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Robert Carl: The Time Keeper

By Molly Sheridan on June 1, 2013

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Filmed, condensed, and edited by Molly Sheridan
Transcribed by Julia Lu

Robert Carl's music, to my ear at least, has always felt like the work of a particularly sensitive sonic observer of the world. Originally a student of history before he refocused his efforts into music, his interest in time, memory, and space are veins running through his compositions, his work more given to conjuring imagery than narrative plot. And whether inspiration is mined in the wake of a seascape or travelers on a speeding bullet train, the resulting music tends to carry a distinct organic beauty and rich, encompassing depth.

Read the keynote address delivered by Robert Carl at the third annual Westfield Festival of New Music, presented by the Westfield State University Department of Music on March 3, 2013.

Currently chair of the composition department at The Hartt School, Carl acknowledges an aesthetic genealogy that nods to names such as Ives, Xenakis, Shapey, Cage, Kramer, Ruggles, and Rochberg. But for a long time, he says, he felt like a late bloomer scrambling to catch up, something of "a spy in the house of music." For whatever anxiety that might have caused him, he immersed himself in this world at all sides—a voracious listener dedicated to composing, performing, teaching, and writing about the music that has filled his head and encircled his life. This work has provided him with opportunities for insight yet somehow without the pressure of it second-guessing his muse. When the work calls for it, he simply puts that experience on the shelf.

> I tell my students that one of the things that you have to do is to create forms of creative self-delusion when you write. You can't think too much about the weight of history, or about the weight of the field, which is even worse, especially if you're young. … [I]f you have an idea for a piece, and you believe in it, then at a certain point that piece becomes the only piece of music that's ever been written. Honestly, I can feel that when I'm writing. I mean, thank god, I'm inventing music! And of course, it's a delusion. Of course, I know it's not true. But you can feel it in a certain deep way.

Ultimately, it's a delusion that has allowed Carl to explore the great global diversity of musical experience while also providing a level of clarity and space to communicate in a voice distinctly his own.

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Molly Sheridan: Your artist statement opens with the line, "My work has always been concerned with time." That has a certain poetry and also concrete applications to music, of course, but I thought we might start by digging into what that really means to you and why that's such a powerful focus in your work.

Robert Carl: It's changed over time. I think in some ways the initial impulse was because my first love was history. All through my childhood and adolescence, I thought I was going to be a historian. That, of course, has to do with time and the sense of the past being present. So this feeling for the co-existence of all sorts of different moments in time has a certain poetic quality to me. Earlier on, I think I wanted to evoke that with different types of music and historical periods. There was more of an element of, well, never literal pastiche but a sort of intersection and looking for connections between very different types of musics.

With more passage of time, it became a little bit more abstract and at the same time elemental for me. I think part of that was just digging deeper into music and finding its own world. Of course, one thing about music is that it is time reconsidered, because when you have counterpoint, you've got different things going on at once to begin with. You're going to have returns; you're going to have premonitions and echoes of things that have happened. So long as you have memory, then that sense of it being a dialogue between events that happened at different places in time in the unfolding of the piece is also going on. Music embodies this in a very rich way. That was always there for me, but over time, it became more visceral.

I think the key was encountering Xenakis. I was not a private student of his, but I was in Paris for a year and just stumbled on his course at the Sorbonne. It turned out to be about six or seven people in a seminar room once a week, which was great. It was basically him describing his music. One semester was sieve theory, which involved stochastics and it demanded calculus, which I had in high school and actually passed, but I'd forgotten everything. I took notes the whole way through diligently. I still have them and if I really wanted to relearn calculus, I might get something out of it. That was sort of a loss. But the other semester was group theory, which essentially had to do with envisioning the form of a piece as a geometrical solid with points on it, then putting it into rotation and comparing where a point was at one point to where it was after the passage of time and putting these into different parameters of the music. In a sense, it was creating a form which was the envisioning of this object, almost this sculptural form, but from different perspectives in time. I started to see a connection, I guess, between time and space. That was for me the thing that blew my vistas open. After that, I think in some ways my music has become much more interested in space and spaciousness. Long sustained tones, big registral separations, large gestures—that's sort of a surface metaphor for what I'm looking for. I mean, I also love pieces that now and then are incredibly dense, but it feels like the space of the piece is big enough to accommodate that density. The very fact the piece is as rich as it is and yet doesn't seem clogged was a thing that I really felt was to be aspired to. That's another way of getting at space. And, of course, it has to do with the way you play around with time. They go back and forth like that.

