



Interview with Jeffrey Stadelman James Gardner

JG: What's your background, Jeff?

JS: I grew up in a tiny farming community in northern Wisconsin, U.S., twenty miles from what you might call a small city, and an hour from Green Bay. I started piano when young, and had quite a few musical experiences through my church.

JG: Such as...?

JS: An austere Lutheran hymnody, mostly. I'd say my earliest musical memory is of sitting in church between my mother and father. My mother had an excellent alto voice, and I used to be quite embarrassed by her singing; it was in tune, soulful and loud! And since she often sang the alto line—so clearly *not* the melody—I would poke her and point emphatically to the upper line to get her back with the congregation, to no avail usually.

JG: How old were you then?

JS: That would have been, say, ages 4 through 10 or so. Anyway, later on I became organist for the church. But I guess what I wanted to say is that it's funny how, if you boil it down, my first feeling about music was an attraction to it, but also a

personal embarrassment about someone close to me doing it in a way so obviously different than ... the others.

JG: Are you religious?

JS: On the contrary.

JG: After your encounter with "austere Lutheran hymnody," how did you become aware of other kinds of music; what tickled your ears in your teens, for instance?

JS: I seem to have gone straight from the little yellow 78s with "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt," to wearing out "Fresh Cream." Not long after that I became extremely fond of The Who, Yes, ELP, Jethro Tull. And The Beatles, of course.

But later, I'd say my interests broadened so that it would be hard to summarize. In my early- to mid-teens, I was learning Beethoven and Mozart piano sonatas, and playing the oboe. And this is when I became interested in a number of jazz pianists, in particular Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. The radio and libraries were the two main music sources.

I'll spare you any gory details about the various jazz and rock bands, the pit orchestras for local musicals, the choirs, and the like. There was a lot of that, and it was generally fun.

JG: Who, if anyone, do you think 'granted you permission'?—let's not say 'influenced'?—to pursue your current line of enquiry?

JS: That's a very good question. I think that a number of accidents of birth, and fate in my early life, led me to feel by the time I was ten or so that I wasn't going to stay in Pound (named, by the way, for Ezra's uncle).

I can say that during November of 1977, when I heard the music of Webern and Carter and Schoenberg and Varèse and Cage for the first time, I was electrified. Just bowled over.

JG: How did you get to hear this stuff?

JS: Some of it was presented in a couple of introductory classes at university. I remember that a recording of the Webern Op. 6 orchestra pieces featured prominently. Once I realized that such music existed at all, I checked out of the public library all the scores and recordings I could find. There wasn't much, but I made up for lack of selection by repetition—memorizing the individual scratches and clicks of the Mercury/Dorati recording of the *Lulu Suite*. And the Lateiner recording of Carter's Piano Concerto!—I have to say that Zappa's description of fetishizing particular pieces and recordings captures my own experience remarkably well.

Plus, I was rebellious during my teen years. It may seem strange, probably self-dramatizing, to say this since rebellion is virtually one of the physical changes of puberty. But you would be surprised how many colleagues and musicians I've encountered along the way who seem to have traveled reasonably smoothly from childhood music-making through arts high school, or whatever, to conservatory, and beyond.

But for me, Webern and the other composers I mentioned were not only beautiful, powerful, perplexing; they were valuable as symbols and weapons against things as they stood in life then.

JG: The body piercing of its time...

JS: Everyone else found the stuff absolutely repellent.

JG: Anyone else, more local?

JS: Besides family, I'd say I was lucky that during my education I came across a number of inspired mentors. The ones who taught musical fundamentals were rigorous and vivid explicators—people like Joe Straus, Milton Babbitt and David Lewin. On the composition side I benefited from individuals who taught more than anything by the example of their own music-making and career—I'm thinking here of Babbitt again, as well as Stephen Dembski and Donald Martino.

JEG: I'd like to turn now to your music on your new disk from Centaur. A good starting point, considering our discussion thus far, might be *Kinderszenen*. That work, and several others I know of, have "historical/genre references" [e.g. *Kinderszenen* m.412+; the "grand" piano and "cocktail" piano]. What purpose do they serve? For me they "break the surface" and produce a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt*, but was this your intention?

