

To live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it.

Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

For nearly fifty years the work of Alvin Lucier has marked off a space unlike any other in American music. By now a hero to three generations of experimentalists, Lucier continues to make work at a brisk pace, finding new, surprising and radical approaches to the same artistic concerns. His subject is the human as listener, and his music can be understood as a detailed, exhaustive investigation into the complexities of the act of listening. The results are often uncanny, but the approach is through the familiar and the ordinary; and the production is invariably of rare composerly discipline and exactness of execution.

Lucier is one of the very few of his generation whose work has entered the collective consciousness of American culture; and it has done so both as a set of ideas, testing the definitions of music at a particular point in history, and as ravishing sound experiences, unforgettable to listeners who have properly heard them. A work like *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) is as thought-provoking as Cage's *4:33*; yet more than philosophical challenge or pure process to be extrapolated from its self-reflexive instruction score, it is a work in sound as awe-inspiring as one of Feldman's late epics.

In the first phase of Lucier's output, the works of the '60s and '70s, the components of traditional concert music are excluded, even the venue of the concert hall. These are works for informal or neutral spaces—galleries, or gathering places of whatever purpose—and the instruments deployed suggest a very broad definition of instrument: microphones and tape recorders, EEG machines, portable resonant vessels, signal devices, sound reinforcement equipment, and rooms themselves; not the instruments of the orchestra. The scores tend to be carefully-worded text scores, sometimes including drawings and schematics; some scores seem to engage the very act of reading them, and the performance of memory or imagination on the part of the reader. By avoiding the milieu and the materials of concert music, Lucier seems to signal that the ingrained, conditioned ways of listening set in motion by the concert experience do not apply to his music. Personal expression, expressive gesture, and sound as a rhetorical system take music away from its underlying actuality, the behavior of sound itself. Lucier's early work excludes musical gesture and overt expression in favor of an unparalleled sensitivity to the nuances of sound as it is found in our world. Room acoustics, standing waves and reflections, the physical fact of *wavelength* as opposed to *frequency*, and the limits of our ability to perceive all of this, stand revealed as objects to be contemplated on their own.

Only in the 1980s, in response to requests from performers, does Lucier begin to reintroduce the instruments of the European tradition into his music, moving gradually from circuitry, studio, and gallery practice back to staff notation and the concert hall. Miraculously, the focus on acoustics and perception survived the move completely intact; and to the idea world which his music already investigated, another, enormously provocative idea was added: that of European concert music. In much of the work since then, a dual engagement is at play beneath the surface: acoustics and perception are addressed via the discipline and instrumentarium of European classical music; and European classical music, with all its appurtenances, is beheld through the lens of acoustical physics and simple human awareness. It has been Lucier's project to capture,

reveal, and magnify the details of how ordinary sounds behave when we make music, details which, strangely and sadly, seem to have been overlooked in our society's formulation of what music is meant to be. And in the process, Lucier has effectively invented an art of music subtly and unobtrusively celebrating sound as *a given*.

The three works presented on this album set forth three perspectives on the orchestra, monument of the European concert tradition. In each work we hear unmistakable echoes of the familiar iconography of the orchestra, associations with the past that are the bearers of complex meanings. Yet in a kind of tandem reality, sound itself pushes forward, bringing us back to the present, to our immediate presence as listeners, and to meanings independent of association. The world construed as what is known, as a set of received notions, is gently put in question; another world, the one we live in moment to moment, is briefly illuminated.

One premise of *Diamonds for 1, 2, or 3 Orchestras* (1999), is that imagined graphic shapes can be traced by gradual pitch change in performance. If the string players in an orchestra are divided such that, starting from unison, some sweep upwards while others sweep simultaneously downwards, their slow glissandi halting and reversing direction at a mid-point, then returning symmetrically to the initial unison, the sound will have followed the path of a diamond drawn from left to right. Lucier poetically conceives this as “drawing diamond shapes in the air.” Sound as diagrammatic figuration appears regularly in Lucier's recent music; the shapes vary widely, from the initials of a performer's name (conceived as shapes, not simply spelled as note names) to Carlo Scarpa's image of intersecting circles for the Brion Tomb to the visual pattern of a barbecue grill. The embedding of non-musical information in music has taken many forms—encrypted names and numbers, mimetic representation, program music, film soundtracks—but Lucier's take on the notion stands apart. Locating the drawing in the air, in the space of listening, rather than as a graphic feature of the score or as an illustration of the meaning of a text, he weights the experience unmistakably toward sound and away from image.

