

“The emotional impulse that moves a composer to write his scores contains the same element of poetry that incites the scientist to his discoveries.”

—Edgard Varèse, *New Instruments and New Music* (1936)

For nearly 40 years, Elliott Sharp has created a body of work that is exemplary in both its breadth and its depth. Sharp’s discography, which numbers more than 300 separate items, includes works for orchestra, string quartet, rock band, blues band, solo guitar, multiple guitars. But what is most remarkable in Elliott’s work is the *consistency of vision*. Even a cursory voyage through his body of work reveals certain key soundscapes that recur, independent of genre, independent of medium.

The Presence of the Low Throb

It’s the rhythm of your blood and your heart. Sex rhythms. Dronalities. A drone that morphs. The throb breaks apart into discrete pulses. Some sort of pulse that everything relates to. All of a sudden you’ll hit a certain resonance and you’ll hear clicks and those clicks might become a groove.

This throb, in various manifestations, can be heard throughout this disc. It permeates *Venus & Jupiter*; it generates the opening of *Homage Leroy Jenkins*; it comes and goes throughout *Tranzience*. It would probably be heard in *Approaching the Arches of Corti* if the range of the soprano sax permitted it (although Sharp *does* try to get around this, as we will see. . .).

Improvisation? I don’t buy it—Morton Feldman to Elliott Sharp

Many listeners think of Elliott Sharp primarily as an *improviser*, situated within the world of what has come to be known as *Downtown Music*. But the term *Downtown*, as it applies to the music that emerged from ’70s and ’80s New York City, actually denotes a *contested space*. Some future history or histories will have to parse through all of the narratives and genres that make up this loose and contentious federation.

Elliott’s use of *pulse* and *repetition* could connect him to the *Downtowns* of Reich and Glass, or Branca and Chatham. But his use of fissures and disruptions, explosions and noises, connect him more to what is commonly thought of as the *Downtown Improviser* scene. However, when Elliott emerged in the late ’70s/early ’80s (his first issued recording dates from 1978), he perceived a hostility toward pulse-based work among that particular group of musicians. As a result, Elliott Sharp is a musician and composer who has almost been *forced* to straddle groups, scenes, and genres.

I feel like I had a parallel course—I was enthralled with a lot of the same things that minimalism was developing but I never wanted to do it the way they did it. I didn’t want to exclude the notion of things being gnarlier, noisier, grittier.

One of the major tendencies of the 1970s and 1980s was the emergence of a group of creators whose practice was *equally* marked by experience in the worlds of Improvisation and Composition: There were several slightly earlier groups, movements and developments that influenced this development. The AACM and its major figures (Anthony Braxton, Roscoe

Mitchell, Wadada Leo Smith, etc.) have been centrally important as both an inspiration and an influence. But there was also the group of *post-Cagean* composers (Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Cornelius Cardew) and their (sometimes uncomfortable) relationship with the line between *Open Form Composition* and *Improvisation*. There was the widely-distributed series of works that Karlheinz Stockhausen created with a core ensemble—some of which bore the moniker *Intuitive Music*. And one would be remiss not to mention the important influence that non-Western ensemble musics such as gamelan, gagaku, and the music of the Central African Pygmies had on this tendency.

*At a certain point **just** playing improvised music ceased to be meaningful. You build structured music, you create scores. But the natural habitat of the musicians who compose scores is not necessarily a place that we're comfortable in either.*

Most of the impulse comes from observing physical phenomena

A background in science and math marked Elliott Sharp on the deepest of levels. Anyone who has even the slightest knowledge of Sharp's music knows that Fractal Geometry, studies of Flocking, and the Fibonacci Series are key concepts which inform his thinking and his choice-making. But dystopia and the decaying industrial world are also central. And notions of *disruption* are never far from this rigorous yet unschematic thinker's mind:

Some of the sections are based on Fibonacci numbers and some . . . it goes until it stops feeling good.

