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20TH CENTURY MUSIC

May 1997
Volume 4, Number 5

MICHAEL HOFFMAN
Stravinsky's "Agon": An Overview Analysis
1

MARK ALBURGER
Dinner in the Loop with Charles Amirkhanian
10

CONCERT REVIEWS
A London Symphonic Season:
Montague, Lutoslawski, Ligeti
HANS THEODOR WOHLFAHRT
26

Jin and Yang
MARK PETERSEN
28

Pamela Z and Lukas Ligeti in The Lab
KATHRYN KETMAN
29

Music Not Music
MOLLY AXTMANN SCHRAG
30

Sound and Light
MARILYN HUDSON
31

Henry Cowell's "Whole World of Music"
KEVIN HOLM-HUDSON
32

RECORD REVIEW
Some Heir of 42
JEFF DUNN
34

CALENDAR
For May 1997
35

CHRONICLE
Of March 1997
37
Dinner in the Loop With Charles Amirkhanian

MARK ALBURGER

Born January 19, 1945, in Fresno, California — composer, percussionist, sound poet, and radio producer Charles Amirkhanian is a leading practitioner of electroacoustic music and text-sound composition, and has been instrumental in the dissemination of contemporary music through his work as Music Director of KPFA-FM Radio in Berkeley from 1969 to 1992. He also directed the Speaking of Music series at the Exploratorium in San Francisco (1983-1992) and was the founding Co-Director, with John Lifton, of the Composer-to-Composer Festival in Telluride, Colorado (1988-1991). Since 1993 he has been Executive Director of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, California, and Program Director of the Other Minds Festival, a new music event in San Francisco.

On July 15, 1996, I joined Charles Amirkhanian and his wife, Carol Law, for a vegetarian dinner at the Director's House of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program's spectacular Woodside retreat. The panoramic view of Coast Range foothills extended over Neil Young's rangeland holdings to the Pacific Ocean, in counterpoint to a foreground of what Amirkhanian characterized as a rather bizarre collection of fruits and vegetables. Naturally we began with food.

AMIRKHANIAN: We were in Sydney and went to the suburb of Paddington where Peggy Glanville-Hicks lived with a big shaggy dog that shed all over the apartment. The object was to meet her -- I had been a big fan of her music for a long time -- and Carol made a videotape of me interviewing her. Then she served us fresh shrimp, which she boiled up.

LAW: She said, "Would you like a little snack? Afternoon lunch?" We said, "Fine." She said, "Wonderful, I have fresh shrimp." We were drinking some sherry in jiggers. It was about two in the afternoon and she had this shrimp in the kitchen. So she brought the shrimp out in a bowl and put it down in front of her. It was boiled in the shell. But rather than serving it to us, or letting us help ourselves, she was going to peel it all for us. So she took each shrimp and she sat there and peeled it. Poo, her dog, sat right beside her in the chair. It was a really sweet dog with curly dark brown hair -- a full-sized poodle, but the SMALLEST dog that you would ever see. It was shedding; it had never been bathed, you could tell. The dog was licking and slobbering all over her. She pets him and then she picks another shrimp up, peals and pops it in the dog's mouth. The dog licks her hand. Then she peels the shrimp and reaches over to pop it into his mouth.

AMIRKHANIAN: You forget the part about the de-veining of the shrimp.

LAW: How did she do that?

AMIRKHANIAN: She would take it in her teeth and de-vein the shrimp and then hand it to you.

LAW: So not only did the dog lick it, but Peggy kissed it! You couldn't say, "I don't want to eat that shrimp!"

AMIRKHANIAN: She kept joking about her lobotomy, which was just something else. She had actually had one, I think. A brain operation of some sort.

LAW: It was so sad. But I think it was just obliviousness more than anything else. Eating experiences can take unusual turns.

ALBURGER: Reminds me of the anthropologists who would have to go and eat the "local lice," because that's the delicacy!

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, we had to eat local worms. We went to Mexico City.

ALBURGER: Was that to visit Conlon Nancarrow?

AMIRKHANIAN: It was the first time we met Conlon in 1969. Carol and I had just gotten married in December of '68 and we wanted to have our honeymoon somewhere nice. We decided, after we heard his music, to go down and meet Conlon in Mexico City. He was then unmarried, living kind of a hermetic existence, but he knew every restaurant that did not have muzak in it.

ALBURGER: That's important!

AMIRKHANIAN: He would not go to a restaurant where there was music playing in the background. He took us to one place that had taco specialties (In fact, he took us again there, many years later, but it's now disappeared). They would put anything you could imagine in tacos, and you would order maybe ten or eleven of them and sample them like hors d'oeuvres. At one point we were dipping these French fries in guacamole sauce, and I was remarking about how good they were, except they looked a little funny -- they had rings around them. We finally got Conlon to tell us that they were 'gusanos.'

LAW: They were deep-fried worms!

ALBURGER: Coming from a culture that puts worms in the bottom of their tequila.
LAW: They looked like cheese-its, but lighter colored. And they're very crispy, like pigskins. When he put them on the table, he was laughing and said, "Well, how do you like this?" Charles, of course, loves to eat and is very adventuresome. Charles had cleaned half the plate up, and then Conlon leans back and says, "You know what those are? Ha! Ha! Those are WORMS!"

ALBURGER: Was he eating them, too?

AMIRKHANIAN: Oh yes, and in fact they were quite good and I continued to eat them. But not Carol!

LAW: I had two. They were O.K. Conlon just thought that was the funniest thing in the world.

AMIRKHANIAN: But I think one of the most interesting experiences we've had over the years is to meet composers who were older, and to find out about their histories and adventures. Because many times these ideas and events weren't published anywhere. It was a really interesting pursuit, wherever we went to find people who had interesting things to document.

ALBURGER: How did you get on that kick?

AMIRKHANIAN: When I was in high school, I was a member of a debating organization that was a hundred years old. One of our oldest members was still living. It was the Fresno High School Senate, a kind of boys club where you would debate the public issues. The guy who had been a member of the Senate in 1888 was still living in the early '60s, and I found him and went over to his house and interviewed him and had slides taken of him for some major anniversary of this organization -- maybe the 75th anniversary. Then when it came time to play the tape and show the slides at an event, nobody of the alums who came back to the high school had the slightest interest in it. So I had done all this work but never got to show it to anybody. When I began working at KPFA I took the opportunity to start meeting everybody I was interested in meeting. Most people like to reminisce about their past and tell you interesting stories. It's a great deal of fun for them sometimes.

ALBURGER: Oh, yes. Here we are doing that again: looking at the mirror looking at the mirror. So in a way, the interest in documentation was a separate strand of your development apart from music. The interests come together.

AMIRKHANIAN: I guess I had the interest before. I was very close to my grandfather, who was a rancher -- he grew grapes. He was such a nice person, a nurturing person (and the same for his wife, my grandmother on my mother's side), that I think I naturally took to older people. I liked the history. The church that I attended when I was young: when it was torn down, I was the only person who went down and photographed all of it. It was built in 1903. It was an Armenian Protestant church. They were tearing it down to make a new building, and in the process losing a beautiful organ and an incredible set of stained-glass windows. I just had the sense that those things shouldn't be lost.

ALBURGER: Suddenly you were the historian.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes.

ALBURGER: Did you grow up in a rural situation? Or were you in downtown Fresno?

AMIRKHANIAN: My house was in central Fresno, right near the city college, which was formally the state college. My grandparents -- the only ones I knew who were living when I was living, who were on my mothers side -- were on a ranch near Sanger, which is outside of Fresno. My grandfather grew grapes and plums, and had an outdoor swimming pool that he built with his own hands that had a raised side that came up out of the ground about three feet. It was a very old-fashioned swimming pool. At the end of the day after everybody had swum, he would empty the water into the fields and irrigate the grapes.

ALBURGER: How long had the Amirkhanian side been in America?

AMIRKHANIAN: They came at the turn of the century -- first to New York and then to Fresno. And the other side, who's name is Kaprielian -- son of Gabriel -- came in the 1890's to Boston and then to Fresno.