In fact, there is little correspondence between the heard music and the posited image. The listener, knowing that diamond shapes are invoked, will note the directions of the sweeps and may identify the turning-around point, the apex of the diamond shape. But because the images are being drawn very slowly, the listener inevitably is absorbed in the ongoing articulation of the sound, its present and its becoming. An overview of the diamond shape is not made available, only its moment-to-moment drawing. And the experience is vastly complicated by the compositional richness of the work's other features. Three diamonds are in fact being drawn, slightly asynchronized with one another, by three separate orchestras lined up across one stage. The sweeps of the string instruments are intersected by intermittent sustained tones from wind instruments and repeating percussion, visualizable as horizontal lines crossing into the shape made by the strings. The sustaining of these tones causes clearly audible acoustical beating that is in a constant state of slowing down or speeding up depending on the changing distance between sliding pitch and sustaining pitch. These layered differentials of off-set glissandi, and of glissandi constantly coming into phase and going out of phase with unchanging wind and percussion tones, bring about an overwhelmingly complex network of continuously changing acoustical details. Sensory experience confounds any attempt to assimilate the immediate causes of what is happening.

Thus the premise of *Diamonds*, ultimately, is not the tracing of a shape, but the framing of the incommensurable. The shape functions as a leverage point from which to launch a listening experience. The act of the performers placing pitch in motion with utmost concentration and obvious intention materializes the abstraction of the drawing as human doing, as a more primal drawing, with its multiple meanings of pulling, extracting, and prolonging. The shape is neutral, ordinary, even banal. Its activation in sound yields something in fact jewel-like, a brilliance utterly at odds with the schematic simplicity of its two-dimensional form.

A clear procedure defines the form of *Slices* for cello and orchestra (2007). The full range of the cello, arrayed as a 53-note chromatic scale from the low open C string to the high E above the treble staff, is sounded as a sustained cluster by the 53 musicians of the orchestra, each assigned one of the 53 notes, appropriate to register. Thus the lowest C is held by the tuba, the next lowest notes by contrabasses, then cellos, trombones, bassoons etc., and on up to clarinets, oboes, and flutes at the highest notes. Only sustaining instruments are used, and their sustaining is soft but as continuous as possible (short breaths are allowed in the wind instruments). Against this splayed background, the entire potential ambitus of the cello unfolded like an enormous fan, the solo cello articulates a melodic sequence of the cluster in a measured and moderate pacing. With each note that the solo cello sounds, the corresponding orchestral musician holding that note falls silent; and as the 53-note sequence is traversed, the sustained cluster is erased, note by note, finally reaching complete silence. At this point the solo cello begins a different melodic ordering of the 53 notes, and with the sounding of each new note the corresponding orchestral musician begins again, re-inscribing what had been erased until the complete 53-note cluster is again present. This process of alternately erasing and re-inscribing is repeated seven times in all, each time in a different melodic ordering, such that at the end of the seventh sequence the work ends in silence.

Lucier approaches the selection of melodic orderings by systematically laying out a wide range of possible orderings, then choosing a handful that dispose the cluster in coherent patterns. The notion of “drawing in the air” is echoed here in wedge and wave shapes scaled by a particular interval or an alternation of intervals. In the sparse sections when orchestral instruments enter, these patterns give rise to very striking arpeggiations of stacked intervals. In the opposite situations, when orchestral instruments stop, the patterns result in remainder sonorities that Lucier almost certainly did not consciously aim for. In my performance of the solo part I try to use as many natural harmonics as I can, in order to highlight the space of slight difference between the native resonance of the cello, heard through the overtone structure of its open strings, and the unbending rule of the sustaining orchestral instruments in their equal-tempered chromaticism. It is hard not to be reminded of the work of the acolyte, snuffing out 53 candles, lighting them again in a different pattern, snuffing them out again, and so on, until they have been snuffed out a last time.

The orchestra is reconceived as a virtual cello, or as a resonating chamber calibrated exactly to the frequencies that here define the cello. A 53-note chromatic cluster in mixed orchestral instruments is a very complex sound indeed, conforming to none of the sonic expectations we have of orchestras or orchestral instruments. Barring advance knowledge, one would be hard-pressed to identify the source of this sound as a symphony orchestra. And the listener who accepts and yields to the experience of the sound as unattributable may succeed in sustaining a state of not-knowing, not-identifying, throughout the piece, even when only a handful of

instruments are playing with the cello. Without extended techniques, without processing or distortion, even without amplification, Lucier has made of the acoustic sound from traditional instruments a site of perceptual uncertainty, defamiliarization, and discovery.

For the present performance the instruments of the orchestra were recorded individually and multi-tracked in order to achieve maximal clarity of timbre and balance. Although they played alone, the musicians were seated at locations on the stage that correspond to that instrument's spot in the traditional seating arrangement of the symphony orchestra. The recordings were made in the Conrad Prebys Concert Hall at U.C. San Diego, the last auditorium designed by legendary acoustician Dr. Cyril Harris. During the sessions, the experience of listening to only one tone at a time, in long durations, from a wide variety of instruments over a period of days, proved to be a case study in the remarkable acoustical complexity of what we casually think of as "a single note."

