

James Tenney (b. 1934) is one of the most important American composers and theorists of the past fifty years. For a very long time, his work was known mainly to other musicians and its tremendous influence was belied by its obscurity. In the past twenty years, however, as his music and writings have been more and more published, recorded, performed, and studied, his place in the context of American contemporary music has become far better understood. He has pioneered musical fields as diverse as computer music, tuning theory, and integrating ideas from acoustics and music cognition into his work. Tenney has also been important as a teacher, performer, and scholar of other radical American composers.

This CD contains recordings of the complete set of his *Postal Pieces*, written primarily during a very brief tenure at California Institute of the Arts in the early 1970s. These works, although frequently performed over the years, have not, to my knowledge, been recorded (with a few exceptions). This recording is a natural and important companion to the recent New World reissue of Tenney's computer and electronic music from the 1960s (New World 80570-2). Both collections represent complete, highly individualistic and essential bodies of work by a major American artist.

The postal pieces, which Tenney called "Scorecards," are a remarkable series of eleven short works printed on postcards. Each card contains a complete if minimally stated work to be performed by instrumentalists. Several of the pieces were written in and around 1971 for a select group of Tenney's artistic friends and colleagues. Each is a kind of meditation on acoustics, form, or hyper-attention to a single performance gesture. The set includes pieces written between 1965 and 1971, but it was actually produced in 1971 with the help of Alison Knowles and Marie McRoy at California Institute of the Arts.

Tenney related the genesis of these pieces to his aversion to letter writing. Since he had a number of very short compositions, he was able to turn them into postcards, in which a single image (or sound) magically engages in strange, hypotactical relationships with the almost punitively abbreviated message on its reverse side.

Composers and artists have long been fascinated by postcards—among others, Pauline Oliveros and Tom Phillips have made extraordinary experiments in the medium. Years ago, Bay Area experimental composer Tony Gnazzo created and mailed a fantastic set of successively color-bleed postcards each of which contained one word, and which, after four years, said "Certain processes evolve gradually." Tenney's set is an early example of the form, and certainly one of the most striking and important.

The set consists of:

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|--------------|----|---|
| Scorecard #: | 1 | <i>Beast</i> (7/30/71) |
| | 2 | <i>A Rose Is a Rose Is a Round</i> (3/70) |
| | 3 | <i>(night)</i> (8/6/71) |
| | 4 | <i>Koan</i> (8/16/71) |
| | 5 | <i>Maximusic</i> (6/16/65) |
| | 6 | <i>Swell Piece</i> (12/67) |
| | 7 | <i>Swell Piece #2</i> and <i>Swell Piece #3</i> (3/71) |
| | 8 | <i>August Harp</i> (8/17/71) |
| | 9 | <i>Cellogram</i> (8/17/71) |
| | 10 | <i>Having Never Written a Note for Percussion</i> (8/16/71) |

Seven of the eleven pieces were written in 1971 (the same year as his *Quiet Fan for Erik Satie* [for chamber orchestra] and *Hey When I Sing These Four Songs Hey Look What Happens* [for chorus]) with the second two "swell" pieces in the same month as the latter. Most were written within a period of two weeks, including: *Beast*, *(night)*, *Having Never Written a Note . . .*, (the two percussion pieces written on the same day), *Koan*, *August Harp*, and *Cellogram* (the latter two written on the same day, *Koan* the day before). On the back of each postcard is the indication 1954–1971 for the set, which is confusing since none of the pieces seem to have been written that early. According to Tenney, he had originally intended to also include two small songs written on short poems by the filmmaker Stan Brakhage.

Most of the pieces deal with one of three fundamental musical ideas: *intonation*; the *swell* idea, which Tenney used frequently in his earlier work, but here becomes more explicit; and the unadorned use of musical structures to produce *unusual perceptual states*. In the third, the listener, and to some extent the performer, must construct his/her own listening experiences out of circumscribed and relatively static, but fascinating, musical stimuli. It is in this sense that Tenney and others have sometimes referred to all the pieces as “koans,” although only one is so named. None of these three musical ideas were new to the postal pieces in the context of Tenney’s work, but here he presented them almost as theorems, leaving no doubt as to his intent.

