

By any objective measure, William Hellermann's *Three Weeks in Cincinnati in December* was unlike anything its first audience, at the American Center, in Paris, on December 18, 1979, had ever encountered. Those among them who were attuned to the contemporary flute repertory knew about the instrument's steady march toward complexity and textural variety, from the gentle chromaticism of Claude Debussy's *Syrinx* (1913) to the slightly more angular range-probing of Edgard Varèse's *Density 21.5* (1936), through Pierre Boulez's gritty, agile and intensely dramatic *Sonatine* (1946), Luciano Berio's equally athletic, challengingly restless *Sequenza I* (1958), and more recent tests of both technique and musicality by Toru Takemitsu, whose *Voice* (1971) incorporated a range of vocalizations into the music, and Robert Dick—the flutist and composer who was playing the Hellermann work that evening (and the only flutist to play it since then)—whose *Afterlight* (1973) used multiphonics as its primary source of material.

But nothing they had heard on the flute was quite like this new piece, completed less than a month earlier (the score is dated Nov. 21, 1979). For starters, its scope was unprecedented for a solo flute piece: It ran for nearly an hour, with all but the first five minutes of music unfolding without so much as a pause for breath. It was clearly a measure of a flutist's virtuosity and endurance, yet it was by no means a virtuoso showpiece—at least not in the grand Romantic tradition of concert dazzlers, or even earlier modern scores like the Prokofiev *Sonata* or the Boulez and Berio works. And no one could honestly call this gradually unfolding essay in otherworldly atmosphere a grab-bag of effects, although it is founded entirely on extended techniques.

Those techniques, used through the work from start to finish, are multiphonics (or multiple stops), which suggest chordal textures; “whistle tones,” as Hellermann calls them in the score (Dick prefers the more poetic “whisper tones”), which create eerily high-flying lines of counterpoint over the more standard flute tone; and abdominal tremolo, a form of energetic, sharply rhythmic breathing that produces a stream of short bursts. And the flutist executes all of this while circular breathing, a technique that gives the piece its non-stop seamlessness.

Those first listeners may also have puzzled over the piece's whimsical title. Surely the whisper tones, which at times evoke distant birdsong, suggest April more than December. So what's it about? Nothing, Hellermann has said. He is not given to suggested specific imagery in his music. The title is taken from a remark by the composer Peter Gordon. Hellermann, running into Gordon in New York after not seeing him for some time, asked Gordon how he was doing, as one does. Gordon's caustic response: “What do you mean, ‘how am I doing?’ I just spent three weeks in Cincinnati, in December.” As Hellermann recalls, “his answer was so expressive that it didn't need to be explained, and I thought it was not a bad idea for a title.”

Hellermann conceived the piece during a visit to the Center for Creative and Performing Arts in Buffalo, New York, where he was a composer in residence between 1977 and 1979, and where Dick was the flutist in Creative Associates, the center's resident new-music ensemble.

Hellermann was forty years old at the time, and had established a reputation as an innovative experimentalist, not only as a composer of electronic music and works for small ensembles, but also as a performer (his instrument is the guitar), and as a visual artist, with a particular interest in an amalgam of sculpture and music that he called SoundArt, a play on the old German term, Tonkunst, though Hellermann applied it only to his art pieces, not to his scores. The grandest expression of this hybrid was the 1984 “Sound/Art” exhibition that Hellermann curated at the Sculpture Center, in New York, with his own works as well as pieces by likeminded SoundArtists, including Pauline Oliveros, Carolee Schneemann, and Les Levine.

Hellermann had studied at Columbia University with Chou Wen-chung, Otto Luening, and Vladimir Ussachevsky, privately with Stefan Wolpe, and sometimes lists “post-graduate studies with Morton Feldman at the Chock Full of Nuts at 116th & Broadway” on his curriculum vitae, a reference to Sunday morning philosophical discussions he and Feldman had at the long-gone coffee shop across the street from Columbia’s main gate. His earliest acknowledged works were piano, vocal, and chamber pieces, dating to 1966 and 1967, but by then he had become fascinated with electronic music. His *Ariel* (1967) is an enduring electronic piece, built mainly on the heavily processed and transformed sound of a gong, its elements performed live and then juxtaposed to create a broad, constantly shifting texture.