We are just the upper partials of the Big Bang

Tranzience (2013)

The transient is the short burst of harmonics and noise at the beginning of any sound. Loud, rich, full of non-periodic components and high frequencies, they are the bow sounds, the spit sounds, the scrapes, the sounds that the casual listener tends to unconsciously filter out of their perception of the “musical.”

But when these sounds are slowed down, they reveal

*landscapes, textures, and rhythms unheard and unpredicted in the original sound.*¹

Tranzience is not an actual transcription of these slowed-down artifacts. Rather, it is an imagined recreation of this process, based on thirty years of experience with this phenomenon.

In order to facilitate the creation and performance of these Transients, Sharp fashioned aluminum “tube bows.” These bows are smoothly polished on one side and with carved grooves on the other (they make their first appearance in the piece about 7 minutes into the recording). In working on this piece, with its unique challenges, Sharp was aided immeasurably by the flexibility and creativity of the performers:

¹ Elliott Sharp, *some notes*, email Jan. 30, 2016.

The young players, they're comfortable rhythmically with a lot of different impulses—that's why the JACK Quartet inhabits the music in a way that none of the others did.

Tranzience—the pun implicit in the title is not unintentional: Elliott points out that *Tranzience* refers to these bits of sound, but it also has to do with *the transient nature of everything*. As one ages, one has the feeling that time is speeding up. . . . Twenty years ago, writer Mark Dery spoke of the “unexpected humanism at the heart of Sharp’s cyberpunk aesthetic, an embrace of the nonlinear dynamics of human intelligence that is ultimately antithetical to cyberpunk’s emphasis on the technological. . . .”² And now, Elliott Sharp is the devoted father of young twins. He used to feel like an alien—but now he feels like a cook. . . .

The string quartet is an instrumentation that is *much more* than an instrumentation. It brings with it the weight, but also the *baggage* of History and Tradition. Here is one place where Elliott speaks of *influence*—particularly the quartets of Lutoslawski and Ligeti. But to my ear, this piece also looks *forward*—more than with any other piece on this disc, I hear the reflection of contemporary Sound Art in the way that the sonic objects sometimes seem to hang in space, changing almost imperceptibly.

Translation is the Essence

Approaching the Arches of Corti (1998)

Cor ti arch—*That formed by the junction of the heads of the inner and outer pillar cells of Corti in the inner ear*³

The late Steve Lacy arguably did more than any other musician to bring the soprano saxophone into the world of modern jazz and improvised music. While a student at Bard College, studying with trombonist Roswell Rudd, Elliott Sharp encountered Lacy, Rudd’s lifelong musical partner. The soprano saxophone is found in both straight and curved form. But this piece specifically demands four *straight* soprano saxes.

*A good portion of the piece is played with the bells of the straight soprano saxophones jammed into the calves of the players to produce low glisses and split tones. I was initiated into the joy of the leg-mute by Steve Lacy who used it to extend the soprano’s range downward.*⁴

When I first heard this work I was amazed by the variety of the sounds produced through the leg muting. I was very curious to find out how all of this was notated. In fact, the score’s notational solutions are elegantly simple (*full leg mute, leg mute to bend note down, open leg mute, etc.*). We live in an age of hyper-notation, and I wondered what was behind this simplicity.

We had a Boy Scout troop that was sponsored by IBM and we were learning Fortran. The ideal for any of us was to write one line of code and have it generate this incredibly complex system.

² Dery, Mark. *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*. NY: Grove Press, 1995.

³ <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Corti+arch>

⁴ <http://zoarmusic.tumblr.com/post/128725734315/sept-1-recording-homage-leroy-jenkins-and>

I want the accidents. I want what happens when players put something of their own into it. I like the idea of a piece that's clearly the same piece every time it's played but every performance has enough difference.

A lot of the compositional ideas come from having been a performer for so long.

This is where you can really feel the improvisational sensibility in Elliott's work. More than in the note choices or the rhythmic choices, it's those timbral variations and the play of the things that operate there that really reveal the practiced improviser in these works.