Tenney discussed these ideas at some length in an interview (1978) with Gayle Young, the Canadian composer, writer, and instrument builder:

GY: How do you deal with musical form, in that light? You obviously wouldn’t be concerned with the release of tension, which is the conclusion of the usual type of classical music.

JT: No. I think of form as the same thing, on a larger temporal scale, as what’s called content on a smaller scale. That old form/content dichotomy is, to me, a spurious one, because they involve the same thing at different hierarchical levels of perception. What we take to be the substance or content of some sound—say, a string quartet—is really the result of forms—formal shapes and structures at a microscopic, or “microphonic” level: particular envelopes, wave-forms, and sequences of these—details in the signal. All form is just the same thing at a larger level, involving spans of time over, say, five or ten or twenty minutes or more. It’s precisely the same thing physically. When you begin to see it that way, you can begin to feel it musically. So my interest in form is identical to my interest in sound (*laughs*).

GY: Your postcard pieces, for example, are essentially a single musical gesture that continues until it’s over.

JT: Those pieces have a lot to do with this attitude toward sound, but also with something else, which is the notion of the avoidance of drama. They involve a very high degree of predictability. If the audience can just *believe* it, after they’ve heard the first twenty seconds of the piece, they can almost determine what’s going to happen the whole rest of the time. When they know that’s the case, they don’t have to *worry* about it anymore—they don’t have to sit on the edge of their seats. . . .

GY: Waiting for the big bang.

JT: What they can do is begin to really *listen* to the sounds, get inside them, notice the details, and consider or meditate on the overall shape of the piece, simple as it may be. It’s often interesting how within a simple shape there can be relationships that are surprising. It’s curious—in a way, the result in this highly determinate situation is the same as in an indeterminate one, where things are changing so rapidly and unpredictably that you lose any sense of drama there, too. Now people react to that in two different ways: some are angry about it, because they expect, and demand, meaningful drama. But if you can relax that demand and say “no, this is *not* drama, this is just ‘change’” (*laughs*)—then you can listen to the sounds for themselves rather than in relation to what preceded or what will follow.

GY: Would you go so far as to say “Sound for the sake of sound”?

JT: It’s sound for the sake of perceptual insight—some kind of perceptual revelation. Somehow it seems to me that that’s what we’re all doing—searching to understand our own perceptual processes. In a way, science is about the same thing, but its enterprise seems to be to understand the nature of reality through thought and intellection. It seems to me art is about understanding reality to the same extent, and as singularly, but through a different modality—through perception.

(*Only Paper Today*, Toronto, June 1978, p. 16)

The Pieces

Beast, for solo bass, written for Buell Neidlinger, the great jazz and classical bassist, is one of the most well-known and frequently performed of the set. A cryptic study in rhythm (with a correspondingly anagrammatic and multiple-meaning title that would make a *London Times* crossword puzzle setter proud), it uses the low-frequency first-order difference tones (or slow beats) produced by the simultaneous bowing of two strings, whose relative intonation is continually and slowly changing. The bass low E-string is tuned to E flat, and assuming an A = 55 Hz (three octaves below A-440), a little calculation shows that, as Tenney says, the open tritone below it has a frequency of about 38.8 Hz. The maximum possible beat-frequency, or the quickest “tempo” for the piece, is about 16 Hz. In comparison, a just-tuned E below, a ratio of 3/4, would have a frequency of 41.25 Hz, producing 13.75 beats per second. Detuning the low string enables the piece to straddle that strange and difficult-to-pinpoint psychoacoustic frequency distinction between the infrasonic and the sonic (somewhere between around 16 and 20 Hz, where individual beats begin to “fuse” into a discernible pitch). The number of beats per second produced in *Beast* is directly proportional to the distance from the unison, since the frequency differences increase accordingly. (This should not, of course, be confused with the relative consonance of an interval, which, among other things, involves the entire system of beat frequencies between the spectra of two tones).