ALBURGER: Is that an Armenian name as well?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes.

ALBURGER: Pure-bred?

AMIRKHANIAN: Uh-huh. My grandparents came when they were young. I was the second generation born in the United States. My parents were both born in Fresno.

ALBURGER: And mom was a daughter of a rancher.
AMIRKHANIAN: Right. She and her three sisters were all piano majors at Fresno State. She had this life-long interest in music. One of her sisters was my first piano teacher. Lorraine studied at Fresno State and got a masters at USC. There were some pretty interesting pianists on that faculty. And then she moved back to Fresno and started teaching piano and I was one of her first students. I was five.

ALBURGER: When you started playing the piano, that would have been the time when the Hovhaness record came into the household.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right.

ALBURGER: Had you grown up with a lot of Armenian music?

AMIRKHANIAN: No. None at all. Nothing. Didn't know a thing about it. Except for one 78-rpm record that was very important to me, which was Khachaturian's "Gayne" Ballet. In fact we had Mahler's Fourth Symphony and a lot of rather wonderful classical pieces on 78. One of my favorite recordings, I think, was the two-piano team of Vronsky and Babin. They recorded the Stravinsky piece for the elephants, "Circus Polka," in an arrangement, and [Rimsy-Korsakov]'s "Flight of the Bumblebee" and lots of arranged pieces for two pianos. That was, among our family, a big favorite, too. Two of my mother's sisters, who were never married, lived with my grandmother -- one of whom was my piano teacher -- had that recording. And we had it at our house, so we'd all listen to it at both houses.

ALBURGER: So it was a musically educated and sophisticated family.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, and my grandmother and grandfather both sang in the church choir and in an a cappella quartet. My grandfather was a tenor and my grandmother a very high soprano. They read music and were very involved in music as an art form. My mother was the church organist and studied organ at Fresno State, where she graduated with a B.A. in music in 1939. That was a time when anybody who studied piano in college would play in group ensemble pieces for four, eight, sixteen pianos -- big concerts at the end of the spring. And then Gilbert and Sullivan operettas at the college in the summers. I grew up going to all of those things, and also going to events of the Fresno Musical Club, which was a monthly concert series which had famous pianists coming through town: Guiomar Novaes and Dame Myra Hess and Walter Gieseking -- all these people played in Fresno and I was there for many of these events.

ALBURGER: So it would have hardly felt like a backwater growing up.

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I thought I was in New York City, you know? I didn't know, from that perspective, that there was anything more.

ALBURGER: But that's not bad for being in an agricultural town in the Central Valley of California.

AMIRKHANIAN: It was probably due to the college that there was so much interest in music at all.

ALBURGER: You started percussion then at some time.

AMIRKHANIAN: In the fifth grade a woman came into the classroom and said, "We need someone who can read music to play the drums in the orchestra." And there were only two people that read music -- my friend Ric Conaway and myself -- and we were asked to come down to the auditorium and read a couple of rhythmic patterns. I read them better than Ric, and so they put me in the orchestra.

ALBURGER: This was an orchestra for what age group?

AMIRKHANIAN: Fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.

ALBURGER: How good did you play at piano?

AMIRKHANIAN: I could play part of the Alban Berg Sonata, Opus 1 -- but not all the way through! I played a lot of "Ludus Tonalis" by Hindemith. Things like that that I like. I love Bartók's piano music, but couldn't play the most difficult pieces. I enjoyed piano playing more after I quit my piano lessons, for some reason. I guess because I could select the pieces that I wanted to play. And I always remember that I tended to like pieces in minor keys or with modern harmonies. Kabalevsky's Sonatina I loved. I didn't like Mozart. I didn't enjoy playing Czerny.

ALBURGER: We can do business.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right! So I got off into these other pieces.

ALBURGER: Was this a process of self-discovery?

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Heft 2

12. Variationen über ein eigenes Thema
AMIRKHANIAN: Absolutely. I had a band teacher in high school, when I was in marching band and concert band, whose name was Harry Buryukhan -- another Armenian -- a trumpet player who would play Las Vegas all the time and would come back to Fresno from time to time with showgirls on his arm and walk around town -- never married as far as I know. Harry was a great band director, very inspiring, and he got all of us going during the concert season playing contemporary American composers. He would play the Frederick Fennell LPs for us LOUD into the big Fresno High Auditorium that sat 3000 people. He'd turn up the volume on these huge large speakers and say, "Now here's what this piece really sounds like." And it really was exciting. And for five percent of the kids in the band it was pivotal. I don't think he has any idea how important that was. I once wrote him and tried to explain it to him. It was there that I heard music by Persichetti and Piston and Schuman and so forth and got turned on to it, because, you see, in pieces like those, the percussionists had a great role. So I had something to do. Every time a piece like that came around, I loved it.

ALBURGER: But playing Mozart. I'm an oboist -- neither of us get much to do.

AMIRKHANIAN: No, that's right. There you go.

ALBURGER: So that's why we're 20th-century people.

AMIRKHANIAN: Maybe. The other thing that happened was that I discovered percussion ensemble music at some point. Probably the last year of high school. I went to a clinic at Fresno State, led by a man named Ed Jackson, who was a percussionist in Fresno. He played an LP for us in the concert hall that had music by Cage and Lou Harrison. And Cage's music I had known from a 78, and here he was popping up again, not this time with prepared piano, but with a whole percussion ensemble style of writing. I was very excited about that. My colleague in the band, Tom Bendon (who was a very talented pianist and percussionist, but went on to work for Hewlett-Packard and has no involvement in music) and I wrote pieces on New Year's Eve in 1961 -- when we were both playing in a Dixieland band, during the breaks -- percussion ensemble pieces. We raced to finish them before the year ended. So just before midnight that year I finished my first composition for percussion ensemble. We would try to rap it out [our pieces] for each other and play what the five percussionists would sound like. The piece has never been performed, but I went on to write about 25 other percussion pieces, and Tom never wrote another one. But he and I challenging each other got it started. There wasn't much activity in Fresno like that and I was working pretty much in a void. When I got to college (I went to Fresno State), the music department had gotten as far as Hindemith, but no further in a compositional sense. But I was lucky to meet a music librarian who was a gay man named Ronald Harlan. Ron allowed me to surreptitiously take home from the library 50 or 60 LPs at a time.

And during the course of my stay at Fresno State I listened to every LP of music of the 20th century, period...that they had in the library. They had the best music library in the State University system because of Ron's activities. So I heard very, very rare LPs from the late '40s - '50s. So no one else had: everything up to 1962, complete. I would take home the complete Webern and listen to it from beginning to end, driving my parents absolutely frantic.

ALBURGER: What's gone wrong with our boy?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yeah. Well, they'd just leave the room. They realized they didn't want to expose themselves to too much of that. I had a great deal of trouble, at first, listening to Hindemith. For me, it was very weird. And as I listened, I realized that I was becoming accustomed to the chromaticism and the dissonance. It became second nature. By the time I got to Boulez, I could handle it. This was an era in the early '60s in which in America, you could very rarely find any of the avant-garde European composers on LP, except for one series of records which Earle Brown produced at the time. That series had the concert percussion for orchestra album that I heard in my percussion seminar. I was so influenced by the record, that I listened to the Kagel and other records in that series: Feldman and various other composers, and realized that there was something out there greater that the neoclassic composers -- not greater than, but different from.

ALBURGER: Beyond.

AMIRKHANIAN: Beyond. Stockhausen's "Zyklius" was on that series and "Refrain" and pieces like that.

ALBURGER: So it was time to go to San Francisco.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right. I began to go to San Francisco because my parents became partners in a greeting card shop that sold wedding invitations. They had to go to San Francisco to buy wholesale for the store. So we'd go and stay in a motel on Market Street. Then they would go to buy things and I'd go haunt the record shops and look for the complete piano music of Bartók. I discovered my first record of Antheil's music on one of those trips.

ALBURGER: This would have been back in high school? Or college?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yeah, last year of high school, first couple years of college. Then I moved to San Francisco in 1967 and got a job at the record store where I found all these rarities, which was called the Sea of Records.