“I was very happy with electronic music,” Hellermann said, looking back from the perspective of late 2016. “That is pretty much where I cut my teeth. I was at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, and what I really loved was cutting tape, manipulating it, re-recording it, splicing it and putting it together. That, maybe, had something to do with the SoundArt—the feeling of making a piece in the more physical sense that you have with a sculpture, more than you have with music you’ve written down. And when tape died out, I didn’t feel the same way about the synthesizer.”

By the late 1970s, Hellermann had moved decisively toward scored music for standard instruments, and was particularly taken with the Minimalist concern with the ways our perceptions shift as musical textures slowly evolve. *Three Weeks in Cincinnati in December* is one of four works for unaccompanied instruments that Hellermann composed between 1977 and 1981, in which that slow shift is paramount.

They are, in a way, Minimalism at its purest. Where Philip Glass used additive processes, LaMonte Young focused on an expansive overtone series, and Steve Reich was developing structures by moving instrumental lines out of phase, Hellermann kept his processes largely invisible, giving the listener just the unfolding sound.

“These are pieces that Bill wrote that all have a kind of human endurance factor,” Dick explained. “They are also pieces that move very slowly, yet if you look away for a second, you’ve missed something.”

Hellermann composed the first piece in the set, *Tremble*, to perform himself on the guitar—a nylon-string classical model, amplified. Using a blues guitar slide, Hellermann began at the top of the instrument—between the tuning pegs—and then moved slowly down the strings, to the guitar’s bridge over the course of an hour. Central to the piece was what Hellermann called a “tremor”—a slight trembling of the hand muscles that would make the steel bar that he used as a slide rattle against either the guitar’s wood or strings, or both, producing unpredictable combinations of percussive and resonant sounds.

Hellermann played the world premiere of *Tremble* before a small audience at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation on February 13, 1978, and repeated it exactly two months later at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo. It was clearly something new, and some of its driving principles turned up elsewhere in the series of solo works that followed. The tremor, for example, found its way into *Three Weeks in Cincinnati in December* by way of the abdominal tremolo, and though it may be a stretch, you could liken the sound made by the trembling steel slide against the nylon strings to the flute’s whisper tones.

A broader connection, though, is the way *Tremble*, *Three Weeks in Cincinnati in December* and the two other pieces—*Tremble Too*, written for the double bass player (and composer) Jon Deak, and *The Violin Between Us*, composed for the violinist-composer Malcolm Goldstein (both works had their premieres at Roulette, in New York, in early 1981)—explore, through painstaking gradual unfolding, the physicality of the instruments for which they are composed.

“There is an aspect of all these pieces,” Hellermann says, “where, especially at the time they were written—perhaps not so much now—there was a feeling of, ‘Can he do it? Is he going to make it?’ There was very much a built-in tension. The demands on the performer were such that the piece wasn’t a display of virtuosity, but it was a *test* of virtuosity.”

Dick found *Tremble* intriguing, and asked Hellermann to compose something for him.

“In those days, I thought of myself primarily as a flutist who was passionate about new music, and very interested in helping in the creation of new works, by asking people to write for me,” Dick explains. “And my process of who I asked was completely intuitive, based more on a feeling of personal empathy than anything else. I had a fairly large apartment in Buffalo, and often had Creative Associates’ guests stay with me, so Bill stayed at my place, and we became friends. But when I first asked him to write for me, he didn’t just say yes—he said, ‘Well, let’s talk about it. Show me some stuff.’ So I played quite a few kinds of things for him, and what attracted his ears were the whisper tones and the concept of duration, through circular breathing.”

Hellermann quickly saw that a flute work for Dick could fit into the series of solo pieces that began with *Tremble*, but also that it would have to break one of the ‘rules’ of the series, which was that each piece would focus on only a single technique. In *Tremble* and *Tremble Too*, that technique was the tremor. In *The Violin Between Us*, the focus was on the relationship between bow pressure and bowing speed, and how the instrument’s sound changed as one increased and the other decreased.

