

## ***Artistic Experimentation in Music***

### ***An Anthology***

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© 2014 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain / Universitaire Pers Leuven, Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

ISBN 978 94 6270 013 0

D / 2014 / 1869 / 57

Distributed by Leuven University Press

<http://upers.kuleuven.be/nl/book/9789462700130>



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# Artistic Experimentation in Music

INSTITUTE

Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore (eds.)

## An Anthology

SERIES

Reprint from *Artistic Experimentation in Music* - ISBN 978 94 6270 013 0 - © Leuven University Press, 2014



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AN ANTHOLOGY







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# Five Maps of the Experimental World

Bob Gilmore

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When I was sixteen years old I fell in love for the first time with the music of an experimental composer. I had no idea he was an experimental composer, and back then I would have had no clue what that term meant. On the contrary, I loved his music because it was Protestant, as I was, because he did crazy things with hymn tunes, and because his music sounded like New England in autumn—at least the New England of my imagination—with barn dances and cider barrels, church bells and marching bands. It was music like no other, and it made my imagination run wild.<sup>1</sup>

The composer in question, of course, was Charles Ives. I learned that, depending on which view you took, Ives was either the first great figure in something called the American Experimental Tradition, or he was a precursor of that tradition, which began a few decades later with the music of Henry Cowell and his student John Cage.

From my sixteen-year-old perspective this didn't make much sense. Stravinsky at that time seemed to me just as experimental as Ives, possibly more so, because Stravinsky's music was so diverse, with so many different languages and accents and sudden, startling changes of direction, whereas Ives's music, visionary and uplifting though it was, basically all sounded the same. Yet no one called Stravinsky an experimental composer. Insofar as "experimental" meant anything to me back then, I thought you could apply that word to all my favourite composers—Beethoven, Berlioz, Chopin: they had all *experimented* with various elements of music and introduced new things as a result.

Subsequently I heard more music by the composers within the American Experimental Tradition and was absolutely knocked out by it. Some of it changed my whole musical life; other parts left me absolutely cold. Thinking of it as a *tradition*, however, I found it hard to understand why music historians insisted that some of these people belonged so closely together. The work of Harry Partch and that of John Cage, for example, especially their later work, has

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a conference paper at the ORCiM International Seminar 2012: *Composition—Experiment—Tradition*, at the Orpheus Institute on 23 February 2012. This slightly revised text retains something of the informal nature of my spoken presentation.

really nothing in common, and is actually highly antithetical on pretty much every count. The argument goes that what unites them is their very outsider-ness in terms of career path and lifestyle, their distance from the mainstream. Well, maybe: but it doesn't seem very convincing to define a musical tradition in terms of kinships based primarily on non-musical considerations. Moreover, several of the composers supposedly at the heart of the tradition themselves shunned the word "experimental." Robert Ashley, in a 1995 CD liner note, commented that "composition is anything but experimental. It is the epitome of expertise. It may be aleatoric or purposefully unpredictable in its specific sounds, or purposefully exploratory of a sound, but experimental is the wrong word." Or we find Harry Partch (1974, 357) quoting with approval the exasperation of a famous artist, who protested "You never *see* my experiments" (my emphasis).

So we have two things we need to understand if we want to talk about an "experimental tradition" in music: the word "experimental," and the word "tradition." I think in this case the latter is a good deal easier than the former, so let's talk first about "tradition" and then about the question of what "experimental" in music really means. I would suggest that the American Experimental Tradition is an example of what the historian Eric Hobsbawm called an "invented tradition," a social construct invented by a few (an "elite" of some kind) to proclaim and to justify the coherence and importance of (in this case) a certain kind of artistic work and a particular aesthetic, and to differentiate it from other directions, other traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). If conceived as a role call of names, it makes no sense to me, as many of the composers thus included have arguably less, or certainly no more, in common with one another than with others outside the tradition.<sup>2</sup> But as a description of a general *tendency* it may have some validity. Among the first to advance the idea was John Cage himself, notably in an article entitled "History of Experimental Music in the United States," written in the late 1950s and included in his first book, *Silence*, in 1961. In that text he doesn't actually use the phrase "experimental tradition," but that is essentially what he's talking about. (The phrase crops up a year or two later in writings by the American musicologist Peter Yates; there may be even earlier examples.)

