

“The mixture of composition, improvisation and chance is exactly what life on this planet is all about.” —Piero Scaruffi¹

For the past few years the London-based *Wire* magazine has run a regular feature on its inside back page under the rubric “Epiphanies,” in which somebody from the new-music world is invited to write about one or more musical discoveries or experiences which literally changed his/her life. When asked to contribute something myself,² I recalled the shattering double whammy of hearing, at the tender age of fourteen, György Ligeti’s *Requiem* in the record library of Manchester’s Royal Northern College of Music, and shortly afterward on the radio, Eric Dolphy’s alto saxophone (“So Long Eric” from Charles Mingus’s *Town Hall Concert [1964]*). One written out in meticulous micro-polyphonic detail, the other snatched from the air, as it were (though no less intricate in terms of its structure); one composed, the other improvised.

Back in the mid-1970s when these two epiphanies turned my head inside out, the worlds of contemporary composition and free improvisation had already begun to gravitate toward each other, though I wasn’t aware of it at the time. Nowadays, to quote David Toop, “reasons for distinguishing between composition and improvisation are diminishing fast,”³ and there’s no finer example of that than the music of Earl Howard, particularly *Clepton*, commissioned by and recorded at that most venerable showcase for the latest editions of contemporary music (that, in case you’d forgotten, is what ECM stands for), the Donaueschingen Festival.

Founded in 1921, Donaueschingen quickly became a landmark new-music festival, presenting first performances of works by Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, and Hindemith. In the artistically turbulent aftermath of the Second World War, the orchestra of South-West German Radio in Baden-Baden was put at the festival’s disposal and premiered groundbreaking compositions by Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Cage, Kagel, and Xenakis. But by the late 1960s the festival had broadened its horizons to include free jazz and improvisation. Donaueschingen 1967 featured appearances by Archie Shepp and Alexander von Schlippenbach’s Globe Unity Orchestra, which also played three years later on a bill that included Peter Brötzmann, Manfred Schoof, the Sun Ra Intergalactic Research Arkestra and the quartet of Carlos Roque Alsina, Jean-Pierre Drouet, Vinko Globokar and Michel Portal, all of whom had appeared on the recording of Stockhausen’s *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, one of the earliest (and most controversial) examples of the barriers tumbling down between composition and improvisation. Scroll through the archives of the Donaueschingen Festival and you’ll find many well-known names from the worlds of free jazz and improv, from Don Cherry and Derek Bailey in the early 1970s to Otomo Yoshihide and Ken Vandermark in 2004 and 2005. The 2006 edition of the festival included appearances by Amsterdam’s Schönberg Ensemble, the Arditti Quartet—and the Earl Howard/Georg Graewe/Gerry Hemingway/Ernst Reijseger quartet.

It should come as no surprise to find the Graewe/Reijseger/Hemingway trio sharing the bill with such established new-music specialist ensembles—because that’s exactly what it has been since its debut recording, 1989’s *Sonic Fiction*, on HatART. To realize the intricacies of *Clepton*, Earl Howard couldn’t have asked for more able sparring partners: These musicians are as well-versed in contemporary composition as they are in jazz and improvisation. Pianist Graewe has been exploring the dynamics of large ensemble improvisation since the early 1980s with his GrubenKlangOrchester, but has also written numerous compositions for forces ranging from solo piano to symphony orchestra; cellist Reijseger, though best known for his eclectic jazz work with the Clusone Trio, ICP, and the Janna Trio, has penned numerous soundtracks for film and television; and though Gerry Hemingway has an awesome track record as an improvising percussionist (BassDrumBone, the Anthony Braxton Quartet, the WHO trio, duo collaborations too numerous to mention), it’s worth bearing in mind that he has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for his work as a composer—check out 1999’s *Chamber Works* on Tzadik.

One thing that has brought the worlds of composition and improvisation closer together in recent years is their shared niche-market status, resulting from the commonly held belief that new music is somehow “difficult.” I well remember a conversation I had as an idealistic teenager with an elderly heckler in the corridors of the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, after a fine performance of Berg’s Chamber Concerto met with resounding boos and catcalls. “Ah, but when I listen to Beethoven I can understand it,” he said. At the time I didn’t take issue with his use of the verb “understand” (hands up anybody who “understands” the late Beethoven quartets), trying instead to convince him that getting to love new music was

¹ <http://www.scaruffi.com/avant/howard.html>.

