

I first encountered Earl Howard's music in 1980 with his work *V & T*, which was composed for the violinist Shem Guibbory. I was greatly impressed by his command of texture and the subtle interaction between the soloist and the tape. Initially I felt the soloist was controlled by the tape music but the piece fostered a nuanced performance with a refreshing attention to detail within a relatively restricted musical realm. I felt a connection to this new music because it resonated with my desire to create ensemble music in which compositional aims could be achieved through directed improvisation. I was pleased when he decided to create a new work for piano and tape, *Particle W*.

Particle W was the beginning of a creative collaboration with Earl that continues to this day. Working on *Particle W* I was introduced to a new vocabulary of musical terms that were certainly unique in the improvised sphere. His directions for the piano were very specific, not necessarily about pitch or even rhythmic gesture, but about the relationship of the "improvised" material to the tape music. The tape music moved through various textures divided into sections that featured subtle transitions. I had to negotiate very specific musical identities whether playing points with space, bandwidth games, or the beating tones of microtonal harmonics. The terminology for the piano textures came from electronic music. Directions were not metaphoric but a concrete design of interaction and play within a dynamically evolving musical frame. I was always aware of the fixity of tape music, the idea that the piece provided a clock, an organization and frame for the timing of events. This was not altogether different from playing a concerto where the performer must not only realize the inherent structure of the piece but reveal the structure as a new discovery for each performance. The piece excited me because it shattered the anachronistic idea of improvisation and composition as an oppositional binary. Howard's innovations suggest that music can be realized in a continuum of interaction and design.

The only limitation in *Particle W* and *Monopole*, the subsequent work that Earl created for piano duet with Ursula Oppens and me, was that ultimately the tape maintained control. It dictated the duration and succession of events. The sounds and textures for *Particle W*, *Monopole*, and the tape composition *Pele's Tears* were all created with a Serge system that Howard describes as an analog computer. With new technology, particularly the Kurzweil K2600, he could create music in real time. The music could be truly interactive within a complex, replicable design. The music could flow through textures and processes that were never static. Textures and ideas could transform and evolve over time. Howard did not conceive sound as an environment or a sonic field but as dynamic forces in motion. The sounds and textures could have behaviors and probabilities rather than static, unrelenting fixity.

In many respects Earl Howard's music is an anomaly that resists categorization and the seductiveness of genre. He is an important force in improvised music and yet his work employs complex structures and rigorous transitions of sound and texture. His electro-acoustic music is realized with a Kurzweil K2600 that for Howard is not merely a keyboard synthesizer, but as he has described, an open system, a computer with a most effective interface with modules and a key map that enable more freedom in the composer's creation of textures. The keys, pedals, and sliders on the instrument are in effect switches that can accomplish various musical tasks determined by the composer. Howard does not play the Kurzweil as a mere keyboard; the tactile interface with it allows for a musicality and subtlety that cannot be achieved by most artists working on laptops that feature a visual interface. Howard's performances on the Kurzweil are embodied and the physical relationship of performer to music and action is self-evident. His painstaking programming of the Kurzweil creates a space for the intuitive mind and the

improviser's imagination. I have witnessed experts in computer music who are stunned by what he is able to achieve with effects and processes that would be impossible for the laptop in real-time. Howard's music challenges many assumptions about electro-acoustic music and the role of electronic music. In most electro-acoustic music today the electronic elements are limited to either an attenuation of the instrument in so-called hyper-instruments or in the creation of static environments that provide background for acoustic instruments. Very few composers working in computer music today are interested in new sounds or textures or sound transformation and are more concerned with the movement of sound in virtual spaces, the concert hall as a projected set of headphones.