ALBURGER: Where was it located?
AMIRKHANIAN: 116 - 9th Street. It was near the corner of Mission and there's a Chinese rosewood furniture place there now. And this was an amazing store, run by an eccentric rich owner from Santa Barbara, who had a very good store manager who later became very prominent in distributing in California: Woody Bader. Woody was an opera fanatic and he made sure that every out-of-print record that they could find would go into the downstairs used section and be sold for 98 cents to $3.98, or something like that. Instead of getting a paycheck while I was going to graduate school at San Francisco State, I mostly took my paychecks in records and built a huge collection. By the time I started at KPFA, I already owned 500 records, which was kind of unusual at that time.

ALBURGER: Well, your collection has continued to grow. And this is only part of it that I see here?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, those are just CDs. I still have seven or eight thousand records at home. I've sold a lot of them, because I'm never going to use them. I'm not going to use the ones I've kept, either! And you can't get anything for them. Occasionally I'm finding myself going back to them now.

ALBURGER: Not everything has been brought over [from LPs].

AMIRKHANIAN: No. You would think so, but it's not true.

ALBURGER: So, working at the record store on 9th street, going to San Francisco State...

AMIRKHANIAN: ...going to concerts at the Tape Music Center. I gave concerts at the Dancers Workshop Company.

ALBURGER: Still with percussion at this point?

AMIRKHANIAN: Theatre-pieces, more. Things where percussionists did actions. Also, I was making a lot of speech pieces in which four voices would be speaking words in various combinations. Speech rather than song.

ALBURGER: I noticed that one of your work lists starts in '69: would that have been about when the text pieces began?

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I actually started doing live text pieces in 1965 and they were usually quartets or trios or duos. They were usually composed on a typewriter with coordination marks.

ALBURGER: You had already discovered the Toch "Geographical Fugue"?

AMIRKHANIAN: Right, yes, just before that, and it reminded me of percussion music for one thing.

ALBURGER: In fact your first piece was a percussion quintet, so you were thinking lines of music. And now you take those lines and just make them voices instead of percussion.

AMIRKHANIAN: Sure, that's right. At some point when I was living in Fresno, I became very interested in Happenings. This would have been 1966 or 7. I met a painter named Ted Greer. And Ted and I developed a notation system which was not like conventional music, but rather drawings and images that we played as if they were meant to be performed and interpreted subjectively. He would draw a line and I would draw a line, and we would play each other's lines simultaneously in time. There might be a splurt or a sunburst on the page, and you would do something that would be...

ALBURGER: Sunbursty.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes. Then there'd be a long wavy line and you would do things like that.

ALBURGER: Were you aware of graphic notations?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes. What was different about this was that it allowed for psychological involvement. It was not a scientific practice. It was kind of a...

ALBURGER: ...an intuitive...

AMIRKHANIAN: More intuitive and more expressionistic, I would say, because very often you would not only make a sound but do a theatrical action at the same time. And so if you see pictures of us performing, you'll see a roll of serpentine [party favor streamer] flying through the air as someone shouts something. There would be a tub full of jello, and you would take a tape recorder and lift it up and drop it into the jello. So you'd get this "OOF" sound, but you'd also have the image of a tape-recorder, which is a music-playback device, being doused in jello.

ALBURGER: Takes a lot of work to set that up, too.
AMIRKHANIAN: Got to make that jello! Ted had been influenced by the Dadaists and was interested also in Jung, and had studied with a German professor at Fresno State named Heinz Kusel. Heinz was the kind of person who really turned on students to all the possibilities of the world of art. With his German background and European experience -- an older man, older than we were, by maybe twenty years -- he brought to education a kind of depth that was the kind of profound thinking that you encounter once in a lifetime. So he had Ted read Robert Motherwell's book on the Dada painters: "Dada Painters and Poets," I think it's called. From that Ted became interested in Jung and started to talk to me about how we could open up the psyche and try to plumb the subconscious in our performances. Ted was the kind of person who could do these things that would be absurd-looking with a totally straight face. I was the yo-yo who was always breaking character. I would try to be serious, but I could not bring myself to be that austere. If I did something funny I would often break character and laugh. I used to hate that about myself! And it would bother Ted. But we did this for two or three years in Fresno and became known as kind of the bad boys of that cultural scene.

ALBURGER: The Bad Boys of Fresno.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yeah! We were doing some of our performances at Fresno State as sanctioned concerts by the music department, and got in quite a bit of trouble with a couple of people in the department. Then we began to do performances at the Fresno Hotel, which is a retirement hotel -- some of the people who were sitting in the lobby were half-dead, and here we were doing these wild things. About the time we were becoming too notorious to stay in town, Ted and I both moved to San Francisco.

ALBURGER: Is that your only theatrical background?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes.

ALBURGER: Makes sense, since you broke character!

AMIRKHANIAN: That's right! I didn't have the training for it. Also I was involved with the dancers in Fresno. I would do music for dance performances. Janice Wentworth, who was a choreographer, was a good friend, and also was very involved with this Happenings Movement. We were all reading books by Dick Higgins that he would send free to us from Something Else Press. Beautiful volumes about texts and art and happenings.

ALBURGER: How did that connection start?

AMIRKHANIAN: I wrote to Dick Higgins -- I forget how -- and asked him to send some information on his press, and instead he sent a box of samples of his books. I didn't know he was rich. I think his family was the Higgins Ink family. Dick had a habit of publishing very expensively-bound beautifully-made books about totally outside artists. One day he sent a box of his complete publications to me and I shared them with people at Fresno State. We started in the Experimental College at Fresno State (which was big in those days, having Experimental Colleges) a Happenings Class with Heinz Kusel as the teacher. We would have Happenings and Events as part of the regular activities. When I came to San Francisco State (I had graduated from Fresno State with a B.A. in English and started an English major at San Francisco State for a Master's degree), after a semester I found out about the Interdisciplinary Creative Arts Department and transferred to that -- which floored me, because I couldn't believe I had found one of the only Interdisciplinary Program in the U.S., and it was right at the school that I enrolled at.

ALBURGER: Lucky.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yeah!

ALBURGER: I would have thought that by this point, doing all this music, you would have thought "music" when you got to San Francisco. By this point you were doing the "text-things," so you were thinking English.

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I was thinking in terms of getting a job, really. I didn't think I had the conventional background in music to teach college. But I thought in English, I could do that. And then after getting to San Francisco State and spending a semester in the Shakespeare class and writing a paper on the Ghost in Hamlet, and realizing that sixty books had been published on the Ghost in Hamlet, I realized that maybe this was a field that I wanted to get out of. I had been reading Clark Coolidge and some of the very experimental poets. But in these schools you have to understand that in the early 60's, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley and Kerouac -- none of those people were taken seriously, and these were my interests at the time. I just didn't see a future there for me.

ALBURGER: So what was important was to find something in the cracks. Did San Francisco, despite the Shakespeare experience, seem like a little slice of heaven? It sounds like things were pretty good with that Experimental College in Fresno. Did you feel the world was opening up for you, with the record shop and the Tape Music Center?
AMIRKHANIAN: I realized that there were some people that could take you seriously in this field who had stature. For instance, I was doing performances at the Dancer’s Workshop, which was a place that you could rent out and do a concert, and I did do. I was approached afterward by Larry Halprin -- Anna Halprin’s husband -- and he had been conceiving a book on scores: how architects use “scores” to make buildings. He was fascinated by the scores that Ted and I were making for each other. In fact, within the first ten or fifteen pages of his book, our scores are there. He actually said that this pushed him over the edge into wanting to do this book, which he had just been contemplating. He saw this connection to our music. He got very excited. And then Anna (Ann as she was called then) came up to me and asked me if I would work with the dance company. So I became involved in a major production that she was doing to open the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, which was just being built. I did the music for a performance called “Ceremony of Us,” which was a very complicated project involving dancers from Watts who were black and dancers from San Francisco and Marin County who were all white -- working together in workshops for an entire summer, culminating with a performance where they jointly performed in L.A. I mean, Ann’s always been on the cutting edge of choreography and dance, and this was so far out, because it involved literally psychodrama amongst the participants. I was there for a lot of that and witnessed this, and was shaken by it on occasion. It really made me feel like I had reached another level.