MS: That doesn't really necessitate that you use particular sonic combinations. You might say technology would be an attraction, but you wouldn't necessarily associate that interest with the flute, or the piano, or the orchestra, or any one thing. Are you particularly attracted to a sound world as a result of this?

RC: It's a really interesting question. I admit, I'm very drawn to the orchestra. In some ways there's not as much engagement there as I would like, but that has to do with practical things. But let's redefine that a little bit: Orchestra. Let's talk about large ensemble —a large sonorously and timbrally mixed ensemble. That, I think, is something that I'm drawn to precisely because it gives you yet another dimension to explore in space. All through my life, I've made electro-acoustic music. It's not my primary profile, but every three or four years it seems I make an electro-acoustic piece of some sort. Now it's almost exclusively using Max/MSP. If I have a particular idea I'm interested in that I want to explore, it's a great sketchbook. I've been able over the years to make pieces that now and then open up possibilities, not just technologically, but actually in terms of compositional practice that will then work their way into other pieces, as well as being in these pieces.

When you start to combine electronics with the chamber orchestra, for instance, the sound can be as big as you want it. I have a piece that I just finished which has a fixed media part. It's sort of a white noise *Bolero* called *The Inevitable Wave*. It's essentially a ten-second wave that was stretched to ten minutes, and it has an accompaniment from the chamber orchestra that's based on spectral analysis of the sound file. It's sort of a tsunami, and that was the point of the piece. The thing is, though, that just having this interaction between those two sounds, it becomes a really satisfying blend. You can't really tell what is what anymore. So in that sense, large ensemble with sort of a symphonic bent and an electro-acoustic component, that's where I've found myself more drawn. But I'll write for anything. I'm a gun for hire.

Score pages posted on the walls of Carl's office

MS: Considering that, I'd actually like to read a quote to you, if I may. It's from Kyle Gann in response to your Fourth Symphony. He writes, "I think it's taken Robert a long time to clarify what is truly Carlesque in his music amid the Ruggles-like angularity (his dissertation was on *Sun-treader*), the Ivesian layering, the Rochbergian style schisms, the Shapeyesque pitch usage, and it's been exciting to hear it emerge ever more clearly in each new work." That's a really neat and evocative packaging of your influences. But is it a true catalogue? And is it one that you still carry?

RC: Now we're talking about aesthetic genealogy. I do think in large part that Kyle is hearing me pretty correctly there. I think the one thing that he's not including is the Xenakis influence that I was discussing earlier. What actually has become more and more clear to me over the last five or six years in an overt way is the importance of Cage. When the centennial happened, I was actually shocked. It just didn't occur to me that it was coming. But it gave everyone a chance to look and listen to the work, and really see it in context as a whole. The body of work is incredibly inspiring as music, and I think the permission that it gives to explore anything, and to go in any direction that you want to, has been a nice little shock or goose that I've gotten at this age. I think that's now a part of my framework.

The composers I studied with were very important, and I didn't always realize what the importance was. I wanted to study with Rochberg. I wanted to study with Shapey. I stumbled onto Xenakis, and it was extraordinary. But my first teacher was Jonathan Kramer at Yale. I mean, I'm interested in time, right? When I was a sophomore and starting to take lessons with him, I had no idea that this was his prime scholarly and intellectual interest. So I think I carry him in me too, that way.

But I think Kyle's basically right.

MS: I know you consider yourself to be something of a late bloomer when it comes to composition. How did those teachers influence the path in music that you ended up following?