JS: Teenage alienation again? Perhaps in a rather mild way. If you go back to earlier works of mine, you'll find that many of them establish a more or less regular rhythm of interruption. I mean one goes along for a certain short span and then, wham!,

the texture, or instrumentation, or whatever breaks, and you start up with something else; and so on and on. Perhaps Robert Morris's description, "a fabric of seams," is useful here.

Now *Kinderszenen* is a special case in that it is locally more continuous. In fact, it's the form of the piece itself that expresses continuous interruption: assuming accurate performance of the notated tempi, each of the eleven separate movements lasts almost precisely two minutes.

Anyway, here I felt the need to connect what I was doing to a short quotation from the overture to Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. You might even say the piece culminates with it.

JG: And if a listener were unfamiliar with this quote?

JS: I hope it would be something like—I don't know—enjoying a de Chirico painting that juxtaposes Attic columns with a train, etc., without recognizing that the particular steam locomotive depicted is a Baldwin! It's the composition and structure and staging of the figure within the painting's whole that is important, along with its sheer identity *as* a locomotive.

JG: And as for the question of intention?

JS: I intend a quote only as an *apparent* discontinuity, more or less like the other interruptions and what-not that give texture to the experiential surface of my music. I would be pleased (leaving aside intention here) if a listener realized in hindsight that what seemed at the moment an inexplicable dissociative

tear in the fabric, was in fact a kind of upper partial of the experience of the piece.

JG: How, or perhaps *where*, do your compositions come into being? Is it utterly different from piece to piece or are there consistent gestational tendencies?

JS: Well, Jim, one could equally ask “when” does a piece come into being—I flunked Ontology.

No, there are definitely tendencies. It’s more or less like this: I first scout out and set up the instrumentation. This is followed by lots of inner-ear imagining and instrumental improvisation (usually piano, but increasingly with other instruments). Well into this phase it usually gets tough—an agonizing period of making maybe a hundred pencil sketches on both plain and manuscript paper, most of which are trash. But within a month or so of beginning the project, if I’m lucky, one of the sketches will strike me as viable, pregnant. And at this point I’ll be off and running, composing daily, pretty much from “left to right,” though with significant rearrangement of musical objects possible later on.

JG: What *are* your notions of “musical objects” vs. musical processes, not to mention variation vs. repetition? For example, in *Pity Paid* there’s a preoccupation with the initial rising figure (and variants thereof) in the solo violin. Is form sedimented content?

JS: Well, what do we actually hear when we hear the things that are referred to by words like “motif,” “variation,”

“phrase,” “ostinato,” “similarity,” “diversion,” and so on? These aren’t isolated, monolithic experiences. I’m interested in putting them under a ... lyrical-critical microscope, if you will. For instance, imagining how “empty development” might in a certain context induce “cadence.” In sections of my work I try to weigh and choreograph, you might say, the various “values” of recollection, of closure, of new material, of *hinting*, of bass-contrast-within-full-spectrum-repetition. Et cetera.

On the other hand, and despite my reputation as rather a “structural” composer, I have learned to trust my daydreams. It’s just that daydreaming on manuscript paper is difficult, because the process moves in slow motion and, in composing time, I need to break up the dream over many sessions, spanning many days.

It’s hard to explain. But, do you know who’s the master of such things in my book? John Ashbery. I think his poems say again and again that *meaning* is sedimented *form*. And that’s more what I’m interested in.

JG: Could you elaborate?

I’m very interested in the ways conjugations of local forms give rise to things like lyricism.

Generally speaking, Ashbery has a way in the longer poems of sort of building up the experience of the dream, through surreal shifts and so forth, but also through a beautifully regulated sequence of “reader response” experiences. First you feel this, then that happens, then an aria crosses your mind

while the scenery changes and you have second thoughts about the weather ... This kind of enactment takes time, it takes many pages. But he sometimes, I think, aims at something similar in more direct, concise and descriptive (even prescriptive) language. This is from “Late Echo”:

Beehives and ants have to be reexamined eternally
And the color of day put in
Hundreds of times and varied from summer to winter
For it to get slowed down to the pace of an authentic
Saraband and huddle there, alive and resting.