One flute technique Hellermann was fascinated by was circular breathing, and he was intent on using it. But unlike the tremor or bowing techniques, circular breathing does not, in itself, generate material, only seamless. Hellermann would have to look at other techniques to produce the work’s substance.

Multiphonics seemed promising, not only because they yielded multiple notes, but because they also—depending how they were fingered—could yield those not-entirely-predictable whistling whisper tones. And the abdominal tremolo (which Hellermann calls a quiver), would provide the work’s motivating force—the rhythmic drive that keeps the multiphonics and whisper tones flowing.

Of the techniques that attracted Hellermann, only circular breathing was relatively new to Dick, who had mastered the technique less than a year earlier. Circular breathing was mainly the province of reed players: Jazz musicians like Rahsaan Roland Kirk and John Coltrane were famous for it, and some classical performers—most notably the oboist Heinz Holliger—had made it an important part of their artistry, though without calling particular attention to it.

Circular breathing on the flute, however, is notably more difficult than on reed or brass instruments, where the instrument itself creates resistance, an important aspect of the technique’s mechanics, and something the flute’s mouthpiece does not provide. Dick had met a few flutists who had mastered circular breathing, but had not been impressed with the results until he met

the Swiss flutist Aurèle Nicolet, who produced a lustrous tone while using the technique. Nicolet passed his method on to Dick, with a little ceremony something like rabbinical ordination, or the laying on of hands.

“He put his hand on my shoulder, looked right into my eyes, and said, ‘Do you think you understand?’” Dick recalls. “I said, ‘Yes, I do,’ and he said, ‘Good—it’s yours for the doing, if you do it,’” and then the hand on my shoulder turned me around and propelled me, and I wound up here.” Dick subsequently published a book on the subject, *Circular Breathing for the Flutist* (Multiple Breath Music, 1987).

Work on *Three Weeks in Cincinnati in December* progressed over several months, with Dick traveling to New York to work on it while staying at Hellermann’s apartment. Because Hellermann was intent on using multiphonics as the source of the work’s thematic material, Dick intensified his study of the fingerings that produced the effect, supplying Hellermann with lists of the notes and overtones produced by each—and periodically calling Hellermann to say he had discovered new combinations.

“He definitely wanted something demanding,” Hellermann recalls. “I was very careful about it. I would come up with something and ask him, ‘Do you think you can do that? It’s getting pretty hard.’ And he would say, ‘No, no problem,’ and he’d get back to me a day or two later to say he’d worked on it, he’d figured it out. Or he’d call and say, ‘I just came up with another multiple stop—I thought I had them all!’ It was that kind of interaction. He was a willing participant in introducing the multiple stops and some of the other effects, on top of what was already a challenging technique, and that determined the course of the piece.

“The thing that Robert brings to the table is that he really can control breath pressure,” Hellermann adds. “I’d give him a multiphonic, and he could bring out various notes—he’s got a way of getting these things to happen. When you enter this world of multiphonics, there’s nothing but interesting things going on. There are always things going on in the background that are very remote in the overtone series.”

There is also an intentional measure of semi-improvisatory unpredictability—changes that occur from one performance to the next. The first pages of Hellermann’s handwritten score give a four-note chord at the start of each line, a series of wavy lines, and a time measurement. Later, the notes are given, often (though not always) without stems, but with copious, if sometimes vague, directions about pacing, fingering, and gesture (“adopt a rocking motion,” “begin to wander with confidence,” “go back and forth at first—always keeping the line unstable,” “hold only as long as necessary”).

Dick kept the piece in his repertory until 1983, when he decided to set it aside, partly because he worried that as he gained more control of the required techniques, the performances lost some of their unpredictability, and partly because he was devoting himself increasingly to composition. By the mid-1980s, he was playing his own music exclusively.