RC: Shapey was in some ways the only composer whom I felt taught me concrete technique. Anyone who came in as one of his students had to take a short course, basically a series of exercises where he taught you to, more or less, write his music. Of course, you're immediately chafing at this. It was very entertaining—it was a highly personalized riff on serialism without it dealing with note count at all. It was mostly gesture, motive. He always talked about wanting something to be a graven image, as though an idea was written in stone. And he wanted to convey ways of doing that, and then developing it.

What it did show me was that you were able to take a sound, an idea, and then keep playing with it—the way of constantly reviewing a sound, a little bit like I was saying Xenakis performed, but in this case on a micro basis. He was able to give ideas for how you could continue to maintain the energy in an idea. If you do that in one line, and then you do it in another line in a different way, hey, you start to get counterpoint! So I felt like writing a phrase and creating counterpoint were the two things that I got from him. George Rochberg was a master of many different techniques. Interestingly enough, I look back on those lessons and I feel more like it was a constant kind of moral education and philosophical debate that was going on. He was always considering the fate of the

world—what the flute does here, what does that mean in terms of Western civilization? I'm totally exaggerating, but he took it very, very seriously. Shapey was just much more nuts and bolts. I mean, he was a visionary—he was part of that head banging, post-*Varèsian* mindset, very macho in that way—but at the same, it all came down to the notes, whether they worked for him or not.

You asked about late blooming. Well, I had written a little bit of music at the end of high school and taken piano for a few years. When I was in elementary school, I quit and started back up toward the end of high school basically because I had an amazing French teacher who at one point decided just to give us a thumbnail sketch of the history of classical music from his record collection. That got me going. I got to Yale and I was a history major my entire time there, but I took a lot of music courses. I did get a real musical start at that point.

After I turned 50, I started feeling like I may have caught up. Up to about then, I felt like I was constantly scrambling to try to catch up on what I didn't know. Of course, there's always a million things you don't know. Given. But I sort of became a composer, I think, before I became a musician. I was writing music before I had this fluency in musicianship and a confidence in musicianship that now I feel I do have. It took a long time to get there, and in a way, I felt almost like a little bit of a spy—a spy in the house of music. In a way, academia was right for me because I'm pretty verbal—I write, I like ideas—and those characteristics were things that helped to sustain me while I was working to compensate for that weakness.

MS: At what point did the electronics enter into this picture of you as a composer?

RC: When I was an undergraduate at Yale, I took the electronic course. It was actually Robert Morris, as I remember, who taught that. That was still when we were in the late years of analog electronic music. It was a studio in what used to be the ROTC building. There was a room that was dedicated to that, and they had a big ARP. They even had a spring reverb that was about as big as that wall over there where you could turn a crank to determine the amount of reverb that you'd get on the sound you were producing. So, it was actually something that, from the very beginning, I saw as kind of co-equal with any other type of composition that I did.

In Chicago, the first year I was there, I was Shapey's assistant; I did the electronic studio afterwards. At the time, it was basically one of the doctoral students who would run the electronic studio and would show anything to any student who was interested. They had a Buchla, so I got to know another analog system. Things still hadn't changed over. When I got to Hartt, basically within the first year or so, they got a Synclavier, which was a white elephant of a system that was like a predecessor of MIDI. It was a dedicated workstation. It actually had synthesis, and sampling, and sequencing, even a certain degree of re-synthesis and spectral analysis built into it. It was a kind of visionary thing, but—at least my experience with the one that we had there—it was always breaking. But I had electronic music experience, and so I had a conceptual framework, so they said, "Okay, you're going to teach this course." And indeed, the person who was originally going to teach it had a health issue, and I was brought in about four weeks into the semester and had to learn it on the spot, which is a situation that all of us know from a certain time in our lives when we have to just do things like this.

So, that became a kind of transitional wave into digital electronic music. I was never doing really hardcore programming, but the thing that I actually yearned for was finally met by Max, because there was a system where you actually could program things of enormous sophistication. I'd always been drawn to algorithmic music, in the sense of a strict process that will open up vistas that you couldn't imagine otherwise, and finally that was possible. Though there's plenty of stuff that can be very, very frustrating in terms of the object-oriented programming that you do, at the same time, it's not all code.