Beast, whose title also connotes a jazz-vernacular homage to Neidlinger’s virtuosity, is seven minutes long. Its form is simply related to the Fibonacci sequence and to the idea of recursive replication of inner forms (as in so much of Tenney’s earlier music, like *Quiet Fan for Erik Satie*, and the computer pieces). Incidentally, this type of thinking predates by many years the later interest of many composers in the use of recursive, self-similar ideas such as *fractals*, functions whose “shape” is replicated at infinitely many levels of detail. The score indicates the “target” values for the beat frequencies, connecting them sinusoidally, with each of the four large humps made up of smaller ones which resemble Tenney’s characteristic “swell” shape. The durations of the four large humps, whose respective target beat-per-second values are 3, 6, 10, and 15 (a series of linearly increasing differences), are 1 minute, 1 minute, 2 minutes and 3 minutes (as in the first four terms of the Fibonacci sequence). In addition, the intermediate values in each of these larger shapes are 1, 3, 6, 10, and 15. The intervals that roughly correspond to these target values are: a 53¢ flat major third ($55/45 = 11/9 = 10$ Hz); a 32¢ flat major second ($55/49 = 6$ Hz); a 3¢ flat semitone ($55/52 = 3$ Hz); and a sixth-tone ($55/54 = 1$ Hz). In performance, this is all done by ear, and the performer need not be versed in intonational arithmetic. I have heard *Beast* many times: It is a stark and unassumingly beautiful sonic meditation. Like the other postal pieces, it asks more questions than it answers.

A Rose Is a Rose Is a Round is written for Tenney’s friend Philip Corner, a composer who for a short period in the late 1960s composed rounds almost exclusively. Tenney’s postcard (the only one in color—rosy pink) is a direct homage to his friend’s interest. Corner told me that originally the intention was to exchange—a Tenney round for a Corner rag, since Tenney had become interested in rags at about that time. *A Rose* seems to be meant as a kind of amusement—a clever use of simple diatonic melody that cycles out of phase with itself. It is written in circular notation for reasons more visual (and visually punny) than musical, and could just as easily be written conventionally. Each successive musical phrase starts on a different word of the three- word pattern, resulting in the three repeating lyrics (A ROSE IS/ ROSE IS A/ IS A ROSE), since the melody has 11 notes in it (non-divisible by three until three repetitions). The compositional “trick” is the traditional canonic requirement of finding the right place to start the repetition (I use the word “start” loosely here). Tenney’s solution, beginning the inner melody six beats behind the outer, minimizes the number of vertical seconds in the melody and emphasizes a conventionally consonant contrapuntal texture. The second-best solution (see the example below, beginning on the third eighth note) will not observe the metrical and lyrical structure and will also result in two fourths. There are other reasons why Tenney’s is the optimal solution. As Philip Corner has pointed out, Tenney’s canon is also interesting in terms of its harmonic (tonic-dominant) implications, symmetry, contrapuntal obliquity, and textual alignment. Tenney explored the round idea carefully, with a meticulousness central to his idea of homage that is prevalent in his music.

(*nigh*), for the composer Harold Budd, whose lush, quiet, and lyrical music made a deep impression on Tenney at the California Institute of the Arts, and who became a good friend, is a piece about which little can be said. It seems to be a kind of musical poetic evocation of the nature of Budd’s music, and is rather singular in the set and in Tenney’s output as well.

Koan is written for violinist and composer Malcolm Goldstein, one of the co-founders, along with Tenney and Corner, of the Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble in New York City in the early 1960s. A kind of miniature version of Tenney's classic computer work *For Ann (rising)* (available on New World Records 80570-2, *James Tenney: Selected Works 1961–1969*), it is a perpetually ascending tremolando double-stop. Continuity is achieved by dovetailing the glissandi on adjacent strings (for example, the G rises to an A above D before the D string begins to ascend). In a sense, it is a tribute to and study of the intensely personal and introspective nature of Goldstein's work, both as performer and composer. It can be quite long, and Goldstein has said that although at first it was physically difficult to perform, on successive playings the piece became much easier, as he relaxed and ceased to worry about it. A koan is a "question" in Zen tradition which a teacher or master poses to his student, not so much to answer as to ponder. Typically, it might involve some apparent paradox or inconsistency, as in "There is a high mountain in a range where all others have snow on top, yet this one is snowless." Something that has always interested me about this piece, coming from one composer to another of a very distinct musical personality, is the question of "who is the teacher and who is the student?"—but perhaps that itself is part of the koan.