² *The Wire* 201, November 2000, p. 98.

³ *The Wire* 239, January 2004, p. 54.

simply a question of listening to it, over and over again. To quote Robin Holloway: “Analysis is how we hear anyway; the composer has taken pains to make things clear for us. There are no deep secrets, for everything significant tells sooner or later.”⁴

But listening to new music can be a challenging experience, especially if it’s accompanied by a text like this: “Textbooks describe music as an interplay of scales, intervals, and proportions. But what if music were more than this? What if music were a malleable substance? What if it could pass through all the states of matter, from solid to liquid, from liquid to gas, and from gas to plasma? What shapes might it assume?”⁵ It’s another aspect of contemporary music that has probably alienated traditional concertgoers like the gentleman in Manchester, this increasing interest in—and fondness for titles that reference—the world of mathematics and science. For more than half a century, in keeping with the idea of music moving “out of the world of Newton and into the world of Einstein” (Boulez), composers and improvisers alike have drawn inspiration from the brave new worlds of chaos theory and particle physics, domains of knowledge that aren’t exactly accessible to the layman. Iannis Xenakis was no doubt trying to be helpful by informing the audience at the UK premiere of *Eridanos* that it was based on statistics derived from the study of Brownian motion in gases, but it only led to wags propping up the bar at the interval making snide remarks about “too much phosphorus.”

To his credit, Earl Howard is not in the business of telling people how to listen, or what to listen for. “I don’t like the idea that to get to my music you have to know about this or that,” he states flatly. Nor does he go into details on the particle physics that inspired *Clepton* and earlier works such as *Strong Force*, *Naked Charm*, and *Particle W*. For the record, *Clepton* is “lepton with a C,” a lepton being “any of a class of particles with spin of 1/2 that are not subject to the strong force and that are believed to be truly elementary and not composed of quarks or other subunits. The leptons known or believed to exist are the electron and electron-neutrino, the muon and mu-neutrino, and the tau-lepton and tau-neutrino.”⁶

Howard’s composition is as complex, mysterious, and poetic as the outer limits of the science he finds inspiration in, and the imagery of particle physics is particularly appropriate for the extraordinary interaction that takes place between the composer and his three playing partners throughout *Clepton*’s thirty-eight minutes. For Gerry Hemingway, “these are models that might be referenced to help us focus our approach to a given section—a basic understanding of scientific principles and concepts is useful as they often have terminology that better articulates the intent of a player’s actions rather than, say, feelings which are more vague and open to interpretation.”

Howard and Hemingway began working together in 1979 shortly after the percussionist moved to New York City. “Earl reinvigorated my relationship to electronic music and also expanded my knowledge of how to structure extended techniques, primarily by working on composition projects together. In *Clepton* I see his role as a composer, as an orchestrator of our natural inclinations as a trio that has a highly developed understanding of collective improvisation,” he adds. “We prepared our own scores based on Earl’s instructions, but they don’t provide anyone outside of ourselves with much information, because the main meat of what we play is loaded with spontaneous detail that we generate, which is refined in an experiential way, aided in this case by the feedback of listening back and discussion.”

Howard’s own score for *Clepton* is divided into ten sections, entitled respectively “Wave,” “Gestures to Points,” “Uneven Pulse,” “Exponential Trills,” “Chase,” “Stochastic,” “Particles,” “Harmonics,” “Delays” and “Last.” For each section Howard prepared a bank of ten programs/multiple programs on his Kurzweil 2600 for real-time processing of the instrumental sound. Where one section ends and another begins is for the listener to figure out—the titles merely serve to remind the performers of the main focus of each section—but, by way of illustration, Howard indicates that the opening section, “Wave,” runs from the beginning of the piece until Hemingway’s solo starting shortly after the 6’ 30” mark. “The overall description of this section would be of a slow and precise undulating mass developing from a web-like cello texture to a continuous noisy less-pitched texture for me to granulate,” he explains. “This foreshadows Gerry’s solo where he imitates the rhythms I made from granulating his sounds.” That word “solo” needs some explanation: The idea of “solo” usually

⁴ Robin Holloway, “Alexander Goehr: Towards a critique,” in *The Music of Alexander Goehr*, ed. Bayan Northcott (Schott, 1980); reprinted in *On Music: Essays and Diversions 1963–2003* (Clarendon Press, p. 245).

