

It is obvious that the time-honored medium of the string quartet will never become a relic of the past. The evolution of the string quartet repertory has accelerated during the last half of the twentieth century and beyond as composers from both the mainstream and the avant-garde have mined its seemingly inexhaustible creative resources. This CD features the virtually unprecedented combination of string quartet and percussion. It contains three works by prominent American experimentalist composers from several generations exploring the ensemble's unique sonic resources in diverse stylistic settings, each with its own original approach to musical form.

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In a lecture entitled “Little Bangs: Towards a Nihilist Theory of Improvisation,” composer/pianist Frederic Rzewski tells the story of an encounter he had in 1968 with the legendary soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy. Rzewski asked Lacy to describe the difference between composition and improvisation in only fifteen seconds, to which Lacy replied, “In fifteen seconds, the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to think about what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have only fifteen seconds.”<sup>1</sup> Rzewski goes on to explain that improvisation is more than “real-time” composition, as Lacy’s description implies. The differences between the two modes of expression go beyond duration. Composition, he writes, “is the result of an editing process in which one’s impulses are passed through the critical filter of the conscious mind: Only the ‘good’ ideas are allowed to pass through,” while in improvisation “ideas are allowed to express themselves without having to pass this test, somehow avoiding the critical filter of the conscious mind.”<sup>2</sup> That improvisation, in Rzewski’s view, avoids a “critical filter” does not mean that it is less rigorous than composed music. Quite to the contrary, improvisation taps into a mysterious, ecstatic form of creative energy, allowing musical universes to emerge spontaneously from moment to moment as a series of “little bangs,” as Rzewski describes them, drawing an analogy to the creation of the physical universe as a single “Big Bang.”

Rzewski’s contribution to the development of “free improvisation”—a term with associations to concurrent political and social currents such as “freedom rides,” “free love,” and “free speech”—began in the 1960s. In 1964 he performed with Franco Evangelisti’s Gruppo d’Improvisazione “Nuova Consonanza,” an ensemble based in Rome and several years later founded Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV), along with Alvin Curran, Richard Teitelbaum, Allan Bryant, John Phetteplace, and Ivan Vandor. (New World Records 80494, *Musica Elettronica Viva—MEV40*, a four-CD box set documents four decades of MEV’s music.) Improvisation remains an essential part of Rzewski’s musical life. He continues to play with MEV, has performed masterful improvised cadenzas in Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” and “Appassionata” sonatas, and has merged improvisation with his written music. He has also composed “written out improvisations,” such as *Ludes* (1990–91), two books of short pieces for piano, which “apply the techniques of improvising to writing itself.”

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Rzewski, “Little Bangs: Towards a Nihilist Theory of Improvisation,” in *Nonsequiturs: Writings and Lectures on Improvisation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Cologne: Edition Musiktexte, 2007), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., p. 52.

*Whimwhams* for marimba and string quartet (1993) develops “Stravinsky’s idea of composition as improvisation without a pen.”<sup>3</sup> A “whim-wham” is a “fanciful or fantastic notion or object.” In *Whimwhams* the “fanciful” occurs within a pre-conceived formal design. Much like the rhythmic structures John Cage employed in his percussion music and works for prepared piano, form in *Whimwhams* occurs on two levels: eleven sections, each divided into eleven, eleven-beat subsections.<sup>4</sup> Rzewski points out that at a metronomic marking of 112 beats per minute, each of the 121 small subsections has a duration of six seconds. The eleven large sections are arranged symmetrically: the sixth section, a solo for the percussionist who is instructed to “play on four different instruments (not musical instruments, e.g., tables, chairs or pieces of junk),” is preceded and followed by five sections.

The formal structure in *Whimwhams* provides time units, “empty containers” for the free play of the composer’s imagination, which yield striking successions of musical moments, each with its own distinctive identity. Yet, *Whimwhams* is not merely the accumulation of 121 six-second contrasting “riffs.” An attentive listener will encounter musical ideas, which return in altered form, giving the work a certain sense of coherence, a magical quality absent from more rational, thought-out composed music. As Rzewski puts it: “A work of art can make sense without being rational. In fact, the success of a work of art may depend on its defiance of the rules of syntax. . . . The inside of the mind is a jungle in which order and disorder coexist in playful struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