In that article Cage offers not one but two definitions of the term "experimental." And there are others: I can think of five plausible and reasonably distinct definitions of the term "experimental," which I'd like to outline briefly. There may be more than five, and I'm certainly interested in the possibility of a sixth. These are definitions of, and perspectives on, what I will call "the experimental world" (with a nod to the sociologist Howard Becker [1982]), and they will hopefully provide us with ways of navigating that complex and sometimes daunting terrain.

<sup>2</sup> The "experimentalist" Nancarrow's friendship with the decidedly "uptown" Elliott Carter belies the simplistic pigeonholing of Nancarrow's music as merely "experimental" (see Stojanović-Novičić 2011).

## Five Maps of the Experimental World

### ONE AND TWO

The two definitions Cage provides in his “History of Experimental Music in the United States” are quite different, so I’ll call them the “soft” and the “hard” definitions. The soft definition holds that to be experimental involves “the introduction of novel elements into one’s music” (Cage 1959, 73). As examples of this practice, Cage points to the music of many of the composers now considered part of the American Experimental Tradition, including Carl Ruggles, Leo Ornstein, Dane Rudhyar, Alan Hovhaness, Lou Harrison, Henry Brant, Ruth Crawford, Gunther Schuller, Harry Partch, and Virgil Thomson. But he feels about their music the way he does about that of Charles Ives, about whom he remarks that “much of Ives is no longer experimental” (70). (Logically, the “novel elements” after a time cease to be “novel.”) This is the first of my five definitions: “the introduction of novel elements into one’s music.”

Cage’s “hard” definition has become justly famous. In it he says that an experimental action is “an action the outcome of which is not foreseen” (69). He goes on to relate this to his own work with chance operations and, more essentially, to “composing in such a way that what one does is indeterminate of its performance.” He tells us that this type of experimental music is what he now does, what his teacher Henry Cowell sometimes did, and what a few of his younger friends do, notably Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff (69–71). This is the second of my definitions, and it can be applied also to the work—or some of the work—of many composers since Cage. Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969), by this second definition, is a classic example of an experimental composition. What will happen to the playback of the voice recording, as it is re-recorded and played back again and again, is entirely dependent on the particular acoustics of the room in which the performance takes place: the sonic outcome is unpredictable.

### THREE

Within the optimistic climate of the late 1950s, when “History of Experimental Music in the United States” was written, Cage apparently had little need to feel that his experimental work had solid historical roots, and was more concerned to *differentiate* it from the work of those earlier Americans, the “soft” experimentalists. But he did like the feeling that certain younger contemporaries were keen to share his endeavour. Things were very different with the composer who is in a way Cage’s natural successor in the next generation, James Tenney. One of the recurrent themes of Tenney’s output is an engagement with the work of others, especially older composers, and the majority of his compositions bear dedications to a wide range of them whose work he admired. This is as true of early Tenney pieces like *Quiet Fan for Erik Satie* of 1970 and *Spectral CANON for CONLON Nancarrow* of 1974 as it is of his later works, which bear dedications to, among others, Varèse, Cowell, Ruggles, Partch, Wolpe, Cage, Xenakis, and Feldman; to friends and contemporaries like Harold Budd, Pauline Oliveros, Nam June Paik, Steve Reich, and La Monte Young; and to older figures that he himself had never known personally, like Ives, Crawford, and Scelsi. All these

composers, of course, are “experimentalists” in (at least) Cage’s soft definition. Tenney’s ongoing need, his whole life, to invoke these composers in the titles and dedications of his pieces has an aspect of “safety in numbers,” forming a link to this invented tradition. He strove, in his work as well as his life, to understand where these experimenters—these pioneers—were leading, and to support them by helping to colonise the new terrain they had uncovered.<sup>3</sup>