⁵ Curtis Roads, liner notes to Earl Howard’s *Strong Force* (Mutable Music 17511-2).

⁶ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/lepton>.

goes hand in hand with “accompaniment,” establishing a perceptual hierarchy of foreground and background, but in the quantum mechanics of Howard’s work the two interpenetrate, opening up new perspectives from moment to moment. Each instrumental solo is combined with a live electronic process specifically adapted to it; for Reijseger’s opening solo Howard opts for additive synthesis, transposing his sound and adding harmonics with comb filters arrayed as clusters whose density fluctuates according to the curve of the cellist’s dynamics. “I talked to Ernst about making wavy, curvy arcs of different length with different parameters chosen as the basis of the curve; I also had several sounds orchestrated for the cello and ensemble, so I was able to guide the harmony the way I wanted it to go.”

From the outset it’s clear we’re talking neither standard free improv nor traditional modern composition. While most improvisations tend to start and finish with either a bang or a whimper (more often than not the latter), *Clepton* begins in full flight, “as if it had been playing already”; and by so doing avoids the traditional compositional reflex of exposing basic material that will be explored as the piece proceeds. Holloway’s notion of the composer “taking pains to make things clear” still applies, but Howard’s approach is light years away from the “this is what you should be hearing” approach of a Schoenberg, who even went as far as indicating the *hauptstimme* (leading voice) in his scores, to make sure that listeners and musicians alike “get the point.” But the ear doesn’t work like that—elegant Schenkergrams and Forte-style K/Kh complexes are pretty—and pretty impressive—representations of compositional deep structure to look at, but they fail to take into consideration the myriad tiny events that constitute the surface of the music. And this is Howard’s universe: sonic particles, constantly colliding and interacting and sending the ear off down different paths at each subsequent listen.

Clepton’s world premiere, which Howard directed from behind his Kurzweil using a system of predetermined cues (“to bring sections to a close . . . or remind someone who might be lost where they’re supposed to be”), followed four days of extensive rehearsal in the studios of South-West German Radio, Baden-Baden, during which a complete take was recorded along with several improvisations, one of which is also included here. “I teach my pieces by explaining the conceptual basis of textures,” he explains, “demonstrating the proper execution of parts which are hard to explain. And having a dialogue about everything. I trust people in a unique way to understand what I want and make important contributions based on our shared understanding of particulars, like Georg’s sense of harmony and Ernst’s use of extended techniques. It’s a part of my theory of composition that certain behavior presents a predictable set of choices to a composer or improviser. The pre-composed order of the piece never changes but there are many places where the input of the musicians is required as part of their realization. I make ambitious solos, so people often compare me with [Anthony] Braxton. I guess we both cross jazz and new music.” Hemingway, who has worked extensively with both men, is quick to downplay the comparison: “I think it has only to do with the fact they both play solo saxophone. Beyond that their compositional, structural methods and emphasis of approach to the instrument have no relation.” Granted, both have developed their own idiosyncratic notational procedures, but unlike Braxton, who over the past four decades has refined an entire theoretical system (accompanied by some pretty forbidding terminology) to underpin his compositional aesthetic, Howard feels that in-depth discussion of notation specifically devised with just one individual performer in mind is something of a distraction. When pressed for details on the subject, he replies simply: “Why don’t you just listen to it? You’ll understand.” And when asked about how *Clepton* relates to other work, his response is categorical: “I reject as superficial the historical discourse as the first point of intersection to my music.”

