James Tenney on Intention, Harmony and Phenomenology – A Different View of the Larger Picture. Ciarán Maher, MusicWorks Issue 77, pp. 25 ff. (2000).

"He cernly had some program, he wern't just randeming"
– *Ridley Walker* by Russell Hoban.

In the autumn of 1995, having never seen my face, Jim Tenney and his family took me into their home, and taught me how to be in the world. Some months before, Bob Gilmore had played a recording of Tenney's piece *Critical Band* at a party in his house and the scales had fallen from my ey(ea)rs. It seemed to me that I had never heard anything so beautiful, so interesting. I contacted Tenney to ask whether he would take me as a short-term student – explaining that I'd only heard that one piece – and he agreed.

In spent those months in the Tenney household talking, listening, drinking, learning. Laughing. I found Tenney, his assiduity, his contagious enthusiasm, utterly inspiring. In early October he contracted bacterial meningitis, and he was confined to bed where he couldn't "do anything but think," and so we decided – as much to take his mind off the pain as for my benefit – to record his thoughts. The following excerpts are from those conversations and from further discussions we had in Devon in 1998. In the first excerpt we were talking about Tenney's interviews with Alvin Lucier, particularly where he asks Alvin why he wants to remove himself from the process. Lucier responds: "The first answer I thought of was that I was embarrassed to be there in the first place."

CIARÁN MAHER: Why do you feel the need to remove yourself from the compositional process?

JAMES TENNEY: My interest in my music relates to my interest in any other music, and other music doesn't have me in it. I'm interested in music as an objective thing out there, which is hopefully attractive to us, something we want to go and hear because it provides some kind of special experience that can't be gained any other way. But it's not a self-expressive process. I don't have something to "say," unless I happen to be working with text, where I do have something to say, but that's in words.

Composition for me is mostly motivated by curiosity. First of all, an interest in answering the question: what will it sound like if I do such and such? But then, also, a desire to hear it. It's a desire for a certain kind of experience, a certain kind of sensory experience, which does not involve communication. Now, you speak of just about anything involving the senses as a communication process in an abstract way, but when I say communication, I mean something involving intention. There is an intention on the part of the sender to produce a signal which means something specific to the receiver, and the receiver is made to understand something through the receipt of the signal.

The only way in which that is relevant to my work is to say that what I want to be understood is just the message itself, the signal itself. It's not about something else. It's simple the basis for an experience. And I make music with the

awareness that other people are going to hear it; so in a certain sense, I make it for other people to hear, but primarily because *I* want to hear it. Although I could imagine being quite delighted to sit in a studio and produce music that interested me, I'm a social being too, so it's part of my way of being in the world. I don't remove myself from and being with other people to want them to hear it too. I don't remove myself in the sense that I stand apart from it. It just doesn't seem relevant to me to attach myself as a personality, or as a subject, or as someone who experienced a certain sequence of feelings.

In many cases there may be a musical idea that the listener picks up on, more or less, and that's fine, but that's not what's being communicated, right? They're catching on to something that was part of the mechanism, the creative mechanism, and I don't mind that they see that, or apprehend that, but it's not what I'm trying to communicate. I'm not trying to communicate ideas either, although ideas are involved. On can also say: emotion is always involved in music.

CM: And in music perception.

JT: Yes. Music making is not only a social activity; it involves emotion from the standpoint of the performer and the listener. But the emotions are not what's being communicated, if anything is being communicated [*laughs*]. The emotion is not the content of the music but a result of perceiving that content, which is just sound.

It is as though we have purely musical emotions that are related to the kinetic energy of dancing. Everybody dances, right? Dancing is not necessarily about something, and nobody expects it to be. It's just manifesting, it's using a facility of the body in a way that is pleasurable, exciting, or whatever. And it's similar with music.

CM: That answers one side of the question: it deals with emotion and its expression, communication of particular things – formalism versus expressionism. What I was trying to get at was *intention.*

JT: Well, my intention is very similar to Alvin Lucier's – which is, if anything, to get myself out of the way.

CM: Uhuh. But what I'm driving at is the sense in which Cage wanted to remove his intention – his choice, his taste …

JT: He never removed his intentions except in the kind of trivial sense of intending to have a certain sound at a certain place. Some people said he was inconsistent.

CM: Well, he said, "You will not find me consistent."

