

## 17 Anecdotes re: and not re: Martin Bartlett (or Some Pragmatics of the composer/performer)

“Originally we wanted it to be improvised but there just wasn’t time, so we wrote it all out.”

paraphrased from Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*

In his solo concert at Western Front a few years ago as part of the Coastal Jazz & Blues Society’s Time Flies festival, Dutch vocalist/sound poet Jaap Blonk performed part of one of the first text-sound pieces, Kurt Schwitters’ *Ur-Sonata*. I’d come up to Vancouver to work on *Burning Water*, a compact disc of music by Martin Bartlett. I spent the days listening to tapes of Martin’s music with Donna Zapf & going through the Bartlett materials at the library at SFU. I was staying with Charles Watts & went to the performance with him. After the concert, Charles & I ate at Delhi Dharbar with Donna & Susan Clark. Susan & Donna knew each other from when they’d attended U-Vic, & from there, and then, they were familiar with composer Christopher Butterfield’s performances of the Schwitters. Susan seemed at least initially put off by some of the more theatrical aspects of Jaap’s rendition, apparently in contrast to her experience of Butterfield’s performance, which, based on the (very good) recording I’ve heard, may be more like recordings of Schwitters’ own performances.

If you consider Schwitters’ text as a poem, the range of interpretation allowed in standard performance practice is rather narrow. The various theories of poetics that are based in the author’s own “true” voice run the gamut of writers from the workshop poem, through Naropa and beyond. The few times I recall hearing a writer publicly reading the work of another author, the reader has usually invoked the absent (often dead) writer and issues of performative interpretation rarely apply. For all of the multiplicity of voices of say Charles Bernstein or Susan Howe, it’s difficult to imagine their work being read by someone else.

But music rarely works like that &, if you consider Schwitters’ text as a score to guide a performance (and his notes to the text, as well as the idea of the piece as a sonata, support this interpretation) why can’t the work be interpreted to the extent that Jaap does? I’ve heard performances of music by Bach & Mozart in which the performer takes more liberties than Jaap in his versions of the *Ur-Sonata* &, for a classic work of the avant garde, Schwitters’ work is almost boringly reductive in it’s adherence to the sonata allegro form. While his interpretation is perhaps more romantic with a small “r” than recordings of Schwitters’s own, Jaap’s performance falls well within the range of performance allowed for in the score.

In music (at least outside of the pop music realm), it's not uncommon to hear performances by people who may not even know the composer, let alone know how he or she might want a work to be played. The generative artist, the composer, is frequently invisible.

I started work on my CD label for recordings of new music, ultimately called Periplum, about a year after Martin died. When I first considered projects I wanted the label to release, I thought of how Martin's works for interactive computer weren't well represented on recordings. Western Front had released a CD of the works performed on Martin's final concert there & though I like that disc, it didn't present the pieces that seemed most important to me. Because Martin was dead, I figured it would be quick and easy to produce the album: get the master tapes, & get it pressed. But Martin had embraced the ephemerality of live performances keeping only cassette dubs of concerts, if that. It took nearly 2 years to find the masters for 2 works of the 4 works I wanted, in the performances I'd wanted. For one of these pieces, there was no reel to reel tape or digital master Martin's cassette was the best available recording, so a cleaned up version of that is on *Burning Water*.

Starting in the 1960s many composers who didn't have ready access to performers or ensembles (often because they weren't affiliated with a teaching institution) began to create works they could perform on their own. Besides the simple pragmatics of being able to hear a new work performed more easily if you were able to perform it yourself, there were economic considerations too. Performers frequently get paid more than composers, especially in the US where the royalty rate for composers is appallingly low, so by performing their own works, composers were able to generate more income than they might otherwise have been able to. As a corollary to touring solo performer/composers, several composers, Steve Reich & Philip Glass may be two of the best-known examples, formed their own ensembles, to play their music in concerts. In the case of Glass, he'd still rather have someone hire his ensemble to play his music than to hire local musicians to do so. Some of this is still based in the economics (while Glass himself may earn more than most of us in this room combined, this may not be the case for his performers). But Glass is still concerned that musicians who haven't played his music before won't know how to deal with a very different kind of nuance than they're used to & he'd rather people heard the music played correctly, even if they end up hating it.

Until the late 1980s, there was a large active circuit of venues for concerts by these traveling composer/performers; often, though not exclusively, at artist-run visual art spaces. The Western Front was an important stop on this circuit,

and while the booking there is somewhat different from what it was vestiges still remain. Martin Bartlett was active both as a performer and presenter in this circuit &, while I heard his first Seattle concert a few years earlier, it wasn't until I became music coordinator for and/or gallery in Seattle that I got to know Martin at all.