The inclusion of *Rosebud*, a Howard/Hemingway duo recorded during a tour of upstate New York with the Re-Ensemble quartet with Anne LeBaron and George Lewis back in 1989 illustrates this beautifully. It’s as fresh and challenging as if it had been recorded yesterday. What’s particularly remarkable is the range of color and timbral sophistication of Howard’s electronics. Milton Babbitt’s famous line about nothing growing old faster than a new sound certainly applies to the world of electronic keyboards; tune in to your local Top 40 station and if you hear a mellotron, an ARP Odyssey, a Yamaha DX7, or a Korg M1 you have a pretty clear idea as to when the song was recorded. Very few musicians have taken the time to explore these instruments in depth and go beyond the standard patches that soon sound dated, even clichéd. Sun Ra was one, Thomas Lehn is another, and you can add Earl Howard’s name to the short list. The sounds he conjures forth from his DX7, a Lexicon PCM 70, and what today would be considered a relatively primitive Akai sampler are extraordinarily subtle, and haven’t aged in the slightest. And they’ll sound just as fresh twenty years from now. The words I scrawled in my diary that night long ago when Eric Dolphy came sailing into my life are just as appropriate to describe Earl Howard:

“He who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise”

– William Blake

–Dan Warburton

Paris-based composer/improviser/journalist Dan Warburton is Editor-in-Chief of Paris Transatlantic Magazine (www.paristransatlantic.com) and a regular contributor to The Wire.

Earl Howard (born 1951) has been performing his compositions in the United States and Europe for the past thirty-five years. He studied saxophone in Los Angeles with Phil Sobbel. He graduated from California Institute of the Arts in Music Composition in 1974, where he studied with James Tenney and Morton Subotnick. Over the years Howard has performed frequently in New York at the Knitting Factory, Location 1, Tonic, and The Stone, with improvisers including Georg Graewe, Mari Kimura, Anne LeBaron, Mark Dresser, Thomas Buckner, and George Lewis. His music has been performed at Merkin Hall, the Whitney Museum, The Kitchen, Roulette, Carnegie Recital Hall, the Herbst Theater, Ars Electronica in Austria, the Acoustmania Festival in Romania, and the Ulrichsberger Kaleidophon Festival in Austria. Recently, he was a special guest synthesizer performer and sound designer with the Perspectives Ensemble at the Miller Theatre and with the Opera of Omaha.

Howard has been the recipient of a Regents Fellowship at the University of California at San Diego, three New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships, New York State Council on the Arts Media, and an NEA Composers fellowship. He has received commissions from the Fromm Foundation, Ursula Oppens and Anthony Davis, and the Donaueschingen Festival, among others. In 2004 his first sound installation was commissioned by the Queens Museum of Art.

His works have been recorded by a number of musicians, including Anthony Davis’s recording of *Particle W* for piano and tape and Gerry Hemingway’s recording of *D.R. for Solo Percussion*. His recent compositions include music for live electronics and instruments, and solos for synthesizer and saxophones. He has produced numerous soundtracks for leading film and video artists including Nam June Paik, Mary Lucier, Rii Kanzaki, Bob Harris, and Bill Brand.

Georg Graewe started performing at age fifteen and has been leading a variety of ensembles—ranging from trio to chamber orchestra formats—which have involved some of the leading instrumentalists in contemporary music. His compositions, which include chamber music and works for symphony orchestra as well as scores for theater productions, radio drama, and video, have been performed and broadcast around the world. His opera *Kopenhagen* (based on the play by Michael Frayn) was produced by Oper Köln (Cologne Opera House) in 2003. His video cantata on Albert Einstein’s travel diaries, *alle kennen meine visage*, was premiered at the Jewish Museum Berlin in September 2005; and his latest opera *Quicksilver* (a commission by Semperoper Dresden) was premiered in November 2006. Graewe continues to perform as a soloist as well as the leader of several international ensembles. His music is documented on more than forty records.

Gerry Hemingway has been making a living as a composer and performer of solo and ensemble music since 1974. He has led numerous groups, including (since 1997) his quartet with Ellery Eskelin, Herb Robertson, and Mark Helias, as well collaborative groups with Mark Helias and Ray Anderson (BassDrumBone, celebrating its thirtieth-year anniversary in 2007), Reggie Workman and Miya Masaoka (Brew), Georg Graewe and Ernst Reijseger (GRH trio), the WHO trio with Swiss pianist Michel Wintsch and bassist Baenz Oester, his duo with Thomas Lehn, and also with John Butcher. Mr. Hemingway is a Guggenheim Fellow and has received numerous commissions for chamber and orchestral work including *Terrains*, a concerto for percussionist and orchestra commissioned by the Kansas City Symphony. He also completed a production of *Songs*, a two-year recording project for the German label between the lines. He is well known for his eleven years in the Anthony Braxton Quartet, and his many collaborations with some of the world’s most outstanding improvisers and composers including Evan Parker, Cecil Taylor, Mark Dresser, Anthony Davis, George Lewis, Derek Bailey, Wadada Leo Smith, Oliver Lake, Kenny Wheeler, Frank Gratkowski, John Cale, Marilyn Crispell, Michael Moore, and many others.