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James Tenney, arguably one of the most distinguished post-Cagean American experimentalist composers, was also a brilliant pianist known for legendary performances of Charles Ives’s *Concord Sonata* and John Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48) and a founding member, conductor, and pianist for the New York–based Tone Roads Chamber Ensemble. As a composer and as a music theorist Tenney created musical works noteworthy for their conceptual elegance and beauty as well as path-breaking theoretical writings of extraordinary intellectual rigor. For Tenney, music was not a means to express human emotions, but to explore the nature of sound. He pursued this latter project along diverse trajectories. Working with Max Matthews at Bell Labs he contributed to the early development of computer music and created works such as *Ergodos I* and *Analog #1 (Noise Study)*, now considered classics in the repertory of electroacoustic music. His seminal treatise *Meta + Hodos* laid the groundwork for subsequent investigations into the nature of musical perception and cognition. His innovative theories of intonation and pitch space not only led to compositions such as *Bridges* (1982–84) for two pianos, eight hands, and *Changes* (1985) for six harps, but also place him within a long historical lineage of theoretical investigations by Leonhard Euler, Hugo Riemann, Arthur von Oettingen, Herman von Helmholtz, Arnold Schoenberg, David Lewin, and Fred Lerdahl. Tenney’s theories were inexorably linked to his compositional practices. Following Cage, who defines experimental music in terms of “an activity the outcome of which is unknown,” his compositions were designed to explore the ramifications of his theoretical speculations and invariably involved exploring the thresholds of human perception.

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<sup>3</sup> Rzewski, “Program Notes,” *Nonsequiturs*, pp. 512 and 526.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., p. 526.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., “Inner Voices: In Search of a more Spontaneous Form of Writing,” *Nonsequiturs*, p. 80.

Tenney, as did Cage, also sought to remove himself from the compositional process:

My interest in my music relates to my interest in any other music, and other music doesn't have me in it. I'm interested in music as an objective thing out there, which is hopefully attractive to us, something we want to go and hear because it provides some kind of special experience that can't be gained any other way. But it's not a self-expressive process.<sup>6</sup>

Tenney's rejection of music's emotive qualities led to his work with what he called "ergodic form," a form devoid of drama and rhetoric which, according to Tenney, "will always and inevitably be the result when the range of possibilities (with respect to the sound-elements in a piece, and their characteristics) is given at the outset of the compositional process, and remains unchanged during the realization of the work."<sup>7</sup> He achieved this goal through algorithmic composition and stochastic processes, which for Tenney were constrained random procedures.

Given Tenney's predilection for process-oriented composition and ergodic form, his interest in canonical forms is not surprising. Canons employ a simple mechanical procedure and have a formal consistency devoid of dramatic content. Quite a few of Tenney's compositions use canonical forms, such as his *Spectral CANON for CONLON Nancarrow* (1974), *Three Pieces for Drum Quartet* (1974), *Chromatic Canon* (1980), *Two Koans and a Canon* (1982), and *Cognate Canons* (1993) for string quartet and percussion.

Tenney's interest in the music of Conlon Nancarrow dates back to the early 1970s. His *Spectral CANON for CONLON Nancarrow*, written for harmonic player piano, was completed in 1974 with Nancarrow's help and three years later Tenney authored one of the first studies of Nancarrow's music.<sup>8</sup> Tenney's *Cognate Canons* was also dedicated to Nancarrow. The canons occur between the percussion and the string quartet. The durations of the two canonic "voices" are related by a series of proportions, creating the effect of simultaneous tempi, which Nancarrow used in his player piano music. For example, the percussion part opens the composition with durations consisting of 28, 20, and 28 sixteenth notes. The string quartet enters in the sixth measure with durations of 21, 15, and 21 sixteenth notes. The proportional relationship between the parts is thus 4:3. Each of the work's thirteen canons uses its own proportion. The repetitions both within and between the two parts (which include statements of individual musical gestures within each voice in retrograde) create a static, timeless atmosphere.

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Zeena Parkins is a composer, improviser, educator, sound artist, multi-instrumentalist, and pioneer of contemporary harp practice. As a composer she is interested in articulating musical ideas and relationships with both traditional scoring and unusual scoring tactics, working with combinations of acoustic and electronic instruments and acousmatic sounds, often dispersed in multi-channel environments.

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<sup>6</sup> Ciarán Maher "James Tenney on Intention, Harmony, and Phenomenology—A Different View of the Larger Picture," *MusicWorks* 77 (2000), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> James Tenney, "John Cage and the Theory of Harmony," reprinted in *Writings about John Cage*, ed., Richard Kostelanetz (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University Press of Michigan, 1996), p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> "Conlon Nancarrow's Studies for Player Piano," *Conlon Nancarrow: Selected Studies for Player Piano*, ed., Peter Garland (Berkeley, CA: Soundings Press, 1977).

