

Interview with Markus Trunk, 9th July 2003

by Tim Parkinson (Part 1)

The Wellington pub, The Strand, London

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M: ...it is. But the nice thing is you watch it all happening, the pianist records um... records that line...

T: Just "nothing is real"? (Sings it)

M: It's the melody from "Strawberry Fields", yeah. I guess I don't know it well enough to know what it really is. It doesn't sound like a pop song.

T: It's just er... four notes.

M: So it's recorded onto DAT or whatever, that's basically the first half of the piece, that the pianist actually plays the piano, then he or she has to get up and rewind the tape, and then play it back through the teapot while operating the lid, and the er... the resonances you get are amazing, if you've got the right pot. If I remember right, Alvin [Lucier] actually sent a specific Chinese teapot through the mail. It was a long time ago but...

T: Well that would be nice to get a nice Chinese teapot through the post. I presume you'd have to pay for it.

M: (laughs) It's a cheap one, you know, I'm sure he bought it... T: Wholesale. A hundred... M: ...on Canal Street in New York or something. But they work well for this purpose.

T: So you um... I'm just trying to think about your... You studied with Alvin at Wesleyan?

M: Mhm. This is the second time I've gone back to Connecticut and not visited Middletown. Strange.

T: When was that though?

M: From '91 to '93.

T: I thought it was quite recently.

M: You think that's recent?

T: Well, in contemporary music terms it's brand new!

M: Imagine, I graduated from there ten years ago...

T: And what was that? You just studied composition?

M: No no, I got involved in all the other stuff they do. Mostly world music. They were sort of pioneers in that field. Um, back in the sixties they imported all these native musicians to teach their own music, rather than having Western scholars talk about it, though they've got that too. When I was there they had "real" Indonesian and Indian and Ghanaian and Japanese musicians teaching on their own terms, which was very different. There's often not much explaining going on. I did um some Carnatic rhythm, a drumming language that's called solkattu, it's South Indian - North Indian and South Indian classical music are two separate traditions - and er...

T: Did any of that inform your music?

M: Oh my God, of course you were going to ask that question. (laughs) It's so obvious isn't it.

T: What?

M: The question is obvious.

T: Yeah.

M: Um, well there's some direct way. Apart from writing pieces for gamelan ensemble, and later for steel band, without paying much attention to the musical traditions behind them... I've actually written a piece that employs rhythmic principles taken from solkattu. The notion that you have a fixed rhythmic cycle which stays the same all the way through, but then you overlay another rhythmic structure in various speeds, um sort of a rhythmic theme, and then you speed it up- you double the speed... um... i.e. halve the length, you do the same thing again and then again, first four cycles long, then two, then one, and each time the relationship between the two rhythmic layers changes completely.

T: Like um... (Very noisy police siren goes past)

M: No doppler effect.

T: No no, well it went around the corner, maybe we didn't hear it. Oh here comes the other one.

(Another siren goes past)

T: Only slightly.

M: Yeah. Why is that...?

T: It's very high isn't it? So anyway, what was it like studying with Alvin then? All my questions are gonna be leading questions.

M: There wasn't much teaching as such, but I guess you won't be surprised to hear that, you know what he's like.

T: Yeah but I mean I didn't study with him for three years.

M: Two.

T: Two years.

M: Two years... I think we had our weekly sessions. That was mostly because I came from Germany, I was fresh from Germany from the music academy and that's what I was used to, so I

kept doing that. I don't know whether he would have pushed that. So I would go to his office and um, we would have a chat...

T: About what you'd done? Did he set you tasks?

M: If I'd done something he would look at it, but I was just writing whatever I was going to write anyway.

T: I remember he said to us "I don't know what to tell you guys, you all seem to know what you're doing."

M: Yeah, I mean that's just a... what's the term? A figure of speech. Yeah he hardly ever says anything directly. It's more through anecdotes or stories, or looking at something else. I don't have any specific memories about the lessons, about what was said. I mean there's maybe one thing about the piece "slightly ajar" which is the one piece of mine that's very directly influenced by him.

T: It is isn't it. M: It's quite unique in a way, I've never really tried that again. I think it's quite successful, on its own terms, and er... Did you hear it at the Conway Hall?

T: No I just have a recording.

M: The recording...

T: Which is probably nowhere near...

M: Yeah well it is a spatial piece, it's about the acoustics of the space. In that sense it's very much like Alvin's pieces: the recordings are documents which sometimes are interesting in their own right, sometimes they are just documents. Um. What was I saying? Oh about that piece, because, it started out a lot messier than the recording you have.