So your question is dead-on. Over the years I’ve realized I value those pieces most that seem complex, but also richly self-resonant in a coherent, if dreamy, way: they continually shock and delight by revealing how it may be possible seductively to digress, while each digression is revealed in hindsight to beautifully nest and collaborate with the others.

JG: Can you give an example of this nesting?

JS: There’s a striking passage near the end of Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* where Charles Mason, in mourning his dead, beloved wife, finds himself looking into the face of his son, trying to disentangle his wife’s features from his son’s, and from the mirror-image of his own. It’s a proliferation of that type of experience I’m after, in an admittedly Western contrapuntal, kaleidoscopic way—where each *new* thing comes to seem, sooner or later, intriguingly related to ... the others, ones already experienced.

JG: One certainly gets the feeling in your work that no single state of affairs will hold for very long, yet the new condition into which it develops or by which it is suddenly replaced tends to have a sense of “inevitability” with hindsight. But perhaps this is simply the human tendency to cling fast to “post hoc ergo propter hoc”—the security blanket of causality.

JS: I’m glad it sounds that way to you. I’ve provoked students over the years with the remark, “You can analyze a ham sandwich.” And by that I mean a (usually narrative) story invoking causality and involving at least a few layers of association, and so forth, can be developed for almost any random, bracketed bunch of stuff you want to call an aesthetic *thing*.

Joe Straus has called certain tools for looking at music “analytically promiscuous.” Between John Cage’s “happy new ears,” arguing for “no interpretation,” and Allen Forte’s tools, for instance, careening toward “rampant interpretation,” there is that danger. (Luckily we have the preponderance of humanity tending in neither direction—it’s *all* rejected.)

But more seriously, I would mention that in my experience fresh ears are indispensable in composing, and that your “security blanket of causality” can easily obscure and smother any perspective on how someone *else* might hear the piece. The comment from young composers, my former self included, “I write what I myself would like to hear”—how misguided so much of the time! Kids come in having listened to recordings of their pieces a thousand times, to the point where the post hoc business is more potent than Beethoven’s V-I!

JG: So how do you suggest we keep our ears fresh, Jeff?

JS: I try to stay real. And that doesn't mean I can't use precompositional tactics, and so on. But here's where I want to take issue with something you said. It's not hindsight "inevitability" that describes what I'm after in the nesting I mentioned. It's more "resonance," or association. When Nancarrow's *Canon X* rolls off the edges of the keyboard after incrementally working its way to them, *that's* a feeling of inevitability. I can take or leave that, generally. For instance, it's the only thing I don't like so much in the music of my teacher Donald Martino—this insistence upon filling space incrementally upward or down.

Anyway, I'm interested in the tickle of association, of possible identities linking things—against all odds—that are clearly not the same, in each and every domain. Not just pitch. I'm trying to think of a way to put it: a contextual harmony of experiential shards.

JG: So an impulse that triggers autobiographical resonances on the part of the listener, or is it more like putting in a subliminal frame in a movie?

JS: It's not really either of these, at least not to begin with. I don't want to make it sound as if I'm after a kind of note-for-note musical version of subjective inner fantasy—I'm not transcribing *Mrs. Dalloway*.

JG: One could do worse...

JS: Agreed. But here I mean something purely musical. What the listener makes of it is secondary: I see such things throughout the music of the Second Viennese School. It was there in Brahms too.

When I say "experiential," I mean the listener's experience, moment-to-moment, while carefully attending to the piece. With "shards" I mean an almost early-serial deconstruction of a particular sonic thing into dimensional parts: the thing's characteristic gestures, its contours, its timbral profile, its pitch and intervallic aspects, its registral seating, its embedding within a texture. On and on, there's almost no end.

OK. That said, I'm proposing that all these aspects have "values," coordinates within their own parametric spaces that are related to, but not at all identical with, coordinates within some listener's own "reaction space."

JG: And where is the "contextual harmony" you mentioned?