Parkins arrived in New York City in the mid-eighties at a time when an exciting East Village experimental arts scene was gaining momentum. She was a member of Skeleton Crew, the legendary experimental rock band formed by Fred Frith and Tom Cora. She joined the original group of musicians who performed in *Cobra*, John Zorn's path-breaking "game piece" and participated in many of the early "conductions," directed improvisations devised by the late Butch Morris. Parkins was a founding member (along with Chris Cochrane with whom she formed the band No Safety and a collective of other like-minded improvisers) of Amica Bunker, an alternative performance space located on East Ninth Street. She also began collaborating with Jennifer Monson, John Jasperse, Jennifer Lacy, and DD Dorvillier, dancer/choreographers developing new dance forms, who shared her interests in improvisation. They began their work together in the infamous Music/Dance research workshop that met Saturday mornings at P.S. 122.

Parkins describes *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:i:n:g*, composed for the Eclipse Quartet and new-music percussion virtuoso William Winant, as follows:

Flickering sound and shifting colors subvert the linear. *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:i:n:g* is composed of ten movements, evolving things, and *objets sonores* that acquire a modulated presence through accumulation. Resonance piles up and is dispersed by the "scatterers" as they journey within conditions of motion and stasis. The title refers to these acts of collection, disruption, and dispersal that occur over and over again throughout the work creating a landscape of diversion.

One of the inspirations for *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:i:n:g* was lighting at a KTL (Stephen O'Mallery and Peter Rehberg) performance in the Knitting Factory featuring a series of superimposed cone-shaped beams emitted from a single point of concentration and spreading out. The idea of a focal point transforming into a dispersed field and the reverse underlies the work's form on both small and large scales. *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:i:n:g* begins with tones played on a metallophone built for Lou Harrison, which he used to demonstrate just intonation. As Winant gradually plays the scale, starting with a low "D" up into the instrument's high register, the tones and their partials interact, transforming the resonating pure tones into a chaotic almost "electronic" sound. This process of saturation and disruption or "scattering" occurs throughout the composition and creates a sense of formal coherence despite the juxtaposition of contrasting sections.

Growing out of a collaboration with DD Dorvillier in 2009 on a piece called *Choreography, a Prologue for the Apocalypse of Understanding, Get Ready!*, which explores perception through language and sensuality including correspondences between physical properties of light and sound, *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:i:n:g* contains three color sections: "Cyan," "Yellow," and "Magenta." A section entitled "Cyan" articulates its own "scattering" process, this time in reverse. White noise, which in the work's live version whirls around the concert space via a spinning Max patch designed by Matthew Ostrowski, slows down to focus on a single point in the space, transformed into sustained pitches with frequencies approximating the wavelengths of green and blue, components of the color cyan. The strings accompany the drone, and then burst into a noisy improvisation. A rhythmic, composed section featuring the marimba played with shaker mallets abruptly follows, "clearing the air" with new material, which in turn is interrupted by a movement with pitch material spread across several octaves, which awkwardly weaves together and finally converges into a new cluster/drone.

“Yellow” adheres to the same format as “Cyan,” with a drone approximating its wavelength. In addition to the white noise, drone, and string improvisations it also features sampled “stuttering,” one of several “vocal utterances” (moaning, groaning, stuttering, whistling, whispering, and teeth chattering), scattered throughout the work, invoking a corporeal intimacy—a connection to the body and a reminder of the physicality and the sensuality of sound. The Lou Harrison instrument returns in “Magenta,” initiating the work’s reprise. The format is the same: white noise once again transforms into a cluster with frequencies corresponding to the appropriate color components. The subsequent composed section, “scattered” both registrally and rhythmically, eventually reaches a focal point. The pure tones return at the very end of the composition, concluding with a final electronic-sounding, shimmering wave dissipating into the air.

—David W. Bernstein

*David Bernstein is Professor of Music at Mills College. His publications include books and essays on John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, the San Francisco Tape Music Center, Frederic Rzewski, Arnold Schoenberg, and the history of music theory.*

**Zeena Parkins** (born 1956), multi-instrumentalist/composer/improviser, pioneer of contemporary harp practice and performance, re-imagines the instrument as a “sound machine of limitless capacity.” Inspired and connected to visual arts, dance, film, and history, she follows a unique path in creating her compositional works and unusual scores. Through blending, morphing, reconfiguring of both real and imagined instruments and drawing from extra-musical sources for formal constructions, as well as utilizing multi-speaker environments, she remains in process with sound as material and music, engaged in translations of sonic states.

