambers (1968)

Another brilliantly original use of space to musical purposes. Another problem for the recording engineer and another problem for us as listeners to understand what we are listening to.

It is wonderfully lighthearted of Lucier to bring musical space to the table in containers of various sizes. Like a banquet of small dishes. It would be hard to know this from the recording—unless you were told—but each sound is enclosed in a space, a chamber. The sound is packaged, in a way. And in this packaging the sound is made acceptable to us as a musical sound, when it might not have been acceptable otherwise. *Chambers* is a compound gift. We are allowed to listen to new sounds and to listen in a new way. This is accomplished by distracting us in the technique of presenting the sounds. The packaging distracts us by adding peculiar resonances to every sound. The resonances come from the chambers that enclose the sounds.

And in *Chambers* the effect of the sound in space is compounded by movement. Every chamber full of sound is moved or can be moved during the performance. “When carried to outer environments, such as boilers into parks, the sounds of the now-portable resonant environments may be treated as original portable environments.”

North American Time Capsule (1967)

North American Time Capsule is described metaphorically by Lucier as a message to listeners who don't know about us. These could be very remote and exotic humans or the fabled “beings” in some other part of the universe. The message is encoded in accordance with the empirical fact that purely electronic signals are more easily transmitted through space (and through time) than the more complex waveforms of speech.

The sounds of the recording were made on the Sylvania Electronic Systems Vocoder, a device designed to encode speech or speech-like sounds so that, presumably, the speech or other speech-like information would not be intelligible to any system except a system controlled by a designated listener. This is standard practice among intelligence operatives, whether they use the Sylvania Vocoder or some other form of encoding.

Lucier ignores Sylvania's obvious motive of secrecy and treats the sounds as a matter of urgency: Here We Are. Lucier's unstated premise is that the exotic human receivers will have access to a decoder (Sylvania Electronic Systems) on their end of the transmission, or that the ones in outer space are simply smart enough to be way beyond Vocoder and can simply chuckle at the message when it arrives in such a primitive form. This is a nice joke. The piece should be heard with this in mind. Or heard simply as amazing sound, unexplained.

The idea that music can come from sounds organized in a manner other than the manner taught in the conservatory is an important idea.

The sounds are organized mainly by the nature of their origins in speech. In the performance the speech is taken without any other organizational rules, except guidelines about what the subject matter should be and guidelines about what kind of message the speaker is trying to send out. Further, the performers (speakers) are allowed to include in the message sounds of various domestic appliances and other sounds that we make indirectly, in keeping with the notion of letting someone out there know who we are.

The Sylvania Vocoder (voice encoder) analyses the performers' sounds and produces a purely electronic “version” of those sounds, the various components of which can be controlled manually by persons following Lucier's instructions.

The instructions in this recorded performance are fairly casual: “... prepare a plan of activity using speech, singing,

musical instruments or any other sound producing means that might describe—to beings very far from the earth's environment either in space or in time—the physical, social, spiritual or any other situation in which we find ourselves at the present time. Using sound, the performers might choose to convey, for example, the ideas of life and death, young and old, up and down, male and female. Sonic aspects of our technological environment, such as household appliances, trains, aircraft and automobile horns, might be used.”

This casualness is the way it should be. If anybody is out there listening, there is plenty of evidence for them about how we organize things when we are serious—the Vocoder, for example. It is nice, considering this is music, that they might get some idea about how we play.

(Middletown) Memory Space (1970)

(Middletown) Memory Space is a reenactment of the composition called “*(Hartford) Memory Space*, for any number of singers and players of acoustic instruments.” The instructions for the original (city) composition say: “For performances in places other than Hartford, use the name of the place of performance in parentheses at the beginning of the title.”

The schedule for the sounds on the CD seems to come from an exchange of gestures or other kinds of communication among the performers. But, in fact, the performers are acting independently. So, it is particularly important that this seeming ensemble of intentions comes from a common base of instructions to the performers. That is, the performers’ “timing” is given by the composer in the instructions. Because of the unique “freedom” given to the performer in much of Lucier’s music, it is of great importance that there is no improvisation. Of any kind. Lucier is strict about this. In *(Middletown) Memory Space*, as in any of Lucier’s other work that depends on a new kind of performer responsibility, what is required, significantly, is a kind of humility in the presence of environmental sounds—and the ability to listen accurately.

The instructions tell the performers to go out into the city and record, by any means—electronic recording, graphic notation, or memory—the sounds of the city, and to return to the inside performance space at any time and “recreate, solely by means of your voices and instruments and with the aid of memory devices (without additions, deletions, improvisation, interpretation) those outside sound situations.”

The importance of this attitude toward music—the obligation to listen to the sounds as being important in themselves—finally was articulated in the 1950s, probably after being “in the air” for a couple of decades. No one with any authority took the idea very seriously. The world of new music was fascinated by the promise of perfection in serialism.

Then gradually it happened that a lot of younger (then) American composers took the idea very seriously, mysteriously almost without any guidance. The idea didn’t appear in books. It was one of those ideas that everybody had, more or less at the same time. Lucier was one of the most important—because he was most uncompromising and original in his compositions—of those following the new idea. This produced works like *(Middletown) Memory Space*.

Elegy for Albert Anastasia (1961–1963)

Elegy for Albert Anastasia is described as composed “for electromagnetic tape using very low sounds most of which are below human audibility.” For sounds that are important to hear, but that cannot not be heard in an ordinary way of hearing.