For Tenney, the idea of an American Experimental Tradition was a living reality, one to which he felt a strong sense of belonging. But Tenney had his own definition of “experimental,” which is different from either of those I mentioned by Cage (whom Tenney regarded as an important mentor and friend). Tenney believed that “experimental” in music should mean more or less what it does in the sciences. The composer would write a piece of music, try certain things out, then judge whether they worked, didn’t work, or only partly worked, then in the next piece that experiment could be followed up: like a scientist, one could go further down the same line. “I guess all of my music can really be called experimental,” he told an interviewer, “but in a sense different from how John Cage uses the word, and a bit different from how it’s been used to describe the experimental tradition . . . It’s more literally an experiment, like a scientific experiment, and in science, in scientific work, one experiment always does lead to another one” (Tenney, Kasemets, and Pearson 1984, 10). The etymology of the word *experiment* links it to the Old French *esperment*, meaning a trial or test, but which also had the sense of “practical knowledge.” In other words, Tenney’s is the concept of composition as *research*. By analogy to a research scientist, a composer could test or verify a hypothesis through the medium of music. This definition seems more inclusive and in a way more generous than either of Cage’s two, because by Tenney’s definition composers like Carl Ruggles or Ruth Crawford, say, with their explorations of dissonant counterpoint, could be considered as doing research, since a new composition would be at least partly an experiment into a specifiable aspect of music that was being tested. Moreover, Tenney’s own interest in picking up their explorations of dissonant counterpoint in some of his own later works (for example in the *Diaphonic Toccata* and *Diaphonic Study*, both from 1997) continues the experiment, and reinforces the idea of an ongoing experimental project across generations, something that Cage’s “soft” definition—with its emphasis of the transitory nature of “novelty”—does not acknowledge.

#### FOUR

There was an interesting exchange after a lecture Tenney gave at Darmstadt in 1990. When the then-young composer Daniel Wolf asked him what advice he would give a young composer operating within what Wolf called a “post-experimental model,” Tenney replied: “There is no such thing as post-experimental . . . My sense of ‘experimental’ is just ongoing research.” Tenney couldn’t

<sup>3</sup> CD, track 7, features Tenney’s *Harmonium* #1 (1976), dedicated to Lou Harrison, in a live performance by Trio Scordatura at the Orpheus Institute, Ghent, 3 October 2013.

accept the concept of “post-experimental”: to him, just as there was no end to the musical experiments we could imagine, so there would always be such a thing as *composition-as-research* as long as there was such a thing as *composition*. We might ask exactly what Wolf meant by “post-experimental” (remembering that this particular exchange took place more than twenty years ago). “Post-experimental”—with its resonance of terms like “post-tonal,” “post-serial,” “post-minimal”—implies that experimentalism is a historically bounded phenomenon, a period of music history that has now passed, or nearly so. Wolf’s term reinforces the idea of experimentalism as an invented tradition, a historical construct with its own particular history and ideology. So here comes a fourth definition: that “experimental” refers to a type of music of a particular historical era, essentially, if not quite exclusively, the music of the fifties, sixties, and seventies stemming from Cage’s “hard” definition—such things as Alvin Lucier’s music for brainwave phenomena, David Tudor’s forest of electronica, the indeterminate scores of Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and Cornelius Cardew, and much else.

This is important as we need to remember that the whole idea of an “experimental tradition” does not happen by itself but must be *constructed* in various places and by various individuals. Perhaps ironically, for a tradition with such strong American roots, one of the most important of those places was West Germany, especially in the years between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The musicologist Amy Beal has shown in her brilliant book *New Music, New Allies* (2006) how it was overwhelmingly *this* kind of American music, the “experimental” rather than the more symphonic kind, that was seen as the most important by a number of new music festival directors, composers, and critics from the 1950s right through to the 1980s (and beyond). A number of young American composers in those years made their names, and a sizeable part of their incomes, in Europe, using their successes there to try to boost their profile back home.