Martin considered himself to be a West Coast composer rather than a Canadian composer. Most of his aesthetic connections were with musicians from other parts of the world

Matt Rogalsky had worked with Martin on fine tuning the software of his last composition, *Paraphernalia*, after a rough draft was premiered at the Western Front. Matt hadn't done much recent work on the piece until VNMS asked him to prepare it for the concert. In the year prior to this concert Matt, who lives in Cambridge England, corresponded with Peter Hannan, who had played in the piece as a work in progress at the Front, sending computer code back & forth. Things went very well until the day of the performance. When I walked in to the room during the tech rehearsal, it sounded like Martin's music, full of some of the signature sounds and grammar, but then the computer crashed, for what both Matt & Peter said was the first time in the process of developing the piece. After a little troubleshooting, it seemed as if things were stabilized. During the performance the computer crashed again. Afterwards, Peter said that Martin's programs often crashed at their premieres, so I take this as a sign that Matt's realization of *Paraphernalia* is truly in the style of Martin's work.

Frank O'Hara's essay *Personism* begins as a response to hearing "that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can't be got at one reading is because I was confused too." I'm not here to talk about writing. If I were, this might be the last audience to need reminding that clarity as such isn't necessarily the most important quality of writing. I'd guess most of you have run into someone (perhaps with roots in either the "workshop poem" or Naropa) who thinks the best poems are little stories that end with a flash of razor-sharp wit & anything else is simply no good or too weird to count as a real poem.

I bring up the O'Hara quote as a way to point out that, in the world of new music, the inverse is often true. Many of the best-known, best-received composers, those who win the most awards, who receive the largest commissions, who get the best critical response, who generally get treated as gods among mortals, are those whose music is NOT immediately perceivable. Now, I like works by many of these guys (& they are, by & large, all guys), but what they do is only a small part of what's most interesting to me in contemporary music.

Martin sailed from Vancouver to Indonesia, and back. Among his papers at SFU include hundreds of snapshots from these trips, as well as parties, concerts, etc. These included pictures of people I know who I never saw at new music concerts in more than 20 years of traveling to BC to hear music, as well as a surprising dearth of photos of some folks I'd always thought had been close to Martin.

Jim Tenney, an American-born composer who has been teaching at York University for about twenty years, has a concept of the klang. This is a compact sound-image that can be (sometimes simultaneously) the originating impulse for a piece, a model of the form of a piece, a piece as a process unfolding in time. In some pieces the klang & it's relation to the overall form of a piece is simple and clearly audible, other times you might be hard-pressed to notice it without someone pointing it out.

As far as I know, Martin Bartlett didn't name any compositions after restaurants, but he always knew wonderful restaurants in Vancouver. And he always knew which restaurants didn't have music playing, either live or recorded. One restaurant that he liked a lot was Delhi Dhar-bar around the corner from the Front on Main Street. While Martin was in the hospital for the last time people often brought him take-out from there & Delhi Dahr-Bar catered the wake for Martin that was held at the Front.

At the first (I think) DuMaurier Jazz festival in Vancouver (I'm not even sure if it was called DuMaurier then, & I guess it won't be for much longer) that I was in BC to hear performances by John Zorn, Eugene Chadbourne, Davey Williams & La Donna Smith, and Wayne Horvitz. One afternoon, Robert Mittenhal, a writer who lives in Seattle who some of you know (in fact, I think he's still given more readings up here than in Seattle), knew about a reading by bpNichol at SFU. We drove out to hear it. It was the only time I ever heard Nichol, but instead of turning this into a reminiscence of my first live encounter with Nichol's work, I want to point out that Robert & I were the only people in the room who hadn't previously met him. With everyone else it was, oh yeah how've you been since Banff, or the conference in St John's, or so & so said to say hello if I saw you here etc.

Interactive computer music is a genre, I guess, of music in which a composer creates a software program that "listens" to what a musician (usually improvising) plays, and responds according to a set of rules, controlling the sounds of a synthesizer. The rules can be fairly simple & easy for even non-musicians to follow or so complex that the final effect can sound arbitrary. In the best interactive pieces, the live musician can respond to the computer as one might respond to another live performer, and will be rewarded

with musical surprises that make sense after the fact which were unpredictable prior to hearing them.

