

Nicolas Collins
Professor Alvin Lucier -- notes on a notebook
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I met Alvin Lucier at the end of August, 1972, on the second day of my freshman orientation at Wesleyan University. I had arrived from New York City unsure of my long-term goals, but suspecting I would spend a fair amount of time in the Music Department. In my senior year of high school I'd built my first electronic circuit, and earlier that summer I had taken a course in synthesizer technique at Manhattan School of Music. At the suggestion of my advisor, I called Prof. Lucier to discuss opting out of his "Introduction to Electronic Music" and proceeding directly to a more advanced composition seminar.

When I walked into Lucier's small house on Miles Avenue I noticed, in a living room that suggested I had missed one hell of a party the night before, a conspicuous absence of the obligatory composer's piano. I made my pitch. His answer to my request: "I'm sure you know much more about synthesizers than I do, but I like my students to have an understanding of the music that's already out there; I really hate having to say the words, 'that's very nice, but it's been done before.'" Begrudgingly, I signed up for Music 183, "Introduction to Electronic Music".

Twice a week for the next two semesters I sat in a large lecture hall, listening as Lucier played records and tapes, passed around scores, and talked. The first semester was devoted to John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earl Brown, Christian Wolff and David Tudor, covering a period from 1939 until the mid-1960s. The second semester brought us up to the present day, and focused on composers of Lucier's generation who had been radicalized by Cage and his colleagues: Terry Riley, LaMonte Young, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, Phil Glass, Robert Ashley, Gordon Mumma, David Behrman. I was smitten from the first class; mid-way through the second semester I had my epiphanyⁱ. For better or for worse this class is the reason I've done what I've done for the past 38 years.

This spring (2011) Alvin Lucier is retiring from Wesleyan University after 41 years of teaching. On the occasion of his combined 80th birthday and retirement party I decided to give him my notebook from the course, recently unearthed from my mother's attic. The childish handwriting and misspellings (starting with Lucier's name on the first page!), doodles, the scribbled ideas for experiments of my own, pithy observations and self-aggrandizing pronouncements are squirm-inducing reminders that I was only 18 years old, in an epoch characterized by extreme self-indulgenceⁱⁱ. Posting it online has the recklessness of publishing a diary. I am no Ned Rorem – this notebook does not reflect a particularly interesting life – but I think it provides a rare window into Lucier's teaching and the musical culture of the day, both of which are very interesting indeed, and – secondarily – it documents my gradual conversion from student to acolyte.

General embarrassment aside, as I scanned the pages I was struck by a pair of realizations that never occurred to me so succinctly before. First, I was reminded of the degree to which this course immersed me in primary sources. Instead of reading a textbook by a musicologist, I listened to David Behrman tune up his homemade synthesizer and perform a brand new composition; I followed Pauline Oliveros as she guided the class through her *Sonic Meditations*; I prepared ten minutes of John Cage's *Cartridge Music* from the score's array of transparencies and performed it in public. When Lucier discussed Cage's music he talked about performances he attended or assisted in that caused him to question all the beliefs he had held sacrosanct as a young composer. My notebook is filled with xeroxes of unpublished scores (the ugly gray

swatches are stains from deteriorating rubber cement used to hold them in place). Some might have faulted the lectures as being too anecdotal, but as far as I was concerned these were daily dispatches from the avant-garde.

Secondly, I realized that, without a doubt, this was paradigm-shifting music, taking place right then and there. It's hard to exaggerate the impact of Cage on Lucier and his contemporaries, or the profound changes that this next generation introduced into America's musical landscape. The period between 1950 and 1972 was, in the words of David Behrman, a time in which "established techniques were thrown away and the nature of sound was dealt with from scratch"ⁱⁱⁱ. Indeterminacy, Minimalism, live electronic music, computer music, Fluxus, sound installations, prose scores, graphic notation and a host of other novel techniques for composing and performing – the majority of these movements were still in their early stages of development and proliferation while I was a student. Steve Reich's *Come Out*, David Tudor's *Rainforest*, Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*, Terry Riley's *In C*, Philip Glass' *Music in Parallel Fifths*, and Gordon Mumma's *Hornpipe* were all less than ten years old at the time I heard them.

The ensuing four decades has seen no equivalent shift in the fundamental terrain of music. Toward the end of the 1970s my own generation ushered in the personal computer as a musical instrument, and we bear some responsibility for its significant effect on both experimental and pop music. Pop music itself has seen the introduction of two distinctly new genres – one with considerable economic and social impact (Rap), and the other firmly rooted in earlier Minimalism (1990s Ambient Electronica). But when I look back over the past five, ten or even twenty years I detect no groundswell of change as profound as what was taking place as I sat in Lucier's classroom.

This latter acknowledgement I find more than a little depressing. I've been teaching in the Department of Sound at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1999. Many of the faculty are of roughly my generation and tend to venerate the art movements of their youth – as Douglas Adams said, "Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things."^{iv} I try hard to avoid this cliché and I search hard for inspiring recent work to play my students. Whether this music is engaged in radical musical restructuring like the music Lucier played, or whether it is refining and elaborating the now radically altered musical landscape, it is the music of the world in which live now. And as Cage himself once said, music is "not an attempt to bring order out of chaos ... but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living"^v

ⁱ Nicolas Collins. "Epiphanies – Alvin Lucier's *Vespers*". The Wire. February 2010. See <http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/epiphanieswire.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Comments about "digging" in the second section refer to classes missed due to fieldwork for an archaeology class I was taking the same semester.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Behrman. Liner notes to *Wave Train (music from 1959-1968)*. Alga Marghen CD. 1998.

^{iv} Douglas Adams. *The Salmon of Doubt*. Harmony Book. 2002.

^v John Cage. *Silence*. Wesleyan Press. 1961.