Chambers (1968) is the work of Lucier's which declares that a resonant vessel, even a small and portable one, is a medium of music. His very next work, *Vespers* (1968), applies the same logic to the room occupied by performers and listeners, making of this a resonant instrument which performers attune themselves to using echolocation. In later realizations of *Chambers* Lucier combines these inside-outside perspectives, conflating acoustical spaces by playing recordings from a particular acoustical environment—a train station, for example—through small vessels such as a teapot or thimble. The acoustical signature of the thimble superimposes itself on that of the train station, and vice versa.

I Am Sitting in a Room (1970) conflates an acoustical space with itself, as illogical as this may sound. Speech is recorded and then serially re-recorded so that the acoustical traces of the room that are at first only faintly present in the recording are fused again and again with themselves, until they become more prominent than the apparent content of the recording. Little by little the intelligibility of what was spoken is engulfed by the resonant frequency of the room, a sustained harmony that was there all the time, but barely audible.

In 2005, with *Exploration of the House*, Lucier returned to this strategy, applying the process of serial re-recording to a work of Beethoven, *The Consecration of the House* overture. Beethoven's work was composed for the reopening of the Theater in der Josefstadt in Vienna, in 1822. As a theatrical work, it appeals to the listener's ability to imagine a ritual of consecration and a festive opening night. Solemn march music, bustling passagework evoking excited crowds, brass fanfares and the like call up familiar associations, conjuring a ceremony that does not take place, and that no one is actually participating in; the concert tradition relegates listeners to captive observers, separated from the musical activity, sitting still and facing forward.

Lucier divides Beethoven's score into seventeen fragments, inviting the conductor to choose a selection of fragments for a particular performance. A fragment is performed live and recorded; the recording is played back and re-recorded, this recording is played back and re-recorded, and so on, until a point of saturation has been reached whereby the resonant frequencies of the concert hall overtake the source recording. Playback and re-recording occur seamlessly, so that we hear a succession of repetitions transforming before us in real time. Then the next fragment is played live, and the process repeats.

The work is fashioned as an *Exploration*, not a consecration. Lucier is presumably not interested in ritual, or in the sacred or the mystical. He is interested in the space immediately at hand, and the

listener's awareness of being present in that space, whatever space that may be. Beethoven's fictional space recedes as the dimensions of the actual concert hall are called forth, an unmetaphorical and unconditional sound fact. Very possibly a kindred sort of unconcealing of the space of listening can be experienced in the playback of this CD, wherever that may take place.

—Charles Curtis

Alvin Lucier was born in 1931 in Nashua, New Hampshire. He was educated in Nashua public and parochial schools, the Portsmouth Abbey School, Yale, and Brandeis, and spent two years in Rome on a Fulbright Scholarship. From 1962 to 1970 he taught at Brandeis, where he conducted the Brandeis University Chamber Chorus, which devoted much of its time to the performance of new music. In 1966, along with Robert Ashley, David Behrman, and Gordon Mumma, he co-founded the Sonic Arts Union. From 1968 to 2011 he taught at Wesleyan University where he was John Spencer Camp Professor of Music.

Lucier lectures and performs extensively in Asia, Europe, and the United States. He has collaborated with John Ashbery (*Theme*) and Robert Wilson (*Skin, Meat, Bone*). His recent sound installation, *6 Resonant Points Along a Curved Wall*, accompanied Sol LeWitt's enormous sculpture, *Curved Wall*, in Graz, Austria, and in the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University in January 2005. His most recent instrumental works include *Coda Variations*, for six-valve solo tuba; *Twinings*, for cello and piano; *Canon*, commissioned by the Bang on a Can All Stars, and *Music with Missing Parts*, a re-orchestration of Mozart's Requiem, premiered at the Mozarteum, Salzburg in December 2007. In October 2012 *Two Circles*, a chamber work commissioned by the Venice Biennale, was premiered there by the Alter Ego Ensemble. *Reflections/Reflexionen*, a bilingual edition of his scores, interviews, and writings, is available from MusikTexte, Köln. In September 2012 the Wesleyan Press published Lucier's latest book, *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music*. Lucier was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States and received an Honorary Doctorate of Arts from the University of Plymouth, England.