JT: Yes, but he was not inconsistent either, in that. That's a sophistic argument. To say, "Well, he was trying to go beyond his intention, and yet he's always intending to do that," well that's stupid. What he was trying to get beyond was the very specific intention that right here it's got to be a B-flat, or this passage in the piece has to do a certain thing. He was trying to get beyond that type of intentionality that is note-by-note intentionality – you know: the aesthetic assumption that's behind the boast of the analyst when he thinks he has explained every note in the piece and shown why that note has to be exactly what it is. I'm amazed they're not even embarrassed to say it [*laughs*]. What kink of mechanistic universe is implied by that – that somehow, every note has to be exactly the way it was?

You know, this notion can be traced – well, can be traced back to a lot of sources – but Schoenberg is one of the writers most guilty of this, in a way, where he claimed that every note he wrote was there because of an inner necessity. That was his term. And I'm not even sure what he imagined that was supposed to prove to us. You know, the mass murderer does what he does because of an inner necessity too. It doesn't explain it, it doesn't justify it. Inner necessity doesn't any longer hold water for me. Apparently it did for him, though. His critics were coming at it from the point of view that there was an external necessity, a certain way things were supposed to be done that meant this other note should be in this place, right? This is coming out of tradition, and he's simply saying, "Well, no, it doesn't come from that. It comes from an inner necessity." If you understand it that way, then it would make sense.

Anyway, what Cage was trying to do, I believe, was detach himself from the responsibility to make those decisions. When you're working in an indeterminate way, all you've done is shift the realm of decision making to other levels. He was just saying: I don't want to attach this much importance to details, partly because all possible sounds are beautiful, and in the right context, any possible sound can occur.

CM: But the context is to be determined by the composer.

JT: Right. If you read deeply enough in Schoenberg's writings, you find passages where he speaks of wanting – even though he's done something incredibly expressionistic and it's full of all kinds of emotional and psychological implications, he's saying, "I just want it to be heard abstractly. I just want all this theatrical stuff, like the lighting and the scenery, to be perceived like chords. Which means, abstractly: in a purely musical sense, purely formal. And that's in a way removing himself from it. One can say that although he had to use his emotional apparatus and had to question things on the basis of that inner necessity, still, ultimately, what was important was the result, not the feeling that lead to it.

CM: How do you feel about the juxtaposition in your music of your very strict control over form, in a macro sense, and your relinquishing of control over the note-to-note – vertical and horizontal – micro form?

JT: Well, I think id comes from two things. One was my early observation that a lot of the details the analysts were talking about in music were not that important to me [*laughs*]. You know, most of the time I couldn't care less whether it's a minor third or a major third in there, from the standpoint of thematic unity. Now, I know they make a different sound, a different sonority; there's a different texture created with these different pitch sets, and so forth. I'm quite aware of that and I do hear that. But the detail that's usually gone into in analysing, I got to a point where I felt it's exaggerated way out of its true proportion, at least in my perception.

Another thing is that I think the real world's textures – or textures that have this character – are beautiful: the starts in the sky, the leaves on the trees, the noise of the traffic on the street corner, the birds in the forest etc. These are beautiful textures to me. I think of Jackson Pollock, for example. It's not just interesting and radical and non-figurative, and all the rest. It's gorgeous. It's beautiful stuff. Not everything that arises in those situations is "beautiful" in the same sense, you can have ugliness too. But when it feels like it's part of reality, and relates to the actual formal properties of the world, we can understand it through our senses. So, in a way it's a paradigm for a larger reality. What's important here is the immediate sensual response to textures of that kind.

It also has to be understood that I don't just set up a random process and accept everything; and I don't select from it either. I set up a constrained random process – constrained one way or another, that sometimes includes no constraints at all, but that's a special case of constraints. And I listen to it, or check it out one way or another. And if something happens that I don't think is right , I go back to the programme, go back to the constraints, and say, "Now, I haven't defined the constraints that I want carefully enough."

Cage wanted to remove himself, I think, for other reasons – a kind of Zen philosophical attitude. I want to remove myself because I'm irrelevant to it [*laughs*], except as the finder of it, or the maker of it: it's not going to happen unless I do it, but It'd not about me.

I think we're all channels, in a certain sense for a creative process which already exists in the universe. It's very widespread. There is what could be called a creative process involved, which historically has led from, you know, the world of elementary particles to atoms, to complex molecules, to complex organic molecules, to simple living cells. Biological evolution is a manifestation of a creative process which is inherent in matter, or inherent in the material world.