ALBURGER: What was the musical response?

AMIRKHANIAN: What I did was work with tape recordings of the rehearsals and manipulate those tapes and then score some things for large horns that people blew (I forget how we came across these large Tibetan-style horns), but the piece ended with a procession, exiting the hall, with the audience following the dancers out into the street. I was responsible for making tape sounds that were echoed in the performance and various other things. I guess the next thing that happened that was very important for me was that as I worked at the Sea of Records, I began to meet a lot of people in San Francisco. One of them was Clark Coolidge, who came in. We discussed a record of Gertrude Stein’s poetry, which he had never heard. As I recall, he was looking for it and I sold it to him. Then I found out that he was the guy whose poetry I had been buying at City Lights [Bookstore] in the “weird magazine” stand! So we became very friendly, and his neighbor, John Payne, who is also from Providence, Rhode Island -- John worked with me on a number of Ann Halprin pieces. He was a very good technical person with tape recorders and homemade electronics, and a very interesting conceptual thinker in music. He and Clark and I did early programs at KPFA when I got the job there. Clark and I became very friendly and worked together on various things. Clark is perhaps the most prominent poet in what’s called the Language School of poetry. He’s sort of like the Aaron Copland of the Language School.

He’s also a jazz drummer and his dad was the chairman of the Music Department at Brown, so he had a huge background in music. But his interest was in Kerouac and Stein -- conversation transmuted into music, and language, as Kerouac used it, in a musical way. Images of words as “drum-points” in space, you could say. So that changed a little bit my thinking about the text-sound pieces I was doing. Rather than using phrases and patterns of words and rhythms, I started using individual words that didn’t have any syntactical relation.

ALBURGER: So something like “Just” comes out of that.

AMIRKHANIAN: That’s right.

ALBURGER: Why that title? Is it “just” those few words?

AMIRKHANIAN: That title was given the piece because, the engineer in the recording studio in Sweden turned to me and said, “Well, what do you call this? Just...?” And I said, “O.K.!!...Just!” And I thought, “Gee, you know, that’s interesting: I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a piece called ‘Just!’” It’s not like it’s overly used. The other thing that happened while I was at the Sea of Records was that I began to sell records to Robert Hughes and John Rockwell, people who were working with KPFA Radio. John was doing a midnight show there. And I sold John his first minimalist recording.

ALBURGER: Wow.

AMIRKHANIAN: It was "Come Out," by Steve Reich, or something like that. I said, "John, you’ve gotta take this home and listen to it. I knew he was an opera buff, but he also had an ear for the unusual. And he came back after heard this recording, and he said, "What else do you know!"

ALBURGER: So you gave him a primer!

AMIRKHANIAN: Then Bob Hughes, the same thing. We would compare notes on what was just out. And Bob told me that the job at KPFA had come open, because Howard Hersh was leaving to move to the [San Francisco] Conservatory to start a fantastic concert series that the Ford Foundation had funded at the De Young Museum, which went on for four or six years, and was co-produced by Bob Moran. Those were very, very interesting concerts. I went over to apply for the job and I guess there weren’t too many people applying for the job, because they knew something at KPFA that I didn’t know: it was a political hellhole for new-music people. And the salary was only $130 a week!

ALBURGER: There had been some turnover since Robert Erickson?

AMIRKHANIAN: A lot.
ALBURGER: But then there wasn't turnover for quite a while.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right. I stayed there for 23 years, so that was quite a long time. I did get away for six months or a year every time Carol got a teaching job out of town -- once at the Art Institute of Chicago for a half a year, and once at UC Santa Barbara for a full year, and other people would fill in for me. I was there a long time.

ALBURGER: What was your secret, in terms of this "political hellhole"?

AMIRKHANIAN: I guess I have a high tolerance level for abuse! Also, I was so deeply involved in the experience of discovering music while I was there, by meeting people who came to town, or my travelling out and interviewing people. I paid for my trips. They were my vacations, but I would spend them meeting people, the way you probably do. It was always so much more interesting to meet the individual after you had heard the music. I found there were a lot of composers whose music I liked better after I met them and found out what the motivation was, and really listened more carefully, than if I didn't. There were also reverse situations: some people can be so unpleasant that, no matter how good their music is...!

ALBURGER: It colors you a little bit!

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes. Actually, the good music is good whether the person is interesting or not! But I realized also that the audience that listened to the radio was not a trained music audience, and that they would benefit a great deal by hearing the actual voices of the composers. The fact that it wasn't an academic situation and I could make interesting this person's experience of listening to music by interviewing the composer was to me a real challenge and a lot of fun.

ALBURGER: Would you bring composers into the studio and bring them on the air?

AMIRKHANIAN: At first we taped interviews and edited them. Then, as the year's went by, there was less and less time for that. The format of the station changed drastically and we did many more interviews live. Sometimes they really clicked, other times they were dead in the water and you wished the person would not be there!

ALBURGER: It occurs to me that some of the "action" had already passed in San Francisco by the time you arrived: the Tape Music Center had been founded, Riley's "In C" had been done -- he was gone by this point -- Reich was also gone -- you got to know Reich "from the album."

AMIRKHANIAN: Right. Didn't know him then.

ALBURGER: When did you start your association with the Tape Music Center?

AMIRKHANIAN: When my parents came up to San Francisco for these "gift shows" as they were called, I would go to the Tape Music Center and hear concerts, so I had been there a few times. I had seen dance and music performances that were quite astonishing. I don't know what year it was, but I saw Pauline Oliveros play a piece by Ramon Sender called "Desert Ambulance," in which she sat on stage with her accordion and an enormous screen full of images were projected in back of her, I think by Anthony Martin, who was a colleague of Subotnick's. So, whenever that was -- it could have been '63 or '64 or '65 -- I had begun to become acquainted with this place as the central place. Before that there was a guy in Fresno who ran a folk music festival, and he had in his backyard an enormous tower. He received KPFA at night -- on good nights! When there was a Tape Music Center live concert, I would go to his house and we would tune it in. Through the static you would hear the announcers and the music being played. Thrilling, for somebody in Fresno! Unbelievable. In fact, it was unusual by any standards to have that kind of music broadcast on a non-commercial radio station anywhere in the United States. KPFA was truly a pioneer in that field.

ALBURGER: Was there anything exciting you at San Francisco State, or was more of your energy spent going to concerts and talking to people at the record store?

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I think at San Francisco State the exciting things for me were the poetry readings: hearing Robert Bly reading his work -- before he became the Robert Bly we know -- was wonderful. He was walking around with a blanket on his back and every English major was crowded into a little tiny facility -- little tiny room that was a kind of student center. And we would listen to these great readings. At Fresno State I met George Oppen, who had been a friend of Nanurry's in Mexico City, during the Communist purge period. I reconnected with George, who had moved to San Francisco from Brooklyn, by the time I got to San Francisco. I would go to readings with him or hang out with his wife, Mary, and him at their Polk Street apartment, where lots of younger artists came -- almost like a pilgrimage to this guy's place every week. The San Francisco State scene was not an interesting music scene at all. The music that I heard that was interesting was off-campus.

ALBURGER: You had been doing the text-pieces, but the tape pieces...?

AMIRKHANIAN: I started making tape pieces in Fresno, with tape equipment at the college. I wrote a Concerto for Trombone and Autoschedism Ensemble -- an improvisation ensemble.

ALBURGER: Autoschedism. What's it mean?

AMIRKHANIAN: I don't know! But I had a Portuguese friend named Sousa who would look up obscure words in the dictionary!
ALBURGER: So you had actually done tape music.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, tape mixed with live ensembles, and very crude "concrete" tape collages and speed changes and so forth. And then when I really started up the tape work in earnest, not just the little Wollensak tape recorders, but with really good tape recorders, that was at KPFA. I started work at KPFA on July 8, 1969, which was the birthday of Grainger and Antheil, as I found out later.