One could write an essay much longer than these liner notes about Lucier’s titles. It is almost impossible to deal with that subject succinctly here. We have gotten away from generic labels—“concerto for whatever.”

Lucier’s titles sometimes suggest a kind of resolution of mind after a long search. How to describe this new music?

And then the brilliant image, as if from nowhere: *Vespers*, evening, when the bats come out to hunt with their built-in echolocation systems; *North American Time Capsule*, a package of coded information about who we are.

Elegy, for the Mafia guy Albert Anastasia, who did not hear the sounds he should have heard when he was sitting in the barber chair. Actually, the barber chair was too late. He should have heard the sounds a few days sooner. Might have saved his life. Brilliant title.

This is a remarkable composition, especially considering the possibility of 1961 as the date of its conception and 1963 as the date of its completion.

The low electronic sounds are beautiful, as sounds can be beautiful and even without other meanings.

The sounds are presented on a schedule that invites the listener simply to listen. This schedule can have been planned to the second or it could be very free. The wonder of the schedule is that it works without the listener's being burdened as an accessory to the fact. This is a perfect example of the argument, usually proposed in the most conservative circles as a challenge to new ideas, that one should be able to appreciate the music without knowing how it is made. *Elegy* is beautiful, however it is made, whoever made it, and whomever it is intended for.

These "Early Works" are compositions from an important time in music, especially in America (and without any chauvinism intended, almost only in America; this has yet to be explained). Some quality emerged then that for the succeeding forty years has influenced every thought about European, American, and Asian concert music, American jazz, international popular music—and probably music we haven't even heard of yet. Lucier was there at the beginning.

—Robert Ashley

Alvin Lucier was born in 1931 in Nashua, New Hampshire. He attended Yale and Brandeis and spent two years in Rome on a Fulbright Scholarship. From 1962 to 1970 he taught at Brandeis, where he conducted the Brandeis University Chamber Chorus, which devoted much of its time to the performance of new music. Since 1970 he has taught at Wesleyan University.

In 1966, along with Robert Ashley, David Behrman, and Gordon Mumma, Lucier founded the Sonic Arts Union, for whose concerts he developed numerous live electronic works, exploring echolocation, brain waves, room acoustics, and the visual representation of sound. His recent works include a series of installations and works for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, and orchestra in which rhythmic patterns and related spatial phenomena are created by close tunings.

In 2001 Lucier's *Ovals* for chamber orchestra was performed at Donaueschingen by the Hilversum Radio Orchestra, Peter Eötvös conducting, and in 2002 *Just Before Dark* was premiered in Vienna by the soloists of the Tehran Symphony Orchestra. He recently completed *Ever Present* for flute, alto saxophone, and piano for the Drescher-Okabe-Armbruster Trio, first performed at the Musikhochschule, Freiburg, and *Almost New York*, for five flutes (one player) for Carin Levine. He is currently working on a collaboration with sculptor Alain Kirili for baritone voice and French horn, commissioned by Thomas Buckner.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Bird and Person Dying. Cramps CRSCD 111.

Clocker. Lovely Music LCD 1019.

Crossings. Lovely Music LCD 1018.

I Am Sitting in a Room. Lovely Music LCD 1013.

Music for Solo Performer. Lovely Music VR 1014 (LP).

Music on a Long Thin Wire. Lovely Music LCD 1011.

Panorama. Lovely Music LCD 1012.

Sferics. Lovely Music VR 1017 (LP).

Still Lives. Lovely Music LCD 5012.

Theme. Lovely Music LCD 5011.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1998.

Lucier, Alvin and Douglas Simon. *Chambers*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981.

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Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Sutherland, Roger. *New Perspectives in Music*. London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1994.

PRODUCTION CREDITS:

Producer: Alvin Lucier

Digital mastering: Tom Hamilton

Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc):

Photograph: Photonica

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

Vespers

This recording was made in 1969 with the Environ-Ears Recording System, an integrated acoustical labyrinth and microphone assembly which duplicates the localization and noise-reducing functions of the human ear. The system consists of a pair of ears mounted on a tube containing two miniature high-quality microphones which record the actual physical positions of sounds in three dimensions. Both the Sondols™ and the Environ-Ears system were designed by Listening Incorporated, Arlington, Massachusetts.

Chambers

Environmental recordings by Alvin Lucier. Recorded at The Coffehouse, Middletown, Connecticut, in 2002; Michael Arafah, engineer.

North American Time Capsule

Recorded at the Sylvania Applied Research Laboratories, Waltham, Massachusetts, May 1967; Alvin Lucier, engineer.

(Middletown) Memory Space

Recorded at The Coffehouse, Middletown, Connecticut, in 2001; Michael Arafah, engineer.

Elegy for Albert Anastasia

Recorded in 1961 at the Studio Fonologica, Milan, Italy. Re-mixed in 1963 at the Electronic Music Studio, Brandeis University; Alvin Lucier, engineer.

This recording was made possible by grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

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1. *Vespers* (1969) 15:54

2. *Chambers* (1968) 14:19

3. *North American Time Capsule* (1967) 10:35

Members of the Brandeis University Chamber Chorus, Alvin Lucier, conductor

4. *(Middletown) Memory Space* (1970) 16:32

Rees Archibald, shakuhachi; Ryuku Mizutani, koto; Charlie Looker, electric guitar; Matt Welch, accordion; Shawn Onsgard, piano

5. *Elegy for Albert Anastasia* (1961–1963) 7:22

All compositions published by Material Press (BMI).

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