T: With hundreds of notes?!

M: Oh, yeah! Lots of different sound sources. Because I think the way I started on it was er, the idea of a biographical piece, almost like Bluebeard's Castle, where behind every door is some treasured memory of something... I think it's actually an idea I had before I went to Wesleyan and er... it was more about this mixing up different musics, you know, maybe in an Ivesian way. It wasn't so much about the space. So the first Wesleyan performance had lots of different stuff everywhere- it had a celeste in it playing a...

T: Behind one of the doors.

M: Yeah, playing a motive from Bartok "Out of Doors" suite and er, another one had a tape of "Light My Fire" - The Doors, very unfunny pun.

T: (laughs) What, deliberately?

M: No, no, it was deliberate, yeah. Another one had a fiddle player, because we happened to study together, she played North American folk fiddle, and um, it was kind of droney, so that was sort of well suited. Another door had um... speech behind it. I chose three Japanese speakers so nobody could understand what they were saying, it was not about text as such but um...

T: The sound of speech.

M: Yeah. They really got into it, they were like arguing, very acrimoniously. But then I had a... Have I already mentioned the Hoover?

T: No.

M: That was sort of a constant, the most drone like noise. Oh, and an organ, um, in that hall they had a pipe organ backstage...

T: They had six doors in this place?

M: At least. No there were more, one guy was in the lavatory but he didn't actually produce a continuous sound, he only screamed really dramatically loudly at various points throughout the twelve minutes. And, on top of it all, I didn't just have the light coming through the doors from outside, um, I had somebody operating the lights in the hall as well so they went on and off at intervals. And, yeah, to cut a long story short, Alvin didn't like it! (laughs)

T: Why?

M: Because it was too distracting from the purely acoustical phenomenon.

T: Yeah it was more about what you put behind the doors.

M: Yeah, so most people would have been listening to the sounds themselves rather than how they're shaped by the space and the doors. So it took me, I don't know, three or four performances to arrive at that one-note version at the Conway Hall.

T: Where there's just nothing behind the doors?

M: Oh no, there were instruments. All playing the note C. And in different octaves so maybe it's not- still not radical enough.

T: Well it kind of makes a constancy for what's outside.

M: Yeah. No, no I think it's fine because um... all the er, higher octaves are... are part of the overtone series of whatever the lowest C is. It's really one sound.

T: And what about "Leaf", that's '92 or something isn't it?

M: That was written- that was the main piece in my "graduation recital".

T: Is that two pianos...

M: It is...

T: ...trombone and double-bass. That's right, I'm just remembering. Because um...

M: Yeah, it was... It was um, originally intended- the way the trombone and double-bass are similarly treated but different, I didn't originally want two pianos, one of them was supposed to be a harp really but I've never done that version.

T: Would you re-orchestrate it?

M: Sorry, I would...? I would. But er, I guess-

T: It's like that piano version "Leaflet", am I right? That's based on it.

M: Yeah, it's not exactly the same but... it's the same pitch sequence. Yeah, I think "Leaf" has only been done once since. Which is when I offered to do a harp version, I really wanted... They wanted the original version. This is not really interesting is it?

T: That's what everybody says.

M: Talking about different versions...?

T: That's what everyone says but it remains to be seen.

M: (laughs) That's the kind of stuff musicologists are interested in!

T: Well... But what I wanted to ask you though was all your um... That CD that you gave me, and that tape before the CD, all the different pieces, your music- your output is quite sort of varied, you know what I mean, you don't have er... It's not er... I mean your greatest hit is definitely the big orchestral piece. I was just speaking to lots of people who heard it, um... "On a Clear Day".

M: Oh, right.

T: Lots of people heard it and mentioned to me as well, and said "oh Markus, you wrote that great piece, it was fantastic!?" and...

M: I actually still get feedback about "Slightly Ajar".

T: Really? From the Conway Hall performance?

M: From the people who were there. I suppose it works very well within a regular new music programme. It's theatrical in a way.

T: It is quite theatrical isn't it.

M: With the light coming in through the doors. It's interesting that you say um... You think my output is varied which is not the way I think of it.

T: Well, sure, of course.

M: I sometimes think I'm stuck in this er, sort of minimal, reduced er, vein...

T: Vain? Oh, "vein". (laughs) I thought it was just another adjective, "vain".

M: Oh no. ...vein - full stop. (laughs) Yeah but you're probably thinking I guess I've tried other things like er, "Spelling Lesson" which is partly humorous.