ALBURGER: Serendipitous.

AMIRKHANIAN: Unbelievably. The fact of having four tape recorders -- four mono machines in one room at KPFA enabled me to make tape-loop pieces. But when I got to the Swedish Radio in '72 to recreate some of those and make some new ones, I really had professional equipment. Those pieces are the first ones of mine that are absolutely of top professional quality. "Just" is one of those pieces.

ALBURGER: And then in '73?

AMIRKHANIAN: Then I was at the Dutch Radio, also very good equipment. Boy, those were wonderful days! Being able to be in Sweden for a week, working on nothing but composing, and having five or six full days in a top-flight radio studio. By the way, there was no multi-tracking in those days.

ALBURGER: So it was all just these mono machines?

AMIRKHANIAN: All just mono machines fed in through a mixer to a stereo machine.

ALBURGER: The recordings do sound very clean to this day. One wouldn't know how crude some of the technology was.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right. And, you know, there's a point in "Just" where there's a kind of caesura and then everything comes back. At that point, we had six or seven engineers all pushing a button to start at the same moment. We had to do that seven or eight times just to get it! Because you can't control an analog tape machine. But that was a thrill to make that piece and to hear that. It was really triumphant to get that all started at once. And you can't explain now to people how difficult that was then. Really tough.

ALBURGER: Now you had heard Steve Reich's tape stuff by this point?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, very obviously. And Clark Coolidge had heard it too. Clark was trying to make pieces with multiple loops on the loop player that Terry Riley had used at Mills.

ALBURGER: Had you heard Terry's older tape music, pre-"In C"?

AMIRKHANIAN: No.

ALBURGER: "Mescalin Mix"?

AMIRKHANIAN: Never heard it.

ALBURGER: You had heard "In C"?

AMIRKHANIAN: I had heard [Reich's] "Come Out" first and "It's Gonna Rain" and then "In C" later. But the pivotal pieces for me were the loop text pieces.

ALBURGER: Because they were texts.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes.

ALBURGER: And this was directly, "what's next," given that.

AMIRKHANIAN: That's right. In the case of Steve's pieces, he would take a loop and play it for the duration of the piece. And my idea was to have a more restless minimalism, where you would seamlessly change and move through time a little bit faster. I think I was the first person to do that actually. Its like "Seatbelt," where you can't hear how I change the loop. What really happened was that I was recording on a multi-track machine, and I would stop a loop on one machine and change the loop, and that would be on let's say just the track three, and then start up a different loop, recording or punching in track three. Because of the density of the layers of the texts, you would not notice when things were changing. That was another very difficult technical feat. One of the reasons, I think, the other minimalists didn't do it was because it was so tiring. It was difficult to do, and they were also discovering the limits of concentration with their work. But I didn't want to do that, so I took it in a different direction.

ALBURGER: Interesting that Terry Riley was the one that did tape loops, but soon moved off in a different direction. Steve picked up the loops with voices and then went off in different direction. And you take the loops and keep the voices and go in yet a third direction.

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I wouldn't have done it, I'm sure, without Steve Reich's work.

ALBURGER: And yet, of course, those two pieces that you mention of Steve's are the last pieces that he does like that for several decades. He goes to "Piano Phase" and "Violin Phase" and abandons text for quite awhile. And yet he didn't abandon the loop and phase notion, which Terry abandoned. Everyone takes their own course! The aspect of the cleanliness of the sound: did that provide a particular challenge when you were taping Nicolas Slonimsky's comments on "Just" for your "Heavy Aspirations"?

10+2.12
AMIRKHANIAN: Well, luckily, that was recorded in a lecture in which we had a very good sound recordist. And subsequently I think that original lecture tape has been misplaced, I've been searching everywhere for it. It was made at Mills College, I think by a man named George Craig who was our engineer at KPFA. George was a fantastic -- still is -- recording engineer. He owned very expensive Neumann microphones, which he employed for KPFA all the time.

ALBURGER: Were you at Mills at this point?

AMIRKHANIAN: No. I made "Just" in late '72 or early '73. I wasn't at Mills until 1985 or '86.

ALBURGER: So that's why "Heavy Aspirations" is so clean as well.

AMIRKHANIAN: And Nicolas was standing on stage very far from the audience.

ALBURGER: The particular words: "Rainbow, Chug, Bandit, Bomb" those are just words that intuitively you thought, "These are great words to use. I like these words."

AMIRKHANIAN: Right.

ALBURGER: "Seatbelt" is the same kind of thing.

AMIRKHANIAN: Also that the character of the words is such that you have fricatives and different sorts of plosive sounds. I think what happens for me in "Seatbelt," for instance (as Terry Riley and Steve have pointed out): when you get inside a texture where you have a lot of "Seatbelt - Seatbelt - Seatbelt - be - be - be - belt - belt" you start listening to the B's and the S's, or some aspect of the repetition which is not the whole word. Your mind begins to play tricks on you. It shows you a way to listen. But there are times when, in "Seatbelt," the B's begin to double over on themselves. If you listen carefully to the piece your hear this "b-b-b-belt-belt-belt," where the juxtaposition of several B's on top of themselves (or "bel's", I guess), create an audio illusion -- a kind of bubbling sound -- that's unexpected.

ALBURGER: This aspect of Steve's work which then becomes much more of a focus for you strikes me as something that could only have been done by someone who was working at a radio station, with lots of people around, with lots of great equipment.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, that's right!

ALBURGER: So often it seems like the most effective music that we write is music that speaks to our own experience. That comes out of our lives.
I said, "No Tom, what you do is you start with #1751." And so 1750 Arch Records #1752 -- the second release -- was the text-sound record. I thought that was a very funny play on numbers.

ALBURGER: Most people just go with "#1001."

AMIRKHANIAN: Right. Which I hate for some reason.

ALBURGER: Because it's so obvious --

AMIRKHANIAN: -- that they have not released 1000 records. Never in their wildest dreams! So then I went back to Tom and I said, "There are some other things I think are really neat. What about this idea of electronic compositions by women? We have Mills College here, a lot of women are composing music that are not on recordings -- this would be a great statement." And he finally agreed and we did that recording together. At the time, Tom was married to Chris Buckner who was studying to be an attorney, and they had adopted many children from different countries of the world who were all from countries that we had oppressed: Vietnam... Many of them had physical disabilities, so they had a very complicated family life. In Chris's haste to become politically correct, she began to oppose the project, because I was the producer. Finally as we went to press, she told Tom, "You cannot release this record, because a man is editing it." I thought about it for awhile. I was married to a feminist artist and had always been a proponent of helping women composers on the radio and concerts and so forth, so it was something that I wanted to do because I liked music by Peggy Glanville-Hicks and Johanna Beyer, etc. All the musicians in my family whom I respected were women: my grandmother, my mother, my three sisters -- those were the good musicians I knew early on. So I decided to fight it, because they were going to pull the record. I called the women composers on the record and had them call Chris to say, "What the HELL are you doing? This is my first chance to be on a recording and you're going to screw it up because a guy put it together? GET REAL! Somehow it got turned around and the record got released. And a good thing too, because it was the first commercial record of Laurie Anderson's! She had never gotten a commercial release out. It was the first commercial recording -- LP -- of Johanna Beyer and Ruth Anderson, Megan Roberts, and Laurie Spiegel. The record now is selling for $300 a copy. You can't find it anywhere. CRI has asked to re-release it and we are going to write to the composers and ask permission to re-release it [The recording was released on CRI 728 in early 1997].

ALBURGER: How much of a distribution had Arch Records?

AMIRKHANIAN: They made maybe a thousand of each recording and it took three or four years to get rid of 500. These were very slow-selling records.

ALBURGER: Were they actually placed in record stores?

AMIRKHANIAN: Oh yes, they were widely distributed and widely returned to the distributor. It was a money-losing affair.