Lisa Robertson asked me to share a talk on new music with François Houle while we were drinking in Seattle after she had read with Robert Gluck. I was coming up to Vancouver about once every month then, working on *Burning Water*. So you know how long ago this was, the day that Italy & Brazil both won games in the World Cup elimination rounds, Lisa & I had coffee & talked about possible topics, probably coming out of my work on the disc of Martin's music. My first thoughts were to talk about new music as a small town with no geographic locale. As soon as Lisa asked if I meant new music as a "discourse community," I decided against using this as the stated theme for the talk, though vestiges of this topic, like this paragraph, remain.

About 15 years ago, I heard a concert by California composer Carl Stone at the Western Front. All of Carl's pieces are named after restaurants he likes (he has one named after Nuur Mahal, a Vancouver Indian restaurant that unfortunately closed years ago). The piece he performed at the Front was Shibuchō. In this piece, Carl manipulates short excerpts of 4-5 songs by the Miracles & the Jackson 5 using a stereo digital delay. The excerpts from these songs are quite short, but all become recognizable at some time during the piece, though the overall effect is quite different from the originals. When the concert was over there was the usual gathering of electronic composers asking technical questions about Carl's equipment etc. (This was before MIDI & the processing box that Carl used was particularly unusual, rarely seen outside of high-end recording studios.) Martin's first comment on approaching the table Carl had his gear on & seeing the blue box of Lps used as source material was "Oh, Motown's Greatest Hits, I didn't recognize those songs."

Martin & I weren't best friends or anything. There are lots of people in Vancouver, perhaps some of you in this room, who could tell you more about his life, about his music. Martin & I would have a meal sometimes when I was in Vancouver or he was in Seattle. We'd pass on greetings from people we saw when we were traveling outside the Northwest. The few times he stayed with me in Seattle he was always surprised at how few instruments were around the house (I don't think we even had a computer at home then). During the time I was going through Martin's stuff lots of folks had suggestions for this gamelan piece or that ensemble work. His acoustic music is also fascinating, but that project would probably require new recordings

Some composer/performers, are virtuosos in a traditional manner on standard instruments, and some of the works they perform reflect this. Frederic Rzewski is a good example of this kind of composer/performer and many of his works have been performed by other musicians. Other

composer/performers developed personal performance works built around idiosyncratic techniques & styles that, while not virtuosic per se, were unlikely to be reproducible by other performers. These works are often examples of what the Slovenian/French composer Vinko Globokar calls “anti-badabum.” Rather than focusing on the speed and density of musical events, conveying what Globokar describes as “the image of man having become machine,” this music focuses on subtle shifts in sonic qualities or other conceptual structures. The form in anti-badabum works is often the presentation of an audible process. This may literally be an acoustic phenomenon, as in the case of some works by Alvin Lucier or Gordon Monahan, or in the case of composers such as Jim Tenney, most of the so-called minimalists and many, though not all, improvisors, a musical form that is equally a process.

Martin Bartlett’s early electronic music was created using hand-made gear, his “black box,” with which he performed throughout the 1970s, now sits unused, and perhaps unusable, in special collections at the SFU library. His early interactive pieces were made using a hobbyist computer called the KIM-1. This device had no operating system; no commercial software was available. Martin talks about having his first KIM-1 for weeks before he got even get it to do anything. In the mid-1970s he began using some modular gear designed by Don Buchla, and in the 1980s wrote several pieces for the Buchla 400 system, one of the first commercial computer-controlled synthesizers.

Once it became possible to buy off-the-shelf electronic gear that was sophisticated and flexible enough for electronic music, most of Martin’s construction was done at the programming level, rather than creating hardware. This is true for most people in the field now, although there are certainly composers who still make their own instruments. And there is still great interest in the old instruments. Several composers, both in & out of Vancouver, were interested in the whereabouts of Martin's black box. When I was on a Bay area radio station talking about and playing the first *Periplum* releases, Jim Horton, a composer who had known Martin when he was at Mills, called wanting to know what had happened to the instrument.

Phill Niblock, travels a lot presenting his music & films. In every new music scene he encounters, he finds the same types: the former lover still interested in the art; the bitter older artist; the inveterate schmoozer; the student who’s on top of the latest work everywhere. Phill says you can find these people & others anywhere there’s an art scene whether you’re looking at visual art, music, poetry, or whatever. While I see his point (& who among us who has been to a post-event party in a strange town wouldn’t), that’s not what I mean when I think of new music, say, as a small town.