T: Yeah, which I haven't actually heard but it's something else that people mention to me.

M: Or that piece that's based on South Indian rhythms which hasn't been...

T: What's that? What is that? Do I have a recording?

M: No it hasn't been performed. Yet. It's called "Du-gun" which is an Indian term.

T: You're gonna have to spell that for me later.

M: (laughs) "Dyoo-gunn". No it's "doo-ghun", D-U-G-U-N.

T: Oh. For?

M: Well, that's a bit of a problem.

T: Unspecified instruments.

M: Yeah yeah, only the ranges are specified but it can't really be done by wind instruments sensibly because there's nowhere to breathe. String instruments is not ideal either because there are lots of big fast leaps, it's just gonna sound horrible intonation-wise, so I have actually reverted to specifying an instrumentation. I think it's vibraphone and accordion- and maybe a bass clarinet, playing the part that's not as fast. Maybe. But that one sounds a bit like Nancarrow. Because it's very fast and it's sort of polyphonic, which is very unusual for me. And it's sort of tonal in a... there's harmony, it's very chromatic, in sort of a Max Reger way, it's chromatic and almost modulating into er, around the circle of keys.

T: So is it always a kind of a extra-musical thing that kicks you off writing a piece?

M: Like?

T: Well just like that- well, not...

M: "On a clear Day"?

T: Yeah, "On a clear Day" and also just what you've just described isn't extra-musical, it's a rhythmic idea, but some other idea that's kind of kick-starting you, or informing what you're doing at that time.

M: Actually I think it's the exception, the extra-musical thing. Is that true? Yeah... I think I usually start out with er... just looking at an instrumentation. The instruments I've thought of or that are there... (pause) No I am just checking what I said in my mind against various pieces.

T: Well, like "On a Clear Day", um, a whole orchestra. Did you immediately think I want to do something like that, because it's a very immediate piece, very kind of just like... striking, you know, there's no nonsense, there it is and then it stops. And you know it takes no prisoners, you either get it or you don't, and in that BBC recording I was sitting next to this guy who completely didn't get it. He wasn't interested at all.

M: That must have been terribly boring.

T: It was just one of those instances where he says "well I don't like these pieces where nothing happens" and I said "well, yeah, fine..." Nothing didn't happen!

M: But I understand that reaction.

T: Yeah of course, exactly.

M: But I guess it doesn't help telling somebody who seems to take offence like that... that it takes you just as long arriving at nothing happening as it takes somebody else to arrive at a lot of things happening... too much happening...

T: Is that the way that you work then, you boil things down?

M: Often works like that, yeah. That I pare down and throw things out, and get rid of whole parameters. Um. Certainly. I suppose my thinking is very um- what's the word... phenomenological.

I wanna hear the phenomenon itself so usually any kind of um, compositional device- traditional compositional device is just distracting. Any... any "Tonsatz". There's no- I'm not sure there's a word in English for that.

T: What is it? Tone-

M: It's a subject if you study music in Germany, it's one of the subjects. It teaches you how to set something. So it's a combination of harmony and counterpoint I suppose. And you do it for several semesters. And um... I often try to find an equivalent but um, maybe it's a very German idea that there's a... that you can teach how to set music properly! Yeah, "tone-setting". That's all it is. That's the literal translation.

T: It sounds quite academic.

M: Yeah, exactly. There you learn what you have to do in order to make "sound" sound like music, so it's got all the proper ingredients.

T: So sound is not allowed to just be.

M: No, of course not.

T: Is that what sort of led you to Wesleyan? Or how did you end up there then?

M: Um, through- well all I knew was that I wanted to study abroad because I thought I had lived in Germany for thirty years and um, it was just not... it was not on! So I was casting around for people to study with. One of them was Christian Wolff, I had an exchange with him, um... James Tenney... I mean, Walter Zimmermann advised me at that time because he was my teacher then. So that's a bit how... Earlier I'd thought about going to Krakow and study... I mean I was more interested in the place. That was to study with Boguslav Schaeffer. Is that a name you recognise?

T: Schaeffer?

M: Schaeffer, not the French one. But no, he actually teaches mostly in Salzburg anyway. I'd done a course with him. Um, one other was... um... I'm rusty you see, I don't talk about music much so the most obvious terminology and names of people, it just doesn't come to me. Gyorgy Kurtag! That's what I was looking for... With him as well as with Christian Wolff the problem was that they don't teach composition formally so it would have meant enrolling onto some other course.