Parkins has a strong commitment to making scores for dance and continues to re-evaluate the nature and issues of the body’s imprint on sound and sound’s imprint on movement. She has received three Bessie Awards for her extraordinary work in music within the dance and performance field in the United States and abroad for more than two decades. Collaborators include Fred Frith, Björk, Ikue Mori, Dame Evelyn Glennie, Maja Ratkje, John Zorn, Butch Morris, Chris Cutler, Elliott Sharp, Nels Cline, Anthony Braxton, Bobby Previte, Pauline Oliveros, Yoko Ono, Christian Marclay, Matmos, Yasunao Tone, Kim Gordon, Lee Ranaldo and Thurston Moore. Commissions include works for the Whitney Museum of Art, Tate Modern, Donaueschingen, SWR, Roulette, Montalvo Art Center, the Eclipse Quartet, the Either/Or Ensemble, Ensemble SON, Bang on a Can/Spit Orchestra, NeXtworks Ensemble and Merce Cunningham.

**Frederic Rzewski** (born Westfield, Massachusetts, 1938) studied music first with Charles Mackey of Springfield, and subsequently with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt at Harvard and Princeton universities. He went to Italy in 1960, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and met Severino Gazzelloni, with whom he performed in a number of concerts, thus beginning a career as a performer of new piano music. His friendship with Christian Wolff and David Behrman, and his acquaintance with John Cage and David Tudor, influenced his development in both composition and performance.

In Rome in the mid-sixties, together with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, he formed the MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva) group, which quickly became known for its pioneering work in live electronics and improvisation. Bringing together both classical and jazz avant-gardists, MEV developed an esthetic of music as a spontaneous collective process.

During the seventies he experimented further with forms in which style and language are treated as structural elements; the best-known work of this period is *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, a 50-minute set of piano variations. A number of pieces for larger ensembles written between 1979 and 1981 show a return to experimental and graphic notation, while much of the work of the eighties explores new ways of using twelve-tone technique. A freer, more spontaneous approach to writing can be found in more recent work. Since 1983, he has been Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium.

A performer as well as a composer and theorist, **James Tenney** (1934–2006) 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. His teachers and mentors included Eduard Steuermann, Chou Wen-Chung, Lionel Nowak, Carl Ruggles, Lejaren Hiller, Kenneth Gaburo, Edgard Varèse, Harry Partch, and John Cage. He wrote 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).

The **Eclipse Quartet** is dedicated to the music of twentieth-century and present-day composers. Their repertoire spans works from John Cage and Morton Subotnick to collaborations with the singers Beck and Caetano Veloso. The Quartet has performed frequently on both coasts and has participated in festivals such as the Festival for New American Music, the Look and Listen Festival, the Scarlatti Festival in Naples, Italy, the Martha's Vineyard Chamber Music Festival, and the Angel City Jazz Festival in Los Angeles.

The repertoire of Eclipse contains diverse works by Roger Reynolds, Julia Wolfe, Ben Johnston, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Annie Gosfield, Steve Reich, Fred Frith, Philip Glass, and Lois V Vierk. They have premiered new works by Zeena Parkins, Carla Kihlstedt, Justin Haynes, Gernot Wolfgang, Stephen Cohn, and David Jaffe. Eclipse has recorded the string quartets of Zeena Parkins for the Tzadik label and Morton Feldman's *Piano and String Quartet* with pianist Vicki Ray on Bridge Records. Eclipse was the recipient of an Aaron Copland Fund for Music Recording Grant in 2011. The Eclipse Quartet has been Artist in Residence at Mills College in Oakland, California since 2009.

**William Winant**, percussion, has performed with some of the most innovative and creative musicians of our time, including Iannis Xenakis, Frank Zappa, Joan LaBarbara, Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, Sonic Youth, Mr. Bungle, and John Zorn. For many years he worked with composer Lou Harrison, and in March of 1997 he participated in the world premiere of Lou Harrison's quintet *Rhymes with Silver* featuring cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the Mark Morris Dance Group. He has premiered many works written specifically for him, by such composers as John

Cage, Christian Wolff, Zeena Parkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Alvin Lucier, Terry Riley, Fred Frith, Frederic Rzewski, and Wadada Leo Smith. Winant has been featured as a guest artist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (under the direction of Pierre Boulez), the San Francisco Symphony, and at the Monterey Jazz Festival, the Salzburg Festival, Lincoln Center, Melt Down Festival, Royal Festival Hall, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. [www.williamwinant.com](http://www.williamwinant.com)

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### **Zeena Parkins**

*The Adorables*. Zeena Parkins and The Adorables. Cryptogramophone CG147.