Actually, in the course that I teach, just about two days ago I put a patch up on the screen. I said, "Everyone, okay, so this is your score identification. What piece is this?" And they were looking at it, and then one of says, "It's *I Am Sitting in a Room*." They saw it. They could read the patch like a score in terms of the process. That's the sort of thing that I have dreamed of for a long time, and now it's possible. I'm nowhere as sophisticated as a lot of people who work with it, but it serves a purpose for me.

MS: In your studio upstairs, you've posted the pages of scores that you're working on up on the walls. They're all in line, waiting to be performed or presented. There was one piece that caused you to mention that "as soon as I'm done, it's done." Was that one of the electro acoustic works?

Scores waiting to be performed or presented

RC: Oh, I said I was going to record it. No, it's actually that piece on the piano there, which is a set of bagatelles after *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*—which I know everybody else in the world has done, but since I actually live in Hartford and I actually go by [Wallace Stevens's] house almost every day on my bicycle, I feel like I still have some rights to deal with it. I've always wanted to write a bagatelle set, and this became the way of doing it. I'm going to go into a studio and record it.

MS: Well, that leads neatly into discussing the influence of your being a performer of your own work *on* your own work.

RC: I'm an incredibly modest performer. I don't mean modest in the sense of being shy or anything like that! My relationship with the piano has always been problematic. It's ironic, because I think I have a bunch of pretty substantial piano music that I'm happy with. But thank god I have known through my life incredible pianists who can realize it, because I could never do it in a million years. I lack stamina—physical but also mental in terms of concentration. Great performers can go into that present moment where you're playing the music, but you can actually see just as far ahead as necessary so that you can keep on top of it. I perform enough to know that, but everything that I have that I do perform myself, especially on the piano, is cannily organized to disguise my weaknesses and emphasize my strengths. If nothing else, it is a testament to me as a composer that I can do that and it sounds enough like real music that it can fool people. The pieces that I can play—and I have a little portfolio of them—they're modest in terms of what the demands are. They're maybe advanced intermediate. I can do it because I wrote it, so I don't have the conceptual leap of going into somebody else's world. Anyway, now that I've trashed myself as a performer, what I will say is that it's incredibly important for me in terms of musicianship, in terms of just engaging in the act of making music and knowing what it is from the inside in a visceral way. I think it gives me much greater understanding of performers so that if I'm going to give them something really difficult, then it should be worth their while when they master it. If they master it, and it still feels grungy, then they shouldn't have done it. I would like it to be sort of an athletic rush, if you can get it.

There's a piece on the CD that's coming out called *Shake the Tree,* which is for piano four hands, and John MacDonald and Don Berman do it. They are astonishing. I originally wrote the piece thinking, "I'll write a piece for John, who is a dear friend, and I'll make it so I'm playing the lower part. It will be easy for me, and I'll play with John. Won't that be fun?" Well, after about one minute of it, I'd already written myself out of that picture. I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is the most difficult piece ever written." It is demanding, but they take it and they eat it for lunch. But what I got back from them was that they got a rush from it. So if I can do that, then that's great. I think that does come from some degree of me forcing myself to sit at the keyboard and practice and constantly make mistakes.

Carl at the piano

The other thing is the shakuhachi, which again, especially in terms of traditional literature, I'm not sure I can for me even use the word "play" and "shakuhachi" in the same sentence. I have a very close, dear composer friend, Elizabeth Brown, whom I admire enormously as a composer and who I revere as a shakuhachi player. So if I say that I'm playing the shakuhachi, well, I've written music of my own that uses it. She's actually played it. I know enough about it to write something that might feel as though it comes out of that tradition, but of course it has nothing to do literally with the tradition. The best thing about shakuhachi is that it's really beginner's mind because I've never had any expectation of being able to play at what would be a professional level for the traditional literature. At the same time, the shakuhachi [community] has a great attitude, which is sort of like, well, it doesn't really matter what you play. Did you get the breath right, you know, did you breathe? So it has this nice compensatory thing that takes you outside of definitions of technique that you get very much in the Western classical tradition. It can be very meditative. And it gives you different systems of judgment.