JS: Just here. It's my attitude that some particular shard can be brought into an ideal harmony with some other one. For example, when I hear the trumpet's lyrical opening of the coda, at m. 282 of *Mr. Natural* [10'01" on the recording], the beginning of the piece resonates very strongly in my ears, despite the fact that on the surface these points are very different. We could get into the reasons why I think this happens, but it would be unwieldy here, and technical. Suffice it to say that when you scratch that surface, you find they have features in common and, not surprisingly, features that

contrast. “Orchestrating” these, as with a kind of tiny mixing board dedicated to these values—that’s what I’m talking about. I’m talking about actually *trying*, with nothing on auto-pilot.

For instance the trumpet plays the same notes as at the m. 1 opening, but transposed up a whole tone and re-registered. A return to the earlier pitches in register would have been far too obvious. As it is, the trumpet’s new melody here trails the aroma of the piece’s opening, which is momentarily blown full into the listener’s face by the piano with its fleeting, but much more recognizable, allusion to the open, this time a whole tone lower. The memory dies down, though, and quickly dissipates with the piano’s upward flourish just following.

JG: That rising quasi-arpeggio figure occurs quite often in your work.

JS: Yes, there are these things I tend to do. It’s there in spades in *Starry Wisdom*. And, too, I’d say there’s generally a 50-50 chance that any piece of mine will contain at least one sequential repetition at the whole tone below. The last minute of *Mr. Natural*, in fact, is built around such a sequence (and includes a glancing reference to Zappa’s “Billy the Mountain”).

JG: Since you’ve brought up *Mr. Natural*, tell me about the practical problems in writing a piece for trumpet and piano. It obviously helps to have such fine performers...

JS. That’s for certain. I was very lucky to be able to work with Jon and Jacob on this project, and the piece is in many ways a response to their remarkable skills.

I did see the piece as a kind of puzzle from the get-go: the question loomed, what do these two instruments have to do with one another, and why are they there on the stage together? This question of course has answers based in the history of the Western instrumentarium, and Western musical literature; but in an acoustic sense, or even in considering the instruments’ “natural” or customary stomping grounds, there are no obvious answers.

JG: Trumpet and piano do make an “odd couple” without any other supporting or contextualizing instruments, don’t they?

JS: Indeed. I felt there might be a space to explore musically between 1) trumpet-piano fraternizing by composer’s assertion, and 2) trumpet-piano fraternizing by history’s assertion. I wanted to explore on the one hand the acoustic, sounding connective possibilities between the two instruments; and on the other hand, a kind of satirical, character-based relationship between them, letting the two agents work out “for themselves” a kind of personal trumpet-piano language *not* based on any ex cathedra assertions.

JG: So what does this mean in practice?

JS: Let’s consider Hindustani raga. One hears a reservoir not only of distinct pitches laid out in registral order (a scale); but more importantly the actuation of characteristic pitch, rhythmic, gestural moves, or *behaviors* (for example, a particular raga, when going from Pa to Ma, might generally reach up to Dha first, unless...). My hope is that *Mr. Natural* works out such

internal rhetoric both with respect to pitches and rhythms, and also in terms of the nature of the interaction itself—who leads, who follows, who “sings,” who accompanies, and so on.

JG: What’s with all those staccato eighth notes at the beginning, then? And the “practice” glissandi later on? [7’16” on the recording]

JS: I have the players begin from a position of maximum agreement. Both instruments are playing A440, a note that is relaxed and focused on both instruments (if one can speak of relaxation vs. tension in the range of the piano—I think so anyway). The two instruments actually “blend” pretty well just here.

By the way, after one measure of that little hocket canon at the opening, the trumpet mucks things up by moving up to B. That precipitates a reaction from the piano, and everything’s already derailed. This is exactly what I was talking about earlier when I mentioned “rhythm of interruption.”

Now, the practice glissandi up and down the overtone series for each fundamental, from C (no valves open) down to F# (all valves open): well, that was intended as a kind of parodic Synthesis combining a) the trumpet’s tendency to exploit its technique of jumping from partial to partial within a particular overtone series; and b) the piano’s tendency to exploit its “technique” of maximal digital, dexterous coverage of a comparatively huge span of utterly focused and in-tune pitches.

But I hope it’s just fun to listen to as well. It’s chock full of motivic reflections in the piano part, too.