T: And going through the back door.

M: So I think it was Kunsu Shim who had a tape of Alvin's music and I thought "that sounds very reasonable!?" (laughs)

T: So you knew Kunsu Shim at that time?

M: Oh yeah. I met him a few years before that, yeah. And I thought "oh that looks just right for me, that sounds really different", without perhaps understanding it all that well. Not sure I- I must have come across him in Zimmermann's seminars but maybe it was just one piece, probably "I Am Sitting In a Room". That was all I knew. And then er... Alvin happened to be on a DAAD scholarship- not scholarship but residency, in Berlin, so I went to Berlin and met him and er... I was lucky to get a DAAD scholarship myself. At least for the first year. Then I went. First time I was on an airplane.

T: Oh wow. And you had to learn English.

M: Oh yeah. I mean I had some vocabulary from school but no colloquial English and certainly no colloquial American. Those first few weeks and months were very intense.

T: Yeah I'm sure, yeah. How long were you with Zimmermann before?

M: Er, just a year. But an important year. I suppose in my mind it almost equals the time I studied with Spahlinger which was... yeah, probably four years, and the time I spent with Zimmermann...

T: When were you with Spahlinger? Before Zimmermann?

M: Yeah. And then Spahlinger left for Freiburg and was basically replaced by Zimmermann.

T: They had different forms of teaching?

M: Totally different, yeah. Shall I illustrate?

T: Yeah, why not.

M: Well Mathias actually set weekly exercises and stuff. It was a bit like "Tonsatz"! I mean very good exercises, um... So I would go home and write them and I was quite good at them, so he had something to pore over at the next lesson, and he would pore over it for ten minutes. Incredibly meticulous.

T: Hmm, like a crossword puzzle.

M: Not necessarily. He would often read all sorts of things into it I hadn't even thought of. And er, he would give a clear verdict. That was very good but stifling in a way. It took me almost two years to come up with a piece, which was actually developed from one of the exercises. And er, so in those four years I think I maybe wrote two pieces. Ten minutes of music. (laughs) And that's very typical really of him, I think, it's a bit like his own way of working, incredibly self-critical. And then Walter comes in and he brings with him this whole wagon-load of music and he just throws it at us, without too much analysis. Mostly American experimental stuff. The most outlandish kind of music. And he would take us everywhere to concerts, you know, the world premiere of- the posthumous world premiere of a Feldman piece in Cologne, four or five hours long, "Violin and String Quartet", and we would like, all ten of us, stay overnight at er... that... another name that won't come to me... um... (pause)

T: Would you like another drink?

M: (laughs) That might help. (pause)

T: Right, I'll go and get something else to drink, I'll pause this.

M: Ok. That'll save some- (Cut)

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M: -you did what?

T: I paused it.

M: Oh right, you didn't erase everything.

T: No.

M: Ok, we stayed overnight at Clarence Barlow's. Things like that. We even went to Brussels, to- in fact there was a performance of Walter's piano concerto.

T: Oh yeah, I heard that.

M: You know which one I mean?

T: I know a piano concerto.

M: It's got a Greek title, something like "Ataraxia".

T: I don't know...

M: That same trip we also went to see John Adams's "Death of Klinghoffer", the original production I think.

T: That all sounds familiar because of um, when I was studying with Kevin Volans, the same sort of ex-Cologne people like Walter Zimmermann, Clarence Barlow...

M: Ah, the Cologne connection, that makes a lot of sense.

T: And Kevin gave me some... well Kevin gave me some composition exercises.

M: He did?

T: He did, yeah, which er, you know again I kind of had to work with somehow...

(waiter brings knives and forks)

T: Are you getting me one? A mushroom pepperpot?

M: He must be assuming we are sharing.

T: So, yeah, so Walter Zimmermann didn't do that with you?

M: The exercises? No. Not sure I remember- By that time I had lots of ideas of my own and I was happy to just get on with it. I mean like "Raw Rows" I had already started writing I think. That goes back a long way.

T: Yeah, that's an early thing as well.

M: It was really just one year.

T: Yeah, I don't mean that your pieces are wildly different, but there's a difference in, you know, sort

of um...

M: I would think that the approach is probably quite similar. Sometimes I try out different material or a different medium...

T: How do you approach, then, writing a piece? If someone said "make me a string quartet"?