I am not thinking of a separate creative agency that puts these together. There must be a tendency in this direction – which is, of course, countered by the opposite tendency of entropy – but it exists, evidently. What you want to call it, and how inherent you wish to believe it is in just plain old matter and energy – that's where the questions arise.

I think everyone is potentially an agent for that. In fact, I this everyone *is* an agent for that, is manifesting this kind of thing, but often in ways that don't get acknowledged because they don't have cultural iconic value. But there are manifestations of this creative process at all levels, from the most basic biological level of procreation up to the social level of relationships within the family and so forth. And whether it's at the highest level or not, I don't care: you have to deal with the biological level first. And at some point, you get manifestations of this creativity in the arts.

Everyone participates in their own way; but some people are too distracted by other things, or they have not trained themselves. Chomsky has a wonderful little vignette in one of his books. He talks about riding home in a cab after a lecture tour, and the cab driver was talking about some sports situation, about what the problems were, and what needed to be done, and if he was manager he would do such and such. Chomsky said he was really struck by the shrewd intelligence that this man was applying to the game, and that if people were allowed to apply that same intelligence to politics, say, it could be effective.

We're all vehicles for creative intelligence. But it's not something that comes through us from outside of the material world; it's something that's inherent in the material world itself, I think.

(…)

CM: I'm interested in two types of importance here: the importance to you attach to other composers in terms of their significance generally, and their importance to you.

JT: Yes, those are two separate things. Ruggles and Varèse were very influential to me, because I knew them, and I got deeply involved in the music, early on. So it had some influence on my work, although I never did much that would sound like either of them. In the case of Ruggles, it's especially important to distinguish those two things, because Ruggles has had no influence on anybody, but he developed this very interesting – it was not a style as much as a procedure, but it led to a style. Because I knew him, and I saw the value in the music – limited as it was, or narrow as it was – I made a deliberate effort to see what I could incorporate, or a very conscious effort to try to do something that I could say to myself: this is my response to the Ruggles influence. And when I tried to do that, what

came out was something totally different, but it had the property that it involved melodies in dissonant counterpoint in relation to each other. And that is best exemplified in a piece that I don't even have a decent recording of called *Sonata for Ten Wind Instruments,* from 1956.

Varèse had a vision of the possibilities of electronic music as the realization of the vision of music as sound. And that was important to me. That's what got me into electronic music in 1959, and into computer music in 1961. But also, I've learned a lot about instrumentation, about writing for instruments, from Varèse scores. I think he's read Helmholtz varefully, he knew everything there was to know about the acoustics of instruments.

CM: That's something that's entirely neglected in the tuition of composers, and also of even the musicians who are actually playing the instruments.

JT: Well it shouldn't be. Acoustics is one of the really important areas where there's something to learn that is given – given by nature, as it were, instead of just culture. Some things that we work with are culturally determined and some are actually physically, or mathematically determined; and they need to be learned as the basis for possibilities. The intent of the learning is not to limit what you do – to say that you should do this of that, and you shouldn't do something else – it's do answer questions like, "if I do this, what will the result be?" Maybe a productive question is, "what needs to be done musically?" In my Darmstadt lecture, I said, "nothing is necessary, but everything is possible. Anything is possible, but not equally compelling." Then I went on to say that what I found compelling at the moment was an exploration of harmony, and that this meant an exploration of different tuning systems.

Often what is compelling is something that's been left undone, unresolved. For me, this is the whole question of harmony. There is a kind of vacuum there – at least theoretically, but also in the sense of doing something that continues the evolution. So the next question is, "What hasn't been done?" And I would ask, "How can we change our musical perception, our musical consciousness?" It's clear we've got huge room for expansion and development with respect to intonation, and also with respect to rhythm. There are still wonderful challenges there. But there are other things too. There are important areas like the social function of art, the roles of the composer, performer, and the audience; like the concert format: what is the nature of that ritual? What has it been and what could it be?