MS: Meditative, yes, but your shakuhachi piece on *From Japan* did not make me feel like I was getting a massage at a day spa. You weren't borrowing clichés, this wasn't an instrument that you didn't really understand added for color. The entire collection of pieces seemed to showcase not a particularly programmatic or narrative instinct, but perhaps more of a fundamental fascination with the sounds around you. I don't know if that's an accurate judgment of your creative impulse—you can correct me on that if I've misinterpreted—but I feel like it's coming from a careful-listener perspective. What is it that gets you fired up?

RC: You're right about listening. I listen to a lot of music. There are some composers—and I fully understand and sympathize with it—where too much music is like too much information. You just don't want to be overwhelmed by other people's music. I understand that. Yet, at the same time, I just get so much pleasure from listening to lots and lots of different things, all the time. It gets me thinking. It gives me ideas. It keeps challenging assumptions. The composer who is essentially my granddad, or great granddad, aesthetically is Charles Ives. One of the things that above all I love about Ives is that there's no composer I know who went further in finding essentially seemingly irreconcilable things that he reconciled, or he made them live together. He found a way for things to get along together that shouldn't. I find that a really noble and wonderful thing, and in a way, it's kind of democratic and idealistically American. It's really an aspect of the better qualities of this culture.

Of course, I have another life as a critic. I got involved in it a pretty long time ago—at the time, it was like, wow, free CDs! Well, of course, that doesn't have the same cachet now that it did then, though I still have a certain fondness for the artifact. But in a way, it helped keep me in touch with what was going on—not only in New York or in the States, but worldwide, which was very, very useful for me as an artist and also as a teacher. I've constantly been listening to music, and I somehow never get tired of it. That doesn't mean I like it all, though I think I like it more than many people. If there's something I really hate, I probably won't review it. I'd rather be an advocate for things that I find satisfying or interesting.

You were saying that you don't hear a particularly programmatic aspect to my music. I think that's true. What I would say is that what motivates my music often is instead what I would call an iconic or imagistic quality. Not in the sense of Impressionism, though there will be things that can be like that, but if there is a motivating image for the piece, either in its form or in its character, I feel like I can then run with it. The piece for string orchestra I'm working on right now is a commission for the Wintergreen Festival, which is in Virginia this summer. I'll be doing a residency there. It's a set of variations that are a response to the fact that I've been in rocking chairs all my life. That's an image—it's basically sort of an inhalation/exhalation between pairs, a kind of large-scale

rocking. Images like that can get a piece going and often they can be rather naïve, but they often end up embedding themselves in the piece so that they affect more of the structural aspects of it than things that are absolutely on the surface.

MS: In addition to your work as a critic, there's also the book on Terry Riley and I've read a few of your lectures. Your career encompasses a lot of deep thinking about music that you've committed to paper for public consumption, in addition to the notes you've written.

RC: It's great if anybody's looking or listening. I think that's a legacy of the side of me that might have been a historian.

The Terry Riley book was a chance to combine several different approaches to musical thinking and writing. It was a strict history in one sense. It had a lot of research and also oral history, but combined with analysis. I said, okay, I'm going to try to prove that you can actually do a serious analysis of this piece, which has always had this kind of hippy-dippy reputation. Totally unjustified. Obviously it's endured and people see, I think much more now, just how wonderfully put together it is. At the same time, you could do an analysis of the score outside of time. Then you could compare it between performances, so you can see the different possibilities of it. Then there's aesthetics—what are the ramifications of this type of music, the fact that this type of music is surviving and is actually ever-increasingly influential. All of that is incredibly stimulating for me.

I've always admired composers who were also writers. As problematic as he is, Schoenberg remains a remarkable force. Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music* is just such an elegant little book. *Essays Before a Sonata* by Ives is cranky and it's almost like your daft uncle who's writing letters to the editor. And yet at the same time, it's absolutely brilliant. For all of those composers, their way of thinking about things was influenced by writing.

MS: That being said, and that being fantastic—being immersed in the community and keeping on top of things, advocating and writing books—how do you keep the weight of that much history and music from becoming a cause of paralysis? How do you keep it from burying your own music?