M: Um... I would just sit down and wait for ideas. Just thinking about the instruments and their ranges. But then I... some quirky idea might just pop into my head and sometimes it develops into something bigger... I mean- I guess I've got quite a catalogue of unfinished pieces as well. Where I got relatively far collecting material um, and then abandoned it.

T: Is that what you do, sort of between pieces or something, you collect material?

M: No, not really. What I meant was pieces where I had already assembled and written out a lot of music for possible inclusion.

T: Ok.

M: No, this was... I don't do that often enough actually because what I find what works for me best to get ideas for pieces is actually going to concerts of contemporary music, um, and actually the worse the pieces are the better it works for me.

T: I was gonna say, is it a negative reaction?

M: Yeah, because all of a sudden you think of all the things one could have done... Yeah. Or sometimes I listen to a perfectly respectable piece of contemporary music which er, is not any- not really very interesting but there's maybe one instrument combination that grabs my attention, or one sound effect and I think, oh I could make a whole piece just out of that, that would be much more entertaining. I wonder now whether I can name something like that. There were maybe a couple of pieces that started out...

T: Yeah, because um, it's almost like you don't... it's not being aware of your own self until you come up against resistance, you know, and if you like, a bad piece can make you realise "Ah! That's not me. This is what I would do."

M: But I'm sure, you know, a "proper" composer is just plagued by ideas all the time. You know, they lie awake at night... I always find I just stumble on something, it's almost like a found object. And that's how I... At least that's what I tell myself, it's not really true, of course you make those "found" things up just as well, because once I write the piece I make up all these charts for the pitches or... for rhythmic values, durational values...

T: What, derived from what you've found?

M: Yeah. Very simple ones. You know, I just list the elements... A certain range of chords and then I number them and then I use very simple chance procedures to tell me what happens. That's true for "Leaf". Either just a certain number of pitches, I think it was barely more than one and a half octaves. The sequence of pitches is basically... I think back then I used real dice. Now I use this website that has a dice program for computer games. Don't ask me why game players need...

T: Oh what? Multi-sided dice?

M: Yeah yeah... why game players need um... chance generated sequences of certain numbers.

T: You can get twenty-four sided dice or something like that. It's practically a sphere!

M: Yeah, that's exactly what I used in "Leaf", a twenty-sided dice for the twenty available notes. But with this online program you can get any number of sides, any number of throws. I just enter them numbers then I print it out.

T: Give me the address! I'd quite like to see it... No but I mean I think it's just interesting where ideas come from, whether it's very intuitive or whether it's a general sense of something and then you find things externally that nudge you on your way, point things out, or even directly give you ideas. You know, like found objects. Found objects are only found if you're looking for it, otherwise it's just rubbish.

M: Yeah. No, true. Of course the found object- you never use it by itself anyway. It just gives you this vision of what there might be and then you try to come close to it... and half the time it works, other times it doesn't. I've said years ago- I told Hauke- have you met Hauke Harder?

T: Yes I remember his first name.

M: He came over for the Jo Kondo opera last year. Anyway, I've told him probably several times that I would stop using dice... that I should be able to decide myself what I want at any point in time. I just keep going back to it... It seems to be that kind of varied but homogenous surface that I prefer. And if I try to decide out of a limited pool of elements what I want it's never as interesting as any throw of the dice because you get these extremes where you have, you know, like the number 6 more often than you would normally like...

T: Yeah you have an idea about how the dice would go, and it's-

M: Yeah if you've got six elements you try to create, subconsciously, balance whereas the dice only does that over a very long stretch.

T: You may throw the dice six times and it's five sixes and a one.

M: Yeah. Or it omits the numbers one and two for the longest time. And musically that's quite nice because it's almost- I mean it could work harmonically if you don't get two of the pitches for a very long time.

T: Well, it's a tool like anything else though. You use it until you have no use, I guess, for it, because um-

M: I don't think it's a cop-out...

T: No, I find it's um-

M: Because if you didn't like what is generated then... I don't- I guess you would never use it just in order to fill time.

T: No it depends what you use it for doesn't it. I mean...

M: I guess I get defensive about it because sometimes I feel it's a weakness that I don't have a clear idea of... Maybe it can be a weakness that I have this fixed pool of elements and I don't change

anything about it for a very long period. So it's just very very static and um... I guess when I listen to other people's music I like surprises or little changes and er... so I guess I have to find ways of factoring them in. But I'm not very good at systems, or computer programming or anything like that.

T: What, systems as in coming up with a random number computer programme?

M: Coming up with more complex things. It's always extremely basic what I do.