ALBURGER: But Tom Buckner could foot the bill on this?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes. Sometimes people shared costs with them, but mostly they covered costs. The most expensive project I submitted to them was to go to Mexico and record Nancarrow's player-piano studies. Tom wanted to do it, finally when he heard the music, because he was a jazz enthusiast. Conlon's very influenced by jazz.

ALBURGER: Was that the first commercial release of Nancarrow?

AMIRKHANIAN: No. There was a Columbia record that preceded it that Gordon Mumma produced with a Mexican engineer's tape in 1968 or 9... '69. It was on Columbia. It was not terribly, perfectly recorded -- it was a little shrill -- BUT it certainly turned a lot of us on, and when it went out of print a year after it was released, it was a tragedy. I spent ten years trying to get somebody else to fill in the gap. I wrote to Tracy Sterne at Nonesuch. She had no interest whatsoever. She later told me it was the biggest mistake of her life -- one thing she feels she really blew it on. So eventually, eight years later, Tom sends me to Mexico with Bob Shoemaker. Bob's girlfriend Eva Soltes comes for part of the trip, although she really couldn't stay for the whole time. But she finally called and said, "Look we're having such a good time -- Carol's here -- Bob's here -- come on down." She subsequently became Conlon's manager and convinced him for the first time ever since the late 40's to come back to the United States for the New Music America Festival in San Francisco in 1981. Subsequently she was very helpful in getting his music played throughout Europe and really managing him. We released one record at a time -- we ended up doing four of Conlon's.

ALBURGER: How many recordings were put out by 1750 Arch?

AMIRKHANIAN: They put out 50 or so. I think they ended up with 1798 or 99. There was one item that's extremely rare. They made a completely undistributed recording of the piano music of Josef Matthias Hauer, who is a wonderful Austrian composer.

ALBURGER: Sure, the Schoenberg also-ran.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes. Hauer's music is a cross between Satie and Webern. I find a lot of it quite fascinating but...

ALBURGER: That's a great characterization!
AMIRKHANIAN: ...very still, very minimal. He'll take an arpeggio and repeat it five times, each time changing one note. The recording had an error. It was made by Josef Kubera, who's now living in New York. And Joe made the unforgivable mistake of not checking the master carefully, so that when the record was printed and shrink-wrapped, there was one cut which was not in the correct order, or it wasn't on the record, or something wrong was put in. And so the entire record -- Tom didn't want to pay to have the whole thing done again. He was angry and the record company was about to go out of business anyway, so that record was never released. A thousand of them were sitting in the warehouse -- I don't know what happened to them. I have one. There aren't too many records of Hauer's music, so it's rather unfortunate.

ALBURGER: That's not the only technical foul-up that I've ever heard of.

AMIRKHANIAN: There have been others, that's right.

ALBURGER: But it sounds like a curse worse than the disease.

AMIRKHANIAN: They could have put in an errata slip.

ALBURGER: How are you able to balance your own creative work with your work as a proponent of new music in general?

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I am one of those people who's very curious about a lot of things. When I'm composing, I'm really excited about it. I feel I'd like to spend a lot more time than I do on it. But I'm not the kind of person who wants to compose all the time, to the exclusion of interacting with other people, or hearing music, or supporting other people. So I have gone this different route. Now, usually what happens to people like that is that you get very marginalized and very disappointed, and I think that the nice thing that's happened to me is that I've felt that when I do apply for grants or do pieces of my own, that there is quite a bit of support. I think of people like William Schuman who ran Juilliard for years and tried to be a composer at the same time. And then, in general, how difficult it is to be a composer in the United States and do nothing else, unless you're independently wealthy or you're in the top 3% -- not too many people have done that in the U.S., and I admire those who have done it. But I think my particular personality is different in that I don't like to be the only person I'm listening to. On the other hand, I'm very proud of a lot of the music that I've done. I often wonder why I don't write more. I go back and listen to what I've done and I'm usually very happy with it.

ALBURGER: What led you to shift gears toward the Synclavier and sounds rather than text?

AMIRKHANIAN: I actually attribute a lot of that to my friendship with Henry Kaiser. I was working on "Gold and Spirit," a 1984 piece that I did for radio broadcast during the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Henry came into the studio where I was working at the 1750 Arch Studio, where I made a lot of my pieces.

ALBURGER: Were your text-sound pieces created for broadcasts or for your albums?

AMIRKHANIAN: No, they were created for concerts and then they were broadcast and released on albums later.

ALBURGER: And you had Carol's visuals for many of those concerts.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, we performed together for over ten years. We had a life-sized eight-foot-high screen that I stood in front of. I would walk back and forth with the microphone and intone some of the layers of text over pieces.

ALBURGER: Were you still doing theatrical things as well?

AMIRKHANIAN: Not terribly much, no.

ALBURGER: They're quite animated pieces.

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, I'm not really jumping around and dancing like Michael Jackson. I guess there were a couple of pieces. In one, I'm lying on a bed and there are some actions. I'll sit up slowly and sigh. So there are some instances.

ALBURGER: But then your relationship with Henry Kaiser....

AMIRKHANIAN: So Kaiser comes into the studio and he says, "Oh gosh, why don't you plug in this?" He had a harmonizer and I tried it and a couple of effects worked really well and I appropriated them in this piece. John Adams heard the piece and said, "Gee, this is really a great new direction. I want to program this on the [San Francisco] Symphony's New and Unusual Music Series. So he did that. Then I thought, "Hm, wow, interesting." Then Henry said, "Well, come on over to my studio," and introduced me to the Synclavier, which he had just purchased. He was still reading the manual and we were figuring things out together.

ALBURGER: The pioneers of new music! "How do you plug this in?"
AMIRKHANIAN: He unpacks it out of the box, and the manual’s three volumes thick. I’m not going to read that thing, because it’s not my toy! I’d do other things and go away and come back a month later and Henry would say, “You can do this too.” Henry gradually became a master of this instrument. I would come over there with ambient sounds, and then trade [synclavier time] for giving him whatever sounds I recorded. I’d put them in his memory bank. Other people and he were doing the same thing. We had 15-20 people going over to Henry’s — dropping sounds into his memory bank. And Henry would have to go out and buy more gigabytes of memory.

ALBURGER: So that’s I suppose why you never bothered to get your own.

AMIRKHANIAN: $50,000 is the reason I never bought one. I was working at KPFA.

ALBURGER: That’s a very good reason!

AMIRKHANIAN: You can buy them for $10,000 — but if you want any bells and whistles... [Frank] Zappa’s cost $200,000 ten years ago. When he had his 50th birthday, his wife bought him another, and it was a huge one.

ALBURGER: Henry is a composer himself.

AMIRKHANIAN: He’s a composer on the synclavier and guitar and has appeared on at least 300 CDs. He’s prolific. Free improvisation is one of his fields. He does a lot of covers of Grateful Dead tunes, and he’s gone to Madagascar and recorded with musicians there. He’s made collaborative works with lots of people. He’s a people-person who likes to intersect with various people. He even lured me into working with the Synclavier, and I’m very grateful to him.

ALBURGER: And so that transition from text-sound to Synclavier.

AMIRKHANIAN: That happened in ’84 to ’92, when I left KPFA. Since I left KPFA, I haven’t worked at all in composing. And one of the ironies is that, when I came to the Djerassi Program, I was hoping to work here half-time and Carol was going to work here half-time and we were going to do our own work.

ALBURGER: These are half-time jobs that are full-time jobs.

AMIRKHANIAN: This is a full-time job that they split between Carol and me. But we came to realize that there was so much to do here that we just didn’t have time to be artists; that if we were going to succeed here, to help other artists, we would have to give up what we were doing for a while. We did that for the experience and for helping this program, which is an extraordinary gift. You haven’t seen the property yet — where the artists live?

ALBURGER: Not yet.

AMIRKHANIAN: There’s a real joy in seeing ten people working at top speed every month and having the time of their lives. I’ve never seen anything like it.

ALBURGER: Hopefully at the end your time here, you can get to do this yourself.

AMIRKHANIAN: I’d love to do that.

ALBURGER: Do you get vacation time?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes.

ALBURGER: But not enough time to get back into composition?