The striking initial leap from (concert) A flat to B an octave above which generates so much of the material of this composition evokes Varèse (especially *Nocturnal* and *Intégrales*) for me. But Elliott more or less disavowed direct influence (although his 2011 *Spectropia Suite* imagines a 1931 meeting between Varèse and Duke Ellington!). Rather, he referenced the great musicologist Curt Sachs and his discussion of one of the earliest melodic formulas, the "tumbling strain."

*Its character is wild and violent: after a leap up to the highest available note in screaming fortissimo, the voice rattles down by jumps or steps or glides to a pianissimo respite on a couple of the lowest, almost inaudible notes; then, in a mighty leap, it resumes the highest note to repeat this cascade as often as necessary. In their most emotional and least 'melodious' form, such strains recall nearly inhuman, savage shouts of joy or wails of rage and may derive from such unbridled outbursts.*⁵

The language is current but the scene is not. We're disappearing

Homage Leroy Jenkins (2008)

Leroy Jenkins (1932–2007), violinist, composer, and key member of the AACM. Jenkins' work with the legendary Revolutionary Ensemble provided a early key experience for Sharp when this trio (Sirone, bass; Jerome Cooper, drums) performed at Bard College in 1972.

They combined the intensity of Jimi Hendrix with the delicacy and intimacy of a chamber trio.

As our generation moves into its 60s, loss becomes more of a subject. More and more Memorials are composed. But these are not just memorials for the great figures that they commemorate. They also function as memorials for the whole way of life and culture that shaped us. And for the music that made us want to be part of this world of music.

Violinist Rachel Golub does an incredible job of channeling Jenkins' raspy, scratchy, sweet-sour intensity. Although this piece is fully notated, the translation of Jenkins' improvisational idiom consists of way more than merely the transcription of some of his phrases. The whole *ethos* of the piece moves in and out of an improvisatory feeling, like the *head-solo-head* of Jazz Vocabulary. And the triplet figures that function as an *idée fixe* throughout this piece are a brilliant evocation of a key aspect of Jenkins' soloing.

⁵ Sachs, Curt. *The Wellsprings of Music*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962, pg. 51.

Popping between the Layers

Venus & Jupiter (2012)

*Venus with Jupiter or Venus against? Opposition, resonance, interlock.*⁶

Venus & Jupiter is a particularly successful example of Elliott's complicating the relationship between his "Social Music"—Open Form pieces meant to be played by musicians conversant with some kind of shared vocabulary that relates to group improvisation—and his fully-notated work. In its relentless, driving, throbbing nature, *Venus & Jupiter* evokes Sharp's 1998 masterpiece of structured group improvisation, *SyndaKit*. On this recording, Elliott occasionally jumps in, performing a guitar part that functions somewhat like a continuo in Baroque music. Unscored, but dependent on a moment-to-moment engagement with the written score.

Also, several pages of the score utilize a unique form of notation:

*An image from the score is processed, using modulation, feedback, and filters to shape the extrapolations of the players. I ask the players when playing the graphic section to proceed from the preceding notated parts and advance to the next notated section, keeping in mind the implied rhythms, contours, and densities of the graphic, but not to deviate too much (just enough!) from the narrative arc.*⁷

Venus & Jupiter benefits from a remarkable performance, where some of New York's most creative musicians demonstrate that they are right on board with Elliott Sharp's unique sense of gesture and rhythm, where *you build up a certain sound—some activity* but this is then inevitably followed by that trademark *disruption of flow to create a new flow*.

The notion of disruption

*Mathematics and the various sciences are just ordered ways of looking at and analyzing all of the raw data supplied by the universe. It's all about mappings and correspondences. At the same time, my work often takes a speculative and irrational/intuitive approach. It includes both the ordered and rational, the intuitive and irrational, and the acoustics of the ear.*⁸

As *Venus & Jupiter* flows into its exhilarating conclusion, we come to the end of this—necessarily incomplete—overview of some of Sharp's recent chamber music. We may well be living in a decaying industrial world, but there is cause for optimism in noting that, well into his seventh decade (!), Elliott Sharp is *flourishing*—as prolific and more committed than ever to his unique vision.