RC: I don't know. That has never really felt like much of an issue for me. Part of it is that over time, I do feel as though the music I'm writing is ever more my music. I tell my students that one of the things that you have to do is to create forms of creative self-delusion when you write. You can't think too much about the weight of history, or about the weight of the field, which is even worse, especially if you're young. Yes, there are tens of thousands just like you out there–go to it, good luck! You have to find ways of not being paralyzed by that. I think one of them is that if you have an idea for a piece, and you believe in it, then at a certain point that piece becomes the only piece of music that's ever been written. Honestly, I can feel that when I'm writing. I mean, thank god, I'm inventing music! And of course, it's a delusion. Of course, I know it's not true. But you can feel it in a certain deep way. I will say that over time, I've felt like I've been making more and more discoveries for myself, and that sense of personal engagement and invention keeps its fresh for me. I don't feel like I'm recycling.

The sense of history, important as it was for me, I did feel early on could be a trap in terms of writing music that was about the music I liked. I wanted to try to find a way to write music where it was truly its own self. It asserted itself, and I was basically the person who was cultivating it like a farmer. I plant seeds, I watch the crop grow, and I harvest it. That's what I feel like I'm doing now. Kyle's quote from earlier: anyone can look and can see all sorts of influences and DNA there. We're all a mixture of other things. Our personality is not something which is ever fixed. Who we were a week ago is already different from who we are now, so there is this constant mutation that's going on in everything that we do. So I'm not talking about having found some sort of absolutely essential core, but at the same time, I feel like there is a practice I have discovered, that I can return to and find some satisfaction. In that sense, it is a little bit like doing something like gardening. You can do this thing that is very elemental. It's in the nature of being human and being in the earth. There's nothing very special about it, but you're still doing it to the best of your ability. And there's something very special about it when doing it.

MS: I want to go back to your Westfield keynote. There was a line about common practice versus a commonality of practice. I wondered if you'd unpack the thinking that went into that a bit, because that integrates a lot of broad observations.

RC: When I say I think there's the potential for an emerging common practice, anyone who hears that will think I'm just insane. The standard line is that, look, we have more types of music now than we have ever had before. Of course, that's absolutely true. But it's interesting in that, for instance, over the period of my life, I have gone from there still being a kind of cachet to classical music, which was then more or less wiped out by the predominance of "popular music." Now what I see is that in fact the monolithic quality of popular music itself is fragmenting into a huge range of different niches.

At the same time, lots of things that have traditions are classicizing themselves. You can have somebody who is in maybe the post-Radiohead school, who sees themselves in a lineage that goes back to Radiohead and the Beatles and that sees this as a very concrete set of techniques and aesthetics, attitudes and expressive tropes. That is basically like any tradition, and yet we have many, many of these. So it sounds like, again, I'm digging myself into my grave right now, but as things get more fragmented, at the same time, no single thing is controlling it anymore. There's more room for cross-fertilization/hybridization. That's why I'm talking about commonality of practice. I see more and more dipping and borrowing—going back to that idea of reconciling the irreconcilable—from different approaches, techniques, and traditions. What comes out of it is ultimately an increasingly synthetic music where people who are involved in one type of music have less difficulty dealing with a different type of music than they used to. I see it in students. They might be in a metal band, but they're really interested in the math rock aspect of it. That then takes them into serialism. Of course, with the communications technology, everything is linked. So there's this sense of the whole intellectual environment that you live in now being a series of connections—a kind of net, rather than being anything straight lined or boxed off. That is becoming much more common intellectual practice—and I'm using the term intellectual in a very, very broad sense.

MS: You're talking about "my students" and what the kids are doing. Do you feel like your music is part of that?