AMIRKHANIAN: What I have done is I’ve collected sounds. I’ve been to Armenia with my father on a grant from Meet the Composer. I’ve collected a lot of the sounds of that country, which I’m going to begin working on next year. So I’m really set up now to get a couple of things done. I have a commission for a piece for percussion from the NEA, which is long overdue. And I’m going to compose a piece using the library of the player-piano of Rex Lawson -- he has five thousand rolls of the history of player-piano music in London. I’m going to go there and sample a lot of those rolls -- play segments of them at different speeds, combine them and mix them, and maybe make a roll of a composite of other pieces that people can play in conjunction with the tape.

ALBURGER: So this interval of not-composing is coming to an end?

AMIRKHANIAN: I hope so. That’s my intention.

ALBURGER: Will you be using the synclavier.

AMIRKHANIAN: I’d love to, yes.

ALBURGER: So that’s not past-tense.

AMIRKHANIAN: Right, but there are also a lot of things that can be done with Pro tools and digital multi-tracking now that I couldn’t do four years ago.

ALBURGER: Back when you started with the Synclavier — your Percy Grainger piece, "Walking Tune," would have been --

AMIRKHANIAN: ’86.

ALBURGER: -- in your second or third year of working that way. Is that the first piece that used actual pitches, or had you done this sort of approach before?
AMIRKHANIAN: Not too much. I was working on my Grainger piece and playing with a sample of a countertenor singing a J.C. Bach aria...

ALBURGER: That's a male singer in your piece?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, a countertenor...and then I realized that something was missing, and I couldn't quite figure out what it was. I took the pattern that I had played on keyboard -- wrote it out -- took it to a violinist friend's home, and she recorded it in a dry space...just a room in her apartment. Then I took the recording back to the studio, added reverb and added it in front of the aria, so the first thing you hear is the violin.

AMIRKHANIAN: And then you hear the voice later. That was the solution to the piece.

ALBURGER: It's gorgeous.

AMIRKHANIAN: I like to listen to it with the lights out.

ALBURGER: I couldn't have done that on the way down here, because it was on the car stereo. Very dangerous.

AMIRKHANIAN: But I think there's something hypnotic, too, about listening to a piece like that, lying down on the floor. I once tried to get an audience to lie down listening to it, at the ijbreker ("Icebreaker") in Holland, and a lot of people poo-pooed that, but others who did it were quite happy with the experience.

ALBURGER: I have fond memories of listening to music in my youth supine.

AMIRKHANIAN: There was the famous concert at 1750 Arch in which everyone came at 11pm. Richard Hayman, a New York composer, had everybody go to sleep in sleeping bags, and throughout the night he'd come around and play sounds in your ear. In the morning everyone compared notes on what had happened. We all told stories. No one had the same stories. I was very interested in that, at that time. The time in people's consciousness when they're very receptive to sound. I want to say one other thing about tape music, which is a frowned-upon medium. I think one of the reasons that it's not been as readily embraced in the United States is that our way of playing tape-pieces is to play them back out of two loudspeakers in a concert hall, rather than spatially arraying the sound around the room with twelve speakers of different characteristics as they do in France and Montreal.

ALBURGER: How well could Varèse's --

AMIRKHANIAN: -- "Poème électronique" --

ALBURGER: -- have been received if it had been presented with two speakers in a concert hall?

AMIRKHANIAN: Which is how we know it now. I think it would not be as good. I remember teaching at San Francisco State, as I did for several years in the Interdisciplinary Creative Arts Department after graduating. One of the exercises I would do would be to have students work with tape machines. Always the students who would take three or four -- even cheap -- tape machines and just play them around the room and play pieces that had multiple locations would make the most effective pieces.

ALBURGER: So an ideal performance of "Walking Tune" would be people on the floor, the lights out or low, and 12 speakers.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, and I think a piece for 12 speakers is best played back from a multi-track machine, where you can actually take one channel and move it around and have other channels stationary. But I didn't compose it that way. I've been talking with Stan Shaff at Audium about doing a piece for their environment. Have you ever been there?

ALBURGER: No.

AMIRKHANIAN: You've never been there? Shame on you! You've got to go.

ALBURGER: I've got to go. Is it different every night?

AMIRKHANIAN: Ah, no. But, if you've never been, what do you care! They do have a wonderful set-up. They can really make the sound travel around in magical ways. The only problem is that Stan has been the only composer working there. It would be fun to hear other pieces there. I've played him my music and he said a few years ago that he thinks I'm one of the people he'd like to work in there, if they ever open it to anyone else, but they never have this whole time. That's one place I'd really love to play!

ALBURGER: The "Walking Tune" uses an original by J.C. Bach with countertenor --

AMIRKHANIAN: -- with an ensemble including Early Instruments that are played with what's called "bowed vibrato." So instead of doing the vibrato with the finger, you do it with the bow. You pull the bow across the string: "ah - ah - ah - ah." It's VERY emotional music.

ALBURGER: Then your selection of it was sampled into the Synclavier?

AMIRKHANIAN: It was. A long segment of it.
ALBURGER: And then the pitches are your selections, or are they J.C. Bach's?

AMIRKHIANIAN: No, the pitches from the J.C. Bach are heard.

ALBURGER: Is the violin melody yours?

AMIRKHIANIAN: [Thinks, humming melody] Yes, that's my selection of pitches, right. But each time I press down a Synclavier key -- as long as I hold it, you get the Bach.

ALBURGER: The bird songs at the end?

AMIRKHIANIAN: The birds were hummingbirds that Carol and I recorded.

ALBURGER: And you're playing them as different notes on the synclavier.

AMIRKHIANIAN: Yes. The interesting thing about those birds was that they were doing a Doppler pattern, because we had a stereo mike that I was holding up. There was a hummingbird feeder and the birds were coming past the mike in this very rural area of Colorado at a campground. They paid no attention to the mike. They were just absolutely unintimidated. They were dive bombing. And I never could have done that in the city.

ALBURGER: Do you have pieces from your output that you regard among your finest or most fun?

AMIRKHIANIAN: I think the one that people know the most is "Dutiful Ducks." I've had people tell me that they perform it with classes in Midwest colleges and it never fails to bring down the house.

ALBURGER: I notice you have the score printed in the second text-sound album? Do your other text-sound pieces have scores?

AMIRKHIANIAN: Not pieces like "Seatbelt." My scores for those pieces are [somewhat] like Terry Riley's score for "In C." It's a list of words placed among two or three readers, so you can read them. But then that is what you would put on to the loop and then those loops get mixed in ways which are not scored.

ALBURGER: So it's more of a set of instructions.

AMIRKHIANIAN: Right. You're given the core phrases.

ALBURGER: But "Dutiful Ducks" is more of a linear conception.

AMIRKHIANIAN: Same with a piece called "Dumbek Bookache," a piece that I made in Australia when I was on tour with Carol which incorporates a lot of Australian words. That piece has a definite order. And then another one called, "Church Car," also has a definite order. Those are written in such a way that an amateur -- a non-musician -- can perform.

ALBURGER: How about of your Synclavier works?

AMIRKHIANIAN: Well I like "Im Frühling" a lot. That was inspired by a challenge from John Cage to put more layers together in music instead of having single isolated sounds. He had heard, I think, "Politics As Usual," and said, "Gee, I'd like to hear more and more layers of these things."

ALBURGER: You had certainly had multiple layers in your percussion work and text-sound pieces.

AMIRKHIANIAN: The multiple layers of "Seatbelt," with the "belts" over themselves. My response [to John] was, "I don't know how many layers you can put over without getting pretty muddy." And he said, "Oh, that's just what they tell you in music school. It's not true, any of it. Trust me." So I was in with Carol at a beach in Yucatán staying in a cabin and there were trees around our building. At 5:00 in the morning a bird would land in one tree and start squawking, and then another bird would be over here, and so on, and it was like a surround-sound experience. I could hear each species call and I wondered why that was. Then I realized that it was because it was in a high-frequency range, where you have a piercing effect. It's like somebody with a very nasal voice across the room: you can distinguish the sounds because of the shrill high nature of it. And so when I was making "Im Frühling," I decided to see how many birds I could layer and still hear them all. I did that by arranging them in space, which [was an] idea I got from the experience in Yucatán. Because they were high-pitched, I got up to 12 or 13 layers, and I could still hear them all distinctly, but I just ran out of...