Earl Howard grew up in Los Angeles. As a child, he was influenced by film music and he was fascinated by the way music and sound in films provided shifting perspectives, moving from large masses of sound like a posse on horseback to an individualized perspective of a bullet whistling overhead. Films provided sound in constant motion forming shifting points of view, from the dense to the spare, from the echoes of space to the violent confrontation. He attended California Institute of the Arts where he studied under the composer Morton Subotnick and the celebrated improviser Buell Neidlinger. Howard also studied saxophone with Phil Sobel. He is a virtuoso on the saxophone, performing on the alto as well as the soprano saxophone and the saxello. Sobel abhorred patterns and licks and emphasized the disruption of patterns by asking for random pitches during exercises. This served Howard well in the future because his music always engages in creative disruption, not allowing the improviser to dwell in the known clichés and patterns of playing and demanding that the performer listen and understand the movement and transformation of texture within the composition.

In the three solo works presented on *Granular Modality*, one can observe the striking continuity of Howard's aesthetic approach. All three pieces employ a flexible script of material that transforms and modulates from texture to texture. Each section in the composition represents a complex sound world that is not simply multiphonics or sub-harmonics, for example, but an exchange, an interplay that is both directional in terms of an overall sense of form and discursive in its oppositional characteristics. The discursive elements in Howard's playing on the saxophone and on the synthesizer convey a restless approach toward material. Musical material and texture always change and evolve. On the synthesizer this is accomplished with a scripted succession of programs, textures, and behaviors that can overlap and be revealed over time. The scripted flow of events creates a coherent overall structure that is malleable in terms of duration and nuance. Distinction between the improvised and the composed becomes irrelevant, as the order of events, the script, remains the same as the details are revealed in the action of improvisation. The binary of composition and improvisation is an anachronism and inadequately describes a creative process that embraces immediacy and formal complexity.

Bird 3 (2006), a solo work for Kurzweil, opens the recording. The piece employs sharp contrasts of musical material with abrupt changes of texture. In a way the piece has a nostalgic quality as it negotiates a virtual history of electronic music from the Columbia-Princeton sine waves to musique concrète to the exploration of granular synthesis and noise. The piece is breathtaking in its virtuosity, filled with surprise and the unexpected. At times the piece builds with rhythmic momentum and then collapses into a mass of sound like a flock of birds drifting in and out of formation moving across a stereo field. *Bird 3* has a unique spaciousness and in the piece Howard explores silences that disturb the expectation and predictability of cross-fades.

Strasser 60 (2009) is the other Kurweil solo on the recording. In both pieces the listener is startled by the variety of sound and texture that are complexly defined, hardly ever sounding like a conventional instrument. In the opening sections of *Strasser 60* the transformations are less abrupt, with large, dense textures that vie for attention. Textures collide and are augmented by harmonics and colorful elaboration with the occasional introduction of tonality and downward moving glissandi. This reveals Howard's mastery in orchestration as the piece finally resolves into a pedal-point drone that dissipates into a sheen of harmonics, a sublimation of the tonal center.

2455 (2009) is a work for alto saxophone featuring the composer. Works for solo saxophone remain an important facet of Howard's music. This piece follows his work on *5 Saxophone Solos*. Unlike Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell, two other important composers who performed music for solo saxophone, Howard creates longer, more elaborate musical structures that are multi-thematic, employing a variety of extended techniques. He never limits himself to one idea in a piece. The composition morphs and transforms, negotiating contrasting textures and sounds. The piece opens with breathy sub-harmonics creating a microtonal melody. He uses his glissando technique with an oblique nod to Johnny Hodges. Howard's control of his instrument is especially impressive in his attention to dynamics and timbre, employing soft multiphonic textures and sub-tone melodies. Howard's process of composition in his solo saxophone works is similar to his approach on the synthesizer. He explores contrasting sections of material in an array of varying approaches to technique and sound. Listening to his performance one often arrives at unexpected places like the folksy, Albert Ayler reference in the middle of the solo. The solo has a strong sense of structure while revealing a playfully melodic vision.