T: But the simplest means can often produce the most complicated results. I wouldn't er... I think it's a very clear idea though to be open about a particular situation because er... you know there are some things I would use chance for, and you know I like to discover things or come across things or be surprised or whatever.

M: Through chance?

T: Well yes but you know when writing a piece to come across things that interest me. And if I make it up myself it doesn't interest me. It's like... my own decision here does not interest me, in a lot of instances, I mean it depends on the- depends what I'm talking about.

M: Yeah. I guess I've started a few pieces myself over the years where I was trying to force myself to make all the decisions, and it lasts for a page and then I look back over it and I realise it's- it's just willful, even ugly, and at the same time totally arbitrary, and I don't like that.

T: You don't like?

M: Arbitrariness. Because I think in Cage, you know, big master of chance, haha, but he always set- not always maybe, but, um, most of the time the parameters are so fixed, even if you inject different materials into it, it still comes out as "the piece". I guess I'm... That's how I feel. I don't like it to be too er... very...

T: What, the parameters?

M: For some reason I was just thinking of the German word but I'm not totally sure...

T: What?

M: I'm not totally sure of what...

T: Oh I thought you just said it.

M: ...how to translate it. (pause)

T: Well, say the German word.

M: Oh, ok, just to make it more colourful, the word is actually "bunt", which means- it means colourful! (laughs) Well, that's one of the meanings anyway... Sorry, where were we?

T: Just using- using chance within particular areas. But is that a sort of um... previous teaching that's saying to you... Is that Spahlinger in your ear saying "don't use chance, you must have a reason for doing stuff." Or is it some kind of academic guilt from your... from anywhere in your past?

M: (laughs)

T: I don't know, it's just because...

M: I like that term. "Academic guilt". It's like Catholic guilt - it's exactly the same thing. Um, I was gonna say no it's not but that's probably partly it. Sometimes I try to be um... because Spahlinger's very systematic, sometimes I think why can't I be totally spontaneous, and that way very personal. And then that doesn't work either. You know, more like improvising on the page.

T: Well you set up a system and then introduce something completely irrational? Or... I mean for example, "Leaf" is very- just...

M: Square.

T: Well, yeah, it's a thing. It's like what I said in that email saying that it was really, it was an installation going on in my living room. And that's how I really...

M: That's a very fair thing to say.

T: I appreciated it a lot that way rather than, you know, kind of sitting down and listening to it, I just put it on as just some music and I just sat and didn't really... actively...

M: Yeah it doesn't work terribly well in a concert situation, it's true, that's true for probably other pieces as well.

T: Well, it's up to... whatever. But I'm just saying that was my experience that one time, it struck me like that.

M: Yeah. I think "sonic installation" is probably a description that's very fitting for a lot of my stuff.

T: Why did it- I mean, what is it, 20 minutes?

M: Sorry?

T: It's 20 minutes, that piece?

M: Yeah.

T: Why 20 minutes. If it was sort of installationey it could sort of ultimately have gone on for much longer.

M: Oh I thought you were going to say why is it so long, but you're saying why is it so short. It's true. I think in a concert situation it has probably run its course by then because I don't introduce new material at all. I mean there are some elements which only turn up occasionally and it sort of interrupts the process but they are, again, that's only three or four elements and they are always the same ones. I guess I felt quite- it was quite a bold thing for me to do for twenty minutes. Because the usual length is about ten minutes. For me. Even though a lot of people... I often get that feedback, "it was very nice - even beautiful - but I wish it could have gone on for longer".

T: Well, once again it's either one or the other. They wish it ended sooner or they wish it went on for longer.

M: Yeah. No of course you should always go with the people who like the music, because the people who don't like it, just by making it shorter it won't please them either. I'm sure Laurence gets to hear that a lot.

T: What? It should be longer?

M: Yeah, yeah. It's just this little glimpse of something and then... I guess- I'm not into miniatures exactly, but er... But "Leaf" was a bit of a departure, somebody must have encouraged me. But I had all this material. Actually I had a lot more material... This pitch sequence... and I played through it on the piano. I quite enjoyed that. And I selected the good bits. Actually the pitch sequence from start to finish is not one that I... um, generated by throwing the dice in one go, it's actually several chunks put together. And I felt a bit guilty about that because er... John Cage wouldn't have done that! Selecting the good bits! The nice chords!

T: (laughs) And you just sellotaped them together. That's outrageous...!

M: Yeah. But I marked the cutting points by using- by a noise element actually.

T: Oh right, so you can almost hear the sellotape.

M: Oh yes...