JG: I think the piece is particularly notable for the way you handle the clearly perceivable pulse and periodic rhythms, but then push them off kilter. This seems to be something you’ve been doing more and more, the subtle displacement of rhythmic phrases or patterns using rather elegant and economical notation. Are you after a rhythmic “jitter”; strike-slip faults; multiple viewings of the same “object” ... none of the above?

JS: I really like that strike-slip analogy. But I’d have to say “all of the above.” I stress that my overarching goal is what Babbitt calls a “successive subsumption”—the assimilation of isolated details, as they come along, to a growing, retrospectively unified whole. I might say, “yes, I’m going for a jittery granular sound right there,” but would still feel the need to understand *why*.

You know the way in many passages by Elliott Carter you hear that the onset of a passage is imperfect, “not together”: that is, if five instruments begin the phrase together, they might all begin at slightly different time points.

JG: Yes, and I often pity the players. If they get it right, they sound wrong...

JS: I agree. And what is Carter’s reason for doing this? Because each instrument is “personally” true to its established identity, in the form a given pulse stream. So the violin may have a

quintuplet-sixteenth as its smallest rhythmic particle; the oboe on the other hand may have the straight sixteenth. Thus if they're to begin together in the middle of a beat, they will have to begin at slightly different points. Giving the effect of a ragged entrance.

Over time, ideally, the listener becomes aware of the *reason*—beyond the *esse* of creating a texture—for this raggedness. The textural effect takes on resonance on a kind of systematic level.

So, take that idea, and try to push “ragged entrance” into texture but also beyond it, into motivic association. That’s what I’m doing.

JG: Would it be wrong to use the word “syncopation” in connection with your rhythmic practice?

JS: No, not at all. I just would want to point out that the “syncopation principle” here is intended to be local and constructive—not, as in for instance most ragtime music I’m aware of, some sort of stabile conventional rhythm.

JG: *Mr. Natural*—that’s the R. Crumb comic book character, right?

JS: Yes. I have a thing about the word “nature”—the way it’s used is so ... artificial; and I include myself in this. It’s so ideological, such a blunt instrument. I think the way Crumb portrays him as this opportunistic purveyor of religious mumbo-jumbo who deep down is a sort of confused

lecher—it’s hilarious; and it lets a bit of self-critical air into the “program,” described above, having to do with aligning the two instruments within a natural relationship.

JG: It would be very easy and simplistic to portray your concern with “itches as points and the relationships between them” as standing in conceptual and aesthetic opposition to the approach of, let’s say, Cage, Feldman and Lachenmann where, crudely put, “the sound’s the thing”. But I really am going to be that simplistic...

JS: Good. My answer to that comparison is as follows. We need to acknowledge that relationships have “a sound” too. I want my music to exist within a kind of social-syntactical network that is at least as rich and variegated and potentially precise as verbal language’s. I feel like the three composers you mention all were responding in a critical way to what they thought were excesses, or misalignments, or academically-driven “hardening of the categories,” as Feldman put it. Where the music being written was weirdly and unhealthily driven by concerns generally foreign to human hearing and experience: that is, by the possibilities of rampant notational excess (either excess of status quo, or ungrounded *Augenmusik*, etc.), of conceptual and mathematical complexity, of potential for academic theorization, etc.

Perhaps there was something to it, though I tend to think they trumped up the bad guys a bit here, in an all too human gesture of personal creative liberatory violence. Anyway, though, I think that time has passed.

JG: Does that mean you view their stance as a historically—or at least personally—necessary one and therefore one that need no longer concern us?

JS: I try never to be too concerned by a composer's "stance." To the extent we want to understand why and how they wrote the music they did, this stance is important. But the critical stance under discussion here was very much of its time I think, and circumstances have changed.

The more concrete things Feldman had to say, such as his informal theorizing of the effect of continuous very soft, virtually attackless sounds: that to me is musically very interesting, and "of use," even if I rarely write such things.

Life is far too short to insist that richness of experience needs to come in the form of timbral texture and connection, or anything else. It's true there are many decorated drones and much slow-moving self-seated music out there today. I love much of it; and I think of it as issuing from the phenomenon of *reverberation*, of the single human being in a cavern listening to his or her own reflected, magnified sound. Or in the desert quiet emptiness, listening as if in meditation to the grain of the voice.