CM: Now, you also see in harmony a very significant link between yourself and Cage, and Schoenberg – the fact that Cage, on hearing your piece was able to make that shift.[1]

JT: Yes. The history of harmony, in this last hundred years … if you want a history of harmony in Western music, it's got to deal with Schoenberg. And then, I claim, that it has to deal with Cage. And the reason it has to deal with Cage, is that we need a new conception of what theory is, and that has got to be informed by a Cagean aesthetic. Otherwise we just replace one set of rules by another set of rules, and we're nowhere. The history of harmony is also going to have to deal with Ives and Varèse. But Schoenberg is the one who wrote the most about it, took a position about it, and made a more conscious effort to analyse the situation at the time, to try to come up with some new understanding. Schoenberg talked about the emancipation of the dissonance, and that means it doesn't have to resolve anymore. So that means it's actually the emancipation of the composer from resolving the dissonance [*laughs*].

One reason we think primarily of Schoenberg is that Ives had no influence on anybody else for fifty years! He was doing this work that was in many ways parallel to what Schoenberg was doing, but nobody new about it until fifty years later. There was this incredible delay in the whole process of influence, of development coming from his music.

There are at least two important sources for ideas about harmony in Schoenberg's writings, and one, of course, is *Harmonielehre,* and the other is an article he wrote in 1934, the year I was born, and he was sixty, called, "Problems of Harmony." This would be about the same time as Cage went to study with him in California.

I then include myself at the end of that chain, from Schoenberg and Ives, through Varèse, through Cage. I include myself – though it might seem immodest – because I am consciously making an effort to deal with it. I don't think too many composers would say that that's what they're trying to do. There are some that I believe are also working in this direction but the don't usually (or they don't always) describe it in this way. La Monte Young is one. Ben Johnston is another.

CM: Pauline Oliveros.

JT: Pauline Oliveros, absolutely. And it has to do with tuning. I think I'm the only one who imagines formulating a new theory of harmony.

[1] On hearing Tenney's composition *Critical Band* (1988), Cage renounced his fifty-year antagonism to harmony, saying, "If that's harmony, I take back everything I ever said. I'm all for it."

CM: You mentioned earlier that you differed from Cage in terms of your aesthetic. How would you define that difference?

JT: It's not anything like a disagreement. It's just different temperaments, I guess. I'm much less involved with the philosophical ideas that were so important to Cage. And I like to shape things, even if I use a random process. What fascinates me is the variety of forms that are possible. Cage, I think, was not so interested in this. He was interested in process and tended to create ergodic situations and essentially set up a field of possibilities, and that would not change in the course of the piece.

CM: I have come to understand your philosophical imperative as a phenomenological reading of Cagean aesthetics – your own "sound as sound." When you first developed your concept of phenomenology, it was coming from Husserl or Merleau-Ponty?

JT: No. In *Meta+Hodos*, I gave that definition by Kurt Koffka: as naïve and full a description of direct experience as possible. That's wonderful, if it's understood as one element in a triplet, the other two points of which are the rational and the empirical. Obviously, you could go seriously wrong with "naïve and full a description": the earth is flat: it's perfectly obvious, right? But I think this kind of description a necessary component of any world-view, or any kind of theoretical enterprise.

Husserl had the idea to actually base science on his form of phenomenology. Now, this was a little presumptuous, right? But there's some sense in which I'm saying the same thing now: that science, as understanding, at least needs it as a component. Husserl wanted to make it the starting point. And then you might do a little experiment, you know, check out the equation. Mine is a slightly more colloquial form of phenomenology, which has a pragmatic aspect that it is very deeply involved with trying to perceive things as they are, even while being aware of all kinds of illusions and distortions of our perceptions that are possible, or even unavoidable. This has, I think, saved me from some of the mistakes I see in other theorist, like the overemphasis on details of the notes, specific intervals and things. Because I look at that and I ask, "Well, how important is that in my actual perception?" Something like a kind of statistical perception is more important to me than it seems to be for them. And that comes from just asking myself, "What am I perceiving? What am I noticing? What is it that's determining the nature of this musical experience?"

I have to keep reminding my students, asking them, "What is your experience of listening to this piece of music? Don't tell me about the notes you see on the page, tell me about what you hear." I know it's very difficult to do: this is one of the reasons why music theory is so hard to do in a fresh, real way. It is difficult to hang on to what we hear, and easy to focus on the score, because we can get a hold of it. In a sense, it's impossible to get a hold of the auditory perception. It's

just too fleeting. There's no simple one-to-one mapping between the units of notation and the units of perception. But what we *can* do is keep referring back to what we hear, and to keep asking ourselves, "How does what I see in the score correspond to my experience of hearing the music?" Only that way can we develop a really useful theory of musical perception. But I think it's possible.

Ciarán Maher, Devon, 2000.