—Anthony Coleman

(All quotes are taken from an Elliott Sharp interview by Anthony Coleman, taped March 23, 2016—except where noted.)

Composer/pianist Anthony Coleman has recorded fifteen CDs under his own name, and he has played on more than 150 others. He has been a member of the faculty of the New England Conservatory since 2006.

⁶ Elliott Sharp, *some notes*, email Jan. 30, 2016.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Elliott Sharp interview with Mike McGonigal, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2582/elliott-sharp>

Elliott Sharp (born 1951) leads the projects SysOrk, Orchestra Carbon, Terraplane, and Tectonics and has pioneered the use of fractal geometry, chaos theory, and genetics in musical composition and interaction. Sharp's opera *Port Bou* premiered in October 2014 at Issue Project Room and his suite *Tribute:MLK Berlin '64* opened the 2014 Berlin Jazz Festival. His *Storm of the Eye* appears on violinist Hilary Hahn's 2014 Grammy-winning album *In 27 Pieces* and *Turing Test* for the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart was premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2012. Issue Project Room commissioned him to compose *Occam's Razor* for double string-quartet for his birthday marathon *E# @ 60* in 2011. In 2010, Sharp directed, wrote, and composed *About Us*, a sci-fi opera for all-teenage performers at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich. He has been featured at such festivals as New Music Stockholm, Darmstadt, Donaueschingen, and Au Printemps. Sharp is the subject of the documentary film *Doing the Don't*.

Sharp was awarded the Berlin Prize for Music Composition for 2015, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2014, and a Fellowship from the Center for Transformative Media in 2014. In 2015, he was awarded the Jahrespreis from der Deutscher Schallplatten Kritiks for *Terraplane:4AM Always*, and the Preis in 2008 for the solo CD *Concert In Dachau* and in 2004 for the orchestral CD *Racing Hearts, Tessalation Row, Calling*. In 2003, he received a Fellowship from the Foundation For Contemporary Art.

His many collaborators have included Radio-Sinfonie Frankfurt, Debbie Harry, Ensemble Modern, *qawaali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, blues legends Hubert Sumlin and Pops Staples, Cecil Taylor, multimedia artist Christian Marclay, and Bachir Attar, leader of the Master Musicians of Jahjouka. Sharp's audio installations include *Fluvial*, a multi-channel audiowork; *Chromatine*, an interactive string sculpture; and *Tag*, an interactive audiowork. *Cryptid Fragments* was included in the Bitstreams show at the Whitney Museum, 2001.

Comprising violinists Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld, violist John Pickford Richards, and cellist Kevin McFarland, **JACK** is focused on new work, leading them to collaborate with composers John Luther Adams, Chaya Czernowin, Caroline Shaw, Helmut Lachenmann, and Steve Reich. Upcoming and recent premieres include works by Cenk Ergün, Roger Reynolds, and Georg Friedrich Haas. The recipient of New Music USA's Trailblazer Award and the CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, JACK has performed to critical acclaim at Carnegie Hall, IRCAM, Kölner Philharmonie, the Lucerne Festival, La Biennale di Venezia, Suntory Hall, Bali Arts Festival, Festival Internacional Cervatino, and Teatro Colón.

New York City-based **New Thread Quartet** was formed with the mission to develop and perform impactful new music for the saxophone. In four seasons, the quartet has commissioned and premiered fourteen new works by such composers as Richard Carrick, Ben Hjertmann, and Kathryn Salfelder, with upcoming commissions from Scott Wollschleger, Ryan Pratt, and Max Grafe. Comprised of Geoffrey Landman, Kristen McKeon, Erin Rogers, and Zach Herchen, New Thread has performed at Carnegie Hall, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Bang on a Can Summer Festival Benefit, and Monadnock Music, and has performed or recorded more than thirty important works for saxophone quartet.