But there are many ordinary models: I tend to prefer the *choral* model, imagining not reflection and amplification of the lone voice—but instead *repetition* and *massing* of plural voices in a social context. That's what's so compelling about the origins of classical polyphony to me. A kind of splitting of the solo song, and then its multiplication...

JG: The lure of the Space Echo ...

JS: Heh heh. ... its multiplication by virtue of the differences between men and women and children. Not to mention as reflection of social roles, of individual aptitudes, and so forth.

That's true isn't it, the old Roland Space Echo was good for both reverb and chorus...? Anyway, maybe I shouldn't say I *prefer* the choral model. It's rather that I feel it tends to be my starting point, the place where my early experiences left me rooted.

Going back to what I said about first encounters with Webern et al: the music has to me always been about recuperating experiential possibility, about freshness, about *play*. It's not about sheer sound per se, or new sound. Sure, music is about sound: but I'm with you only if you acknowledge the importance of the mind and its casting and recasting of *things* within ongoing relations.

Now, in the academy there is a focus on novelty, on innovation—and rightly so. I see myself firmly in the midst of that, despite seldom asking for bowed tailpiece, or whatever, in my string writing.

So yes, my music is more active, employing focused and non-noisy pitch most of the time; and with more chromatic turnover than in much music heard today. But put it this way: I can understand that some people prefer to hear their Bach *Well Tempered Clavier* played on piano, as opposed to harpsichord,

because they subjectively prefer the sound of the piano (I certainly do). But even if I had to listen to it played on calliope, my number-one desert island disk would *still* be WTC I—the “pitch points” and relationships between them are that good.

JG: I think the only piece we haven’t touched on is *Starry Wisdom*. And we have another literary reference, this time H.P. Lovecraft. Assuming it’s not a musical “transcription” of the Cthulhu Mythos, why the title?

JS: Yes, let’s tie this back up with the Space Echo... *Starry Wisdom* is the earliest piece (2001) on the disk, and represents among other things a way of working out for myself an approach toward writing for orchestra, albeit a small chamber one.

Regarding the title: if you asked me what I’d like my music to be, I might say I want to reveal a new, self-consistent and utterly beautiful (in the largest sense) sonic world. So, in titles I occasionally like to point that out. In 1990 I wrote *Friction Oracle* for violin and piano. What happens? The fiddle player rubs a stick with hair clippings across a wooden box with jutting handle. What happens then? Transport. Otherwise inaccessible knowledge.

That’s the ideal anyway. And *Starry Wisdom* is like that. On a verbal level, the title opens out onto a whole story about an occult gateway, the Lovecraft; just as *Friction Oracle* looks out verbally onto a particular African divination practice. So in that way the title is a kind of convenient (and poetic) symbol for a cluster of concerns and enthusiasms. The listener is welcome

to pursue the verbal side of things, or not. But there’s no program.

JG: I think this was written in fits and starts, wasn’t it? I remember there was quite a long gap after you’d got the first few minutes...?

JS: Yes, but here it wasn’t so much a case of trying to find an approach, but that I couldn’t figure out how to keep going after the first act, so to speak. Plus there were other projects at the time.

JG: As in much of your work, I hear a kind of barely suppressed cartoon music below, or even at the surface here—Scott Bradley and Carl Stalling are never far away! And I think this gives it a sense of vitality. It wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to imagine Raymond Scott’s “Powerhouse” being revealed as the generative source of some of the material...

JS: That’s great. It warms my heart to hear this. All those tip-toeing pizzicati, for sure. Rattling harmon-muted brass. And motoric sixteenths churning like powerhouse gears. Yep, I can see that.

The music it reminds me of, more than any other, is Roger Sessions’ *Black Maskers Suite*. But that’s perhaps raw and cartoony as well. And my favorite movements tend to be scherzos.

Anyway, I generally do try to keep things on the lighter side. I find much recent music is almost laughably somber. A defect of

my character, I think, is a kind of fear of obviousness. Wallace Stevens' byword, "The poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully" seems about right to me.

What I'm getting around to saying is that just as I'm interested in constructing lyricism in novel and non-obvious ways, so to I'd like to arrive at tragedy without having to resort to minor-mode trombone choir. Although there is something like this right at the end of the piece!

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