Maximusic was written for another good friend and collaborator of Tenney's: percussionist, composer, sculptor, etc., Max Neuhaus. This piece is an *inversion* of the swell idea, with the attack coming in the middle. It is the earliest of the postal pieces, and I think that the era in which it was written (the mid-1960s, when Tenney was involved in various artistic movements in New York City like Fluxus and the "art happenings") has something to do with the form and nature of the piece. (Tenney has said that it is also a "parody of European music of that period").

Swell Piece, for Alison Knowles, artist, sculptor, performer, composer, and poet, is perhaps the expression of the swell idea in its simplest form. It is an early example of what is currently called "minimalism," though I think Tenney might reject that historically-charged description of his work. It was about this time, 1967, that Alison Knowles created the famous *House of Dust*, a computer-aided poem/sculpture, with Tenney's assistance. (The poem/computer program grew out of an informal "course" in FORTRAN Tenney gave to several of his friends, including Philip Corner, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Jackson MacLow, Max Neuhaus, Nam June Paik, and Steve Reich).

Swell Piece #2 and *#3* were written for Pauline Oliveros and La Monte Young respectively, two composers whose work Tenney admires. These are two *lemmas* (or variations) on the swell "theorem." The first stresses personal sonic/perceptual processes (with respect to Oliveros's sonic meditations), and the second is a reference to La Monte Young's famous "B-F# (hold for a very long time)."

August Harp, a study of possible pedal combinations of an adjacent diatonic tetrachord, was written for the harpist Susan Allen (in August). Each one of the combinations is to be played four times, until the harpist feels she has run out of combinations. Since each of the four strings can take three possible values, there are 81 (3^4) possible combinations (thus 324 notes at a slow tempo). Note that many of the pedal combinations produce enharmonic octave doublings, with seconds the predominant interval, as a kind of statistical resultant.

Though I think this piece is almost never performed, I have always had a special liking for it, as it is one of the few pieces I know of by Tenney in which he explores the idea of an "uncritical list," or a direct mapping of a mathematical concept to a musical one. This idea, which might be called "sonification," or perhaps more specifically "musicification" (a term suggested by the composer and researcher Ed Childs), is one that became better known later in the works of composers like David Feldman and Tom Johnson, whose *Chord Catalog* applies a very similar idea to the piano. The latter is its own form of koan, typical of Johnson's work, in its humble inclusion of seemingly all other piano music (at least that which is not completely monophonic!) within its monomaniacal, obsessively organized harmonic taxonomy. I've always thought of Tenney's piece, in the harp's elegantly "august" enumeration of its pedal possibilities, as an equally wry comment on the wonderfully joyous "head-scratching" that composers typically engage in when they write their first work for this eccentric instrument. It's great to finally have this piece on CD—it should be played more often.

Cellogram, written for Joel Krosnick the same day as *August Harp*, is similar to *Beast* in its use of resultant tones and in instrumental technique, and to *Quiet Fan . . .* in the final aborted coda. Once again, the ideas of *inner canonical form* and *replication of small shapes at larger levels* are formative in the piece.

Having Never Written a Note for Percussion seems to be everyone's favorite postal piece, and popular among many percussionists I've known. I've even heard it performed, uncredited to Tenney, at rock clubs. Written for John Bergamo, percussion teacher at CalArts, the piece (and the multiple entendre) usually consists in performance of one continuous roll on a tam-tam (although that instrument does not appear on the score), and I think it is interesting to perform the piece occasionally on other instruments (I've always wanted to hear a triangle version). The form of the piece is a seemingly innocuous crescendo from quadruple piano to quadruple forte and then back down again. The only duration indication is "very long," and the performances I've heard range from eight minutes to about twenty. All are quite astonishing, as the gentle inaudible hum of the instrument builds into a complex and somewhat frightening chaos of non-periodic spectra, room resonances, illusory tones, and indescribable concurrences with the listener's psyche. I think it is fitting that it is the last of the scorecards, for in a way it most clearly expresses the intent of the whole set. Incidentally, the titular claim, as far as I know, was true. —Larry Polansky

Larry Polansky is a composer, performer, theorist, programmer, editor, and writer who teaches at Dartmouth College. He is the co-founder and co-director of Frog Peak Music (A Composers' Collective).