Winner of the 2015 CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, **Either/Or** is a flexible chamber ensemble based in New York City that presents new and recent chamber music informed equally by American Experimentalism and European avant-garde practice, with special emphasis on artists outside the mainstream and on works exploring nontraditional ensemble formations. Directors Richard Carrick (conductor/piano) and David Shively (percussion/cimbalom) curate its programming and draw on a collective of seventeen soloists and guests to realize each project. Since its founding in 2004, Either/Or has premiered more than a hundred works and recorded for labels such as New Focus, New World, Starkland, and Sterling Classics.

Rachel Golub is a violinist, vocalist, string arranger, and session player performing with artists ranging from Sting and Lady Gaga to Jay-Z, Iggy Pop, Andrea Bocelli, and Suzanne Vega. As an arranger and session artist, her performances can be heard on recordings with Ryuchi Sakamoto, Nancy Magarill, and many others. She also appears on forthcoming records from James Taylor, Billy Porter, Ute Lemper, and Roger Waters. Rachel plays with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, The Metropolitan Opera, and the SEM Ensemble, and other symphonic engagements range from *Star Wars in Concert* to Pierre Huyghe's Antarctic orchestra for *The Journey That Wasn't*.

Jenny Lin's orchestral engagements have included the American Symphony Orchestra, the NDR and SWR orchestras, and Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI. Her concerts have taken her to Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, the Kennedy Center, MoMA, and the National Gallery of Art, and such festivals as Mostly Mozart, BAM's Next Wave, Spoleto/USA, and Kings Place London. Her discography includes more than thirty recordings on Steinway & Sons, Hänssler Classic, eOne, BIS, New World, and Albany Records. Born in Taiwan and raised in Austria, she studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna, Peabody Conservatory, and the Fondazione Internazionale per il pianoforte in Como, Italy.

Clarinetist **Joshua Rubin** is a founding member and the co-Artistic Director of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). He has worked closely with many of the prominent composers of our time, including George Crumb, John Adams, George Lewis, Kaija Saariaho, Magnus Lindberg, and Mario Davidovsky. Recently he has been featured as a soloist with the Seattle Symphony, at the Ojai Music Festival, the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center, and in engagements with the Nagoya Philharmonic Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. He has also given solo performances of new music in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, São Paulo, Rome, and Berlin.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Boreal. Starkland ST-222.

Terraplane: 4AM Always. Yellowbird YEB 7743-2.

Momentum Anomaly. New Atlantis NA-CD-006.

The Age of Carbon. Intakt CD 188.

The Yahoo Trilogy. zOaR ZCD026.

Octal: Books I-III. Clean Feed CFG002CD/ CFG004CD/CFG008CD.

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman (except *Venus & Jupiter*)

Assistant engineer: Jeanne Velonis (except *Venus & Jupiter*)

Venus & Jupiter recorded by Bob Bellerue; produced and mixed by Elliott Sharp.

Homage Leroy Jenkins and *Approaching the Arches of Corti* were recorded on September 1, 2015, and *Tranzience* was recorded on December 14, 2015, all at the Academy of Arts & Letters, New York City. *Venus & Jupiter* was recorded in performance on April 27, 2012 at The Kitchen, New York City.

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

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New World Records, 20 Jay Street, Suite 1001, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Tel (212) 290-1680 Fax (646) 224-9638

E-mail: info@newworldrecords.org

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TRANZIENCE

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1. *Tranzience* (2013) 28:06

JACK Quartet: Chris Otto, violin; Ari Streisfeld, violin; John Pickford Richards, viola; Kevin McFarland, cello

2. *Approaching The Arches of Corti* (1997) 10:05

New Thread Quartet: Geoffrey Landman, Kristen McKeon, Erin Rogers, Zach Herchen, soprano saxophones

3. *Homage Leroy Jenkins* (2008) 9:26

Joshua Rubin, clarinet; Rachel Golub, violin; Jenny Lin, piano

4. *Venus & Jupiter* (2012) 11:45

Either/Or: Stephanie Griffin, viola; Margaret Lancaster, alto flute; Chris McIntyre, trombone; Joshua Rubin, bass clarinet; David Shively, marimba; Alex Waterman, cello; Richard Carrick, piano, conductor; w/Elliott Sharp, electroacoustic guitar

TT: 59:49