T: See the joins.

M: Or the scissors, you know, the sound of the two blades of the scissors cutting. (laughs)

T: I like that idea.

M: Sellotaping?

T: No, now I know that far from being a very homogenous piece it is actually just a kind of Frankenstein. (laughs)

M: (laughs) Frankenstein, yeah. Put together out of... I dunno...

T: The best bits of something else.

M: Ten arms! (laughs)

T: But what great arms! (laughs)

M: Different arms. Maybe I should have called it "Octopus".

T: Well, then how about "On a Clear Day" then? How did that come about? Because the Agnes Martin thing is quite significant really, isn't it?

M: Yeah, I suppose that idea was...

T: In the programme-

M: It's years old. Oh, actually there was an earlier version even from five years before, and er, well this involves admitting to something er... foolish... Right, I had just arrived in this country, I didn't

have a job-

T: When was that?

M: Er, '94, end of '94. I didn't have to work actually because I was still living off a scholarship, um, which I had had for a year back in Germany. So, er, I had basically all day to compose, for a few months anyway. And I came across this- I was trying to find my way around in Britain, so I went to some SPNM events and I came across a competition and I'd entered competitions before...

T: We've all been there.

M: Yeah, of course. But actually I started writing and applying this idea I'd had, the Agnes Martin idea, to um, the requirements of the competition which was chamber orchestra. Strings... String orchestra with um, four solo woodwinds, including horn. And then knowing the piece as it is now you can imagine it was a bit difficult with a much smaller number of instruments. The silences between the chords were actually real silences. I guess I used fewer notes but still there were thirty chords in that one and...

T: Sure. The image is still there.

M: Yeah. I'd seen this exhibition in Baden-Baden and er, the complete print cycle of Agnes Martin's "On a Clear Day" was- took up a whole room. It was just one of those thrilling experiences. We don't need to go into details on this, there's not much to look at but there's just all these grids in various proportions, but er, it just made perfect sense to me, and each of them had their own mood, and it seemed to me pretty straightforward to translate that into music even though... You can't really do it, because the horizontal and the vertical are two very um... equal things... it's the same...

T: Well, sure, not literally.

M: They're the same kind of dimension whereas in music I did use basically the picture on the page, so one dimension is time and progressing from left to right and the other dimension is um... pitch, space, or tessitura, whatever, from low to high. I mean these two dimensions have got nothing in common really.

T: Well no sure, but I think the image is really clear though, when I think of that piece I think of this almost like... You definitely-

M: But still the pulsation in time and the number of notes in the chord have not- they are not really equivalents. So, I mean that's almost like, you know... Well, I was gonna say Stockhausen but that's... that's...

T: We won't...

M: Somewhere else...

T: But how did you end up... Because it kind of thins out doesn't it towards the end. It's very dense-

M: Yeah, that's not the case in the original cycle. I suppose I thought-

T: The Agnes Martin?

M: Yeah. Although she does change certain parameters along the way, like in the beginning those

grids have a frame around them. Though it's hard to explain it without showing it. Whereas further on-

Waiter: Sorry about the wait there. (Bringing food)

M: That's all right.

T: There you go.

M: Wow. It's got garlic bread as well, that's er... As you can tell. You can almost hear the garlic! (laughs) Yeah, move the microphone a bit closer.

T: Well I could switch it off while you eat, or do you wanna talk while you eat?

M: No, as long as you don't transcribe too many of the noises.

T: Munch munch.

M: Or sounds.

T: No no no. So what were you saying?

M: Oh at the beginning they've all got solid frames around them and then later on the grids haven't got that so they- the lines stick out at the edges. Do you understand what I mean?

T: Yeah yeah.

M: Actually I do that in the piece as well. It's not very audible.

T: How so then?

M: (laughs)

T: No it's interesting how it translates.

M: No it's actually audible with regard to the pulsations because in the beginning you get the pulsations, those attacks at the beginning and at the end of the chord, whereas I think from the second, or probably the third third onwards, basically chords 21 to 30, to be precise, you don't get the attack at the beginning and at the end. A sustained chord starts and the pulsations come in whenever they are due.

T: So it's in the detail.

M: And it's at the top and the bottom as well. The pulsations probably don't appear in the top note and the bottom note. I'm not totally sure about that. So... But the thinning out doesn't happen in the print cycle. Because in my piece basically at the end you've got just one horizontal line and one vertical line or attack. Or no attack actually. I took some liberties but I guess for some reason I felt- because if you go into that room with all thirty prints in there, it's like an installation and you have them all present at the same time, you don't have that in music, so I felt the need for some... dramaturgy? Is that a word?!