ALBURGER: ...ran out of birds.

AMIRKHIANIAN: Well, I thought I had enough! But it was a great idea from Cage. I'd like to pursue that in other pieces. There are places you have multiple basketballs bouncing on top of one another, too.

ALBURGER: That's in "Politics As Usual."

AMIRKHIANIAN: That's right. And other times like that I've tried that same thing.

ALBURGER: You left KPFA in '92.

AMIRKHIANIAN: I left at the end of November in '92. Took a month off and then came here [to the Djerassi Program]. Actually, we had taken over here in mid-December, although we weren't living here yet, we were running it from Berkeley.
ALBURGER: That would be extremely difficult from Berkeley.

AMIRKHANIAN: My friend Charles Boone was running the place then, so we had a little overlap time of two weeks where we were both working together. Charles had to move out and I had to move in with Carol and our houses sort of crossed one another.

ALBURGER: Was the connection Charles Boone in terms of coming to this position? Or was it something out of KPFA?

AMIRKHANIAN: No, I had been on the board of the Djerassi Foundation when it started, as an advisor, in 1985 or so. The first person I recommended (because in those days there were no applications) was John Adams, who at the time had told me that he was having trouble composing his electronic music because the television towers had gone up on Twin Peaks and they were giving what we call RF (radio-frequency) signals into his synthesizer.

ALBURGER: He was in San Francisco at the time.

AMIRKHANIAN: Mm-hm. In the Haight-Ashbury. And he was badly-positioned to make electronic music. He had a commission in L.A. and couldn't finish the piece, so I told Leigh Hyams, who was the director then (she was an artist), that I had a candidate for the program. John came down and did a piece which was called "Light Over Water."

ALBURGER: Nice piece.

AMIRKHANIAN: He got it done and was very thankful. Then I left the board. So I had a connection with the place in its initial stages and when I heard there was a vacancy, I really didn't know the fact that you lived here and that this house was here or anything. We came down to visit Charles Boone and his wife and we thought we'd like to live in the country and try this. So we applied for the job -- but there were a lot of people applying -- and we were selected. Then we had to suddenly face leaving civilization and moving out to the wilds of the rural life here.

ALBURGER: They've had two new-music people in a row here. What's the dynamic, since you're working with all sorts of artists? Of course, you have multi-disciplinary arts in your background.

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, well I like it a lot! Carol's a visual artist, so she's been very interested in the situation here as well. We have a sense of what artists need to work here. We're driven to try to provide that.

ALBURGER: Somehow related to this is running the Other Minds Festival.

AMIRKHANIAN: In Telluride, where I had done a similar festival, we had linked a component of residency, privately for composers to talk to one another, followed by a performance segment, where you'd play music for the town and have panel discussions. We did that for four years and sort of ran out of funding.

ALBURGER: Vacations from KPFA?

AMIRKHANIAN: I would do it in the summers. When we came here, I saw the possibility of a similar program, because we were closed five months of the year. So, during some of those months the weather was still good -- March, November. We instituted the program here and it's been a big success.

ALBURGER: So Other Minds was something that you started?

AMIRKHANIAN: Yes, with Jim Newman, who is the president of the organization. He was a long-time supporter of Pran Nath and Terry Riley and Sun Ra and various other important experimental composers. That festival was made possible by the fact that the Djerassi Program had the facilities to host people. It's been a wonderful, additional bit of outreach for the [Djerassi] program, which otherwise is rather isolated.

ALBURGER: This place closes down in the winter? Do you guys go back home?

AMIRKHANIAN: No, we stay here. We fundraise; we fix the facility; we process the applications. We're working year-round, raising money. A lot of money to raise: $400,000 a year.

ALBURGER: Are the residency programs open to any artists?

AMIRKHANIAN: Anyone can apply.

ALBURGER: Is there an application?

AMIRKHANIAN: People can just call us and we'll send the form anywhere in the world. Our phone number is (415) 747-1250, Mondays through Fridays and there'll be someone there ready to take your call. You also can download an application from our Web Site -- http://www.djerassi.org. The application deadline is once a year on February 15, so that's easy to remember. That gives you 12 months to fill out the form! It's a very simple form. We accept 65 people a year, in all disciplines: 7 composers, 7 choreographers -- various experimental artists, about 20 writers, and 20 visual artists.

ALBURGER: Are those percentages set up by the foundation?

AMIRKHANIAN: It's because of the nature of our studios. We only have one composer's studio, so we can only have one a month for 7 months. We have more writer's rooms.
ALBURGER: We've talked about what's next for you compositionally. What's next for the world of music?

AMIRKHANIAN: I think things are moving more slowly than I ever thought they would. I somehow imagined that by the year 2000 we'd be able to move sound around in space. And we would have means for transmitting multiple-location performances and concrete video. Maybe as people become more acquainted with the Internet and technology in general and use e-mail as a matter of course, manipulation of sound is going to follow.

ALBURGER: The Web Page for the Other Minds Festival looks like a step in that direction [http://www.otherminds.org].

AMIRKHANIAN: I think Other Minds is a very promising organization. It's been filling a need. There hasn't been a regular festival of really experimental music that's been run here on a professional level, for some time. Especially one that encompasses work outside the instrumental field. I know Jim Newman is really interested in expanding the activities and making more of this kind of work available. I think the organization is going to grow into a really major force in the Bay Area.

ALBURGER: Do you have to raise funds for that, too?

AMIRKHANIAN: We all do it together.

ALBURGER: Wow!

AMIRKHANIAN: Well, you've got to sell subscriptions! We really go for foundation and corporate grants, but it's very hard to raise individual funds. We have a development director and general manager. It's hard enough just to put on the Festival, let alone raise the money, without help. It's been a real challenge. I think the organization is becoming a little better known now, and probably will pick up support. Having Laurie Anderson at this year's festival is going to be a lot of fun. But equally exciting is having Ionel Petroi, who nobody has heard of (a Romanian composer living in Paris). I'm sure he'll knock everyone dead! And our older famous composer this year is David Raksin. With Frederick Rzewski and La Monte Young, it's going to be a lot of fun.

[N.B. It was. Since this interview, Charles Amirkhanian (Executive Director) and Carol Law (General Manager) have resigned as directors of the Djerassi Resident Artists Program to resume their careers as composer and visual artist respectively. Amirkhanian will work on the composition projects detailed on page 22. In Summer 1997 they will be in residence at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre (Ireland) and Bellagio Center (Italy).]

Concert Reviews

A London Symphonic Season:
Montague, Lutoslawski, Ligeti

HANS THEODOR WOHLFAHRT


The Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen, in György Ligeti's "Violin Concerto," with Fran-Peter Zimmermann. February 19, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, UK.

For the third year British Telecom commissioned a new orchestral piece, which was premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra in January and then given at least 12 further performances by eight different orchestras around the United Kingdom. After James MacMillan and Richard Rodney Bennett it was the turn of the London based American composer Stephen Montague (b. 1943). Montague's output over the recent years has proved him to be a major distinctive voice in contemporary music. With "The Creatures Indoors," a setting for narrator and orchestra of eight surrealistic poems about animals by Jo Shapcott, Montague has created a 40-minute composition of astonishing beauty, atmosphere, and musical tension -- to a certain extent comparable to Ravel's "L'enfant et les sortilèges." Montague notes:

The poems were inspired by Jo Shapcott's own unique interest in the bizarre and the composer's children's fondness for some of Nature's darker creatures like the rattlesnake, vulture, and shark. The "promenade" connecting this gallery of wonderfully weird portraits is a series of flies: Houseflies, Bluebottles, Blackflies, Horseflies, then a large swarm of flies culminating in the sound of the Komoto Dragonfly . . . .