These notes are a revision from the corresponding chapter (VII) in his earlier monograph, *The Early Works of James Tenney*, published in *Soundings* 13, 1984, Peter Garland, editor.

James Tenney was born in Silver City, New Mexico, and grew up in Arizona and Colorado, where he received his early training as a pianist and composer. He attended the University of Denver, The Juilliard School of Music, Bennington College, and the University of Illinois. His teachers and mentors have included Eduard Steuermann, Chou Wen-Chung, Lionel Nowak, Carl Ruggles, Lejaren Hiller, Kenneth Gaburo, Edgard Varèse, Harry Partch, and John Cage. A performer as well as a composer and theorist, he was co-founder and conductor of the Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble in New York City (1963–70). He was a pioneer in the field of electronic and computer music, working with Max Mathews and others at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in the early 1960s to develop programs for computer sound-generation and composition. He has written works for a variety of media, both instrumental and electronic, many of them using alternative tuning systems. He is the author of several articles on musical acoustics, computer music, and musical form and perception, as well as two books: *Meta + Hodos: A Phenomenology of 20th-Century Musical Materials and an Approach to the Study of Form* (1961; Frog Peak, 1988) and *A History of 'Consonance' and 'Dissonance'* (Excelsior, 1988). He has received grants and awards from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Fromm Foundation, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, and the Jean A. Chalmers Foundation. He has taught at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, the University of California, and at York University in Toronto, where he was named Distinguished Research Professor in 1994. He now holds the Roy E. Disney Family Chair in Musical Composition at the California Institute of the Arts. His music is published by Sonic Art Editions and the Canadian Music Centre, and is distributed by them and by Frog Peak. Recordings of his works are available on the Artifact, Col Legno, CRI, hat[now]ART, Koch International, Mode, Musicworks, New World Records, Nexus, OO Discs, SYR, and Toshiba EMI labels, among others.

The Barton Workshop is an Amsterdam-based ensemble founded in 1989 by American composer-trombonist James Fulkerson. The goal of the ensemble is to perform the leading edge of contemporary music, whether notated or not. The workshop primarily creates "composer portrait" concerts, usually in collaboration with the composers, which provide either an overview or an in-depth representation of a chosen composer's work. The Barton Workshop has collaborated with such composers as Alvin Lucier, Christian Wolff, Nicolas Collins, Steve Lacy, and Frank Denyer and has given world and European premieres of works by Galina Ustvolskaya, Henryk Gorecki, Alvin Lucier, James Fulkerson, Jerry Hunt, Frank Denyer, Nicolas Collins, and others. On the second and fourth Wednesday of each month during the concert season, The Barton Workshop presents a two-hour concert/Webcast featuring experimental music and solo improvisation. The "workshop/research" aspect of the ensemble, alluded to in its name, is an important feature of the ensemble and is a distinguishing feature in their performances and recordings.

Composer-trombonist **James Fulkerson** was born in the United States in 1945 and received his musical training at Illinois Wesleyan University and the University of Illinois. Mr. Fulkerson has been a composer-performer at the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts in Buffalo and composer-in-residence with the New York State CAPS Program, the DAAD (Berlin), Victorian College of the Arts (Melbourne, Australia), Dartington College of the Arts (Totnes, UK), and The School for New Dance Development (Amsterdam, The Netherlands). As a trombonist, he has always been associated with performing and championing experimental music and experimental composers. More than 150 solo works have been composed for him, including two works by John Cage.

Nina Hitz, cello, was born in Switzerland and is currently living in The Netherlands while finishing her graduate studies in Baroque cello at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. In addition to baroque music Hitz is active with experimental music, improvisation, and theatrical performances. She became a member of The Barton Workshop through a mutual interest in the music of Christian Wolff, Alvin Lucier, and Morton Feldman. She has since then become a stalwart for the ensemble through her participation in premieres by Michael Pisaro, Christian Wolff, and Ernstalbrecht Stiebler.