RC: You know, I would sort of think so. I don't want to try to assume any mantle of youth or hipness, which would be kind of disgusting, but I feel a great empathy and stimulation from what I see going on in different generations. And I'm not trashing my generation when I say that. I mean, certainly composers who are in my generation—if I mention anyone, and I leave somebody out, it's going to be unfortunate, but I'm just going to choose two off the top of my head. Elizabeth Brown, who I mentioned before, I think has an amazingly synthetic attitude toward different instruments, different world music traditions, and a deep knowledge of the classical musician that comes from her being a freelance flutist in New York for decades. All of that gets all mixed into her music in a really subtle and beautiful way. John Luther Adams—I'll say this, he's the only composer of my generation whom I'm envious of because I feel he actually beat me to doing in his music what I wish I could have done. Of course, I didn't go live in Alaska, so I couldn't have written this music. It's a totally different personal story, but the vision that's in his music is something that I'm deeply moved by and, as I say, creatively envious of. So there are two composers in my generation who I think are doing this sort of techno-aesthetic synthesis already, very, very well. And there are many, many others. So it's a thing that's happening at every generation.

MS: I also think it's often easier to talk about changes in the field, and apply that to people who are still obviously developing. Sure, some people then get down in their trenches, but you don't stop paying attention and developing just because you're 40, 60, 80 years old. Even Carter kept evolving.

RC: You know, Carter is a great example, because to be honest, there are all sorts of pieces from all [of his] periods that I love. But Carter really took off when he turned 80. The music became so playful. There was a piece for wind ensemble that was almost static, like the Carter Feldman tribute. He stayed open, I think, in his own way.

I'm of a generation that really came of age musically in the '70s. One of the myths is that up until recently there were hardcore conservative serialists who were in control of everything, and then it was broken down by either minimalism or post-modernism, or some combination of those. There's of course some truth to that, but the thing was that when I was a student, there was no dominant –ism already. There were more distinct -isms than there are now. But frankly, the dominant one, I didn't encounter. Maybe it's because I chose teachers who were pretty wacky and maverick-ish in their own way.

In my generation, there was always a lot more freedom and liberty. Now I will say, just go maybe ten years back [from my peers], you hear a lot more stories from composers about how if you didn't toe the line in this or that way, you wouldn't get a job or you would be denied all the prizes. Yet at the same time, how does that explain the existence of Ned Rorem, who has been quite successful his whole life and has never shied away from writing exactly the type of music that he wanted to write? There's always a little bit of exaggeration of it being a life and death struggle between different aesthetics. But there's no doubt that it is much more fluid. It is much more hybridizing. It is much more fragmented now than it was before.

MS: Reading your technical discussions of some of the explorations you are doing in your own fragmented area, particularly your application of *overtones,* I kept thinking quietly to myself, "yes, but it's so beautiful!" It was interesting to reflect on your private inspirations and public outcomes.

RC: What it is for me is actually finding something that is natural. Here's the thing, which inevitably becomes kind of controversial: On the one hand, we've always had a kind of essentialist argument about tonality. Bernstein, in the Norton lectures he gave at Harvard, talks about how there's a grammar of music that's fundamentally tonal. Of course, this can really rile everybody up because

it can be easily used as a kind of club to force us into an essential kind of musical conservatism. So I'm skeptical of that. I wouldn't want to give up *Atlas Eclipticalis* for that if I had to, okay? At the same time, I wouldn't want *Atlas Eclipticalis* to rule, you know?

My feeling is that over time—and it comes partly from spectralism, it comes just as much from composers like Henry Cowell and Ives—there are ways of looking at acoustical phenomenon of sound and using that as a model to create sounds on different scales. I don't mean scales like modes, I mean different scales of size. Hierarchies. And what you can get from it actually is precisely that beauty. It is also about space. You get the proper amount of space between the notes, both horizontally and vertically. I think that's why this practice that I pursue feels satisfying to me, and doesn't feel like it's over-intellectualizing. It doesn't feel like it's forcing us into too cerebral a trap. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite. It feels like it kind of frees me up. The analogy that I use is basically a jazz one. I teach myself my own changes so that then I can improvise on the page as I'm writing. That's really what I feel like I'm doing with this. So in that sense, if you find it beautiful, great. But I think that's actually a by-product of the approach rather than something that's being done despite it. It's not so much like I feel like I'd better be rigorous in some way so people won't laugh at me. No, this is what allowed me to dig deep enough to get to what I was looking for.

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