When the possibility of recording the work for New World Records arose, however, Dick jumped at the chance to revisit the piece. He gave it a public performance at the loft of Daniel Goode and Ann Snitow (Goode co-directed the DownTown Ensemble with Hellermann for many years), on Sept. 18, 2016, on a program otherwise devoted to his own recent works.

“I think I was able to understand the piece much more deeply than I did in 1979,” he says. “I found, this time, that the physical struggle aspect really kind of fell away, and I honestly don’t think it’s that important to the music. It wasn’t easy—I’m not going to pretend that I could just pick up the flute and play this piece. I trained for this like an athletic event, I spent more time on the NordicTrack than I did practicing the flute.”

Recording the piece took two days, although the finished version is actually a single take.

“The first day, I played the whole piece in one take,” Dick says, “but I wasn’t very happy with how it developed at the end. I tried to do a retake, starting from about two-thirds of the way in, through to the end. But it’s just not the kind of piece you can jump into, because when you arrive at any given place in the work, the zone you’re in can only be reached by playing through the whole work up to that point. The second day, we recorded it again in a single pass, and I felt it was much more powerful, emotionally, so that’s the take we’re using.

“I’ve got to say,” he adds, “playing it this time really made me feel that this is a true masterpiece. I had always found it compelling, which is why I wanted to revive it. But delving into it again, after more than 30 years—holy smoke, this is just a really great piece of art.”

—Allan Kozinn

Allan Kozinn was for many years a music critic and culture reporter for The New York Times. He retired to Portland, Maine, in 2014 and currently writes about music and musicians for The Wall Street Journal, the Times and Opera News, and is the music critic for the Portland Press Herald.

William Hellermann (b. 1939) graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Mechanical Engineering and arrived in New York City in 1962, where he performed in the Village as Guillermo Brillante, flamenco guitarist. Following a series of minor miracles he became a composition student of Stefan Wolpe’s, got a DMA in Composition at Columbia University, did post-graduate studies with Morton Feldman at the Chock Full of Nuts at 116th & Broadway, and wound up in SoHo exhibiting sculpture, scores, and photographs, as well as composing and performing. In the 1970s he was a curator at PS 1, The Clocktower, and the Alternative Museum, where he launched the first exhibitions of sound sculpture and audio art—in the process bringing into usage the term “Sound Art.” Among his many awards is a Prix de Rome from The American Academy in Rome.

Robert Dick is a musical visionary, a creative virtuoso in the tradition of Paganini and Hendrix, artists who redefined both the music and the technique of their instruments. Dick has released over thirty CDs of original solo and chamber music. Improviser, composer, author, teacher, and inventor, he performs worldwide. His solo performances have been likened to the experience of hearing a full orchestra.

It is a rare composition for flute written anywhere in the world today that does not bear Dick’s influence. His impact on flute playing is significant, made through countless masterclasses, the seminal books *The Other Flute*, *Tone Development Through Extended Techniques*, and *Circular Breathing for the Flutist*, plus two volumes of the etudes, *Flying Lessons*. Instructional CDs and DVDs and his series of instructional videos on YouTube illuminate his ideas and music, and empower other musicians to transform their playing.

Dick teaches at New York University and the City University of New York Graduate Center. He maintains an active private teaching studio, works with flutists the world over using Skype, and conducts his annual Robert Dick Residential Studio in New York. Students in the Studio study with Mr. Dick for two full days each week from September through December, going into depth in contemporary techniques and repertoire, including improvisation and composition.

www.robertdick.net

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

William Hellermann

Ariel. Turnabout Records TV 34301. (LP)

Ek-Stasis II. New World Records/CRI NWCRL 299.

On the Edge of a Node. Included on *Music from the American Academy in Rome*. New World Records/CRI NWCRL 336.

Passages 13—The Fire. Nonesuch Records H-71275. (LP)

Post/Pone. Included on *Downtown Only*. Lovely Music LCD 3081.

Robert Dick

The Galilean Moons. NEMU Records 017.

Our Cells Know. Tzadik TZ 4015.

Third Stone from the Sun. New World Records 80435-2.

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ROBERT DICK, FLUTIST

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