Crupper (2009) features Miya Masaoka on koto with the composer on synthesizer. *Crupper* begins with the koto alone and the listener is struck by the sense of space. The koto plays around D minor emphasizing the flat fifth, A-flat, like a blues. Later, the koto emphasizes a pentatonic modal scale introducing the E-flat against the D. This establishes a tonal center that will be felt throughout most of the piece. The music takes its time to reveal itself. The synthesizer enters as a shadow of the koto as Howard begins the processing of the koto. Slowly the interaction becomes more rhythmic with repeating figures in the koto but the synthesizer never overwhelms the acoustic koto as Masaoka moves to bowed figures on the koto and later percussive sounds beating on the wood. In the beginning sections of the piece the synthesizer plays a more subordinate role, mirroring and attenuating the melodic figures of the koto. This piece is rather unique in Howard's music with its slow, almost ritualistic unfolding and with the presence of a predominant tonal center. The synthesizer gently disturbs and extends the tonality, slowly moving toward stochastic textures, less tonally defined, juxtaposed against the prevailing D tonal center in the koto. When Masaoka moves to more percussive sounds, the gravitational pull of tonality begins to abate as the synthesizer employs more stochastic sounds. Later, Masaoka plays microtonal figures with the synthesizer. The piece concludes with a drone in the synthesizer that recalls the D tonality in the beginning of the piece. The roles of the koto and the synthesizer are effectively reversed at the end of the piece with the koto providing melodic embellishment of the drone. The piece has a fascinating tension between tonality and sound, finding a delicate balance between the stochastic and the melodic.

Earl Howard is a unique voice in new music. His sound world is probably the most rich and varied in electronic music and his playing on the saxophone reinforces a singular vision of music and sound. He draws from a wide range of influences across racial, social, and aesthetic barriers. New music of the late twentieth century is not only defined by Stockhausen, Cage, and Varèse,

but Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Ellington, and even Hank Williams provide the foundation for music today, shattering the anachronistic boundaries between the improvised and the composed. Howard understands the history and development of electronic music without being constrained by its past. His music avoids the facile eclecticism so prevalent in music today. He has created his own idiosyncratic world of sound.

—Anthony Davis

Anthony Davis is a composer, pianist, and Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

Earl Howard (born 1951) has been performing his compositions in the United States and Europe for the past forty years. He studied saxophone in Los Angeles with Phil Sobel. 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 Thomas Buckner, Mark Dresser, Georg Graewe, Gerry Hemingway, Mari Kimura, Anne LeBaron, George Lewis, J.D. Parran, and David Wessel. 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. He has been a special guest synthesizer performer and sound designer with the Perspectives Ensemble at the Miller Theater, with Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and with the Opera of Omaha in opera and ensemble works of Anthony Davis.

Howard received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2011 and has also 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.

Miya Masaoka resides in New York City and is a classically trained musician, composer, and sound/installation artist. She has created works for solo koto, laser interfaces, laptop, and video, sculpture installations, and written scores for ensembles, chamber orchestra, and mixed choirs. She has a large body of work for solo koto, live electronics, and video. She often works with the sonification of data, and maps the behavior of brain activity, plants, and insect movement to sound. Her work has been performed at the Venice Biennale 2004, the Miller Theater, New York City, IRCAM, Paris, and V2, Rotterdam. Awards and commissions include the Alpert Arts Award, Bang On a Can, Engine 27/Harvestworks, Gerbode Foundation. She is currently a professor in the Music/Sound department at the Milton Avery School of the Arts MFA Program, Bard College, New York.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Clepton. Georg Graewe, piano; Ernst Reijseger, cello; Gerry Hemingway, drums; Earl Howard, synthesizer, live processing. New World Records 80670-2.

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.

All compositions published by the composer.

Producer: Earl Howard

Engineer: Mario Diaz de León (*Bird 3*); Stephen Cooper (*Crupper, 2455, Strasser 60*)

Bird 3 was recorded on March, 19, 2006. *Crupper, 2455*, and *Strasser 60* were recorded on November 12, 2009. All works were recorded in concert at Roulette, New York City.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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EARL HOWARD (b. 1951)
GRANULAR MODALITY

80728-2

1. *Bird 3* (2006) 20:00
Earl Howard, synthesizer

2. *Crupper* (2009) 16:19
Earl Howard, synthesizer, live processing; Miya Masaoka, koto

3. *2455* (2009) 11:14
Earl Howard, alto saxophone

4. *Strasser 60* (2009) 20:05
Earl Howard, synthesizer

TT: 67:38

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