The **Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra** is among the five leading orchestras in the Czech Republic. Since 1997, it has regularly performed new music, including works by John Cage, Maria de Alvear, Morton Feldman, Petr Kotik, Pauline Oliveros, Somei Satoh, Toru Takemitsu, Edgard Varèse, and Christian Wolff. Under the baton of Christian Arming, Petr Kotik, and Zsolt Nagy, the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra triumphed with a program of music for three orchestras at the 1999 Prague Spring Festival and the Warsaw Autumn Festival 2000, in a program including *Gruppen* by Stockhausen; *Diamonds* by Alvin Lucier; *Modules 1, 2, 3* by Earle Brown; and *Nest* by Martin Smolka.

Christian Arming was born in Vienna in 1971 and grew up in Hamburg. From 1992 to 1998 he worked closely with Seiji Ozawa, conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood and the New Japan Philharmonic in Tokyo. At the age of 24 Arming became the youngest conductor of the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra. He went on to become chief conductor of the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra and, starting in 2003, of the New Japan Philharmonic, succeeding Ozawa. He has conducted more than 50 orchestras worldwide, including those in Berlin, Vienna, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Stuttgart, Boston, Cincinnati, and Houston. Christian Arming is currently Music Director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Liège.

Charles Curtis was born in April 1960 in Laguna Beach, California. He studied cello with Harvey Shapiro and Leonard Rose at Juilliard, where he received the Piatigorsky Prize. Upon graduation he was appointed to the faculty of Princeton University. Subsequently he became principal cellist of the NDR Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg. Composers such as La Monte Young, Alvin Lucier, Eliane Radigue, and performance artist Alison Knowles have created works expressly for the distinctive qualities of his cello playing. Since the 1980s Curtis has explored performing in alternative venues, including clubs in the downtown New York music scene. Charles Curtis is currently Professor of Contemporary Music Performance at the University of California, San Diego.

Petr Kotik was born in Prague in 1942. He studied flute at the Prague Conservatory and Academy of Music, and the Music Academy in Vienna. In 1970, he founded the S.E.M. Ensemble and, in 1992, the Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble, which, since its debut in Carnegie Hall, has performed in major venues throughout the world. Throughout his career Kotik has championed the music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Roscoe Mitchell, Alvin Lucier, and Christian Wolff, as well as scores of young and emerging composers. Petr Kotik is the founder and artistic director of the biennial summer institute and festival Ostrava Days, in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

Zsolt Nagy was born in Gyula, Hungary in 1957. He studied conducting at the Ferenc Liszt Academy in Budapest and later became Péter Eötvös's assistant at the Institute for New Music, Karlsruhe. He has been active as an opera and concert conductor since 1987 and in 1999 was appointed chief conductor and musical advisor of the Israel Contemporary Players. He is artistic director of Master Classes for Conductors of the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra and for Young Conductors of New Music in the Jerusalem Music Center. He is currently Professor of Conducting at the Conservatoire National Supérieur in Paris.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Alvin Lucier. Antipic/Sigma Editions ANSI 002.

Clocker. Lovely Music LCD 1019.

Crossings. Lovely Music LCD 1018.

I Am Sitting in a Room. Lovely Music LCD 1013.

Music on a Long Thin Wire. Lovely Music LCD 1011.

Navigations, Small Waves. Mode Records 124.

Panorama. Lovely Music LCD 1012.

Still and Moving Lines of Silence in Families of Hyperbolas. Lovely Music LCD 1015.

Theme. Lovely Music LCD 5011.

Vespers and Other Early Works. New World Records 80604-2.

Wind Shadows. New World Records 80628-2. (2 CDs)

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Producer: Alvin Lucier

Engineer and editing: Tom Erbe (*Slices*)

Diamonds was recorded on August 27, 2001 in the House of Culture, Ostrava, Czech Republic. *Slices* was recorded in the Conrad Prebys Concert Hall at the University of California, San Diego, from May 27–29, 2011. *The Exploration of the House* was recorded live in concert on August 23, 2005, in the House of Culture, Ostrava, Czech Republic.

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ALVIN LUCIER (b. 1931)
ORCHESTRA WORKS

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1. *Diamonds for 1, 2, or 3 Orchestras* (1999) 23:31
for three orchestras

Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra, Christian Arming, Petr Kotik, and Zsolt Nagy, conductors

2. *Slices* (2007) 27:57
for cello and orchestra

Charles Curtis, cello solo; Demarre McGill, flute; Andrea Overturf, oboe; Anthony Burr, clarinet; Valentin Martchev, bassoon; Benjamin Jaber, horn; John Wilds, trumpet; Kyle Covington, trombone; Jonathan Piper, tuba; Jeff Thayer, violin; Jisun Yang, violin; Che-Yen Chen, viola; Yao Zhao, cello; Jeremy Kurtz-Harris, bass

3. *Exploration of the House* (2005) 24:21

Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra, Petr Kotik, conductor

TT: 76:04