*Between The Whiles: Music for Harps*. Table of The Elements TOE 110CD.

*Double Dupe Down: Music for Film*. Tzadik 7522.

*Necklace*. Tzadik 8022.

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*Trouble in Paradise*. Phantom Orchard Orchestra. Tzadik 7728.

### **Frederic Rzewski**

*A Decade: Zeitgeist Plays Rzewski*. Includes *Spots*, *Wails*, *The Lost Melody*, and *Crusoe*. Zeitgeist. ODiscs 15.

*Antigone-Legend* and *Jefferson*. Carol Plantamura, soprano; Frederic Rzewski, piano. New World/CRI NWCR 747.

*Main Drag*. Includes *Attica* and *Coming Together*. Alter Ego. Stradivarius 33631.

*Moonrise with Memories*. David Taylor, bass trombone. New World Records 80494-2.

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated*. Ursula Oppens, piano. Vanguard Classics 8056.

*Rzewski Plays Rzewski: Piano Works 1975–1999*. Includes *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, *North American Ballads for Piano*, *Mayn Yingele*, *Fantasia for Piano*, *Sonata for Piano*, *The Road*, *De Profundis*, and *Fougues*. Nonesuch 79623 (7 CDs).

*Rzewski Plays Rzewski: The People United Will Never Be Defeated*. VAI 4440. (DVD)

### **James Tenney**

*Forms 1–4*. MusikFabrik. hat[now]ART 2-127.

*Melody, Ergodicity and Indeterminacy*. The Barton Workshop, James Fulkerson and Frank Denyer, directors. Mode Records 185.

*Music for Violin and Piano*. M. Sabat, violin; S. Clarke, piano. hat[now]ART 120.

*Postal Pieces*. The Barton Workshop, James Fulkerson, music director. New World Records 80612-2 [2CDs].

*Selected Works 1961–1969*. New World Records 80570-2.

*The Solo Works for Percussion*. M. Kaul, percussion. hat[now]ART 111.

*Seegersong #2*. Margaret Lancaster, flute. New World Records 80665-2.

*Spectral CANON for CONLON Nancarrow*. Cold Blue Music CB 0008.

*The Spectrum Pieces*. The Barton Workshop, James Fulkerson, music director. New World Records 80692-2 [2 CDs].

Producer: Jeff Gauthier

Engineer: Les Stuck

Recorded July 6 and 7, 2012 and December 20, 22, and 31, 2012 in the Jeannik Méquet Littlefield Concert Hall, Mills College, Oakland, California.

*Whimwhams* and *Cognate Canons* mixed and edited by Jeff Gauthier at Goatpark Studios, Claremont, CA. *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:r:i:n:g* mixed and edited by Quentin Chiapetta and Zeena Parkins at Medianoise in Brooklyn, NY. Additional mixing by Rich Breen.

Vocals on *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:r:i:n:g* by DD Dorvillier, Heather Kravas, Elizabeth Ward, and Amanda Pina.

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

Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc):

Photo credits:

Design: Jim Fox

*Whimwhams* is published by Sound Pool Music (BMI). *Cognate Canons* is published by Smith Publications. *s:c:a:t:t:e:r:r:i:n:g* is published by Eye of Night (ASCAP).

**This recording was made possible by grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.**

Eclipse Quartet would like to thank Mills College, Jeff Gauthier, Zeena Parkins, William Winant, Frederic Rzewski, Les Stuck, Jim Fox, Heidi Lesemann, Lucy Walters-Maneri, David Bernstein, Ned Zeman, Jason Heath, Nick Terry, Lauren Pratt, Rich Breen, Nels Cline, Joseph Walker, Nancy Meli Walker, Melissa Karaban, Maggi Payne, Steed Cowart, David Witham, and our friends and families.

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ZEENA PARKINS, FREDERIC RZEWSKI, JAMES TENNEY

ECLIPSE QUARTET:

SARA PARKINS, VIOLIN; SARAH THORNBLADE, VIOLIN; ALMA LISA FERNANDEZ, VIOLA; MAGGIE PARKINS, CELLO  
WITH WILLIAM WINANT, PERCUSSION

80740-2

1. Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938)

*Whimwhams* (1993) 13:57

marimba and string quartet

2. James Tenney (1934–2006)

*Cognate Canons* (1993) 23:09

string quartet and percussion

3. by Zeena Parkins (b. 1956)

*s:c:a:t:t:e:r:r:i:n:g* (2012) 25:22

string quartet, marimba, tom toms, snare, Lou Harrison bell instrument, chimes, various metal percussion and spinning samples

TT: 62:35