Going further, and following the ideas of the sociologist Howard Becker in his book *Art Worlds* (1982), we must remember that an experimental music “world” (or, more colloquially, an experimental music “scene”) has to be constructed through a dynamic relationship between agents and mediating factors. If the agents in this case have mostly been the composers themselves, the mediating factors comprise a complex network of festivals, foundations, academic institutions, venues, private patrons, performers, publishers, publicists, critics, musicologists, and so on. Collectively this network sustains, ideologically and practically, the idea of an experimental scene, or an experimental tradition, by boosting the dissemination and consumption of this music. Financially, the experimental scene has always been sustained by a mixture of institutional and foundation support and, crucially, by support from private patrons. Probably the earliest such individual to support experimental music (at least in definitions numbers one and three) was none other than Charles Ives who, beginning in the late 1920s, funded Henry Cowell’s New Music Edition of scores and recordings (Swafford 1996, 368). Later, from the 1960s onwards, a great many experimental composers, especially on the West Coast, benefited from

the largesse of the late Betty Freeman, including Partch, Lou Harrison, Steve Reich, Peter Garland, John Cage, and others. Many of the great experimental music studio spaces, like Phill Niblock's Experimental Intermedia in New York, Walter Zimmermann's Beginner Studio, or Johannes Fritsch's Feedback Studio, both in Cologne, would never have survived as long as they did if they were purely dependent on institutional funding. In other words, all this and more is necessary to create an "experimental scene," after which it is possible, arguably, to be "post-experimental."

## FIVE

Another important component in the creation of an experimental "world" has been scholarship. One of the first and still one of the most influential books to discuss the subject was Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music*, written in the 1970s and reprinted, largely unchanged, in 1999. There he says, in essence—and here is my fifth and final definition—that "experimental" is all the interesting new music that isn't avant-garde. Avant-garde music, Nyman argues—the music of Stockhausen, Berio, Boulez, and others—derives from the great traditions of western music, whereas experimental music does not, and comes from other sources, including non-literate (or perhaps post-literate) ones. So this is an ideological and even a political distinction. This would not be a bad rule-of-thumb definition of what experimental music is were it not for the large amount of interesting music that lies in the grey area between the two. If we divide the world into avant-garde and experimental, where do we place a composer like Feldman? Or Xenakis—does his music really derive from the "great traditions of western music"? Or how about this: compare Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique* for 100 metronomes (1962) with Alvin Lucier's *Clocker* for amplified clock, performer with galvanic skin response sensor, and digital delay system (1978). They are somewhat similar concepts, both problematising time-keeping devices of different kinds, and the sound of each, while distinct, has a lot in common: one piece might quite easily be mistaken for the other by a listener who did not know them particularly well. So do we think Ligeti's piece is avant-garde and Lucier's experimental? And if so, isn't this not so much because of the way they sound or the way they're made but because we're familiar with the rest of the two composers' outputs?

We live at a time when "experimental music" is thriving. There are scenes, in different places; there are venues, websites, record labels, and ensembles devoted to this kind of music—or, more accurately, these kinds of music. But there are of course drawbacks, in that once a "scene" is in place quite a lot that can flourish within it loses sight of the original impulse that led to its creation. Some of what gets called and packaged as experimental music today seems to me not really experimental because, paradoxically, it fits neatly within now-familiar techniques and practices of the experimental tradition. Genuinely experimental work, the work that takes risks and asks provocative new questions about method, material, working practices, and everything else, remains as rare and as precious as ever.



## Five Maps of the Experimental World

Nonetheless, experimental work in my own preferred definition, that of Tenney (definition number three), is alive and well, and thriving in the music of the younger generation. As regards the work of older composers, I'm of the opinion that some music is inherently, not temporarily, experimental. Let's put it this way: it's hard to imagine a time when pieces like Conlon Nancarrow's *Study for Player Piano no. 33* (? late 1960s) which explores the rhythmic proportion of two in the time of the square root of two, will ever *not* be considered experimental. And there is still plenty of virgin territory out there. It seems to me that the maps of the experimental world are not—and perhaps, as James Tenney believed, never will be—complete.

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