T: Yeah.

M: You know what I mean.

T: A direction maybe.

M: Yeah. Something... teleological or goal-oriented. Even though it's not- it doesn't- I don't know how soon it becomes apparent, but I guess at some point you notice it's thinning out, maybe around the middle of the piece. And that's usually when your attention would start to sag. So I thought it was a legitimate device to... keep the interest alive, apart from making the instrumentation of the chords sound nice... I'll have some goo then...

T: Just eat away. So did you basically orchestrate the previous piece or did you just start again from scratch.

M: Um. I guess I needed new chords. I started out with a lot more little pitches-

T: Who did you write that for, incidentally? Because I heard obviously the BBC Symphony Orchestra, but there's a recording from-

M: A friend of mine, the same Hauke actually, had put together a concert for Hessischer Rundfunk in Frankfurt. That's where "Leaf" was played again.

T: With er... Dahinden?

M: They were part of the- they played in the original performance as well. Because Roland was basically studying with Alvin at the same time as me, or mostly with Anthony Braxton, but he was around. He and Hildegard. Anyway the um... the radio editor of Hessischer Rundfunk responsible for contemporary music, Bernd Leukert-

T: What's his name?

M: Bernd Leukert. I think it works quite well in Germany the way that you've got all the regional radio stations. I mean not as many as there used to be now, some mergers going on there, but they all have their own proclivities and er, biases but overall in Germany it works well, you know, some go more for the Wolfgang Rihm school and others go more for experimental stuff and he's a bit more on the less academic side. Anyway, he had come across my music through Walter before and he said- oh didn't I mention that... Why do I go into so much detail?! Probably had too much of this... It may be interesting to you...

T: Well, that's the...

M: Or boring! Anyway he said- he basically gave me this commission. He said can you do something by September? That's why I had to go back to an old idea as well because there was not much time. But that was a big surprise for me. And the biggest surprise of all was that I thought that- I clearly remember that he said, er, he was sorry he couldn't pay any money, but probably what he said was that he couldn't pay any proper money, or something, but there was quite a bit of money involved. I only found that out when I got there for the first rehearsals. After I'd done all the work basically.

T: Oh right. That's nice.

M: Well, it seemed to me like a decent pay, so um... So that's how that came about. The German

broadcasting system paid for it - the German taxpayer! I think that's probably a bit lacking here. There are not that many commissioning bodies and the only radio station that commissions is the BBC and they're trying to be terribly balanced so... They do commission composers from various corners, I mean, it's just not enough...

T: But um... And what are you writing now? Those songs.

M: (laughs) I have done a little bit more work on that. Yeah, working with text is just... a nightmare for me. But that's the kind of thing that every time- well not every time, but, almost every time I've tried that I've thrown it out. Because usually I was trying to use that as a crutch, to get away from generating a piece out of chance procedures or... rows of chords or whatever. I thought, oh just follow the text. But that's the most horrible thing you can do, you know, try to illustrate something.

T: So are you looking though for a more intuitive way of working? Because this is what it seems though, you've got this kind of, um, this Jekyll and Hyde thing. "Chance? I don't wanna use that! Why do you pester me!?" It's like a drug addiction. (laughs)

M: There's some guilt involved, yeah. I should just forget about it and um... I haven't tried it recently, but what I think might, you know, wouldn't hurt is breaking things up a bit, introducing some er... anarchic element into the proceedings.

T: Into the piece itself or into the composition process?

M: Oh, in the piece itself.

T: Anarchic, like what?

M: I dunno.

T: Something completely external to your um... process of work or what you would expect...?

M: I doubt I would go that far. But maybe external to the process that's in motion at the time. (pause) Yeah, I dunno what's gonna happen to these pieces whether they... They're very very short which may help them survive! (laughs) Because they're basically one thing and then they're over.

T: Just a straightforward setting of- What are the texts?

M: They are sort of, asyntactic poems, surrealist maybe. I mean, they are early poems by an Austrian woman writer, and they er- I think the first time I tried to set them was in 1984. (laughs) So, oh my God!

T: You love them!

M: I do. I can't explain it. Because there's a lot of other poetry around which I hate for throwing together random words and they don't do anything for me, but these seem to evoke a specific atmosphere, they resonate.

T: What's her name?

M: Friederike Mayrocker.

T: Ultimately you'll have to spell that-

(End)