Tatiana Koleva, percussion/marimba, was born in Bulgaria and currently lives in the Netherlands. She regularly performs with a.o. Orkest de Volharding, ASKO, Schoenberg Ensembles, and MusikFabrik. She is a founder member of the ensemble ELECTRA. Koleva won the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis, Darmstadt '94, and won a prize in the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition '93, Rotterdam. She has given recitals and clinics throughout Europe, the USA, Japan, Jordan, and Mexico.

Percussionist **Tobias Liebezeit**, born in Düsseldorf, Germany, has specialized in the interpretation of scores by the New York School and the German minimalist group The Wandelweiser Collective. He has been responsible for many premieres of works by such experimental composers as Michael Pisaro, Anton Beuger, and Jürg Frey, among others. He has performed throughout Europe, the USA, and Japan.

Amsterdam-based violist **Elisabeth Smalt** plays new music with the Zephyr Kwartet and The Barton Workshop, nineteenth-century music with the Nepomuk Fortepiano Quintet, baroque music with Musica ad Rhenum, and French Impressionism and string sextets with the Brussels-based group Oxalys. She often performs as a duo with the fortepianist Riko Fukuda. As a soloist she has recently performed music by Mozart, Berio, Benjamin, Grisey, and Partch. She can be heard as a chamber musician and as a soloist on the Vanguard Classics, Brilliant Classics, NM Classics, Explicit!, Mode, Composer's Voice and Tzadik labels.

Jos Tieman studied the double bass at the Arnhem Conservatory with Henk Guldmond and continued his studies with Peter Luit. He has performed with various mostly contemporary music groups, and since 1991 has been a member of The Barton Workshop. Since 1984 he has held a position at the Residentie Orchestra, The Hague. He has recorded works of Christian Wolff, John Cage, and Morton Feldman with The Barton Workshop.

German/Dutch harpist **Ulrike von Meier** studied in the Netherlands with Edward Witsenburg and Ernestine Stoop. Her interest in contemporary music has led her around Europe playing freelance with ensembles such as the ASKO-ensemble, MusikFabrik, Klangforum Wien, Champ d'Action, and the Ives Ensemble. She has worked intensively on the music of Kaija Saariaho and was a member of the ensemble created to perform the theatrical production *From the Grammar of Dreams*. She has previously recorded music by Morton Feldman with The Barton Workshop.

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JAMES TENNEY (b. 1934)

POSTAL PIECES

THE BARTON WORKSHOP, JAMES FULKERSON, DIRECTOR

80612-2 (2 CDs)

Disc 1 (TT 71:45)

1. *Maximusic* (1965) 7:20

Tatiana Koleva, percussion

2. *Swell Piece* (1967) 10:16

The Barton Workshop

3. *A Rose Is a Rose Is a Round* (1970) :45

The Barton Workshop

4. *Beast* (1971) 7:05

Jos Tieman, contrabass

5. *Swell Piece #2* (1971) 10:16

The Barton Workshop

6. *Having Never Written a Note for Percussion* (1971) 13:52

Tobias Liebezeit, percussion

7. *Koan* (1971) 10:50

Elisabeth Smalt, viola

8. *For percussion perhaps, Or . . . (night)* (1971) 11:20

James Fulkerson, trombone and live electronics

Disc 2 (TT 60:50)

1. *Swell Piece #3* (1971) 12:46

The Barton Workshop

2. *Cellogram* (1971) 5:05

Nina Hitz, cello

3. *August Harp* (1971) 42:57

Ulrike von Meier, harp

The Barton Workshop

Jos Zwaanenburg, flutes; Alex Geller, cello; Nina Hitz, cello; Marieke Keser, violin; Jacob Plooi, violin; Judith van Swaaij, cello; Elisabeth Smalt, viola; John Anderson, clarinets; Gertjan Loot, trumpet; Krijn van Arnhem, bassoon, contrabassoon; Frank Denyer, melodica; Charles van Tassel, baritone; Theo van Arnhem, contrabass; Jos Tieman, contrabass; James Fulkerson, conductor

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