Ernst Reijseger started to play the cello at the age of eight and quite early in his life he became fascinated by the extreme diverse musical forms and styles available to him at the time. His teachers were Jan Olivier, Anner Bijlsma, and René van Ast. In 1974 Anner Bijlsma advised Reijseger to stop attending his classes at the Amsterdam conservatory, thus stimulating Reijseger to follow his own path.

He was a member of the Theo Loevendie Consort, the Guus Janssen Septet, the Arcado String Trio, Trio Clusone with Michael Moore and Han Bennink, Misha Mengelberg's Instant Composers Pool, the Gerry Hemingway quintet, and Trio with trumpeter Eric Vloeimans and guitarist Anton Goudsmit. In 1995 he received the Bird Award at the Northsea Jazz Festival.

Reijseger plays in duos with pianist Franco d'Andrea; clarinetist-soprano saxophonist Louis Sclavis; accordionist, banjo, guitar, mandoline, kaval, and pedal steel guitar player Stian Carstensen; in duos and trios with master pianist Simon Nabatov; in trios with the Amsterdam String Trio; Stian Carstensen and drummer Jarle Vespestad; Senegalese singer Mola Sylla and Senegalese percussionist Serigne Gueye; and in a quartet with bass player Mats Eilertsen, clarinetist-saxophonist Fredrik Ljungkvist, and drummer Thomas Strønen. He regularly gives concerts with drummer-percussionist Alan Purves in duo or in combination with singers from Sardinia, the Tenores e Concordu de Orosei. Reijseger also likes to play for children, in schools and theaters, and gives occasional cello workshops.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Fire Song. Denman Maroney, hyperpiano; Earl Howard, alto saxophone, synthesizer. Erstwhile 003.

Five Saxophone Solos. Earl Howard, saxophone. Mutable Music 17521-2.

ILEX. Earl Howard, electronics; Thomas Buckner, voice; Gustavo Aguilar, percussion; Wu Man, pipa. Included on *Contexts*, Mutable Music 17520-2.

Particle W. Anthony Davis, piano with electronics. Included on *Middle Passage*, Gramavision GRCD 8401.

Pele's Tears. Earl Howard, live electronics; Frank Gratkowski, alto saxophone; Melvyn Poore, tuba; Hans Schneider, double bass. Random Acoustics RA 004.

Strong Force. Anthony Davis, piano; Earl Howard, synthesizer; Anne LeBaron, harp; Ernst Reijseger, cello; Gerry Hemingway, percussion. Mutable Music 17511-2.

Clepton

Produced by SWR2 Redaktion Neue Musik/Jazz, Reinhard Kager

Engineered by Alfred Habelitz

Assistant engineers: Winfried Christman and Marcus Krol

Clepton was recorded live on October 21, 2006 in the Sporthalle der Gewerblichen Schulen in Donaueschingen during Donaueschinger Musiktage 2006.

Clepton was commissioned by Donaueschinger Musiktage 2006.

Ernst Reijseger appears by courtesy of Winter & Winter (www.winterandwinter.com).

Rosebud

Produced and recorded by Gerry Hemingway

Mastered by James Hemingway

Rosebud was recorded live at the Pyramid Art Center in Rochester, New York, on April 16, 1989.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, Inc. NYC

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EARL HOWARD (b. 1951)

CLEPTON

80670-2

1. *Clepton* (2006) 38:01

Earl Howard, synthesizer, live processing; Georg Graewe, piano; Ernst Reijseger, cello; Gerry Hemingway, drums

2. *Improvisation* (2006) 6:02

Earl Howard, synthesizer, live processing; Georg Graewe, piano; Ernst Reijseger, cello; Gerry Hemingway, drums

3. *Rosebud* (1989) 14:54

Earl Howard, synthesizer; Gerry Hemingway, drums

All compositions published by the composer except *Improvisation* (Howard/Graewe/Reijseger/Hemingway).

Total Time: 59:03

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